Media and Communication
Open Access Journal | ISSN: 2183-2439
Volume 7, Issue 3 (2019)

# Public Discussion in Russian Social Media

Editors

Olessia Koltsova and Svetlana Bodrunova

COGITATIO

Media and Communication, 2019, Volume 7, Issue 3
Public Discussion in Russian Social Media

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070-129 Lisbon
Portugal

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Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 114–118**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.2389**

Editorial

# Public Discussion in Russian Social Media: An Introduction

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Submitted: 1 August 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Russian media have recently (re-)gained attention of the scholarly community, mostly due to the rise of cyber-attacking techniques and computational propaganda efforts. A revived conceptualization of the Russian media as a uniform system driven by a well-coordinated propagandistic state effort, though having evidence thereunder, does not allow seeing the public discussion inside Russia as a more diverse and multifaceted process. This is especially true for the Russian-language mediated discussions online, which, in the recent years, have proven to be efficient enough in raising both social issues and waves of political protest, including on-street spillovers. While, in the recent years, several attempts have been made to demonstrate the complexity of the Russian media system at large, the content and structures of the Russian-language online discussions remain seriously understudied. The thematic issue draws attention to various aspects of online public discussions in Runet; it creates a perspective in studying Russian mediated communication at the level of Internet users. The articles are selected in the way that they not only contribute to the systemic knowledge on the Russian media but also add to the respective subdomains of media research, including the studies on social problem construction, news values, political polarization, and affect in communication.

**Keywords**
public discussion; Runet; Russia; Russian media; social media

**Issue**
This editorial is part of the issue “Public Discussion in Russian Social Media”, edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

Russian media, and in particular their online segment, have recently been (re-)instated as a focus of attention of communication scholars and computer scientists (Howard, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017; Sanovich, 2017). This was a result of several scandals around the spread of various cyber-attacking techniques, such as email hacking, attacks of social media bots, and spread of allegedly pre-paid electoral advertisements. These techniques, in turn, have been repeatedly reported to have been used for meddling into the US elections and generalized by the term ‘computational propaganda’. Computational propaganda can be defined as ‘the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion’ (Woolley & Howard, 2016, p. 4886).

Conceptualizing the Soviet (Communist), and later the Russian media in terms of them acting as a uniform system driven by a well-coordinated propagandistic state effort has been a long research tradition ever since the early post-war period (Lasswell, 1951). Although the ecosystem of the Soviet and later Russian media has always been richer than that, it is this propagandistic aspect that has been most visible for the international community, including the academe. A major rea-

son for this is that propaganda may have—and sometimes does have—direct political effects on the international, particularly Western arena, while other aspects of the Russian media system are less influential and, therefore, less interesting.

The purpose of this thematic issue is to go beyond the 'computational propaganda' studies and to draw attention to a relatively narrow but important aspect of the contemporary Russian media system—namely, to the forms and content of discussions carried out by its audience, or users. In the last decade, several scholarly attempts have been made to show the complexities of the Russian media scene (Kiriya, 2019; Nigmatullina & Bodrunova, 2018; Toepfl, 2011), including the online media (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015), but no sustainable effort has been done to examine the nature of the Russian online public discussions.

Propaganda-centered vision of a media system that dates back to the times when the media in general were much more unidirectional, does not leave any space for channeling social feedback—either in media practice or in academic theorizing. Additionally, Soviet audiences stayed under-researched due to their unavailability for Western scholars and local restrictions on methodologies and interpretations. Thus, there is hardly any solid knowledge of how public discussions developed in the Soviet countries at the interpersonal level and how mass self-communication (Castells, 2007) via early Internet means affected public agendas in the Russia of the 1990s.

However, as new communication technologies have changed the global media system, user-generated content (UGC) in non-oral forms has not only found a place in nearly all societies but has already transcended its role of feedback. That is, it has become not only reactive but also pro-active, and has developed into a type of media content per se. This content has become an integral part of political life far beyond classical democratic societies. UGC blends together social phenomena that were previously distinct: professional journalism, direct political communication, amateur self-expression, inter-personal communication, and public opinion—in the latter case, hidden previously and now largely publicly available. It has also become a mass mobilization tool distinct from the previously known logics of organizations and movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Diani, 2000).

Russia has not only absorbed all these new developments in media; it has participated in their formation and has experienced a development of a vivid and, in a way, unique Internet-based media system. Russia is, arguably, the only country where national Internet companies have been more successful than their global competitors nearly in all spheres of Internet business, including search engines, mailing services, and social media. Unlike in China, where the closed Internet ecosystem owes most of its success to the policy of technical, political, and economic isolation known as the Great Chinese Firewall, Russian Internet industry has until recently developed without any protectionist barriers. The new, more protective policies are no more than a few years old. At the same time, Russia is not isolated from the rest of the world—in fact, it is more connected to the world than any time in its history but in its own specific way.

Russian social media are dominated by the Russian network VK.com (former VKontakte) that is far ahead of all its competitors, especially in terms of activity, but also in the absolute number of users. Facebook in Russia is a niche network; however, it is preferred by politically active citizens, especially by those with oppositional views (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; for suggestive evidence, see Enikolopov, Makarin, & Petrova, 2018). But if the politically relevant divisions between social media platforms in Russia have at least gained some scholarly attention, the social representation, various aspects of digital divide, and non-political issue-oriented discussions are virtually absent from the view of academics.

Today, it is evident that the presence of foreign social networks in the Russian media landscape, as well as Russian-speaking video bloggers, has started to cast impact upon the state-owned and commercial 'traditional' media. The latter, rapidly losing young urban audience, have to adapt their content and style to this audience and to their views, to make the TV and newspaper content at least noticed. Likewise, Russian media aimed at foreign audiences, such as Russia Today (RT), customize their style of both news and opinion sections according to their vision of international standards *and* to the social-networking viral styles.

All these diverse types of media, including state-run, maintain their accounts in social networks and permit some form of comment sections there, or even host them on their websites (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018), thus becoming actors of the online deliberation. Unlike China, Russia has shown no evidence of developing a large-scale centralized censorship system involved in mass deletion of user messages (which is useless, given the availability of foreign social networks), although it has already introduced a limited blocking of international (LinkedIn) and Russian-language (Telegram) networking platforms. At the same time, Russia is known for a well-developed system of mass 'pseudo-user' content production. Combined with the activity of real users, this creates a specific form of non-democratic discussion, similar to authoritarian deliberation introduced by He and Warren (2011). In the Chinese context for which this term has been initially used, it means a set of institutions to articulate people's needs and later incorporate them into decision-making. In Russia, UGC-based discussions per se are mostly used for articulation of conflicting interests but, with growing evidence, also for shaping protest activity, thus changing the view towards Runet as 'the web that failed' (Fossato & Lloyd, 2008).

While, on the one hand, possibilities of inclusion of articulated grievances in Russia are limited, on the other

hand, user content generates in a less isolated context than in China. Users from within and from outside Russia can 'cross-comment' on the sources from outside their countries of residence; they can interact, and even if they are divided by language barriers they are aware of each other's agendas through multiple channels. Finally, they can create agendas of their own using independent platforms. Thus, a research focus on UGC and political/social deliberation within it can bring to our attention a number of previously under-researched aspects of the Russian media. Furthermore, an in-depth research on specific discussions can produce results that contribute to a broader media theory beyond both propaganda model and the Russian context.

## 2. The Thematic Issue

Studies in UGC of the Russian social media are dominated by examining its role in political protest and civil activity (see, e.g., Goncharov & Nechay, 2018). This issue collects articles that address other political aspects of UGC, each with distinct empirical and theoretical focus.

Filatova, Kabanov and Misnikov (2019) directly address the issue of authoritarian deliberation by comparing Russian user messages about food destruction on both pro-government and independent platforms. Food destruction—a measure taken by the Russian government against import of newly banned products—is taken as an example of controversial counter-sanction policy. The authors predictably find out that the proportion of food destruction supporters is much higher among commenters on the pro-government media platforms. This conclusion is in line with earlier findings by Goncharov and Nechay (2018) who find that social media users clearly fall into oppositional and loyalist clusters. Even more interestingly, Filatova et al. (2019) examine the structure and the quality of deliberation on both pro-government and independent platforms, comparing such features as civility and validation. This contributes to the studies of authoritarian deliberation that includes spaces beyond control of the national political elites.

In a similar way, Koltsova & Nagorny (2019) examine reader comments in a space that, in theory, can be fully controlled—that is, comment sections of regional Russian newspapers. But, in fact, these are not controlled. This leaves readers some room to re-define the offered agendas, in particular, by problematizing the issues that were unproblematic for (or were deproblematized by) journalists. Moreover, issues reported as single events get generalized by readers to the level of social problems, sometimes in several competing ways. The authors propose a number of metrics for these phenomena and supplement them with qualitative text analysis. This article contributes to the studies of social problem construction and dynamic public opinion in non-democratic contexts.

Echoing with Koltsova and Nagorny (2019), Judina and Platonov (2019) go beyond showing the uneven distribution of commenting over topics and examine different news features (such as exclusivity, presence of conflict or follow-up character) that influence the volume of likes, comments, and reposts in news. Just like Filatova et al. (2019), they compare pro-government and independent Russian media. But, more importantly, they test the applicability of Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) taxonomy of news values to the Russian context and provide the critical analysis of this taxonomy, thus contributing to the theory of news values.

Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova and Litvinenko (2019), by studying Twitter user discussions on resonant ethnic conflicts, bring Russian social media studies into a comparative context that portraits Russian Twitter discussions against those in Germany and the US. Detailed cross-country comparison of social media content, in fact, rarely includes Russia (for a rare exception, see Filer & Fredheim, 2016). It is this comparative approach that allows the authors to contribute to the studies of political polarization in social media. They show that, first, the studied countries, despite their differences, share the relatively high level of interaction between users with different views, and, second, the divisions in all three cases are not binary. These divisions are driven by national political contexts and transcend the traditional left/right distinction.

Finally, Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019) study the effects of the Russian social media beyond the Russian audiences. Namely, they examine emotional reactions of English-speaking users on Youtube videos about the Syrian war featured by the Russian state channel RT. The topic of this work is in line with the recent interest in the Russian computational propaganda outlined above; however, the authors develop an entirely different focus on this issue. They build their analysis on the concept of affective investment (Solomon, 2014)—roughly, a process by which audiences relate themselves emotionally with political discourses thus allowing those discourses to resonate with their feelings and to exercise soft power. The irony is that Solomon (2014) has developed his concept to explain efficacy of American soft power and illustrated it with the examples from the US official discourse on the war on terror. Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019), however, do not compare Russia and the US explicitly—rather, they offer a universal conceptual framework that can explain, among other things, RT's ability to resonate with human emotions, but is widely applicable beyond RT and Russia.

Overall, in all the studies collected in this thematic issue, the focus on specific empirical problems going beyond the mainstream propaganda reasoning, allows for placing the empirical findings in a wider context and for explaining them by higher-level concepts not related specifically to Russia. This allows each team of authors to contribute to middle-range theories in their respective sub-fields of media and communication research, and those theories—to be enriched by empirical evidence from a non-Western society.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 119–132**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.1934**

Article

# Beyond Left and Right: Real-World Political Polarization in Twitter Discussions on Inter-Ethnic Conflicts

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Submitted: 17 December 2018 | Accepted: 22 April 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Studies of political polarization in social media demonstrate mixed evidence for whether discussions necessarily evolve into left and right ideological echo chambers. Recent research shows that, for political and issue-based discussions, patterns of user clusterization may differ significantly, but that cross-cultural evidence of the polarization of users on certain issues is close to non-existent. Furthermore, most of the studies developed network proxies to detect users' grouping, rarely taking into account the content of the Tweets themselves. Our contribution to this scholarly discussion is founded upon the detection of polarization based on attitudes towards political actors expressed by users in Germany, the USA and Russia within discussions on inter-ethnic conflicts. For this exploratory study, we develop a mixed-method approach to detecting user grouping that includes: crawling for data collection; expert coding of Tweets; user clusterization based on user attitudes; construction of word frequency vocabularies; and graph visualization. Our results show that, in all the three cases, the groups detected are far from being conventionally left or right, but rather that their views combine anti-institutionalism, nationalism, and pro- and anti-minority views in varying degrees. In addition to this, more than two threads of political debate may co-exist in the same discussion. Thus, we show that the debate that sees Twitter as either a platform of 'echo chambering' or 'opinion crossroads' may be misleading. In our opinion, the role of local political context in shaping (and explaining) user clusterization should not be under-estimated.

**Keywords**
echo chamber; inter-ethnic conflict; political polarization; social media; Twitter

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Public Discussion in Russian Social Media", edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

Today, social polarization is believed to be growing both along traditional and newer lines along which schisms form (Duca & Saving, 2017), of which political ones are, arguably, the sharpest. Despite the ever-increasing body of knowledge on political attitudes and alignments online, we still lack understanding of how political divisions show up in issue-oriented discussions and whether there is a cross-country pattern.

Despite all the well-described representation distortions (Daniels, 2013), the content of social media is still used for predicting consumer and/or electoral choices (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014), and the studies of political polarization on social media, including Twitter, are growing in popularity (Barberá, 2014). However,

there are several shortcomings in today's studies of political polarization in user-generated content.

Thus, in most cases, audience polarization is studied by examining purely political issues or events, while social conflicts of race, gender or religious origins with both evident and idiosyncratic polarization and politicisation (McCright & Dunlap, 2011) are rarely studied. Due to context and language differences, multi-country studies are also rare, especially where both established democracies and countries beyond the Euro-Atlantics are included, as, for most observers, these remain politically incomparable. However, conditions other than political regimes may create grounds for cross-cultural juxtapositions (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2018; Bodrunova, Blekanov, & Maksimov, 2017).

Another conceptual limitation is that, even in the most advanced studies, the detection of users' political affiliations or ideologies is done via proxies, most often via structural network factors, such as: friendship affiliations; patterns of following (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Rivero, 2017); or content sharing (Colleoni et al., 2014), which could be misleading. Addressing this gap, newer works show that group polarization in social media may be studied by looking at user texts, including complex referrals to specific phenomena that matter for group identity (Evolvi, 2017). We argue that the analysis of political divisions needs to unite both structural and content aspects (Bodrunova, 2018).

In order to bridge these gaps in previous studies, we look at Twitter discussions regarding inter-ethnic clashes; they have similar conflict triggers and structure of social groups involved into conflict (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2017). Whilst avoiding making straightforward comparisons, we explore users' political polarization and suggest a mixed method to detect it across three cases in different political regimes: the USA; Germany; and Russia. By the UN estimates of 2013–2017, these countries have recently been the three most attractive countries to migrants in the world (United Nations, 2013, 2017) and have all witnessed violent inter-ethnic clashes that became global trending topics on Twitter.

This article, thus, is organized as follows: In Section 1, we review the approaches of assessing user polarization on social media and the conflicts under our scrutiny. In Section 2, we formulate the research questions and describe our methodology. In Section 3, we provide the results; in Section 4, we interpret and discuss them.

## 2. Political Polarization on Twitter: The Current State of Research

### *2.1. Political Polarization Studies and the Current Research Gaps*

Throughout recent years, mixed evidence has persisted in social media studies on whether users go online to agree or to argue (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Research into echo chambers (Colleoni et al., 2014; Sunstein, 2002) has shown that user homophily, both structurally and semantically, may prevent the formation of online 'opinion crossroads', as there is 'evidence of persistent ideological sorting in online communication networks' (Barberá, 2014, p. 2). However, a range of works point to the opposite effects in Twitter communication, with weaker ties responsible for the diversification of the consumption of political information (Barberá, 2014) as well as different platform features on Twitter leading simultaneously to echo chambers and inter-community communication (Conover et al., 2011). Thus, evidence suggests more research is needed to assess the patterns of users' political clusterization on social networks.

Until today, most Twitter polarization studies are bound to the one-country-one-case strategy—with a few notable exceptions (Barberá, 2014; Barberá et al., 2015). Another problem arises from today's understanding of online political polarization (Bramson et al., 2016) as a situation when 'a social or political group is divided into two opposing sub-groups having conflicting and contrasting positions, goals and viewpoints, with few individuals remaining neutral or holding an intermediate position' (Guerra, Meira, Cardie, & Kleinberg, 2013, p. 215; cf. Isenberg, 1986; Sunstein, 2002).

Empirical evidence suggests that, if a heterogeneous group containing users with two opposing views has a non-zero cross-view retweet rate, it will end up as two polarized communities (Conover et al., 2011). Following this logic, the studies of political polarization result in predefined binary descriptions of polarized communities—see Morales, Borondo, Losada, and Benito (2015) for Venezuela; Agathangelou, Katakis, Rori, Gunopulos, and Richards (2017) for Greece; or Weber, Garimella, and Batayneh (2013) for Egypt.

However, for studies beyond the two-party electoral process, it seems useful to remember that polarization is an individual case of clusterization along schismatic lines, disregarding the number of resulting clusters (Esteban & Ray, 1994). In social conflicts, conflicting groups are not necessarily structured along binary political party divisions. The classic work of Tajfel and Turner (1979) shows how social identity (including ethnic identity) divides in- and out-groups, while a later normative model of dissent in social groups (Packer, 2008) implies that, in inter-ethnic conflicts, the majority may divide into pro-minority and anti-minority clusters if the anti-minority attitude is perceived as harmful to the collective (Packer & Chasteen, 2010, p. 5). Also, the very political spectra may be highly multi-dimensional, as The Manifesto Project (https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/) or Polity Project (http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm) suggest. Thus, we consider polarization more as multi-polar fragmentation of divergent clusters, of which bipolar clusterization is just an option.

Non-bipolar clusterization seems to be especially probable for 'issue' or 'ad hoc' publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015) that emerge on social networks. This claim is supported by research on the

topic and issue-based discussions (Elgesem, Steskal, & Diakopoulos, 2015). In single case studies, user polarization has been studied in regard to abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and climate change (Elgesem, 2017; Guerra et al., 2013; Yardi & Boyd, 2010), with varying degrees and directions of polarization detected. Moreover, there is a clear difference in polarization patterns between political and non-political issues (Barberá et al., 2015). But the evidence of differences in polarization patterns is still scarce in academic literature.

The biggest challenge in today's polarization studies is that instead of taking into account the actual content of user posts, detection of users' political affiliations is conducted via proxies. Of those, the most interesting results come from assessing structural network factors such as friendship affiliations (Barberá & Rivero, 2015), retweeting patterns (Guerra, Veloso, Meira, & Almeida, 2011), patterns of political following (Barberá et al., 2015; Rivero, 2017) or content-sharing patterns (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Colleoni et al., 2014; Elgesem, 2017). However, using proxies may be misleading (Adamic & Glance, 2005) and even express analysis of actual tweets shows the extreme diversity of political views, both in the form of direct expression and in opinionated content.

However, if not proxies, then what? Several studies suggest that group polarization in social media may be examined by analysing complex user referrals to phenomena that matter for their identity and group alignment (Evolvi, 2017), as it is how the attitudes are expressed in natural language. In the simplest possible terms, one would take user attitudes (positive, negative, and neutral) towards particular objects for such referrals.

Thus, we will try to construct group divisions from the actual Tweet content by coding user referrals towards political players and then defining which of these attitudes divide the users most, and for how many clusters.

### *2.2. Lexicon-Based Approaches to the Analysis of User Polarization*

The area of research closest to our idea of bringing content into polarization studies is a lexicon-based analysis of Twitter data. In recent years, the field has experienced explosive growth, predominantly based on the analysis of sentiments. Without delving fully into these methodologies, we will simply note that the possibility of use of vocabulary-based approaches for polarization assessment tasks (Hillmann & Trier, 2012) is usually based on combining lexical and structural analysis. Several researchers went beyond so-called 'naïve' sentiment and have tried to link affect (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012) or appraisal (Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013) in user texts, types of lexical units (Speriosu, Sudan, Upadhyay, & Baldridge, 2011), and structural elements of Twitter discussions, like graphs of following or speed and volume of Tweet dissemination. Using these and other works, one could conclude that a sentiment-based approach to detecting left and right differences would imply developing a 'negative' (say, leftist) + neutral + 'positive' (say, rightist) lexicon and applying them to the discussion bulk. However, the problem that we have run into with this approach is the following:

(1) The users expressed not 'left views' or 'right views' but attitudes (with their lexical markers) towards politicians, institutions, social groups, or events ('actors');
(2) A given user would express attitudes towards not just one but many actors of different political stances;
(3) The same user could express recognized-as-rightist attitudes towards one actor and recognized-as-leftist attitudes towards another actor of comparable significance (e.g., immigrants and nationalists);
(4) The same user could express negative views on both leftist and rightist actors (say, Barak Obama and the KKK in the USA).

In case (3), the user's preferences, as measured by one-dimensional positive/negative sentiment analysis, would create a zero-sum, and assigning the bias would not be possible. In case (4), an at least two-dimensional measurement of the political spectrum is needed. Taking this into consideration, we have further developed our research questions and the exploratory research design based on user sentiment, but not on pre-defined target-independent lexicons. Instead, to better capture user attitudes, we will use expert coding of Tweets, standardising the coding process with the help of the idea of 'complex user referrals' by Evolvi (2017).

### *2.3. The Research Cases*

As stated above, we have studied three intergroup conflicts of ethnic or racial origins in the three leading immigration recipient countries: the USA, Germany, and Russia. Direct comparisons of ad hoc discussions (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) are currently viewed with some doubt in academic literature. Without developing a strictly comparative research design, we have argued elsewhere (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2017; Bodrunova, Blekanov, & Maksimov, 2017) that the conflicts we picked for the analysis are similar enough as research cases. They share a range of attributes: a violent interpersonal trigger, outbursts of public discussion across media platforms (becoming trending topics on Twitter), social polarization along the inter-ethnic or inter-race chasms, street action, and involvement of federal authorities. In addition, they were chosen because they were the first in a line of similar conflictual cases and, at least partly, set the communicative patterns for later discussions.

The cases are described as follows:

1) A violent uprising against immigrants from Central Asia in the district of Biryulyovo, Moscow, Russia, in

September 2013. After immigrant Orkhan Zeinalov, allegedly, killed local youngster Egor Scherbakov, the Biryolyovo residents destroyed the local warehouse and a trade centre around which hundreds of illegal immigrants had been dwelling. Several non-violent 'people's gatherings' followed.

2) Ferguson riots, Missouri, USA, in August 2014. There, unarmed African American teenager, Mike Brown was shot to death by white police officer Darren Wilson. The killing, as well as the defensive behaviour of the local police department, spurred several waves of street protests and peaceful support actions, including crowds at Mike Brown's funeral ceremony.

3) Mass harassment and rape of females on New Year's Eve of 2016 in Cologne, Germany. Over 1,000 women reported being harassed during the celebrations on the city's main square, allegedly, by re-settlers from North Africa and the Middle East. After that, demonstrations in protest were organized by radical political actors (PEGIDA movement and the party 'Alternative for Germany').

## 3. Research Questions and Methodology

### *3.1. The Outline of the Research Design*

#### 3.1.1. Research Questions

From what was said above, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. How, if at all, do the users cluster within the discussions, based on their attitudes to the major conflict actors? Does binary clusterization best describe user grouping?

RQ2. Can the clusters be described as left or right in relation to the respective national political spectra? If not, then how could these clusters be described?

RQ3. Are there similarities in the cluster structure of the discussions?

#### 3.1.2. The Research Design

The way the RQs were formulated demanded an exploratory research design. To answer the research questions, we had to see which user groups emerged among the influencers and what discourses they conveyed.

Our concept for detecting user polarization was that political grouping within a discussion was constructed via a multi-dimensional combination of attitudes towards political actors (as defined above). These major political actors needed to be deduced from the discussions themselves. Then, the attitudes towards these players would be decrypted by expert coders for the key users, or influencers (Bodrunova, Blekanov, & Maksimov, 2017), usually the bearers of the spectrum of attitudes.

The data received after coding would undergo clusterization, with each user belonging to one non-fuzzy cluster. Tweets by the users in the detected clusters would provide the word frequency vocabularies, which, after expert assessment, would turn into clusterization vocabularies. The latter would then be applied to all the users in the discussions, to see which users get into clusters and which discourses form there.

This approach, even if simple enough and reliant on expert intrusion, allows us to take into account the nature of the users' political discussion, as well as the lack of linearity of their political positioning. We consider this crucial for studies on conflict discussions, as it may allow the inclusion of conflict-invoked (e.g., pro- or anti-minority), actor-oriented (e.g., authorities), and traditional political divisions (e.g., left and right and centre and radical). At this exploratory stage, our method does not imply machine learning or supervised approaches to data classification; we use big datasets at this stage of data collection only.

### *3.2. The Research Procedures*

#### 3.2.1. Data Collection and Pre-Processing

As this work is part of a bigger research project, our methods of data collection were described in detail previously (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2017). Here, we briefly describe the steps we followed.

We used trendinalia.com to detect the initial discussion keywords and snowball reading to amplify this collection, thus forming the vocabularies for crawling. Trendinalia.com is a web service that allows daily monitoring of both world, regional, and national Twitter trending hashtags and words with no hashtag on an hourly basis, with the possibility of backdating; it has worked best in terms of detecting the trending topics, compared to the over ten other websites we had tried since 2013.

Using an API-independent Twitter crawler (Blekanov, Sergeev, & Martynenko, 2012), we collected the content of the discussions. All publicly available Tweets and the data on user interactions (likes, retweets, comments) were collected by a two-step procedure. Step one included the users who posted under the hashtags. Step two detected a wider community of likers, retweeters and commenters. On the discussion graph, only the step one nodes have been visualized.

Due to reasons regarding feasibility and sample comparability, collection periods differed. Thus, for Russia and Germany, the download period was 30 days after the trigger event. For the USA, we had to select the two weeks following the shooting, with Mike Brown's funeral as the central event. The user samples included:

For Biryulyovo—Step1: over 3,700 users; Step2: over 12,000 users;
For Ferguson—Step1: over 70,000 users; Step2: over 210,000 users;
For Cologne—Step1: over 12,000 users; Step2: over 99,000 users.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

To answer RQ1, we needed to cluster key users by their political views, define the cluster vocabularies, and apply these vocabularies to the rest of the users, in order to see the discussion clusters and interpret their discourses.

As we expected the influencers to be bearers of the polarizing discourse, for each case, we defined the group of influencers based on nine parameters: the number of Tweets, likes, retweets, comments, in-degree, out-degree, degree, betweenness, and pagerank centralities. After these experiments, using various thresholds, the top 50 users were chosen as the cutting line for each parameter. As many users were repeated in the top due to several specifications, the duplicates were deleted. After elimination of influencers with low numbers of Tweets and bot-like influencers (with a percentage of repeated Tweets over 50%) 156 users for Germany, 105 users for Russia, and 105 the USA were left. But, for the USA sample (which was several times bigger in the number of Tweets), the number of users was reduced by half, to 52 users. Their respective tweet collections for reading and coding included 13,359, 3,012, and 9,540 tweets.

To define user attitudes towards political actors, we developed scales for coding and coded the users (not their Tweets). The coders were experts in inter-ethnic conflict and, additionally, academic native-speakers, and the level of inter-coder reliability as measured by Cohen's kappa reached at least 0.68 for any two sub-samples. The coders used the scale from −2 to 2 to assess the attitude of each user to the following groups that had been identified as attitude triggers by reading the tweets before coding: 1) the minority (immigrants or African Americans); 2) 'radical right' or 'radical white'—nationalists in Russia, PEGIDA and AFD in Germany, and the Tea Party and the KKK (as a label for radical whites) in the USA; 3) the incumbent country leaders—Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in Russia, Angela Merkel in Germany, and Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton in the USA; 4) local authorities and police forces grouped together as the 'oppressive and responsible' actors. Attitudes towards liberal opposition in Russia and to Republicans and Democrats were also coded, as we found them salient in the Tweets.

Based on this coding, the influences were clustered to form groups with similar combinations of attitudes. After clustering, the Tweets of each group were merged, and fully divergent frequency vocabularies of their discourses were formed with the use of expert vocabulary 'cleaning'. Then, we applied the vocabularies to all the users in the discussions, to see how the discourses distribute within the discussion structure. We also measured whether these discourses formed distinct nebulae; but even if they did not, we assessed which users belonged to these discourses and interpreted the semantics of their speech qualitatively. What mattered for our analysis was whether the influencers formed distinct groups; all the following steps were the consequence.

In detail, the research steps were the following.

1) Based on our coding, the influences of each case were grouped with the help of a k-means clustering algorithm with sorted the distances. With the number of clusters and the number of variables being diverse, the best solutions were finally chosen based on Silhouette metric S, within- and between-cluster square sums, examinations of variable means in each cluster (see Figures 1 to 3 for Russia, Germany, and the USA, respectively), and expert reading of tweets in each cluster. All the three influencer groups clustered well; Germany clustered best, Russia followed, and the USA the least, but all the solutions were sufficient by Silhouette from 2 to 10 possible clusters. To identify the best solutions, other aforementioned metrics were used. Those solutions were:

For Russia: 4 variables (attitude to liberal opposition excluded), 3 clusters of 49, 36, and 20 users, $S > 0.4$;
For Germany: 4 variables, 3 clusters of 99, 48, and 9 users, $S > 0.5$;
For the USA: 5 variables (attitude to Democrats excluded), 4 clusters of 15, 15, 12, and 10 users, $S > 0.2$.

2) For each cluster, word frequency vocabularies were formed by merging the Tweets, ranging the words by frequency, and expert reading. After reading, only the words unique or highly characteristic for each cluster (for example, two mentions in one cluster and 160 in another would result into eliminating the word in the first one and leaving it in the other). If the difference between the numbers of mentions in any two clusters of the case was smaller than ten times, the word was eliminated in all the clusters.

3) We applied the thesaurus to the rest of the users in each case; we wanted to identify the users who use the words from the divergent thesauri. As a result, we have received three types of users in each case: 1) the users who belonged to clusters 1 to 3 or 4; 2) the 'overlappers' who used the language of more than one cluster; 3) the users who did not use the discourses (mostly due to a low number of their Tweets). To ensure a higher quality of marking users, rather than using individual words from the thesauri, two-word combinations were used.

4) Based on this information, we constructed the graphs of discourse distribution, with users as apexes and user interactions (comments and/or retweets) as edges, and calculated the indices for user centralities. We assessed who were the most influential discourse bearers and what they spoke about. We used Gephi algorithms OpenOrd and Force Atlas 2 for graph construction (see Martin, Brown, Klavans, & Boyack, 2011, on OpenOrd), as the former favours centripetal graphing and the latter better shows visual homophily (see Figures 4 to 6). To see whether the groups bearing the discourses were tighter than inter-group connections, we calculated the mean number of in-group and inter-group edges.

To answer RQ2 about the left or right nature of the clusters, we partly recoded our coding data and cor-

rected the graphs of means (Figures 1 to 3) accordingly. Recoding was needed to re-interpret attitudes for and against a given actor as pro-left or pro-right. E.g., the influencers expressed attitudes towards political leaders (Obama, Merkel, and Putin), coded −2 to 2. But, for the respective political spectra, Obama is leftist, while Merkel and Putin (Bluhm & Varga, 2018) represent the rightist spectrum side. To 'normalize' the user attitudes, we recoded all the pro-left views as −1 to −2, and all pro-right views as 1 to 2 (see Table 1). By doing this, we could show on the graphs of means whether the clusters (and how many of them) were pro-left, pro-right, or

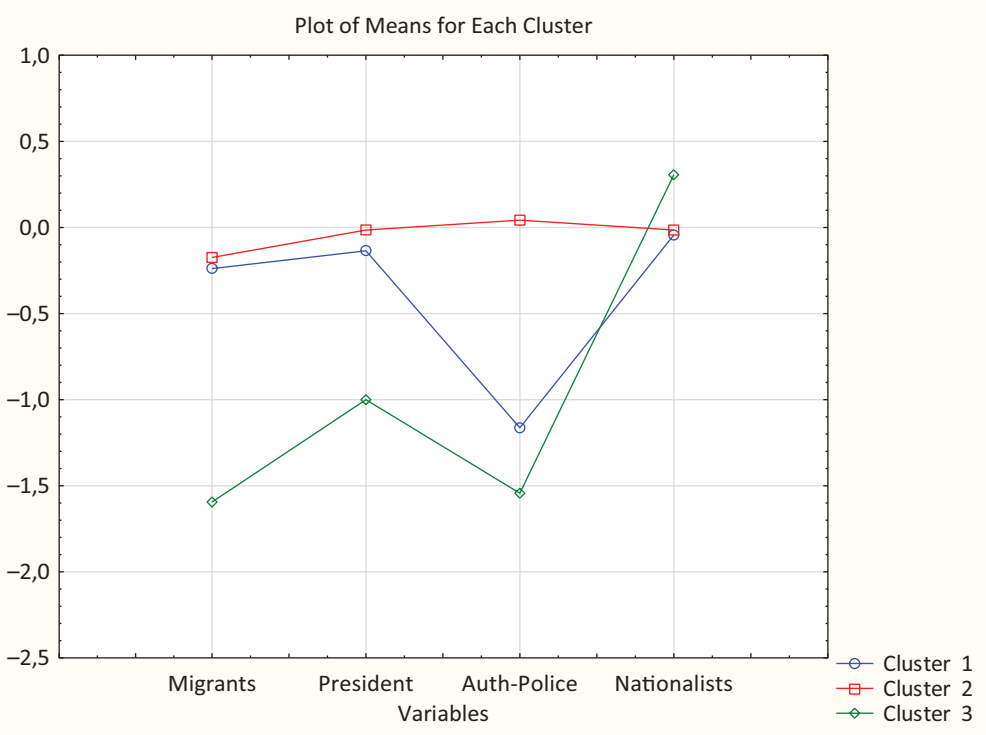


**Figure 1.** Mean values of user attitudes to the selected political actors in attitude-based clusters for Russia.

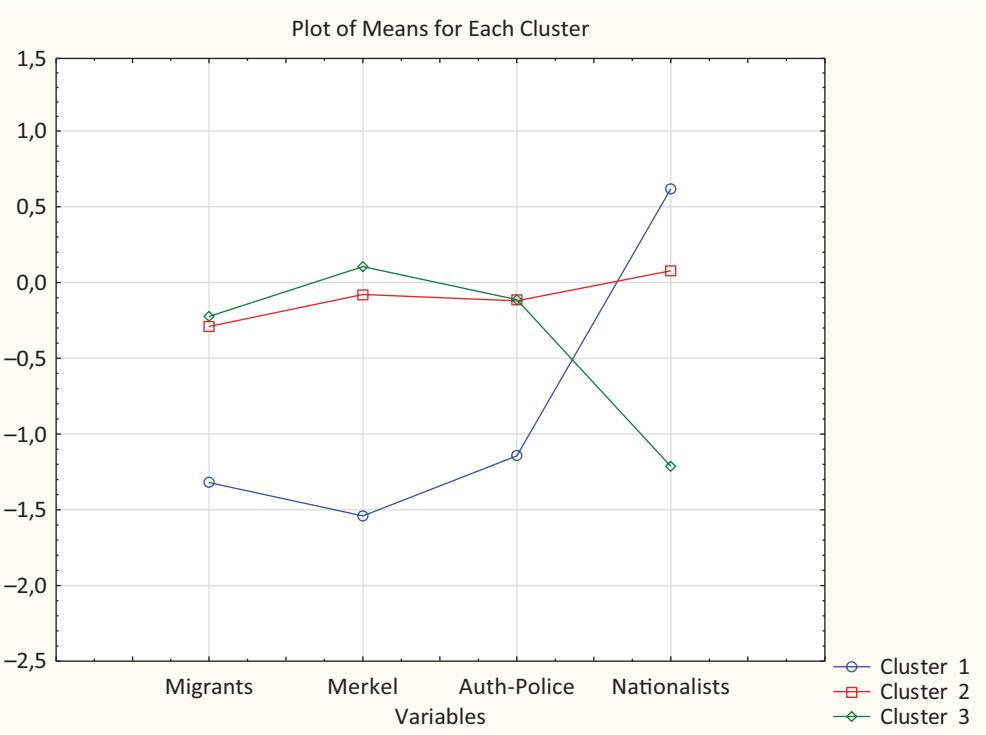


**Figure 2.** Mean values of user attitudes to the selected political actors in attitude-based clusters for Germany.

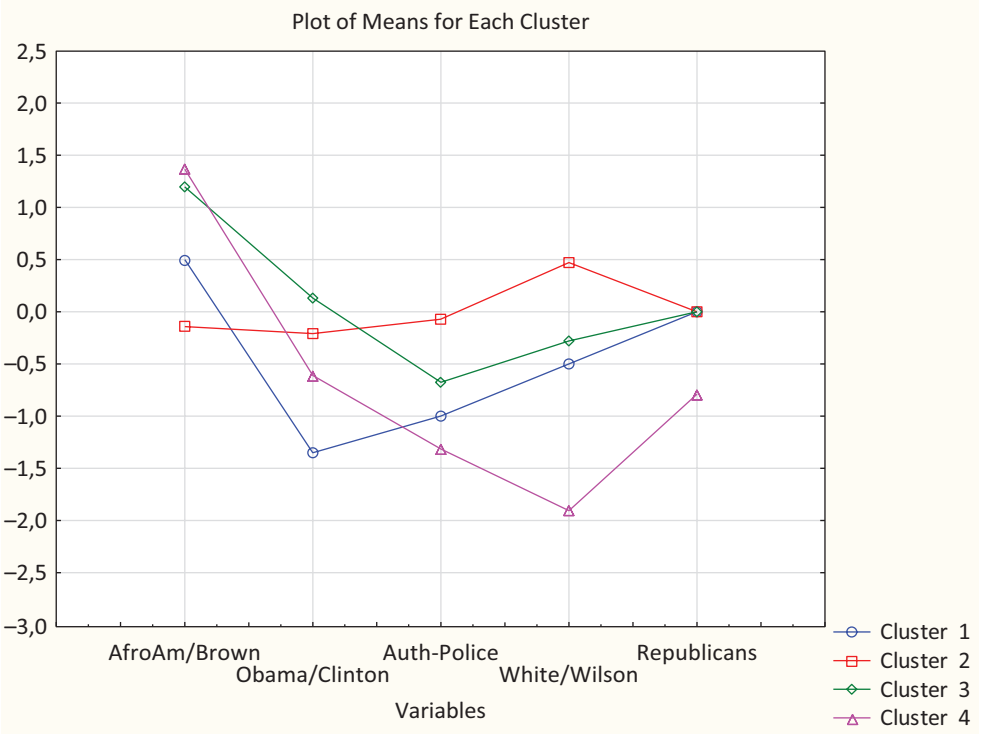


**Figure 3.** Mean values of user attitudes to the selected political actors in attitude-based clusters for the USA.

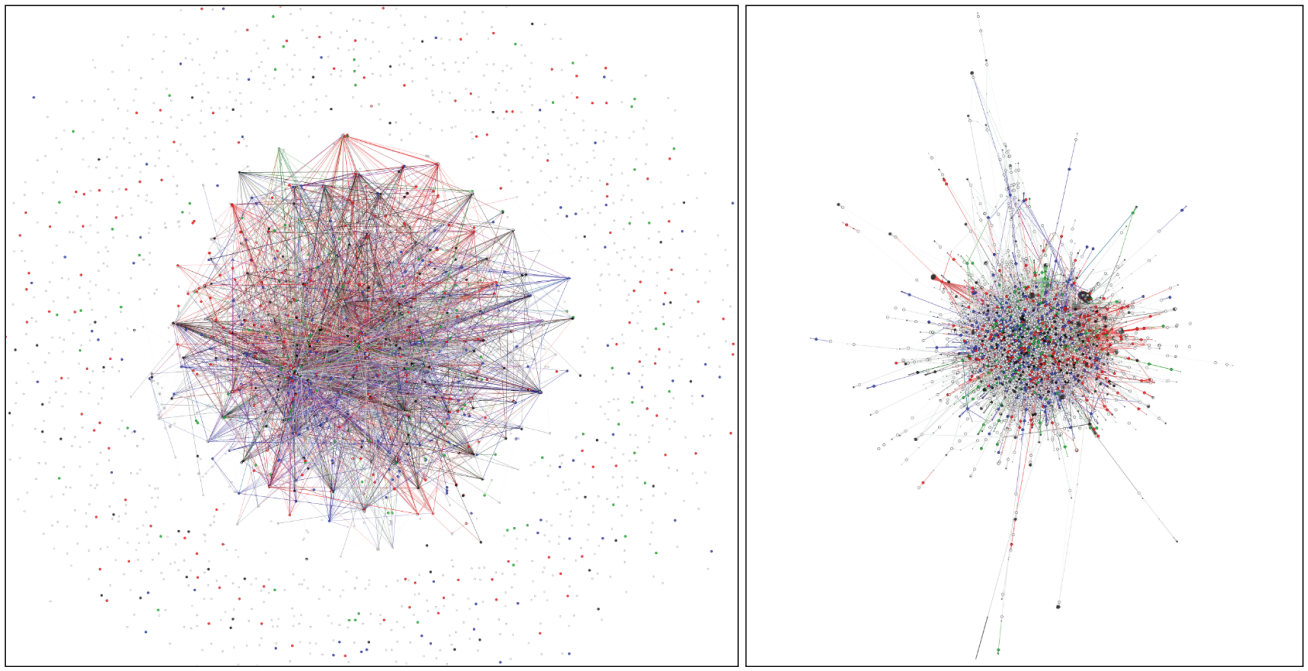

**Figure 4.** Communication within and between discursive groups of users in the discussions, with users as vertices and interactions (retweets and comments) as edges; reconstructed by OpenOrd and Force Atlas 2 algorithms for Russia. Notes: blue: Cluster 1, 'anti-establishment nationalists'; red: Cluster 2, 'news disseminators'; green: Cluster 3, 'angry citizens'; black: 'overlappers'; grey: non-clustered users.

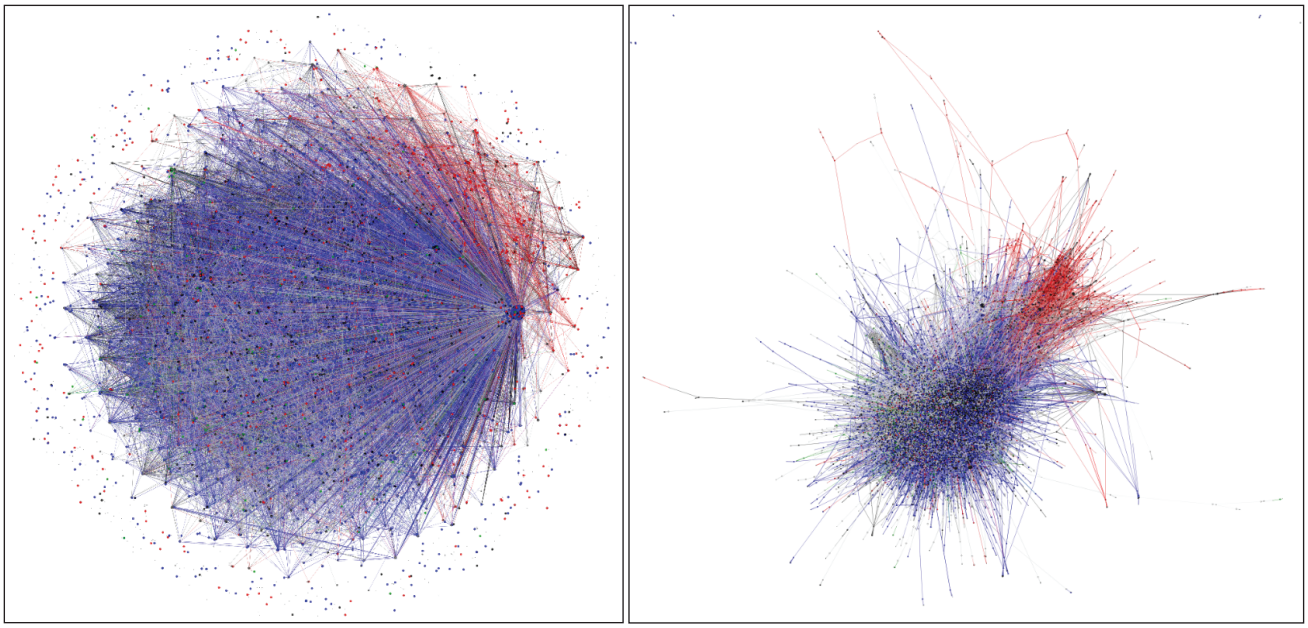

**Figure 5.** Communication within and between discursive groups of users in the discussions, with users as vertices and interactions (retweets and comments) as edges; reconstructed by OpenOrd and Force Atlas 2 algorithms for Germany. Notes: blue: Cluster 1, 'nationalists'; red: Cluster 2, 'news disseminators'; green: Cluster 3, 'anti-nationalists'; black: 'overlappers'; grey: non-clustered users.

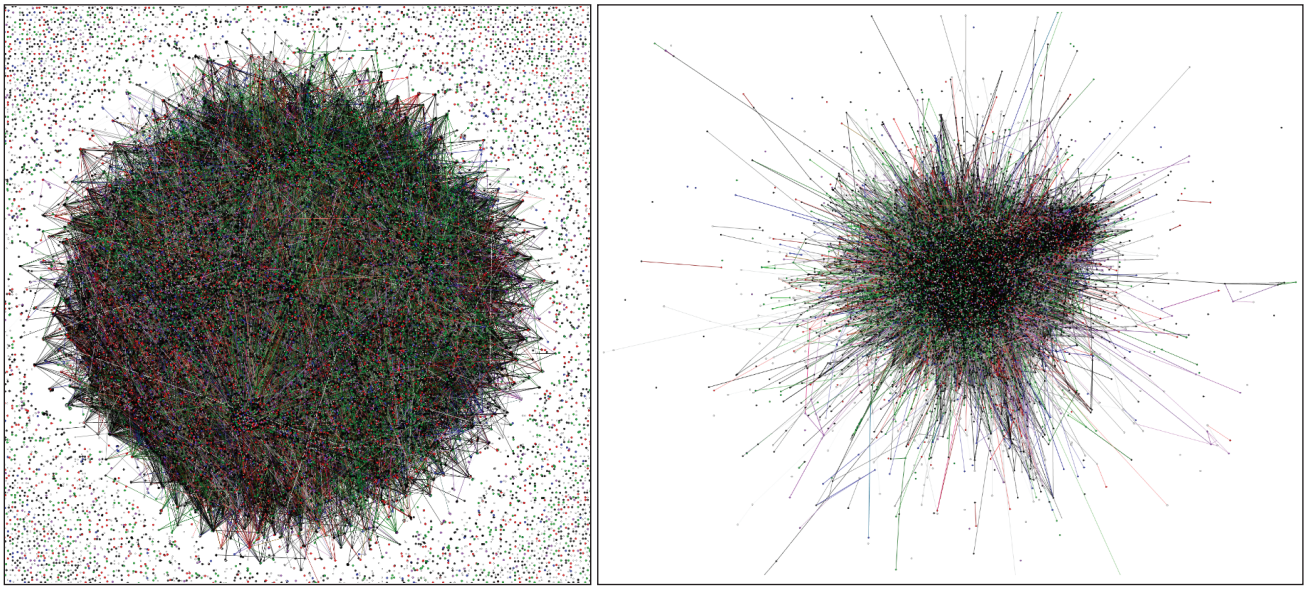

**Figure 6.** Communication within and between discursive groups of users in the discussions, with users as vertices and interactions (retweets and comments) as edges; reconstructed by OpenOrd and Force Atlas 2 algorithms for the USA. Notes: blue: Cluster 1, 'politicized observers'; red: Cluster 2, 'media-oriented users'; green: Cluster 3, 'human rights activists'; purple: Cluster 4, 'whites' blamers'; black: 'overlappers'; grey: non-clustered users.

mixed—see Figures 7 to 9 for Russia, Germany, and the USA, respectively.

To answer RQ3, we qualitatively assessed the results for RQ1 and RQ2.

## 4. Results

Our results show that the discourses identified by coding influencers cover a substantial part of the discourse in all the cases: for Russia, the thesauri covered 31,5%, in Germany, 63,4% and, in the USA, 73,5% of the users. This shows that influencers' talk reflects the discourse of 'ordinary users' to different extents in each country, but everywhere we were able to detect the discourses that were important for the overall discussion.

As the figures suggest, in all the three cases, group structure was not binary; moreover, binary solutions for each country would hide important discourses that

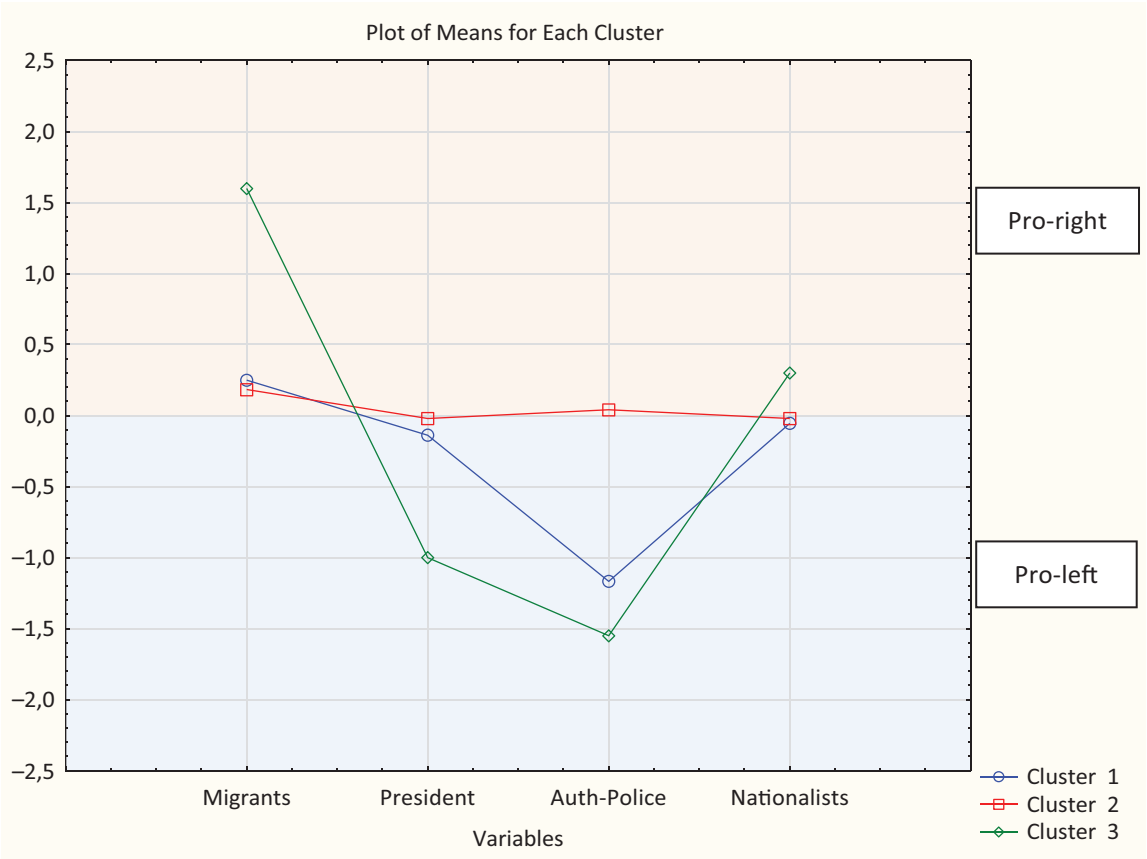


**Figure 7.** Mean values for the recoded data on user attitudes towards the selected political actors for Russia.

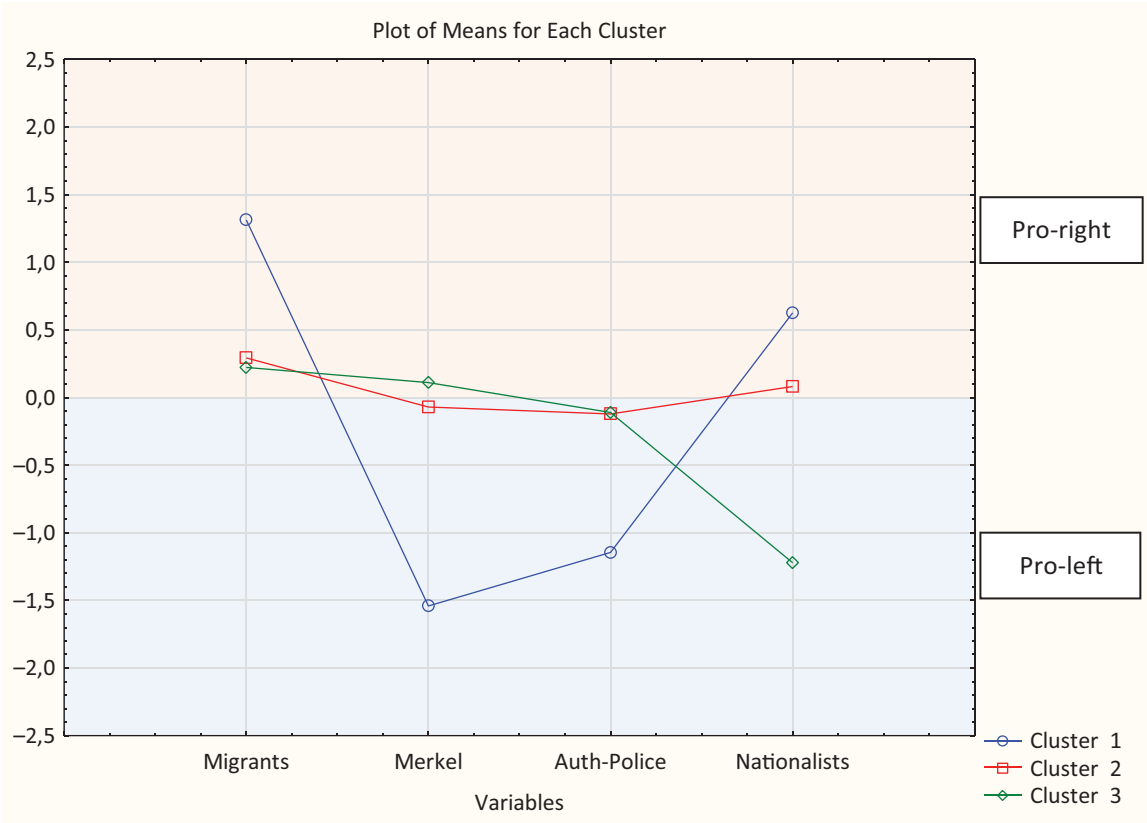


**Figure 8.** Mean values for the recoded data on user attitudes towards the selected political actors for Germany.

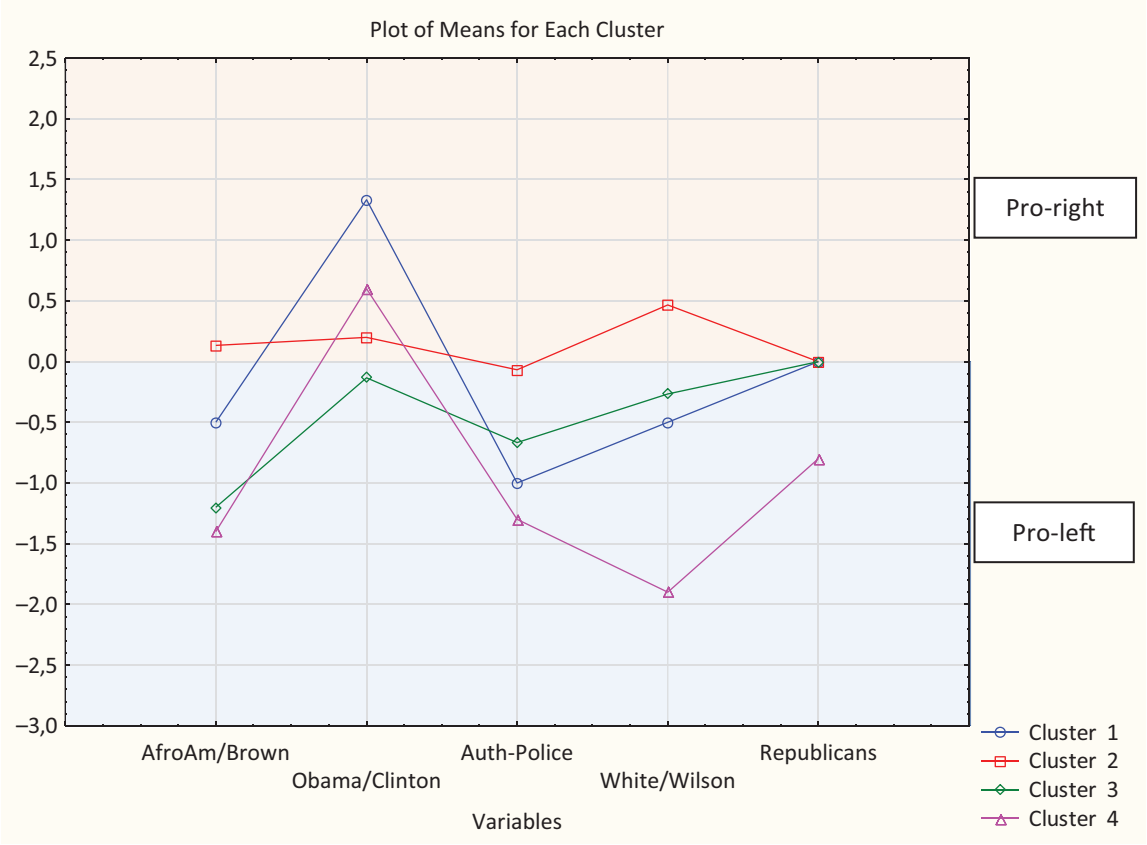


**Figure 9.** Mean values for the recoded data on user attitudes towards the selected political actors for the USA.

**Table 1.** Recoding of variables for their left-right normalization.

| Country | Minority | President | Police-Authorities | Nationalists | Opposition | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Russia** | Recoded | Not | Not | Not | Recoded | — | – |
| **Germany** | Recoded | Not | Not | Not | — | — | — |
| **USA** | Recoded | Recoded | Not | Not | — | Recoded | Not |

actually constituted the discussions. Neither did the group divisions correspond to the minority/pro-minority majority/anti-minority majority scheme. Instead, the clusters may be described as follows:

For Russia, the clusters include: 'news disseminators'; 'anti-establishment nationalists'; and 'angry citizens'. The first group was mostly neutral but formed a substantial part of the political discussions by supplying (posting or retweeting) news at each stage of the conflict. The second cluster was clearly anti-immigrant and nationalistic but differed from European nationalism. Within the discussion, there was also an evident divide between the nationalist groups who supported the current establishment and those who actively opposed it. The former saw the incumbent leadership as the flesh of the 1990s' elites who 'had stolen the country'; such users, therefore, blamed the national policymakers for supporting the post-Soviet immigration. The second type of nationalism—the pro-establishment one—showed up in the third cluster of 'angry citizens'. This cluster united anti-institutionalists who were raising voices against *bespredel* ('the absence of limits' and rules of the game), but in differing ways. This diverse group included pro-Putin nationalists who were ready to fight with the Moscow riot police, liberal oppositional media and public figures who criticized the policymakers, and 'tired citizens' who negatively treated the immigrants, *and* the country leaders, *and* the local authorities, *and* the nationalists. Unlike in the 'news disseminators' cluster, the close-to-zero means for these variables here were the result of pro- and anti-establishment views compensating each other while the users united against police (see Figure 1).

For Germany, the clusters include: 'news disseminators'; 'nationalists'; and 'anti-nationalists'. Discursively, the biggest group of 'nationalists' unites two similar sub-groups, one with slightly more aggressive tendencies towards small liberal-oriented parties and activist movements (like Antifa), and the other more critical of the national government. The anti-nationalist group is, however, also salient, making the German picture one-dimensional in terms of political divisions (pro- and anti-

minority), even if the dimension is not political-party but issue-based. Also, the overlappers play a significant role here, as they visually stand in between the two opposing clusters, thus creating bridges for public dialogue (see Figure 5).

For the USA, the clusters include: 'media-oriented users'; 'human rights activists'; 'politicized observers'; and 'whites' blamers' (see Figure 3). Within the influencers, the clusters were similar in volume, but, on the big graph, the last two groups were relatively small-scale, while the first two dominated the graph. Just as in Russia, the media-oriented discourse was a part of the political discussion, but the three other groups were not neutral, especially 'whites' blamers' and 'human rights activists.' The former actively blamed 'the white dominance' and called for action against oppression. Interestingly, the hashtag #blacklivesmatter was less important for this group than for the media-oriented discourse. However, blaming hashtags and words like 'murderer,' 'republikkklan,' or 'kkkop,' and calls for action (like '#arrestdarrenwilson,' '#boycottgofundme,' or '#donotshopmonday'), were prominent. The other group, very different from 'whites' haters,' and linked the case to human rights issues like abortion (#prolife), gender inequality (#womeninequalityday), morality (#moralmonday), and others. The group itself, as one can see even from the hashtags, was polar in itself in terms of left and right divisions on human rights. For this group, positioning on Mike Brown's death was different, expressed mostly by 'don't shoot' hashtags. 'Politicized observers' abstained from taking clear sides, but discussed the Ferguson events in terms of its influence upon the political process in America. Interestingly, the cluster that mostly reposted media, was the most pro-Wilson, as media, evidently, tried to remain balanced; they also reported police press conferences that were modestly defensive towards Darren Wilson.

Then, we looked at how the discourses we described spread inside the graph. Our task was not to calculate the level of homophily and prove user clustering for all the discussions; the goal was to see how the discourses actually spread and whether they spread in a similar way—and they did not. For Russia and the USA, the discourses mixed, but if in Russia we saw inter-cluster talk, in the USA overlappers took almost all the space in the graph centre. And in Germany, the graph was clearly structurally divided. This was also proved by the mean in- and inter-cluster weighted number of edges: in Russia, the inter-cluster links took over (216 vs. 323.5, respectively), while in Germany (4392.75 vs. 2890.25) and the USA (21114.4 vs. 3755.2) in-group connections were stronger.

Thus, the attitude-based grouping was different in each of the three cases. Also, it was far from clear left-right identifications. In order to show it, we have recoded the variables as stated above, making pro-left views negative (−1 to −2) and pro-right views positive (1 to 2). We considered anti-minority, anti-Obama/Clinton, pro-Putin/Medvedev, pro-Merkel, pro-police, pro-nationalist, anti-opposition (in Russia), anti-Democrat, and pro-Republican (in the USA) views pro-right, while the opposite was marked pro-left. See the full recoding scheme in Table 1.

The resulting graphs of means are quite telling (see Figures 7 to 9). Both in Russia and Germany, the leaders representing rightist sides of the spectra have actually taken pro-migration stance, and this has made right-wing users who support nationalist movements and speak against immigrants, move left and be against the incumbent leaders, as well as against the local authorities and police for 'not protecting' the host communities. But the other clusters in the two countries quite strongly differ from each other. While in Germany issue-based leftism is clearly seen, the other Russian cluster of 'angry citizens' diverges into three discourses that combine clearly rightist, pro-establishment nationalism; liberal, anti-establishment oppositional speakers; and politicised citizens. These politicised citizens, paradoxically for external observers, do not support any of the existing political factions, due to their impotence in resolving local problems. Thus, at least two nationalist discourses were detected by us for Russia—while in the USA there are two very different left-wing clusters, one clearly left, supportive of either Obama or Clinton and based on human rights' discourse, and another that was sharply anti-white, even blaming Obama for not being protective enough, which, in our rough coding, made the cluster stick out to anti-Obama views on the rightist side of Figure 9 (in effect, being extreme left). The cluster of 'politicized observers', interestingly, is reminiscent of the 'tired citizens' in Russia, as they are, on average, only slightly pro-African-American and, more strongly, anti-leader, anti-police, and anti-majority.

Another crucial observation is that, while the divisions in the discussion clearly stem from local political contexts, they are quite far from expectations determined by the systemic political features of the countries. Thus, in the majoritarian USA where one would expect two-sided polarization, the clusters were, in fact, numerous and the discussion was based on overlappers. It was rather coalitional Germany that showed polarization. And in Russia, just one side of the spectrum was present in the discussion. Thus, it is not only the local political markets but also the nature of the issue and issue-based divisions that shape political clustering.

Overall conclusions are thus the following: The discursive schisms do exist in issue-based discussions, but they do not fall into binary categories according to majoritarian political divisions, and; they only partially fall into the three-side divisions expected by the nature of the issue. Instead, local political spectra may provoke the formation of, for example, two leftist or two rightist clusters. Only Germany has demonstrated the expected divisions between anti- and pro-minority majority, while the minority remained highly under-represented at all, like in Russia—and unlike in America.

The similarities can also be traced, but not in terms of left and right divisions. First, in all the discussions, a politically neutral news-based cluster played a significant structural role. Second, all three discussions revealed harsh anti-institutionalism, including that from the users who, in conventional logic, were expected to support the incumbents. Third, Germany and Russia were similar in how nationalist clusters were against the conservative governments, and Russia and the USA were similar in how the 'tired citizens' were politicised against all the political sides.

## 5. Conclusion

In our article, we have combined content analysis of social media with cluster analysis and graph construction. Our method has revealed greater complexity of politicised discourse within ad hoc Twitter discussions on interethnic conflicts. Thus, we have found that there may be several clusters of leftist or rightist views even if the number of clusters is minimal, and users may combine formally leftist and rightist views if positions of political actors or the nature of the issue demand it. The groups we have detected differ highly in their conceptualisation from the traditional left and right divisions and left or right labels cannot be attached to individual users based on their preferences, like pro- and anti-minority stances or treatments of country leaders or parties. We have also shown that, on the graphs, the discourses intertwine quite intensely if we do not force the graphs to artificially diverge according to users' political views.

Our research provides new input for rethinking the political divisions that form online, on what grounds they form, and how to detect them. The local political contexts, as well as the nature of the issues under scrutiny, are major factors to be taken into account. In our article, the 'issue publics' provide clues on how political opinion is veering away from traditional left and right divisions, and Twitter communication is more complicated than the imaginary cocooned talk in echo chambers, especially for issues beyond elections and direct policing.

Limitations of our method stem from the subjectivity of coding and from the low number of coded influencers, but these may be partially overcome by automatisation of coding collections and the increase of the number of coded users thanks to automatisation. Our method may be applied to detect hidden issue-oriented polarization beyond one-dimensional left-right political spectra.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Olessia Koltsova (Russia) and Christian Baden (Israel) for their comments on early versions of the article, as well as to our international team of coders. This research has been supported in full by the Russian Science Foundation grant 16-18-10125-P (2016–2018, prolonged for 2019–2020).

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 133–144**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.1925**

Article

# Public Deliberation in Russia: Deliberative Quality, Rationality and Interactivity of the Online Media Discussions

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Submitted: 15 December 2018 | Accepted: 15 March 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Deliberation research is now undergoing two emerging trends: deliberation is shifting from offline to online, as well as from an inherently democratic concept to the one applicable to less competitive regimes (He & Warren, 2011). The goal of this article is to study the peculiarities of deliberative practices in hybrid regimes, taking online discourse on the Russian anti-sanctions policy as a case. We use the Habermasian concept of basic validity claims to assess deliberation quality through the lens of argumentation and interactivity. Our findings suggest that deliberative practices can exist in non-competitive contexts and non-institutionalized digital spaces, in the form of intersubjective solidarities resulting from the everyday political talk among ordinary citizens. Such deliberations can be counted as argumentative discourses, although in a special, casual way—unlike the procedural rule-based debates. Generally, as in established liberal democracies, deliberation in Russia tends to attract like-minded participants. While the argumentative quality does not seem to vary across the discussion threads sample, the level of deliberative interactivity is higher on pro-government media, accompanied with the higher level of incivility. On the other hand, discourses on independent media are distinctively against the government policy of food destruction. The democratic value of such deliberations is unclear and might depend on the political allegiance and ownership of the media. Though some discourses can be considered democratic, their impact on decision-making remains minimal, which is a key constraint of deliberation.

**Keywords**
argumentation; authoritarian deliberation; civility; deliberation; interactivity; internet discussions; media; online discourse; validity claims

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Public Discussion in Russian Social Media", edited by edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

Since its emergence, deliberation research has been strongly associated with democracy as a goal of deliberation or at least an object of study. This democracy quest has been then extended online (Friess & Eilders, 2015). Yet searching for deliberation in non-democratic contexts, derived from the Chinese experience of citizen engagement, is another emerging trend. The authoritarian deliberation theory (He & Warren, 2011) has already gone online (Jiang, 2010) and beyond China (Romano, 2018; Toepfl, 2018), and, furthermore, from spaces created and totally controlled by governments to grassroot deliberation practices (He, Tang, & Tamura, 2018,

pp. 798–799; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Medaglia & Zhu, 2017), which, however, remain underexplored due to the lack of context-related research. Hence, we aim at contributing to the authoritarian deliberation research by exploring the peculiarities, opportunities and constraints of deliberative practices in non-democracies.

Our study differs from the most in authoritarian deliberation research in several respects. First, we take the case of Russia, which has a different, hybrid modification of regime known as electoral authoritarianism (Gel'man, 2015), i.e., the one that has certain 'democratic' institutions and limited political pluralism. Such pluralism is still visible online, since the RuNet has been for a long time developing relatively freely (Soldatov & Borogan, 2015). It allows us to assess and compare deliberation processes and outcomes depending on the relationship between the government and a certain outlet.

Secondly, we examine deliberative practices on several online discussion platforms among ordinary, politically non-organized citizens. In contrast to invited spaces (Kersting, 2013) controlled by governments, such discussions represent non-institutionalized (semi-) invented virtual public spaces—or rather 'third places' (Wright, 2012)—where members of the public engage in computer-mediated communications to discuss salient issues freely. Here we distinguish the media outlets themselves (that can be under direct or indirect government influence) from the online discussions they host (which are free from such control, as there is no evidence that such discussions are coerced or manipulated—there is no lack of criticism towards authorities on other issues in the past discussions as well). In this view, our aim is to better understand whether deliberation quality and outcomes would differ across online discussion platforms depending on the political affiliation of their host owners.

Thirdly, we choose one highly politically and morally sensitive issue, namely, the discussion of destroying Western food under embargo following the Russian counter-sanctions policy, to study such discussions from a deliberation perspective; the latter includes such features as civility, interactivity, argumentation and the prevailing positions towards the food destruction policy. In doing so, we start with the review of existing theories on deliberation and authoritarian deliberation, followed by the elaboration of research methodology, describing the deliberation standard, against which the discussion content was coded. Then we present the empirical case study. The article ends by demonstrating and discussing the research findings.

## 2. Reconceptualizing Deliberation in the Internet Era

### *2.1. Democratic Value of Deliberation as Argumentative Reason*

As theorized by Jurgen Habermas, deliberation is a deeply democratic phenomenon within the (idealized) concept of the public sphere and participatory democracy (Bohman & Rehg, 1997, p. XII; Habermas, 1992a). His theories of discourse ethics and communicative action decouple the Kantian notion of reason and will-formation from the subjective selves of individuals into the discursively (and collectively) constructed intersubjective solidarities formed during deliberation (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 2006). In this interpretation, deliberation broadens its meaning to include everyday communicative practices among ordinary citizens. Habermas calls such practices 'practical discourses' where citizens are engaged in truth-tracking moral discussions to understand others by making claims to validity (Habermas, 1992b, pp. 52, 103, 122). Habermas (1992a, p. 19) argues, for example, that:

> Everyday communication makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on one another in more or less coercive ways. The validity claims that we raise in conversation—that is, when we say something with conviction—transcend this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatiotemporal ambit of the occasion. Every agreement, whether produced for the first time or reaffirmed, is based on (controvertible) grounds of reason. Grounds have a special property: they force us into yes or no positions.

'Yes' and 'No' positions emerge when discourse participants make the basic claim to the validity of shared values, 'intersubjective' normative rightness (Habermas, 1987, pp. 313–314, 1984, p. 52). Being aware of this way of reasoning encourages citizens to respond by validating such claims and displaying the reason behind 'Yes' and 'No' positions. Habermas (1984, p. 31) specifically argues that 'the theory of argumentation must be equipped with a more comprehensive concept of validity that is not restricted to validity in the sense of truth'. It is the hearer who ultimately decides which claims seem 'truthful' to be validated by agreement or disagreement on the basis of universal or group moral and ethical standards.

In the Habermasian tradition, deliberation is a participatory form of politically, morally, and ethically justified discourse when citizens voluntarily discuss politics in a casual manner to present competing perspectives through public reasoning instead of bargaining; the latter is typical for the pluralist democratic model (Bohman & Rehg, 1997, pp. XII–XIII). They claim that decision-making should not result from the economics of the rational-choice approach, but from public deliberation, from a communicatively constructed public will, so as democratic policies accommodate not only competing group interests, but also the commonly shared public values (Bohman, 1996; Elster, 1998). Gutmann and Thompson (2004), for example, define deliberative democracy as a 'need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives' through exchanging reasons among 'free

and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation' (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3). However, Dryzek (2000) questions the view that deliberation should be associated with discussions that are (unnaturally) calm, reasoned, argumentative, whereas the genuine communication in democracy should include the real-life discursive processes that are intrinsically social, intersubjective invoking all kinds of 'unruly and contentious communications from the margin' (Dryzek, 2000, p. VI). Mutz (2006) and Gastil (2008) concur that the routine political conversations between neighbors, family members or coworkers are to be counted as the core deliberation practice in the common public sphere.

While some are skeptical that the Internet improves democratic deliberation (Sunstein, 2009), others (Coleman, 2017) believe that it is not about the Internet which just offers new opportunities for strengthening democracy, but it is rather our failure to benefit from such democratic opportunities. Even in democracy, citizens with similar political views develop unhealthy fragmentation and group polarization leading to the 'like-minded enclaves' and 'eventually to a polarized opinion climate in the whole society' (Strandberg, Himmelroos, & Grönlund, 2019, p. 12). Jonsson and Åström (2014, p. 1) in their review of the online deliberation research acknowledge the belief that whilst the idealized version of 'pure deliberation' has not yet been realized online, it is an expanding field trying 'to re-link deliberative theory with empirical political science' in a hope to address these fears. We support a view that empirical evidence is still scarce to clarify more credibly the link between deliberation as a real-life practice and public politics well beyond governing practices of western liberal democracies.

### *2.2. Authoritarian Deliberation: From Invented to (Semi-)Invited Spaces*

Although the media freedom subversion is a common trait of non-democracies, its intensity differs across regimes (Stier, 2015) and goes beyond total censorship to more liberated forms (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, & Huang, 2019; Stafford, 2017), with a vast repertoire of control over officially independent outlets (Schedler, 2009). Such strategies can be found on the Internet as well, when filtering and censorship are masterfully combined with citizens' input and free discussion to ensure regime stability (Gunitsky, 2015). This observation is quite in line with the trend of making citizens' input a source of authoritarian stability (Gerschewski, 2013), including online participation (Åström, Karlsson, Linde, & Pirannejad, 2012).

These tendencies give rise to the concept of authoritarian deliberation (He & Warren, 2011) that combines deliberative governance with non-democratic power distribution. Assuming that deliberation and democracy are conceptually and empirically distinct, the authors define deliberative authoritarianism as 'a form of rule in which powers of decision are concentrated, but power holders enable communicative contexts that generate influence (responsiveness to claims and reasons) among the participants' (He & Warren, 2011, pp. 273–274). The democratic value of such initiatives is questionable (Tong & He, 2018), but it is argued that governments tend to ensure somewhat workable mechanisms of deliberation (He & Wagenaar, 2018).

While most authoritarian deliberation research is concentrated on state—created (invited) public spaces, less attention is given to non-institutionalized, invented or semi-invented spaces, like the social media (Jiang, 2010; Medaglia & Zhu, 2017), or news websites comment sections (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018), which are central to our research. What can be expected from such spaces in terms of deliberation? Here we propose several scenarios to be checked.

The first one is that comment sections are a mere reverberation of the governmental discourse to legitimize propaganda by 'public opinion', through various astroturfing techniques (Han, 2015) and messages moderation by the media outlets (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018). The citizens with opposite views may refrain from engaging into such discussions due to self-censorship, fear and similar reasons. However, and this is the second scenario, a sort of free polarized discussion may also be of practical use for incumbents. As shown by Chen and Xu (2017), dictators may use public communication either to get feedback on policies, or to prevent collective actions by making citizens divide on policies and blame each other, not the government. In the third scenario we may expect to find 'democratic enclaves' (Gilley, 2010)—autonomous spaces that can be used by opposition activists and like-minded people to discuss politics, but their scale is too small to pose a challenge to regime stability. Although they have some democratization potential, the recent trends suggest such spaces rather contribute to the regime resilience (Kabanov & Romanov, 2017).

We argue that all three scenarios eventually lead to regime strengthening. But the question of their deliberation quality, in terms of discourse outcomes and dominant positions, remains open. We hypothesize that in the first and third cases we are more likely to view homogeneous discourses with dominance of pro- and anti-government positions accordingly. The second case would probably allow more polarization and heterogeneity.

Due to the media fragmentation, we further hypothesize that such outcomes differ across the outlets, depending on their relationship with the government and degree of loyalty. The scenarios we outline might probably shift from the dominance of pro-government discourse to more polarized views and finally to anti-government discourses. This tendency can be further reinforced by the 'like-minded enclave' effect (Strandberg et al., 2019) when people seek like-minded people to support their viewpoint.

The empirical research of such regime-dependent peculiarities is distorted by the general trends in delibera-

tion and media consumption. First, it is usually observed that such news comment sections lack civility, respect and deliberation whatsoever (Zamith & Lewis, 2014). Secondly, a variety of deliberation outcomes can be explained not only by the political orientation of the outlet, but also by the design of the comment section (Aragón, Gómez, & Kaltenbrunner, 2017; Rowe, 2015). These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

## 3. Research Design and Method

### *3.1. Case Study, Sample and Research Questions*

The case study for the research is based on analyzing five online discussions among Russian citizens on just one issue of the Russian anti-sanctions policy, namely, the social consequences of the government decision to destroy the embargoed food imported from the West. The decision to seize western food was taken in August 2015 in a form of the presidential decree, provoking public debates on its efficiency, morality and rationality. Several e-petitions were cast to ban food destruction, including the one on the Change.org where it was signed by over 500 thousand people (https://goo.gl/FaSEDe). The issue was discussed very widely across the Russian online media.

The choice of these online debates was determined by the following factors. Firstly, there was a need to limit the coding sample with some 500 posted comments which was realistic to process due to the complexity of content coding, including the availability of trained coders and a need to cross-check the coding results. It was assumed that five discussions containing about 100 comments each would be feasible to code and analyze. From the previous research, we knew that large numbers of comments do not necessarily improve deliberative quality, whereas several dozens of comments could be sufficient to capture the discussion essence. Secondly, as Russia does not have its official national or local e-Democracy or e-Participation platforms designed specifically to engage citizens in deliberation practices, we focused on choosing among the prominent national media that were actively reporting on food destruction when it started in August 2015 and thus attracting attention of wide audience within Russia. Typically, these were popular television channels that aired graphic video reports showing how the seized food was destroyed by bulldozers and incinerated (which was a very unusual experience to see for many Russian viewers). Thirdly, the intention was to choose a diverse set of media that would include both television and newspapers, both Russian and international, both clearly pro-government and clearly independent. And, fourthly, we wanted to ensure that the discussions themselves are not explicitly dependent on or influenced by their media hosts and, therefore, undertook a preliminary review of the previously hosted discussions to be sure that there was no visible evidence of such influence—on the contrary, there were many negative comments made by visitors in relation to authorities and their policies despite being hosted by the government-owned media; making such distinction was essential for this research.

The chosen discussions and respective media hosts are listed in Table 1.

The sample includes two national clearly pro-government television channels that had active comment sections (national coverage was important for greater outreach) and were quick to report about food destruction; namely: the Russia Today (a Russian-language service) and the NTV. The selection of these

**Table 1.** List of media hosts.

| Media hosts | Media type | Seed material / Lead article | Number of posted comments | Date of access |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Change.org e-petition website | International, independent | Don'tCrashFood Update: We will achieve our goal! Preparing a conference (Savelyeva, 2015) | 76 | 30 August 2015 |
| Business Gazette *Vzglayd* www.vz.ru | Russian, pro-government | Polish Minister writes to Putin calling food destruction a sin (Vzglayd Business Gazette, 2015) | 161 | 7 August 2015 |
| Russia Today TV channel www.rt.com | Russian government-owned | Dmitry Peskov's (President Putin's press representative) comments on the reaction following the destruction of embargoed food (Russia Today TV, 2015) | 34 | 5 August 2015 |
| Gamers' Playground Forum www.PlayGround.ru | Russian, independent | Destruction of embargoed food (Gamers' Playground Forum, 2015) | 74 | 8 August 2015 |
| NTV TV www.ntv.ru | Russian, government-owned | Tons of cheese and tomato are destroyed with the help special machinery (NTV, 2015) | 160 | 6 August 2015 |

specific channels was also justified by the fact that Russia Today is a global broadcaster. In addition to these strongly pro-government television channels, one online newspaper the *Vzglayd* was added to the sample as a nominally business-oriented non-political media outlet. While the newspaper positions itself as an online edition for business people, its discussion forum is popular with casual visitors as well. The newspaper's owner is a Moscow-based social and economic research think-tank closely linked to the government (but not explicitly government-owned) and advocates for the government policy agenda. The remaining two media were chosen among those resources that are clearly independent from the government influence and control. One was a popular Russian-language version of the Change.org e-petition portal which allows its users to discuss the submitted petitions, including a petition to stop destructing food which collected almost half-a-million supporters; hence, it was logical to include this media into the coding sample. The fifth chosen online discussion took place on the website, most popular among the Russian gamers—the Playground (in fact, a gaming server with over two million of registered users). Its advantage was that it differed from others being politically neutral (hosted by the Internet provider the RopNet).

When composing the coding sample, we were well aware about its limitations understanding that there could have been other candidates to consider as well. However, the existing scholarship on computer-mediated deliberation does not provide any conclusive guidance on how to compose such samples, especially in the hybrid political context and in view of the unclear link between the media host and deliberation itself. As Sandfort and Quick (2017, p. 1) note, 'no single dimension explains success or failure; the results of deliberation arise through a complex mixing of contextual and design features'. Apart from the above-mentioned selection factors, we intentionally chose to a certain extent random sample as an instant snap-shot of a far wider and deeper public debate that was unfolding on the Russian Internet. At the same time, we did not seek to construct a representative sample in a traditional sociological sense, assuming that was impossible methodologically and technically. Furthermore, we did not attempt to measure public opinion, as surveys do, but instead to measure deliberation quality and outcome by revealing the discursively and intersubjectively constructed attitudes towards food destruction at a certain time and on the certain media through 'Yes' and 'No' positions in a Habermasian tradition, as stated above. The aim was to investigate how practical reasoning was discursively applied by participants to advance particular morally and ethically justified (via claims to validity) positions (contrary to distilling public opinion that does not require social interaction among subjects).

The research aimed at accomplishing two interrelated objectives: (1) to test a proposed deliberation metrics (standard) for examining casual political conversations on a salient public policy issue; and (2) to understand how deliberation quality differs depending on the media hosts' political allegiances. These objectives were supported by the following seven research questions:

RQ1: Are the online debates on pro-government media less civil than those on independent media?

RQ2: Can the messages posted on discussion threads be considered both argumentative and rational?

RQ3: Do the discourses on the independent media demonstrate higher rationality and argumentation compared with those on pro-government media?

RQ4: Is interactivity driven by agreements or disagreements?

RQ5: Do disagreements lead to more 'Against' positions, while agreements generate more 'For' positions?

RQ6: Does interactivity influence position-taking—'For' or 'Against'?

RQ7: Does the pro-government or independent status of the media hosting online discussion influence deliberative quality?

### *3.2. Method*

As mentioned above, the research method was based on content coding to reveal the Habermasian claims to validity of normative rightness present in discussion content, i.e., in the comments posted by discussion participants (Misnikov, 2013). The revealed validated claims were further coded to describe the various parameters of discourse quality grouped into three deliberative standards: (a) interactivity, (b) civility and (c) argumentation. While argumentation and civility are well studied, interactivity has not been examined sufficiently. We generally accept the definition of interactivity given by Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997, 1998) focusing on the presence of a particular topic across a certain range of comments, i.e., a certain continuity when interactivity increases with the increase of the number of posts containing references to the same topic. That is typically done among the interacting participants when they respond to one another's messages. We consider intersubjective interactivity central to deliberation quality and propose to use a term interactive deliberation to underline the conceptual and practical importance of interactivity for deliberation. It was coded through agreements or disagreements that participants applied to make their own claims to validity and validate others' claims to display support or rejection of food destruction policy in the form of 'For' and 'Against' positions. In other words, interactivity interlinks at least two messages. For example, the

more messages are involved in one line of argumentation, the more interactive this part of discourse is. There are always other posts that are not necessarily validated through agreement-disagreement or those that deviate from the topic of food destruction; such posts were excluded from the analysis.

The interactivity standard addressed:

- Claims to normative rightness validated via direct and indirect response to other messages and to a discussion source that initiated the discussion by agreeing–disagreeing with the meaning of the message;
- Claims to normative rightness validated via direct and indirect response to other messages only;
- Containing interactively expressed disagreements revealing 'For' and 'Against' positions with regard to food destruction policy;
- Containing interactively expressed agreements revealing 'For' and 'Against' positions with regard to food destruction policy.

The argumentation standard included references to:

- Subjective conclusions, analysis, inferences, reasoning, questioning, generalizations except declarations without justification;
- Any subjective recommendations, proposals, actions;
- Any examples, cases, comparisons, events, proverbs, dates;
- Objective facts (narrative, numerical);
- Any figures (except dates).

The civility standard coded only the explicitly: (a) rude, uncivil, derogatory, personally offensive language; and (b) expressly polite and accommodating messages.

The discussions were also checked in terms of their participatory equality to ensure that these were not 'hijacked' by few dominant participants. Overall, 333 participants posted 503 messages, which means that each participant on average posted 1 or 2 messages. Also, while there were some variations across the discussions (see Table 2), these were minor meaning that the discussions were quite equal and there were no participants that dominated them.

For ethical and privacy reasons, we did not process in any way the participants' names (nicks) that were attached to their posts and never attempted to know their real names or profiles.

## 4. Research Results

### *4.1. Argumentation*

As described above, coding argumentation involved revealing five deliberative parameters: reasoning, recommendations, cases, facts and figures. At least four of five posted messages contained some sort of argumentation and reasoning regardless of the media type. The overall level of argumentation is high across all the discussions. Even a small sample pertaining to the discussion hosted by the Russia Today TV channel is part of this trend. The distribution pattern of five argumentation parameters (depicted in Figure 1) reveals that making references to subjective conclusions, analysis, inferences, questioning and generalizations are by far the most common way of reasoning for all five discussions—almost every second posts contained some sort of reasoning and argumentation (47%).

This category is followed by the mention of comparisons, cases, events (22% of all posted messages) and a group of posts containing recommendations, proposals, suggestions (16%)—the middle of the argumentation pyramid. The use of objective facts (the ones that are hard to dispute—part of the Habermasian claims to validity of the second type describing the objective world) and figures as arguments were in minority—10% and 4% accordingly.

The data broken down by the host media political status do not yield any difference showing essentially the same levels and patterns (see Figure 2).

While the use of conclusions and other forms of reasoning appears to be a standard practice regardless of the media's political allegiance and affiliation, it should be noted that due to the casual character of the everyday political talk online, reasoning takes a loose form that does not assume presenting hard facts and justification for each instance of argumentation every time the post is written. This is a rather typical way of the casual opinion expression and argumentation based on some unproven facts or events, interpreted in a partic-

**Table 2.** Distribution of participants by posted comments.

| Discussion | 1 Comment | 2–4 Comments | 5–9 Comments | 10 + Comments | Average number of comments per participants |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gamers Playground forum | 76% | 16% | 8% | 3% | 2 |
| RT TV channel | 86% | 14% | 0% | 0% | 1 |
| NTV channel | 86% | 14% | 0% | 0% | 1 |
| Business Gazette *Vzglyad* | 64% | 30% | 2% | 2% | 2 |
| Change.org | 81% | 18% | 0% | 0% | 1 |

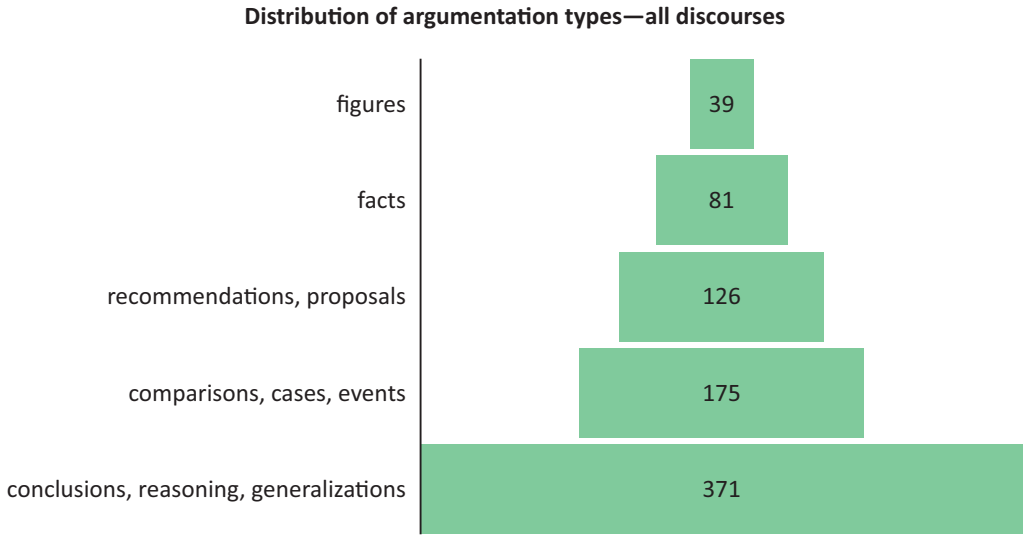


**Figure 1.** Distribution of argumentation type.

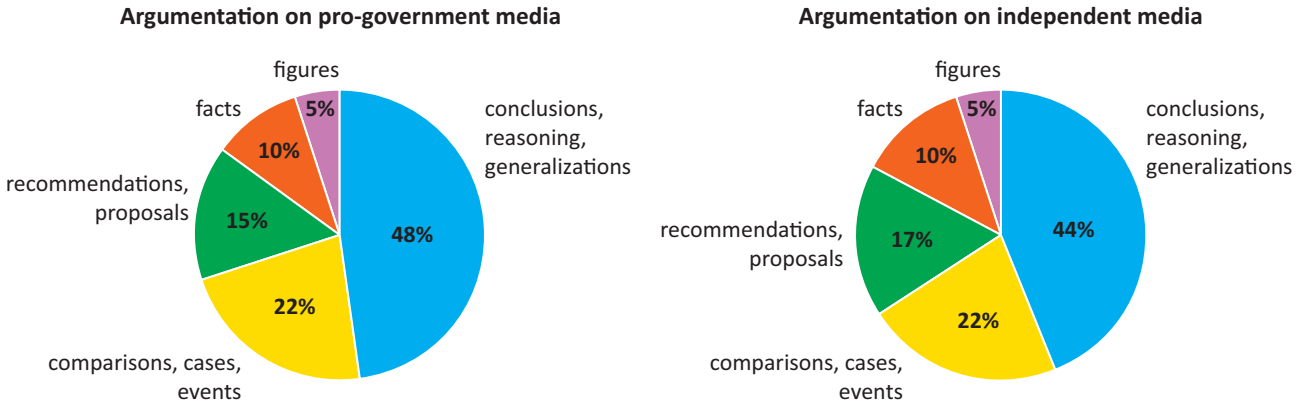


**Figure 2.** Use of argumentation on pro-government and independent media.

ular way—sort of a 'light' reasoning with references to common assumptions that are believed by the author to be shared by many. This is in effect a form of an argument. For example, the post says that 'smuggling with the contraband into Russia as a way of tax avoidance is not a sin, while the destruction of such contraband is a sin…' (Business Gazette *Vzglayd*, 2015). On the surface, this utterance looks like a mere statement not supported by specific evidence. Yet this is actually a (rhetorical) question asking the reader to contemplate about morality of food destruction; that is, whether this is sinful or not? The argument draws on a comparison with a common background knowledge in Russia, presumably shared by many, that if smuggling food into Russia to avoid paying taxes is not considered a sin (although no evidence offered to support this claim about smuggling as something 'normal' and certainly not a sin), then why its destruction should be sinful? Comparing with something commonly known is the argument deployed by the participant to convince others that destroying food is 'normal'. Yet others disagree claiming that even the contraband can be re-sold or utilized in other less dramatic ways, especially food. This kind of reasoning is ubiquitous across the discussion. Sometimes such conclusions are supported by recommendations and comparisons or references to other cases to make the argument stronger. Use of proven facts is not widespread. However, it is hard to imagine a debate among ordinary people where each participant presents facts. That does not make discussion irrational or unreasoned, since it is the meaning and interaction that matter in both moral and pragmatic discourses.

Two conclusions one might make based on the results of coding argumentation. One is that the presence of any type of reasoning does not constitute a deliberative feature of a special democratic significance. On the contrary, it is likely a standard behavior in an online debate among lay people who are interested in discussing politics in a public manner. The other finding is that such argumentation is inherent in this type of debates.

### *4.2. Civility*

Civility was coded to reveal both the expressly civil, polite posts and those that are explicitly uncivil—rude, derogatory, offensive, highly personal. However, the coding re-

sults did not show any significant number of the visibly polite posts. In contrast, as Figure 3 demonstrates, uncivil posts were common on pro-government media (25%), particularly on the NTV channel (30%). Discussions on the independent media were more civil, with just one in ten posts being uncivil. The higher negative emotion (typically the personally addressed messages with little substance) might be indicative of contentious debates on the state-controlled media that attract more diverse audience than on independent media which are more likely to attract like-minded participants critical of the food destruction policy.

### *4.3. Interactivity*

Interactivity was coded to show how many claims to normative rightness were validated (as a percentage of all posted messages); how many of them were interactive either via agreement or disagreement; and which of these supported and rejected the policy of food destruction (see Figures 4, 5 and 6).

The overall level of deliberative interactivity (Figure 4), measured as claim validation, is between 57% on independent media and 77% on pro-government, with the level of validation reaching as much as 88% on the Russian Today TV channel and as low as 47% on the Gamers' Forum. The higher interactivity of the latter might be an effect of the more contentious type of debate there when disparities in views lead to more interaction. However, that link needs further examination and additional evidence to prove or disprove it. In any case, both cases demonstrate a rather high level of reciprocity among participants for a casual talk discussing just one topic of food destruction (other topic were not coded). Larger differences emerge when it comes to the use of agreements and disagreements when validating the claims made (see Figure 5). For example, interactive disagreements are noticeably higher among the state-controlled media ranging from 68% in the case of the NTV channel to 39% on the website of the *Vzglyad* (the average is 56%). While this difference is substantial, it is still smaller than the level of disagreement on the independent media—29% (18% for the discussion on the Change.org and 24% on the Gamers' Forum). In a similar vein, the use of deliberative agreements is even stronger on the independent media—82% on the Change.org and 76% on the Gamers' Forum against 41% on Russian Today and 32% on the NTV. It is not clear what causes such differentiation. Agreements and disagreements are just discursive instruments to claim something or validate other claims to reveal a position or an opinion. Technically speaking, it does not matter whether the rejection of food destruction is materialized through agreeing or disagreeing. The process of coding agreements and dis-

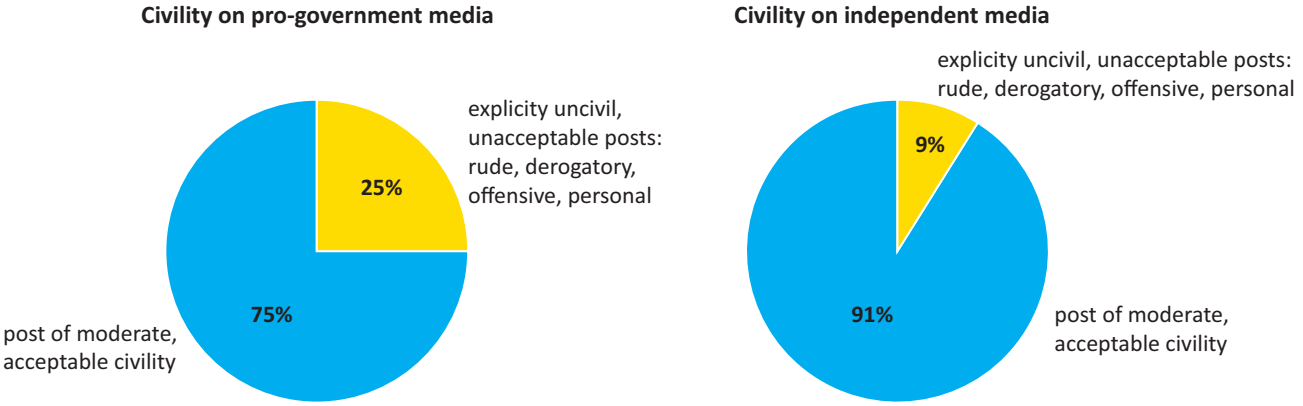


**Figure 3.** Civility on pro-government and independent media.

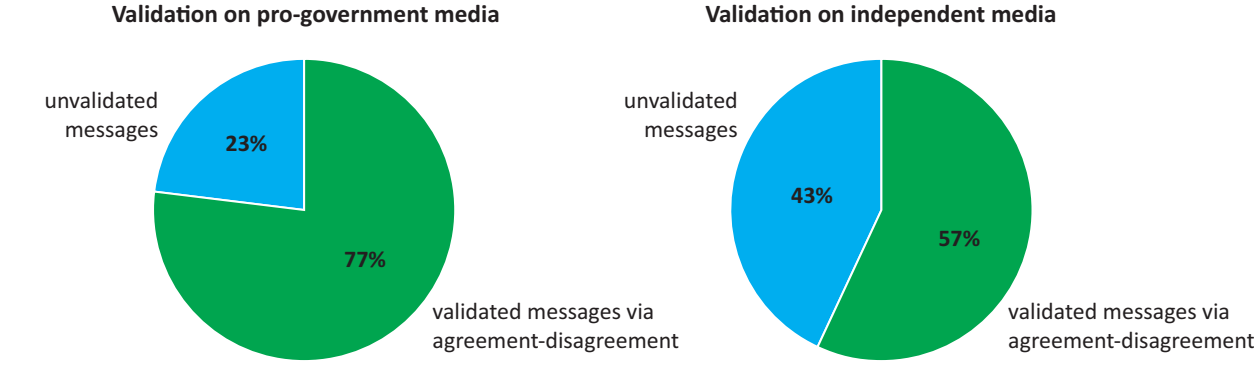


**Figure 4.** Validation of claims to normative rightness on pro-government and independent media.

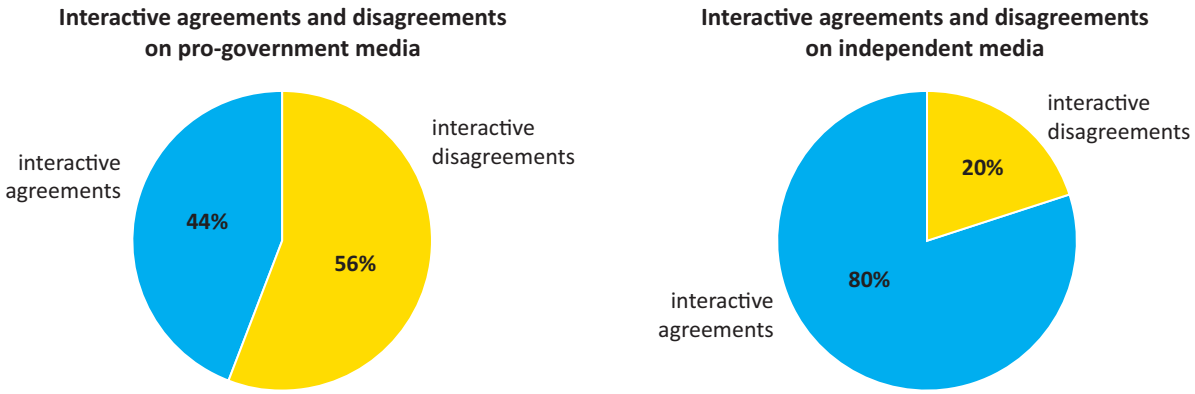


**Figure 5.** Interactive agreements and disagreements on pro-government and independent media.

agreements was linked to the claim making and validation process which allows focusing only on the most recent acts of agreement-disagreement related validations. More research would be needed to provide a plausible explanation why the pro-government media demonstrate more contentious type of public discourse compared with the independent media. We can hypothesize, however, drawing on other research, that on the surface it looks like a manifestation of the 'like-minded enclave' (Strandberg et al., 2019) or the impact of the homophily factor prompting the emergence of the like-minded solidarities (Mutz, 2006) on the independent media among those who do not trust the pro-government media and choose alternative places to express disapproval of the food destruction policy. Naturally, the level of disagreement among the like-minded people is expected to be lower on such a morally loaded issue.

Figure 6 reveals the discursively formed intersubjective solidarities of discussants differing in their attitude towards the policy of food destruction. There is a strong correlation—although not necessarily a cause–effect relationship—between the media political allegiances and the attitude to food destruction. Participants on the independent media reject overwhelmingly food destruction (for in five are against), while the balance on the pro-government media is more muted with roughly one half being in favor with the other half against. It seems that while the independent media may be seen morally superior in its protest against food destruction, it also signals about the 'like-minded enclave' syndrome. On the other hand, the pro-government media demonstrate more diverse debate in supporting the policy of food destruction.

## 5. Discussion

We argue that our study contributes to the existing literature on authoritarian deliberation in several ways. First, the research echoes the assumption (He & Warren, 2011) that deliberation and democracy are conceptually and empirically discernable phenomena: the former may exist across different political regimes and institutional settings. The lack of political pluralism should not be simply considered a counter-indication for deliberation, rather an important object of study within deliberation research theories and methods, previously designed for democracies only.

Secondly, deliberation in autocracies is not limited to the government-created and -led domains, designed to support decision-making and facilitate information gathering (He & Warren, 2011). Our research shows that deliberative practices in non-competitive contexts may ex-

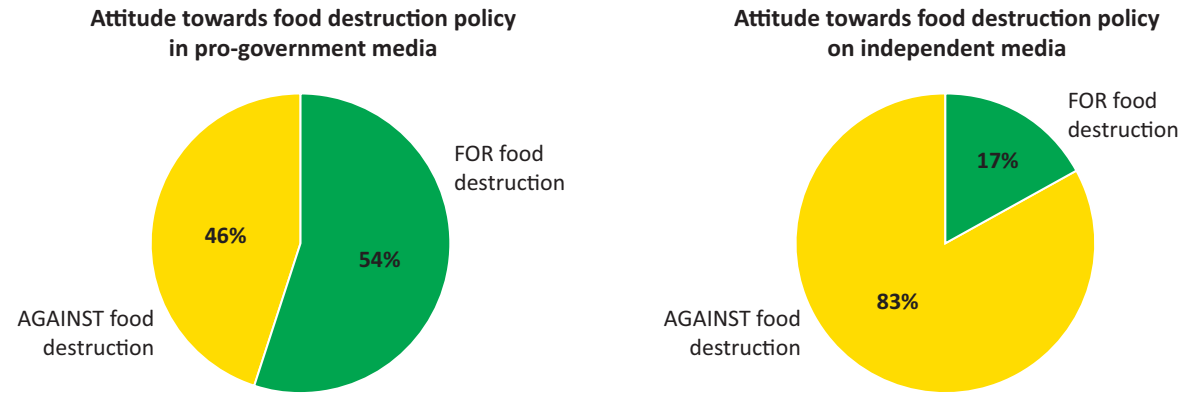


**Figure 6.** Intersubjective solidarities 'For' and 'Against' food destruction on pro-government and independent media.

ist in 'semi-invented' spaces, although patterns and quality of deliberation vary, depending on the political affiliation of the outlets. That speaks for expanding the authoritarian deliberation framework to a larger set of online platforms. The methodology proposed in this study might be a useful tool for such analysis.

At the same time, one should not overestimate the potential of such deliberation to influence decision-making or contribute to democratization. Rather it provides several additional mechanisms of the regime resilience. Out of the three scenarios mentioned in Section 2.2, our research reveals the second and the third one. Discussions on the pro-government media do not hold exclusively the pro-government discourse, but equal proportions of those supporting and opposing food destruction. Rather than being a tool of direct propaganda, they represent a space for disagreement and polarization, intensified by higher rated uncivility and offensive utterances (RQ1).

The clear dominance of the anti-policy discourse in the independent media exemplifies the 'democratic enclave' (Gilley, 2010) scenario, but can also present the 'like-minded enclave' effect (Strandberg et al., 2019). Such 'enclaves' are unlikely to become drivers of democratization, or at least, 'schools' of deliberative democracy. Even though there is a clear link between anti-policy discourse in the independent media and a strong focus on interactive agreements, there is no visible connection between the deliberation quality and the media's political stance (RQ7).

Hence, both scenarios help the authoritarian regime to be stable: while polarization helps autocrats to amortize the negative effects of an unpopular policy (Chen & Xu, 2017), the 'enclaves' channel the discontent in a 'safe' manner.

However, other tested criteria of deliberation are quite equally present across platforms (RQ3). As for rationality and argumentation (RQ1), the coding results reveal that as many as four of five messages contain some sort of reasoning. The use of objective facts is minimal across the media. The casual format of argumentation should not be confused with the logic typical to expert talks, but it is also accepted by other participants, and the level of argumentation in various media seems almost identical.

The available evidence suggests that neither agreement nor disagreement determine how interactive the discussion is (RQ4)—with roughly the same level of deliberative interactivity, the level of agreements and disagreements vary vastly across the media. Nor is there evidence to suggest that there is a clear pattern pointing at the existence of a link between agreeing–disagreeing and position-taking. The respective parameters differ greatly (RQ5). Finally, no relationship has been discerned between interactivity and how often discourse participants take a position 'For' or 'Against' food destruction policy (RQ6). Generally, the overall interactivity has not demonstrated high variability.

## 6. Conclusion

Our findings suggest that authoritarian deliberation is a promising research domain within a general deliberation research, which furthermore contributes to our understanding of the contemporary nature of non-democratic rule (Gerschewski, 2013). At the same time, the shift from *invented* to (*semi-*)*invited* spaces raises some theoretical and methodological complications. First, it is hard to reveal the influence of authoritarian incumbents on the process and outcomes of deliberation, as this effect is distorted by private actors: media owners and citizens themselves. Secondly, while the effect of government-led discussions on policy outcomes can be measured, it is hard to trace the influence of informal discourse on policy change. As our case suggested, such deliberation occurred after the decision had already been taken, and even if it had been held before, the government would have had enormous discretion of taking those opinions into account. Thirdly, it might be problematic to estimate the sample needed for assessing the deliberative potential of the Internet: our 5 outlets represent only a minor segment of the online public discourse, and it is unclear whether it is enough to draw meaningful conclusions. Finally, as deliberation is a very complex concept, more deliberation criteria should be taken into account. We hope that this research can become a step towards resolution of these problems and developing practical solutions for deliberation to become meaningful regardless of the political regime.

## Acknowledgments

The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, grant № 18-18-00360 'E-participation as Politics and Public Policy Dynamic Factor'.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 145–156**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.1894**

Article

# Redefining Media Agendas: Topic Problematization in Online Reader Comments

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Submitted: 13 December 2018 | Accepted: 29 March 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Media audiences representing a significant portion of the public in any given country may hold opinions on media-generated definitions of social problems which differ from those of media professionals. The proliferation of online reader comments not only makes such opinions available but also alters the process of agenda formation and problem definition in the public space. Based on a dataset of 33,877 news items and 258,121 comments from a sample of regional Russian newspapers we investigate readers' perceptions of social problems. We find that the volume of attention paid to issues or topics by the media and the importance of those issues for audiences, as judged by the number of their comments, diverge. Further, while the prevalence of general negative sentiment in comments accompanies such topics as disasters and accidents that are not perceived as social problems, a high level of sentiment polarization in comments does suggest issue problematization. It is also positively related to topic importance for the audience. Thus, instead of finding fixed social problem definitions in the reader comments, we observe the process of problem formation, where different points of view clash. These perceptions are not necessarily those expressed in media texts since the latter are predominantly "hard" news covering separate events, rather than trends or issues. As our research suggests, problematization emerges from readers' background knowledge, external experience, or values.

**Keywords**
audience; issue problematization; online media; reader; Russia; sentiment analysis; social problems; topic modeling

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Public Discussion in Russian Social Media", edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

Readers' comments on the news within online media are increasingly used both as a source of audience feedback by media organizations and as a new type of empirical data by media scholars. Unlike audience surveys and general public opinion polls, comment sections of media websites give users the ability to express themselves, in any form they choose, on issues they consider important. The consequences of such a new form of public expression for the processes of media agenda formation, setting, and problematization has yet to be fully understood. Traditional poll-based studies in agenda setting find a vast array of evidence of the alignment between agenda salience in media and the importance of the respective issues for audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). At the same time, a theoretical tradition stemming from Stuart Hall's concepts of hegemonic and oppositional decoding of media messages (Hall, 1980) focuses on audiences' abilities to resist media frames within given agendas. Building upon the ideas from agenda-setting research, Hall's approach, and from certain theories of

social media, we can formulate a number of further assumptions. In particular, it is plausible, that through their comments, readers may be redefining the level of importance of agendas offered by media, as well as reframing some of them as problematic, thus altering or even subverting the professional definitions of the respective issues. As, according to constructivist approaches (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), social problems are results of collective issue problematization, reader comments may actually serve as a source of popular perceptions of social problems.

In our research, we seek to extract these perceptions from large numbers of reader comments and to interpret them qualitatively. We investigate whether issue salience in professional media content and its importance for the commenting audience are aligned, whether general negative sentiment in comments or comment polarization indicates issue problematization by audiences, and what issues exactly are framed as social problems by readers. To do so, we focus on a set of regional online newspapers in Russia—a type of media that is loosely controlled so that discrepancies between media content and the audience's perceptions are likely to be manifest, but are unlikely to be suppressed. We apply a range of methods, from innovative automatic text mining to traditional qualitative text interpretation.

## 2. Social Problem Formation by the Public and the Media

A social problem can be most broadly defined as an undesirable situation or condition that characterizes society as a whole or some of its parts and that can be eliminated only if a collective effort is made. Early approaches to social problems define them as a social pathology that objectively undermines social health, and that should be diagnosed and treated (Smith, 1911), which means diagnosed by experts. Development of a more relativistic vision of social issues has led researchers to regard the public and its opinion as the source of problem definition. Still, it has been unclear how widely an issue has to be recognized as a problem to be considered as such by sociologists. Lauer (1976) observes that most of the time the number of people is to be "considerable", while often the public is narrowed to "issue specific groups", "strategically placed groups" or just "individuals and groups", as in Spector and Kitsuse (1977).

Conceptualization of the role of media in the process of issue (de)problematization can be conventionally reduced to two major approaches. In the first, media are seen as powerful but not quite legitimate actors of problem definition. They are described as able to influence the public, a legitimate source of problem definition—both through agenda setting and framing (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). The second, radically constructivist approach views media as an integral element of problem formation and existence. Thus, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) view social problems as results of efforts of those who promote them to stay on the public agenda reinforced by inter-media linkages and constrained by the limited "carrying capacity" of various public arenas where such problems emerge. This approach makes it obvious that different factions of the public may hold different opinions on the existence and the features of social problems.

The advent of the Internet has added new layers of complexity to this picture (Zhou & Moy, 2007). Nowadays, public opinion is no longer locked within the datasets collected by pollsters. It has flooded into blogs, social network sites and, most importantly, to forums of online media. By commenting on media messages, readers get a chance to apply oppositional decoding, thus altering news framing, and influence the opinions of others (Kim, 2015; Lee & Jang, 2010), however, the evidence in this sphere is mixed and some studies have found that comments have no effect on reader opinions (Steinfeld, Samuel-Azran, & Lev-On, 2016). At the same time, numerous pieces of research have shown that social media can undermine media's monopoly over agenda setting (Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010; Wallsten, 2007), but it should be noted that this was demonstrated mostly for professional—or nearly professional—social media content. Lay comments are less influential and less likely to alter media agendas. However, since each comment influences its nearest neighbours and the amount of comments is huge, their cumulative capacity may be enough to affect public opinion directly, bypassing the agenda-setting cycle and the regular media. Thus, public perceptions of an issue's importance and their problematization of it may diverge from those set by media professionals without the latter being fully aware of it; this is especially plausible in societies with partially controlled media environments.

Of course, audiences' opinions, particularly those expressed in comments, do not necessarily mirror the distribution of opinions over the general population. It is known that commenters may differ from non-commenters by their psychological (Wu & Atkin, 2017) and demographic features (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). However, earlier research of letters to the editor that had dominated reader feedback before the Internet found that those letters tended to reflect public opinion, especially on salient issues, as found in McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012). Simultaneously, the authors found that comments present a wider range of opinions than traditional letters, and thus should be a better proxy for public opinion. But the most important point is that even though comments, just like regular media content, might be unrepresentative, they do play an important role in social problem definition and public opinion formation (Henrich & Holmes, 2013). In particular, critical comments have been found to shift opinions of readers away from the opinion expressed in media messages (Lee & Jang, 2010) and more generally to alter readers' opinions by influencing their perceptions of others' opinions about the messages (Kim, 2015). Thus, readers'

comments are not only important sources of knowledge about the audience's perception of existing social problems but also an instrument of social problem formation. It is also important that the agenda-setting, frame-building, problem-setting, and opinion-forming roles of comments have been found in different societies far beyond simply the "West", including such diverse countries as China (Zhou & Moy, 2007), South Korea (Lee & Jang, 2010), India (Jayachandran, 2015), as well as Post-Soviet countries (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018).

## 3. Approach

Our aim in this study is to identify which issues covered by media are important for audiences and which of them are problematized by the audiences, based on their comments. A traditional way to do so would be to perform a standard manual content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003). In this case assessors (coders) would have to answer the following questions: (1) what social issue is a given media text devoted to?; (2) is this issue problematized?; (3) does this issue attract much public attention in the form of comments; and (4) does a given comment problematize this issue? A severe limitation of this approach is that it does not scale to the volume of Internet content. We, therefore, employ a semi-automated approach that includes topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and a number of specially developed indices. Specifically, we extract agendas from news texts and compare their salience in news to the level of attention paid to them by the audience, as expressed in the volume of comments; we also determine the prevailing polarity of comments for each agenda item and the balance between negative and positive comments. Our methodological procedure is as follows.

First, media agendas or topics covered in media texts are discovered with topic modeling. Although, to our knowledge, media studies has mostly used supervised methods to detect topics (Flaounas et al., 2013; Scharkow, 2011), we apply an unsupervised approach (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003) following a few examples of its application to media research (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015). The unsupervised approach reveals the latent topic structure that is not known to a researcher beforehand, while supervised approaches have to be guided by prior human knowledge submitted by researchers in various forms, such as keywords or manually labelled texts. As we are interested in finding all topics in a large media collection (not just a few of special interest), the unsupervised approach is a natural choice.

Second, based on topic modeling output, we calculate the salience of each topic in the entire collection of media texts thus elucidating media professionals' perception of newsworthiness. Third, based on knowledge of the proportion of each topic in each news item and the number of comments to each news item, we calculate an index of a topic's importance for the commenting audience. We then compare which topics are important for media professionals, and which are important for readers.

Fourth, we apply a lexicon-based version of sentiment analysis (Thelwall, Buckley, Paltoglou, Cai, & Kappas, 2010) to detect the presence of both negative and positive sentiment in each comment, and then detect the prevalent sentiment in the comments related to each topic. We suggest that the prevalence of negative sentiment, especially in those topics which are important for audiences, is a first step to reveal problematized issues and therefore social problems. Although negative words may indicate grief or fear expressed in relation to an accident or a disaster (Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011) and thus do not always indicate social problems, the latter, however, can hardly be discussed without some negative vocabulary.Therefore, although a researcher's judgement is needed to find social problems among other negative topics, still, this task only becomes feasible when thousands of texts are reduced to a hundred of topics of which only several dozen are negatively commented upon.

Fifth and finally, we calculate a polarization index of each topic—which indicates the ability of a topic to arouse controversial discussion among readers—by assessing the variance in the sentiment of comments related to a given topic. While prevailing negative sentiment may be the first signal of a problem, it may also—albeit not always—indicate an issue whose problematic character is a matter of consensus and is not questioned. However, sentiment polarization may indicate a lack of consensus on whether the issue should be treated positively or negatively, that is, whether it is a problem or not.

Although all proposed indices are only proxies of a latent phenomenon called "problematized issue", they are the only ways to conduct such research at scale. Furthermore, armed with the knowledge about most typical texts in each topic, we supplement our quantitative research with a qualitative examination of readers' comments related to all topics of interest. We use a set of simple interpretative procedures developed in our earlier research (Koltsova, 2011). Most broadly, these procedures constitute a type of discourse or frame analysis of news adapted for analysis of reader comments. It, in turn, builds upon some relatively old ideas of Van Dijk (1988) and Bell (1998) and alters them so as to be able to identify such structural elements of problem-oriented texts as blame attribution, victims, beneficiaries, other actors, problem causes and their consequences.

## 4. Hypotheses

Agenda-setting theory states that the more an issue is covered by media, the more important it will be for the public (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Furthermore, media professionals deliberately aim to satisfy the audience's interest which suggests that the amount of attention to a topic given both by the media and by the pub-

lic should be aligned. At the same time, some research finds that media professionals often have vague ideas about their audiences' demographic features, interests (Atkin, Burgoon, & Burgoon, 1983), and the content of their comments (Ürper & Çevikel, 2014) which suggests that the alignment of media and public attention still needs further analysis. Our first hypothesis may thus be formulated as follows:

> H1: Topic salience in media texts will be positively related to topic importance for the audience.

Previous research (Liu, Zhou, & Zhao, 2015; Weber, 2014) also finds that negative news items (e.g., those addressing damage rather than success) get more comments than positive ones. To our knowledge, there is no research exploring the relationship between the volume of comments and their sentiment which would reveal whether readers are more inclined to leave negative comments. Ksiazek, Peer and Zivic (2015) show that, contrary to their assumptions, civil comments prevail over hateful comments. However, despite the possible overall prevalence of positive or neutral comments, the share of negative comments might be higher among highly commented—that is, more important—topics. Therefore, our second hypothesis is as follows:

> H2: The more negatively a topic is perceived by the commenting audience, the higher its importance for the audience.

We have not found any research investigating whether the importance of an issue for the audience is related to a topic's being controversial. Such a finding would be highly novel, which leads us to our last hypothesis:

> H3: The more controversy the topic arouses in readers' comments, the more important it is for readers.

## 5. Data

In this research, we study social problems at the regional level as we hypothesize that more specific problems may emerge at this level (McCombs & Funk, 2011). Also, we focus on Russia as a country in which the media are partially controlled as we expect that it is here that divergence between topic importance set by media and by readers should diverge most visibly. In Russia in 2014, the media that were most likely to combine content control and absence of comment moderation could be found mostly at the regional level. We use the data from the Omsk region, a typical Russian area in South Siberia. When ranked along with other Russian regions, it finds most of its important socio-demographic indices in the second quartile which includes population size (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2014a), per capita income (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2018), consumer expenditure, employment (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2014b), and in the third quartile for ethnic diversity index (Timonin, Ryazancev, & Tikunova, 2011).

We define an Omsk media outlet as a website registered as such in the region, targeting only an Omsk audience and having a certain level of penetration—no less than 10,000 unique users per month. According to the Agency of Regional Research, the leading Omsk marketing organization, 18 such online outlets we registered in Omsk as of June 2014, the time closely preceding data collection. We focus on four of them that make up 65% of all the visits: BK55 (27% of visits), Omsk-inform (16.7%), Gorod55 (12%), and NGS Omsk (9.2%). Since Omsk regional media are not polarized politically, we believe that audience size is a sufficient selection criterion. On the whole, we follow a procedure typical for sampling media organizations in media studies.

Our sample thus includes all news items and respective comments from Gorod55 (6,302 news items; 67,195 comments), BK55 (14,078 items; 120,015 comments), NGS Omsk (4,780 items; 47,231 comments), and Omsk-inform (8,727 items; 23,666 comments) for the entire year from September 2013 to September 2014. The entire collection comprises 33,887 news items and 258,107 comments. On average, the four sources published 116 news items per working day and 33 news items per holiday. Distribution of comments per news item is, as expected, uneven, but not particularly skewed. Around 80% of news items (26,783) got at least one comment. The average number of comments per news item was 7.6, with Gorod55 taking the lead with 10.7 and Omsk-Inform lagging behind with only 2.7. It thus can be seen that the production leader and the feedback leader are not the same organization. The subsample for qualitative analysis includes 50 news items with the highest probabilities from each of 50 identified topics and all related comments (2500 news texts and 17,390 comments in total).

## 6. Topics and Their Salience in News

To extract topics from news texts, we used the Gensim software (Řehůřek, 2010) implementing the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm (Blei et al., 2003). While LDA limitations are discussed elsewhere (Maier et al., 2018), we employed a metric by Arun, Suresh, Madhavan and Murthy (2010) to overcome one of them, namely to avoid an arbitrary choice of the number of topics. Having obtained 19 topic solutions in increments of 5 ranging from 5 to 100 topics, we found several minima of Arun's et al. (2010) measure and selected one of them (which corresponds to 50 topics) based on manual topic assessment.

Topic modeling may be viewed as a type of fuzzy clustering which clusters both words and documents into a given number of topics so that each word and each text may occur in multiple topics. The search for clusters is undertaken based solely on information about word co-occurrence in texts, and the only information

needed by the algorithm is the number of topics. The output of the algorithm is two tables which sort words and texts, respectively, by the probability of their belonging to each topic. Most probable words in a topic ("top words") are useful for topic interpretation (e.g., "theatre, play, culture, festival" or "Russia, Ukraine, against, sanction"). In our case, the topics were labelled based both on top words and top texts, by two researchers who then agreed on the labels. LDA always yields a certain proportion of uninterpretable topics (e.g., those crystallized around pejoratives), but in our case, we obtained only one completely uninterpretable topic and four topics whose interpretation posed some difficulties (marked *). This is a sign of the high quality of both the data and the solutions.

By summing the probabilities of all the texts in a given topic, we obtained an index of the topic's salience in the collection and thus assessed how widely this topic is covered by journalists compared to other issues. The list of topics sorted by this index is presented in Table 1. When interpreting it, one should bear in mind that due to topic modeling instability less salient topics may appear not in all solutions obtained from the same data with the same algorithm parameters. However, the more salient the topic, the more often it appears and the less its salience score fluctuates. Also, since the calculation of other metrics is based on topic weights from the same solution, the relationship between topic salience and other metrics should not be distorted.

As expected, local and regional topics outnumber national and international topics. The most salient topics are also regional, however, topic 6 due to the fact it relates to the Ukrainian crisis stands particularly high in this list, too. Not surprisingly, accidents and disasters also occupy the three top positions. The topics can be divided into event-driven and issue-driven (including problem-driven). Since our data is news, issue-driven topics do not necessarily contain texts that discuss general trends, causes or consequences of social phenomena as such; they mostly group together events related to a certain issue or a problem, for instance, schooling or economic crime. Issue-driven topics outnumber those centred around a single event, which is natural because a single event has to be as salient as an entire "issue" to compete to be detected as a separate topic. The Sochi Olympic Games has the highest salience among event-driven topics, however, it is the only non-regional topic in this category. Two resonant local events appear in this list: the resignation and subsequent arrest of the Omsk vice-mayor Yury Gamburg, and the murder of the locally famous boxer Ivan Klimov. In relation to the latter, many news items and comments share a belief in that his murder was connected to his conflict with the local "Gipsy Baron" Yan Lebedovoy and was perhaps committed or

**Table 1.** Topics ranked by salience (max = 0.0478; min = 0.0032; mean = 0.0198; stdev = 0.0315).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Car accidents | 25. | Schools, orphanages & child charit |
| 2. | Criminal news | 26. | Urban events & openings |
| 3. | Fires | 27. | Theatres & festivals |
| 4. | Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements 1 | 28. | Beauty contests & their winners |
| 5. | Regional taxes & fuel prices | 29. | Real estate: construction |
| 6. | Russia, Ukraine & US international relations | 30. | Control & regulation of enterprises |
| 7. | Trials on economic crime | 31. | Macroeconomic events: currency rates & oil prices |
| 8. | Sport: hockey | 32. | Holidays & VIP weddings |
| 9. | *Urban development (misc) | 33. | Movies and movie stars |
| 10. | Omsk region industrial development | 34. | Housing: heating |
| 11. | Public transport and traffic | 35. | Ads of banking services |
| 12. | Urban landscaping & greening | 36. | Libraries, literature & art |
| 13. | Regional parliament activities | 37. | *Regional elections and misc. |
| 14. | Accidents with children | 38. | Yury Gamburg resignation |
| 15. | Olympic Games 2014 & Omsk athletes | 39. | Missing person announcements |
| 16. | Police actions drug, alcohol & counterfeit money crimes | 40. | Street & bridge reconstruction & maintenance |
| 17. | Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements 2 | 41. | Concerts |
| 18. | Stray dogs & dog hunters | 42. | Hockey |
| 19. | Weather | 43. | Ivan Klimov's murder |
| 20. | Abridgements of traffic law | 44. | Housing & the case of disabled Akhmetov |
| 21. | Arbitration court and the Mostovik case | 45. | Car sales |
| 22. | Urban demography & housing payments | 46. | *Military holidays |
| 23. | Education | 47. | *Uninterpretable |
| 24. | IT & military high tech | 48. | *Omsk media, plants & animals |
| | | 49. | Crimea accession |
| | | 50. | *NATO warships in the Black Sea, Russian rocket launch & contests |

ordered by someone from the local Roma community. Neither event seems to be very important when judged solely by its salience in the collection. However, further analysis of the comments brings both of them back to our attention.

## 7. Importance of News Topics for Readers

News item importance for (or popularity among) readers is usually measured through the number of views or clicks, but clicks contain no data for further analysis of the sentiment of readers' feedback. This can be most easily assessed through the number of comments (Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, & Wang, 2010). However, a comment is an attribute of a news item, and no news item belongs to any one single topic entirely, which is why we propose an index of topic importance:

$$importance_t = \frac{\sum_{d=1}^{D} prob_{dt} \times qcomments_d}{prob_t}, \quad (1)$$

where $importance_t$—importance index of topic $t$, $D$—number of documents (texts), $d$—document index, $prob_{dt}$—probability of topic $t$ in document $d$, $qcomments_d$—number of comments on document $d$ and $prob_t$ is a salience of topic $t$. This formula normalizes the absolute volume of topic-related comments by the mean probability of a topic in all texts to penalize the influence of the long tail of a topic's distribution over texts. Also, for better representation, we normalize all the importance scores which were obtained to the range 0–100%: $importance\_norm_t = importance_t / max(importance)$. A potential limitation of this metric is that it does not take into account the number of unique commentators involved in the discussion. Following Ksiazek, Peer and Lessard (2016) who differentiate between user-content and user-user types of interaction in commenting, it can be assumed that some lengthy comment threads may, in fact, be discussions among a few readers who, additionally, may diverge from the topic of the news item. Unfortunately, the data on commenters' identity is unavailable in our dataset.

Ten most commented and ten least commented topics are presented in Table 2.

It would be logical to expect that readers turn to regional and local media for regional or local topics. However, the leading topic in our importance list is centred around the relations between Russia, Ukraine and the US in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. As we saw before, this topic is also one of the most salient. The latter fact could have been explained by the bias of local journalists who could be copying the propagandistic agenda of the national media. Nevertheless, this topic is much discussed. A shift of audience's preferences from local to national to international news had already been noticed a few decades ago (Bogart, 1989), especially among younger, urban, male, and more educated consumers. A more recent study has found that online audiences consume more national and international news than traditional audiences (Tewksbury, 2003), which means that our findings are broadly consistent with the existing trends detected by other methods.

Another observation concerns the two local topic-forming events—Gamburg's arrest and Klimov's murder—both of which were much discussed, despite being moderately covered. Here, we can assume the media's intention to play down important local issues. Overall, there is no correlation between topic salience in texts and topic importance to readers (Spearman's rank correlation = 0.076, p-value = 0.598). This means that H1 has to be rejected. This goes against the main claim of the agenda-setting theory, however, it is in line with the recent research on the ability of user texts to influence public agendas. Although unlike autonomous social media posts studied e.g., by Wallsten (2007), news comments cannot generate entirely new agendas, they can signal which issues constitute an agenda in audiences' opinions.

## 8. Negatively and Positively Perceived Topics and Issue Problematization

Sentiment analysis is a methodologically difficult task, and currently, these methods mostly take the form of simple trinary classification into neutral messages and messages containing either generally negative or generally positive sentiment, without detecting the objects of

**Table 2.** Topic importance for readers (max = 100%; min = 20.7%).

| Ten most commented topics | Ten least commented topics |
|---|---|
| Russia, Ukraine and the US international relations | Housing: heating |
| Stray dogs & dog hunters | Movies and movie stars |
| Yury Gamburg resignation | Urban events & openings |
| Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements 1 | Olympic Games 2014 & Omsk athletes |
| *Urban development (misc) | Education |
| Abridgements of traffic law | Concerts |
| Libraries, literature & art | *Regional elections and misc. |
| Crimea accession | Fires |
| Ivan Klimov's murder | Ads of banking services |
| Regional taxes & fuel prices | Car sales |

these sentiments and without differentiating between different types of either negative or positive emotions. Accuracy of these methods is quite high for the English language but varies greatly for other languages which is currently an important limitation. Due to the scarcity of sentiment analysis instruments for the Russian language, we used PolSentiLex lexicon as it was the only one available at the time of the data analysis. Its quality was later shown to be comparable both to a more recent lexicon and to some other approaches (Alexeeva, Koltcov, & Koltsova, 2015). A lexicon is a list of words each of which is assigned a sentiment score by multiple assessors (coders) which may vary from negative to positive along a predefined scale. We submitted PolSentiLex lexicon into the well-known SA freeware SentiStrength (Thelwall et al., 2010) and calculated the overall sentiment score of each comment. This was done by averaging the negative and positive sentiment text scores each of which was equalled to the sentiment score of either the most negative or the most positive word in the text, respectively.

The aggregated sentiment scores of all comments related to a given topic was computed similarly to the topic's importance score, but instead of the number of comments the formula contains the mean sentiment score of all comments on a given news item:

$$sentiment_t = \frac{\sum_{d=1}^{D} prob_{dt} \times sent_d}{prob_t}. \quad (2)$$

This index was also normalized to the range of 0–100%.

The ten most positively commented topics and the ten most negatively commented topics are presented in Table 3.

It is not surprising that the most positive emotions are related to holidays, entertainment, sports and culture. At the negative end, all topics except Klimov's murder are related to disasters and crimes framed as separate cases. They arouse general negative emotions, such as grief, fear, and anger, without bringing audiences to problem definitions. Klimov's murder, however, arouses heated discussions around police inaction, its alleged corrupt links to the Roma community accused of organized crime, and emotional attempts to defend Roma people from ethnic hate speech.

A major observation is that importance scores and sentiment scores do not correlate (Spearman's rank correlation = 0.131, p-value = 0.365); that is, H2 is not supported. We find all types of topics: important positive (Crimea accession), important negative (Ivan Klimov's murder), unimportant positive (weather), and unimportant negative (fires). Moreover, positive comments prevail over negative ones (26% against 8%) which is in line with the findings of Ksiazek et al. (2015) about the prevalence of civil comments over hateful ones.

It is also clear that the negativity of comments is not a sufficient indicator of social problems. However, as all definitions of social problems state that a problem is an issue relatively widely perceived as a problem, we calculate an integral additive index reflecting both a topic's negativity and its importance for audiences. Table 4 shows topics that are both most important and most negatively commented. Those of them that are still event-driven (accidents and crimes) are now less common, and quite a number of others, marked with italics, easily reveal their problem-driven nature after a brief look at the comments. The stray dog topic reflects tensions between defenders of animal rights and those who try to "clear" the city by killing dogs to protect people, especially children, from the danger. The NATO warships topic is overwhelmed with hate speech towards "Americans" and is driven by Russia-US political tensions. Finally, the topic of Russia-Ukraine relations produces the most polarized and diverse comments that embrace the entire spectrum of audience's modes of decoding, as defined by Hall (1980)—from hegemonic to oppositional. They can be grouped into the following types: (1) hostile to Ukrainians (prevailing); (2) hostile to Putin because of the war with Ukrainians; (3) hostile to Putin because of insufficient war with Ukrainians; (4) supportive of Putin; (5) hostile to separatists in the Eastern Ukraine; (6) supportive of separatists. While in the NATO warships topic most comments identify the source of the problem in a similar way, in the Ukrainian topic one can see competing definitions of the problem, which leads us further to calculate a polarization index.

**Table 3.** Prevailing sentiment of the comments (max = 100%; min = 22.74%).

| Ten most positively commented topics | Ten least positively commented topics |
|---|---|
| Olympic Games 2014 & Omsk athletes | Abridgements of traffic law |
| Hockey | Ads of banking services |
| Beauty contests & their winners | Police actions drug, alcohol & counterfeit money crimes |
| Theatres & festivals | Accidents with children |
| Street & bridge reconstruction & maintenance | Missing person announcements |
| Sport, hockey | Car sales |
| Holidays & VIP weddings | Car accidents |
| Public transport and traffic | Fires |
| Weather | Criminal news |
| Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements | Ivan Klimov's murder |

**Table 4.** Top ten topics ranked jointly by negative sentiment and importance.

| Topics | Joint index of sentiment and importance |
|---|---|
| *Ivan Klimov's murder* | 144.56% |
| *Russia, Ukraine & US international relations* | 137.62% |
| *Stray dogs & dog hunters* | 130.30% |
| Criminal news | 124.61% |
| Abridgements of traffic law | 117.89% |
| Yury Gamburg resignation | 113.70% |
| Car accidents | 108.62% |
| **NATO warships in the Black Sea, Russian rocket launch & contests* | 107.74% |
| Accidents with children | 100.98% |
| *Macroeconomic events: currency rates & oil prices* | 99.03% |

## 9. Topics' Polarity as Best Proxies for Social Problems

Controversy in user comments has been studied manually (Weber, 2014), through supervised machine learning (Mishne & Glance, 2006), and based on a combination of sentiment analysis and issue detection (Sriteja, Pandey, & Pudi, 2017), the latter being the most relevant approach for us. Thus, to evaluate how different the sentiment of comments is, we choose standard deviation as a common measure of variation in data and obtain the following formula:

$$polarisation_t = \frac{\sum_{d=1}^{D} prob_{dt} \times std_d}{prob_t}. \quad (3)$$

In this equation, $std_d$ is the standard deviation of the comments' sentiment scores in document *d*. We normalize the index to the range 0–100% as before.

Top ten topics ranked by polarization score are shown in Table 5. First, it can be seen that many of these topics are also among the most important ones (Spearman's rank correlation 0.877, p-value = 4.757e-16), and H3 is confirmed. Topics that arouse controversy attract more attention and more comments. Second, now most topics in this list are discussed as social problems—that is, the undesirable situations demanding collective effort (marked with italics). Three topics are related to local authority resignations and appointments, and they arouse discussion about the fairness of such decisions and corruption. An unexpected case, the "Libraries, art and literature" topic is dominated by a story of a sixteen-year-old girl who was denied access to *The Financier* novel by Theodore Dreiser in one of the local libraries because the book contains scenes of sex. The heated discussions provoked by this story raise the problem of boundaries regarding what is permissible for children.

The Crimea topic is a most interesting case, but it also illustrates a limitation of topic modeling that sometimes brings together several interpretable, but unrelated subtopics. Although Crimea news items dominate this topic, three smaller clusters of news attracted the majority of comments that were both more negative and more polarized which makes this topic as a whole high in both negativity and polarization scores. However, the subtopic truly related to Crimea demonstrates a slightly different pattern. As suggested by manual analysis of comments to 21 Crimea-related news articles that appear among top 50 texts of this topic, the modest volume of Crimea-related comments might indicate readers' uncertainty and inability to forecast the consequences of such a tectonic shift in politics. Moreover, of 82 comments, we find only two that clearly frame the Crimea event as a matter of national pride. However, no extreme negative sentiment is observed in critical comments either, which contributes most to the overall positive tone of this subtopic. Critical comments' authors are mostly

**Table 5.** Ten most polarized topics.

| Topic | Polarization index |
|---|---|
| *Stray dogs & dog hunters* | 100.0% |
| *Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements 1* | 97.2% |
| *Yury Gamburg resignation* | 95.3% |
| *Russia, Ukraine & US international relations* | 94.8% |
| *Ivan Klimov's murder* | 93.1% |
| Abridgements of traffic law | 91.9% |
| *Urban development (misc) | 91.4% |
| *Libraries, art and literature* | 91.3% |
| *Crimea accession* | 88.9% |
| *Local authorities: appointments, resignations & statements 2* | 86.8% |

concerned with the possible reallocation of public funds from their region to the newly acquired territory as well as with the anticipated increase in prices at Crimean resorts (both of which actually happened).

## 10. Conclusion

In this article we have examined which topics are important and which get defined as social problems by commenting audiences of regional media, focusing on a country with a partially controlled media. We have obtained several interrelated findings.

First, we have shown that the volume of attention to topics demonstrated by the media and by their audiences diverge. Possible causes of the divergence include: censorship or erroneous editorial policies that prevent audience's interests from being taken into consideration, difference between general and commenting audiences, and a chance that the volume of comments might measure a type of importance different from that captured by opinion polls (that are traditionally used to verify agenda-setting theory). In any case, this finding contradicts the main claim of the agenda-setting theory about the ability of media to tell the public "what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). It is still an open question whether re-evaluation of topic importance by readers transfers directly into user-generated agenda-setting process, in particular, because the size of comment readership is less known than the size of news readership. As mentioned before, what has been studied so far is mostly the ability of social media content to influence the agenda of traditional media, not public opinion itself (as the classical agenda-setting research design would demand), furthermore this has been related to professional social media content only (Groshek & Groshek, 2013; Jang, Park, & Lee, 2017; Sayre et al., 2010). Also, re-evaluation of topic importance is not equal to autonomous agenda building as it only chooses between the offered issues. This process can be called agenda reweighting and it is closer to Hall's oppositional decoding (Hall, 1980), although, while Hall talks about an audience's redefinition of news frames, here we deal with the redefinition of news importance. New theories of agenda formation and spread are thus needed to account for the changed cycle and agents of media content production and dissemination.

Our second finding is that while the overall sentiment of comments does not correlate to a topic's importance for audiences, the level of sentiment polarization in those comments does. It means that commenting activity evolves there where discussion begins. This leads us to the third and most important finding. While the prevailing negative sentiment alone, and even combined with high topic importance, does not usually indicate topic problematization, high the level of sentiment polarization does. Although initially, we expected to find both problems whose problematic status is not challenged and those whose status is debated, through qualitative analysis of comments we instead found that problem formulation takes place mostly when it is contested. That is, instead of the nomination of fixed problems we observe the process of their definition which potentially can contribute to the debate between approaches that view public opinion as either a static condition or a fluid process.

Closely connected to this is our fourth finding. Although the news mostly reports separate events and seldom formulate them as problems, we see that the media do not need to frame events as reflections of broader problems for audiences to problematize them. Readers make their own conclusions and generalizations bringing their background knowledge into the discussion—thus, although the news does not frame Klimov's murder as a potential ethnic conflict, many comment threads do. This finding is especially important in the context of Russian partially controlled media. This may be correct in regard to the national media and national agendas, as, indeed, we see a striking lack of discussion on Crimea and unanimous hate towards the US which is in line with the national media framing. However, at the regional level, many inconvenient questions are raised by readers that include corruption, police malpractice, censorship in literature, and ethnic tensions. The less problematization of such issues is found in media, the more important is the public availability of such discussions. This observation can have implications for the understanding of social problem definition and public opinion formation in semi-controlled environments. In such environments, governments are seldom able to control user-generated content as efficiently as they control professional content, which creates a visible gap between the two. This makes at least some segments of audiences consult non-institutionalized content for definitions of social problems thus creating alternative paths of public opinion formation.

## Acknowledgments

This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University).

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 157–166**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.1910**

Article

# Newsworthiness and the Public's Response in Russian Social Media: A Comparison of State and Private News Organizations

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Submitted: 14 December 2018 | Accepted: 22 April 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Social media have become one of the most important news delivery channels due to their interactivity and large audiences. The content published by news organizations on social networking sites is of particular value to sociologists, because it allows measurement of users' attitude to certain events. However, we understand that the media choose which events become news in accordance with certain criteria, such as news values. In this study, we decided to examine how news values determine the public's response as expressed by likes, reposts, and comments. To analyze the characteristics of different media and their audiences, we selected four popular newsgroups on the social networking site Vkontakte: TASS and Russia Today, representing the state media, alongside RBC and Meduza, representing the private media. The posts of the selected newsgroups were coded and analyzed by means of Harcup and O'Neill taxonomy of values (2016). The study showed that news organizations tend to have preferences for some news values rather than others. Regression analysis revealed positive relationships between 1) the sharing of likes and good and entertaining content, 2) the sharing of comments and the presence of celebrities or conflicts in news, 3) the sharing of reposts and comments and significant events. An unexpected discovery was a negative dependency between the number of comments and the presence of exclusive content.

**Keywords**
audience; media agenda; news organizations; news values; newsworthiness; Russia; social media; social networks

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Public Discussion in Russian Social Media", edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

The assessment of attributes pertaining to the audiences of online media is an important measurement of public opinion on social media since these news sources contain a significant part of opinions on broadcast news. Social networking sites provide researchers with the opportunity to reveal the socio-demographic characteristics of users as well as their interests and friendships. Applying these parameters, it is possible (in part) to assess the user's political views or his/her prioritized values (DiGrazia, McKelvey, Bollen, & Rojas, 2013; Preoțiuc-Pietro, Liu, Hopkins, & Ungar, 2017). But this analysis is rather complicated, and it does not always provide sufficiently reliable results (Cohen & Ruths, 2013; Mislove, Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela, & Rosenquist, 2011). In addition, both the administration of social networking sites and users themselves restrict, for a number of reasons, access to users' personal data, which further undermines the validity of analysis.

In view of these findings, it seems reasonable to try some other approaches in order to analyze the characteristics of the audience of newsgroups. In our previous study, we applied the agenda-setting theory, assuming

that privately owned, state-independent media adapt news topics to the interest of their own audience, unlike state-owned online media outlets. However, our assumption was not confirmed (Judina & Platonov, 2018). Nevertheless, we decided to continue exploring the relationship between the content of the news stream and the users' response to it in social media. In this work, we used a journalistic approach to analyzing the content of the news agenda, matching each news item with its corresponding set of news values.

This approach was chosen, firstly, due to our intention to look at the news through the eyes of those who select it. Although some researchers believe that one should watch, not for newsworthiness (Ørmen, 2018), but for noteworthiness (Lee & Chyi, 2014) or shareworthiness (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017) when studying the news agenda in social media, but so far online media with large audiences remain the main daily news sources for a significant proportion (VCIOM, 2018), if not the majority, of users, so we need to understand their reasoning in setting the agenda.

The second reason to choose the concept of newsworthiness was our assumption that the news values which receive the greatest public response demonstrate the preferences of the media audience. In this sense, values reflect not only the policy of media but also characterize the readers themselves, enabling us to understand whether there is an agreement between the audience's interests and the media organization.

We also continue exploring the differences between state and private-owned newsgroups. The contemporary Russian news media environment is characterized by high competition for audience share. Current research shows that m Russian news media adhere to pro-active agenda-building (Hanitzsch, Folker, & Corinna, 2016) and framing used to legitimize the power (Lukyanova, 2018). Recently, even private-owned media have been charged with politicization (Field et al., 2018). We assume that, in this situation, the increasing ideological polarization between state-owned and private-owned media may lead to the fact that audiences have different, and sometimes diametrically opposed, ideas about the same events. We believe that the theory of news values will highlight additional features of the divergence between these types of media.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Conceptually, news values are the set of criteria which determine whether a story will become news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). On the one hand, it is a theory that explains the principles for selecting events and their attributes, on the other—it is a kind of standard, a tool that simplifies the "production of news": news values "are the terse shorthand references to shared understandings about the nature and purpose of news which can be used to ease the rapid and difficult manufacture of bulletins and news programmes" (Golding & Elliott, 1979).

The representations of newsworthiness largely depend on the traditions, culture, technology, and economic sphere of society (Dominick, 1993). Among other factors, since the 1960s, the approaches to the classification of news values have flexibly changed in accordance with the development of news genres and content options. The integration of the news flow into social media feeds has expanded the opportunities to analyze feedback and engagement mechanisms.

Above all, as the media market is becoming increasingly competitive, news organizations are trying to bring their content to a wider audience, so they are forced to focus on "infotainment" to varying degrees. (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). Therefore, in the 21st century, the existing set of news values was supplemented due to the increased relevance of such news values as conflict, emotions, and visualness (McGregor, 2002).

There is a limited number of articles in which the conception of news values is employed to study news organizations' outlets in social media from the comparative perspective. Several studies, based on data from Facebook and Twitter, show differences in media from different countries (Al-Rawi, 2017), between federal and regional media (Armstrong & Gao, 2010), as well as those that target traditional and online audiences (García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018).

For our study, we chose the updated taxonomy of news values developed by Harcup and O'Neill (2016), as it was specially adapted to the circumstances of news consumption in social media, taking into account, for example, the presence of audio-visual content in online publications. Since social media provide an opportunity for users to respond to content, including news stories in post layout, the focus of media research is gradually shifting from categories of popularity and exposure to quantitative indicators of involvement, such as user engagement metrics (Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2016). The feedback functionality provided by social networking sites may vary slightly, but as a rule, comments, likes, and reposts are present everywhere in one form or another.

The dependencies between these indicators and the characteristics of the content consumed by users have already been studied both in the context of the news and outside it. Almgren and Olsson (2015) demonstrated that users prefer to comment on hard news (for example, news covering changes in "proximity space, politics, and health care"), even if the news site's policy is such that users are encouraged to comment on soft news (Almgren & Olsson, 2015). Comparative analysis of various user interactions with news posts on Facebook shows that the prevalence of Emoji reactions to the post (instead of simple likes) generally reduces the level of commenting and the intensity of reposting (Smoliarova, Gromova, & Pavlushkina, 2018). In the study of communication on Instagram, it was found that the intensity of liking could be influenced, for example, by factors such as the presence of people in a photo. Ziegele, Breiner and Quiring (2014),

using a series of interviews and content analysis of comments, have shown that uncertainty, controversy, comprehensibility, negativity, and personalization contained in news, have influenced the amount of discussion in comments (Ziegele et al., 2014). The tests of predictive models show that sometimes the cause of a large number of comments to the news may not be a news item itself, but particular comments which have sparked a discussion (Tsagkias, Weerkamp, & De Rijke, 2009). Using the example of retweets (similar to a repost on Twitter), a number of studies have shown that tweets with more emotional content are more likely to be disseminated by users (Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, Colleoni, & Etter, 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Having analyzed the results of the news consumption survey, Lee and Ma (2012) found no connection between the presence of entertainment in a message and the desire to share it. However, they discovered that this behaviour is significantly influenced by one's prior social media sharing experience (Lee & Ma, 2012). Qualitative research has revealed that some people may consciously limit themselves when liking and sharing news for privacy reasons (Costera Meijer & Kormelink, 2015).

## 3. Research Questions

In our research, the basic assumption is that the theory of news values, being a theoretical model explaining the selection of news into an agenda, can be used to detect differences in the types mentioned above and the magnitude of the public's response in social media. Conversely, this model is not applicable to the study of audiences' behaviour. Therefore, the first research question of the article is as follows:

> RQ1. How do various news values influence the level of the public's response, expressed in likes, reposts, and comments?

Since we continue to compare various media by their agenda and try to identify differences in behaviour between their audiences, the following two questions relate to the opposition of state- and private-owned media:

> RQ2. Are there any differences in the share of news values between state and private newsgroups in social media?
> RQ3. Are there any differences in audiences of state and private newsgroups in social media regarding their response rate, expressed in likes, reposts, and comments?

## 4. Data

### *4.1. Social Networking Site*

The most visited social networking site in Russia is Vkontakte (vk.com; Live Internet, n.d.), with more than 500 million accounts registered at the time of writing the article. (Vkontakte, n.d.-a). In addition, this platform provides open access to public pages through the API. Therefore, this site was used as a source of data for this study.

### *4.2. Newsgroups*

The sample of newsgroups available for analysis includes the four most popular text-oriented media newsgroups in Vkontakte (2 state-owned and 2 privately-owned). The procedure of group selection has been described in detail in our previous study (Judina & Platonov, 2018).

The state media newsgroups selected were TASS (Vkontakte, n.d.-e) and Russia today (Vkontakte, n.d.-d). TASS is the oldest news agency in Russia founded in 1902, comparable in scale to Reuters and the Associated Press, with 68 foreign representative offices. Russia Today is one of the most famous Russian media in the world, distributing its content in Russian, English, Arabic, French, and Spanish. RT has repeatedly been faced with accusations regarding a lack of objectivity in reporting information (Yablokov, 2015) and the distribution of fake news (MacFarquhar, 2016).

Sampled newsgroups representing private media are owned by RBC (Vkontakte, n.d.-c) and Meduza (Vkontakte, n.d.-b). RBC is also known as RosBusinessConsulting—the largest private Russian media holding. The organization includes a television channel, an information agency, a newspaper, and a magazine, as well as a number of other services. In 2016, the entire top management of RBC was changed following a series of conflicts with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Meduza, 2016). In 2017, the RBC website became the most quoted online resource (Medialogia, 2018). Meduza is a popular news site in Russia, headquartered in Latvia. This site was launched in 2014 by the former chief editor of the online media Lenta.ru, after her removal from office, which resulted in the voluntary resignation of a significant part of the editorial board (Lenta.ru, 2014). It is considered one of the most independent Russian-language media, due to the fact that it does not fall under restrictions of Roskomnadzor.

None of the presented media specializes solely in hard news, they all have a significant share of soft news.

### *4.3. News Items*

For each of the four newsgroups, 200 posts were randomly selected from the whole news dataset for the period from January 17 to March 9, 2018. Some posts were excluded from the sample for two reasons: because they contained not news but, for example, an analytical article or podcast, or because the message of a text may have been so vague that it was impossible to understand it (for instance: "Future is coming", "They say, it's temporary, but it is still frightening").

Vkontakte posts, whose format is used by media outlets, provide users with the following feedback options—

they could give likes, share content with other users and leave comments. Apart from this, the number of those who have seen a post is recorded, which enables us to calculate the proportion of those who have decided to respond to post content in any of the ways available.

The special features of Vkontakte posts are a highly standardized format and a tendency towards compliance with the principle of an inverted pyramid, which is typical of modern news media, focused on facts (Høyer, 1997). In most cases, the content of a title and a lead allows the presence of relevant news values in posts to be assessed of with a high degree of confidence. Despite the fact that media, in general, use different types of content, not to mention the numbers of communication channels, Vkontakte newsgroups stick to similar formats, which enables us to compare them.

## 5. Method

### *5.1. Coding*

To code news items, we used the classification of values developed by Harcup and O'Neill (2016), excluding Shareability, Relevance, and News organization's agenda. The authors of the taxonomy added the property of Shareability but did not provide a clear description for identifying it. Besides this, their definition of it as stories which encourage users to share them and make comments in social media seems to deprive the rest of the values of the opportunity to be shared. This makes this classification less applicable for the purpose of analyzing the users' response in social media. Relevance was excluded due to the fact that almost every news item falls under the definition given by the authors, since almost all the stories that journalists include in the news organization's agenda concern influential or culturally close groups or nations. This category should be measured with a continuous rather, than a dichotomous scale, and news writers, no doubt, are guided by it, ranking the events from the less relevant to the more relevant for their audience. We refrained from using News Organization's Agenda since the presented media did not openly state any special topics, so we decided to exclude this category for the time being.

The coding procedure was a rather complicated task because of several factors: first, the definitions of news values proposed by Harcup and O'Neill (2016) are somewhat vague, therefore to be able to use them, we had to analyze a significant part of the sample; second, correct identification of some news values required a list to be developed including organizations and the people representing them (for instance, The Power elite and Celebrities), as well as this, each coder had to study the news agenda of the period under consideration in order to trace follow-up news correctly. It is plain to see that the coders had to take into account a wide variety of details, as a result of this we decided to employ the methodology of negotiated coding (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Koole, & Kappelman, 2006) which is typically used in qualitative research.

The coding was conducted using the following algorithm: initially, rules were formulated; using them, the coders labelled the whole sample of posts, after which Cohen's kappas were calculated for each news value and the coders discussed their results and changed the coding scheme, after which the coding procedure was repeated. Labelling the whole set of texts by both coders was required because the share of some news values was rather small (for instance, Good News), consequently, it was necessary to process all posts to ensure the reliability of their coding. In our case, it required us to repeat the algorithm three times in order to achieve a high level of inter-coder reliability. The values of Cohen's kappas for the news values at each stage are presented in Table 1.

### *5.2. Data Analysis*

To answer RQ1 and RQ3, we implemented multiple linear regression models where the cases are news posts.

**Table 1.** Cohen's kappas.

| | Cohen's kappa | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Round 1** | **Round 2** | **Round 3** |
| Exclusivity | 0,75 | 0,77 | 0,98 |
| Bad news | 0,62 | 0,65 | 0,93 |
| Conflict | 0,68 | 0,77 | 0,97 |
| Surprise | 0,52 | 0,58 | 0,95 |
| Audio-visuals | 0,80 | 0,80 | 0,95 |
| Entertainment | 0,81 | 0,83 | 0,97 |
| Drama | 0,79 | 0,79 | 0,97 |
| The power elite | 0,77 | 0,77 | 0,97 |
| Magnitude | 0,59 | 0,77 | 0,95 |
| Celebrity | 0,74 | 0,74 | 0,98 |
| Good news | 0,76 | 0,78 | 0,99 |
| Follow-up | 0,66 | 0,69 | 0,97 |

Independent variables are news values, each of which is binary. Since all the newsgroups have different average shares of likes, comments and reposts, we used a categorical variable which represented these newsgroups as the control one. Dependent variables are the shares of likes, reposts, and comments from the number of views per post. For the convenience of calculation, these shares were multiplied by 1000. Since all dependent variables have positive skewness, we decided to apply log transformation to normalize them.

## 6. Results

The most frequent stories in the news agenda in the four media on "Vkontakte" were, on average, those related to previously published news (Figure 1). Approximately the same shares were obtained by the news, containing information about the power elite. The Good news and, oddly enough, those stories which carried audio-visual content in the form of photographs or videos were rarely encountered.

Responding to RQ2, it can be noted that there are few sharp differences in the share of certain news values between private and state online media outlets. The first dissimilarity is apparent in the value of Conflict: the state-owned media are much less likely to publish such stories than the privately-owned media, $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 800) = 12.01, $p < .01$. The privately-owned media are more likely to try to entertain readers by posting news containing Drama, $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 800) = 5.41, $p < .05$.

Three out of four online media have one or more news values whose shares are noticeably higher than the rest. In the TASS agenda, Good news occupies much more space, and along with this, audio-visual content is more frequently attached to its news posts. More than a half of the RBC agenda is devoted to influential people and organizations (The power elite); apart from that, this news organization focuses more on events with serious consequences for a large number of people (Magnitude). Meduza entertains its audience most actively (Entertainment = 38%), but at the same time, unlike the rest of the media, is not so afraid of scaring its users off with bad news.

It is worth separately noting the unpopularity of bad news revealed in our study, as it disagrees with the famous journalistic guideline "if it bleeds, it leads". One should not exclude the possibility that this result could be generated by some uncertainty in the description of

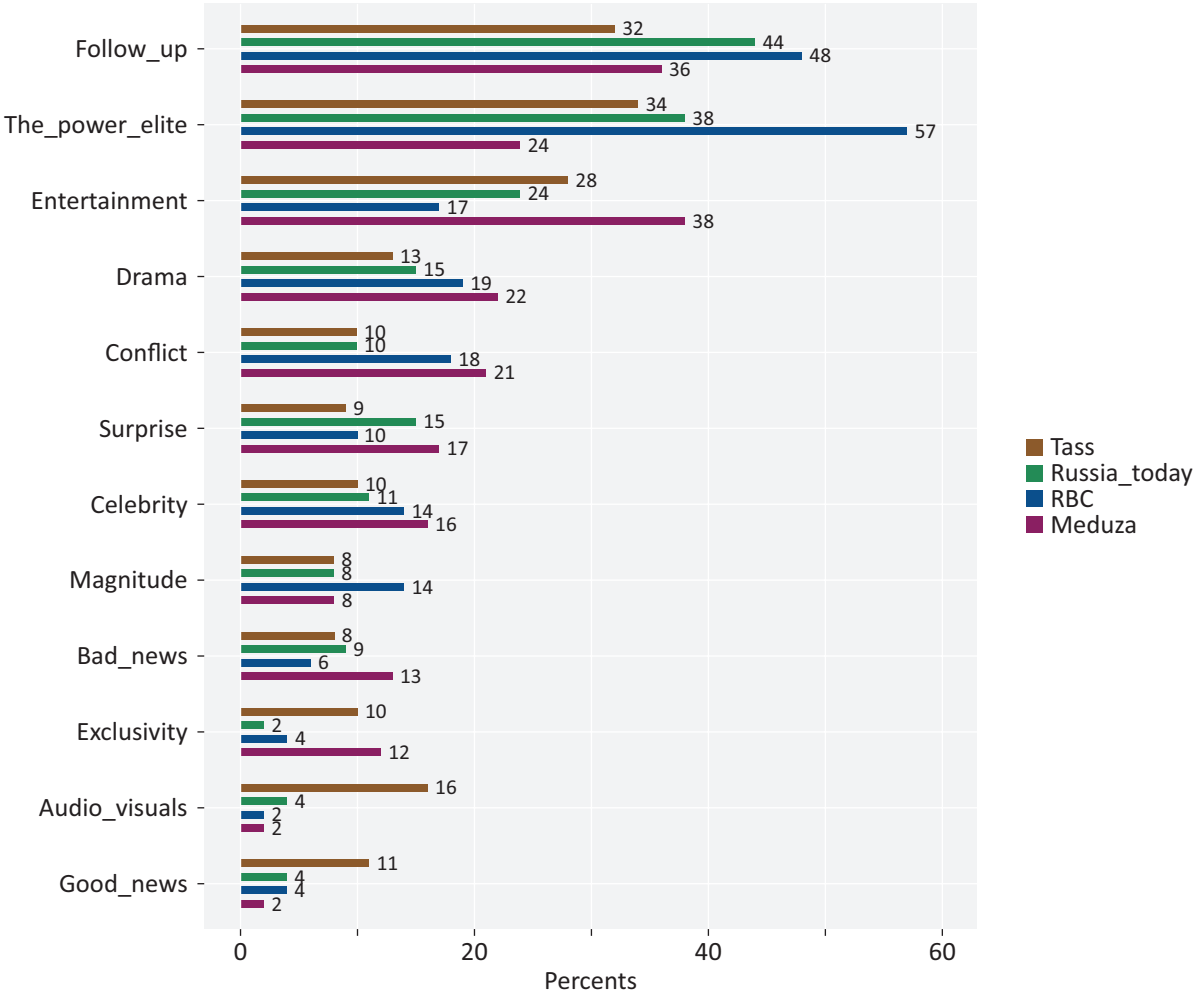


**Figure 1.** News values distribution.

what events are covered by Bad news in the Harcup and O'Neill (2016) classification; so, consequently, the subjective perception has affected the labelling of Bad news. Nevertheless, there are some reasons to believe that the media, both for motives related solely to the organizations' policies (for example, pursuing propaganda purposes not to talk about bad things), and due to the fact that Bad news does not gain the expected response from an audience, restricting their shares on the social media platforms.

To answer RQ1, we used multiple linear regression, including all four newsgroups in the sample. This enabled us to find out if there are any dependencies, common to all the media, for various types of response. The results of the regression analysis presented in Table 2 showed both the presence of somewhat expected dependencies and some whose explanation requires additional analysis.

Analyzing the expected results we can note the negative relationship between bad news and the share of likes—obviously, people do not want to give likes to bad events. Conversely, members of newsgroups like good and entertaining news, and furthermore, good news tends to be shared. It can be assumed, that stories about a conflict provoke readers to argue in the comments. The effect of surprise encourages users to leave comments under a post, probably because Vkontakte, unlike Facebook, does not provide the expression of surprise (in the form of a distinct smile) and, apparently, users want to express this feeling publicly. Quite expectedly, users tend to discuss and share important events (Magnitude) with their friends on social networking sites, as well as the exclusive content, provided by newsgroups. Not surprisingly, news describing celebrities or influential people is more intensely commented on by the audience, because, apparently, this is how the personification effect works, encouraging people to discuss other people. The positive relationship between the share of comments and Follow-up stories is also explicable: users have already formed their opinions on these events and seek to voice them. At the same time, the negative dependency between this type of news and the share of likes and reposts is also clear: the audience sees no reason to support and share stories that are already familiar to them.

In the total of the four newsgroups, there was no dependency between the shares of likes, reposts, and comments and news containing Drama. Perhaps, in order to find a relationship between this news value and the public's response, it is necessary to record and analyze some other types of user feedback that are not provided by the social networking site Vkontakte.

To test RQ3, we also used multiple regression, dividing the sample into two types of media. As the number of news values is relatively small, we decided to include in the analysis dependencies with $p$ values $< 0.1$. Since the number of cases representing several news values became too small within separate samples (especially Good news, Audio-visuals, and Exclusivity), some dependencies found in the total sample ceased to be significant.

The comparison of the results shown in Tables 3 and 4 revealed only some differences between the audience's reactions to private and state-owned media. Indeed, the readers of Meduza and RBC are less sensitive to bad news: the shares of likes and comments under such posts drops insignificantly in comparison with the average value in the sample. The users of these news groups are not greatly affected by stories about conflicts or celebrities, along with that they are likely to follow unfolding events and, consequently, comment on them more actively.

The regression analysis showed that news with surprising elements encourages the users of state-owned newsgroups to leave more comments, whereas the users of those which are private-owned put more likes to such news. This may reflect the fact that in the first case sur-

**Table 2.** Multiple regression models testing news values for likes, reposts and comments: All cases.

| | Regression coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Likes** | **Comments** | **Reposts** |
| Exclusivity | −0,037 | −0,105. | 0,069* |
| Bad news | −0,175** | −0,087 | −0,003 |
| Conflict | 0,024 | 0,090* | 0,016 |
| Surprise | 0,100. | 0,102* | 0,008 |
| Audio-visuals | −0,054 | −0,101 | −0,005 |
| Entertainment | 0,285*** | 0,004 | −0,042 |
| Drama | −0,023 | −0,014 | −0,005 |
| The power elite | −0,001 | 0,097** | 0,011 |
| Magnitude | 0,019 | 0,116* | 0,085** |
| Celebrity | 0,020 | 0,108* | −0,035 |
| Good news | 0,598*** | 0,019 | 0,112*** |
| Follow-up | −0,059* | 0,106** | −0,038* |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0,33 | 0,25 | 0,192 |

Notes: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Sample size = 800. Adjusted $R^2$ = explained variance.

**Table 3.** Multiple regression models testing news values for likes, reposts and comments: State-owned media.

| | Regression coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Likes** | **Comments** | **Reposts** |
| Exclusivity | −0,037 | −0,038 | 0,125** |
| Bad news | −0,234* | −0,199* | −0,068 |
| Conflict | 0,127 | 0,172* | 0,044. |
| Surprise | 0,077 | 0,167* | −0,003 |
| Audio-visuals | −0,104 | −0,131. | −0,011 |
| Entertainment | 0,321*** | 0,013 | 0,032 |
| Drama | −0,006 | 0,015 | 0,001 |
| The power elite | 0,067 | 0,094. | 0,020 |
| Magnitude | 0,029 | 0,162. | 0,059 |
| Celebrity | 0,028 | 0,236** | −0,030 |
| Good news | 0,670*** | 0,041 | 0,118** |
| Follow-up | −0,043 | 0,048 | −0,014 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0,376 | 0,309 | 0,327 |

Notes: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05., .p < 0.1. Sample size = 400. Adjusted $R^2$ = explained variance.

**Table 4.** Multiple regression models testing news values for likes, reposts and comments: Private-owned media.

| | Regression coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Likes** | **Comments** | **Reposts** |
| Exclusivity | −0,040 | −0,180* | 0,026 |
| Bad news | −0,106 | −0,007 | 0,060 |
| Conflict | −0,029 | 0,045 | 0,004 |
| Surprise | 0,133* | 0,036 | 0,024 |
| Audio-visuals | 0,167 | 0,011 | 0,048 |
| Entertainment | 0,275*** | −0,001 | 0,062* |
| Drama | −0,029 | −0,029 | −0,003 |
| The power elite | −0,066 | 0,097* | −0,003 |
| Magnitude | 0,038 | 0,082 | 0,112** |
| Celebrity | 0,028 | 0,030 | −0,027 |
| Good news | 0,429** | −0,132 | 0,107 |
| Follow-up | −0,062 | 0,168*** | −0,055* |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0,221 | 0,175 | 0,057 |

Notes: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05., .p < 0.1. Sample size = 400. Adjusted $R^2$ = explained variance.

prise is used in a negative context, and in the second—a positive context.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

The study showed how news values shape the agenda of popular media in social media in Russia, as well as how their readers (users of the social networking site Vkontakte) react to the presence of certain values in the news. As well as this, the separate analysis of the public's feedback for private and state-owned media discovered that audiences may also be distinguished by the level of interest in a certain news value.

According to Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) news values taxonomy, from one-third to one-half of the news in social media are occupied by Follow-up stories, a similar share covers the events around the power elite, one-fifth to one-third contain entertainment content. Surprisingly, a rather small proportion of the agenda was devoted to Bad news—only about 10% in each newsgroup. We revealed an insignificant number of differences between the private and the state-owned media regarding the preferences of certain news values: there is more soft news in the agenda of newsgroups owned by the private media, and the state-owned media newsgroups publish conflict stories much less frequently.

The analysis of the dependencies between the type of news value, presented in the news, and the type of public response generally showed the expected results. Users tend to like and share good news and entertaining news as opposed to bad news. If there are influential or famous people in a news post, it will receive more comments as a result of the personification effect. Media audiences are also keen to share important and exclusive news with their friends on a social networking site. An unexpected discovery was the negative relationship be-

tween the share of comments and the presence of exclusive content in a post. Perhaps, the novelty of information has such an effect on the users' behaviour.

The results obtained demonstrate that applying news values to reveal the differences in reactions between media audiences is not justified. Despite the fact that we identified some of them, for example, in commenting on bad news or stories with conflicts in newsgroups, which are outlets of state and private-owned media, in relation to the majority of news values, the users' behaviour is similar. Perhaps, for this task, another set of factors may be developed with partial adaptation of news values.

The high complexity of the coding procedure which uses a news values scheme requires a more detailed taxonomy. For instance, it seems reasonable to divide news values into groups as was done in the study dedicated to users' activities around the Ice Bucket Challenge news, where a set of emotions was applied as a separate category of shareworthiness (Kilgo, Lough, & Riedl, 2017). Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple (2017) developed their own classification of news values, grouping narrowly defined values into wider categories. Unfortunately, the practical application of this scheme in news coding is still complicated, since subcategories are left without clear definition.

The results definitely have limitations imposed by the sample, the chosen classification scheme, and, probably, by our understanding of the news values defined within the chosen conception. The category Drama suggested by Harcup and O'Neill (2016) has caused us considerable difficulties when interpreting the news. We understand that in many respects the intuitive process of news selection restricts its formal definition, and this leads to ambiguity of news value formulations.

We understand that some of the identified dependencies could be false positives, both because of a random error and because of the context of events that were occurring during the period of time investigated. In addition, studying the characteristics of audience interest and reaction is restrained by the available functionality of the social networking site Vkontakte, which those visiting this site can use to leave feedback to a post.

Our study provided empirical evidence of the influence of news values on the behaviour of online media audiences on social networking sites. Since online media are among the main spaces where public opinion is formed and expressed in social media, the results obtained may enhance the methodology of these sociological studies. We hope that this article may stimulate future research into developing a more comprehensive method.

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank our colleagues from the Faculty of Applied Mathematics and Control Processes and the Center for Sociological and Internet Research of Saint Petersburg State University for guidance and support.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2019, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 167–178**
**DOI: 10.17645/mac.v7i3.1911**

Article

# Making Sense of Emotions and Affective Investments in War: RT and the Syrian Conflict on YouTube

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Submitted: 14 December 2018 | Accepted: 19 March 2019 | Published: 9 August 2019

**Abstract**
Within the context of an 'affective turn' in media studies and the social sciences, this article explores the methodological challenges of researching emotions when studying online videos of conflict. Our study focuses on videos of the Syrian conflict shared on YouTube by the Russian state funded international broadcaster, RT. We propose that the concept of affective investment is a useful pivot between online videos of conflict and audience responses to them. Our study interrogates the role that affective investments play in 1) RT's YouTube representations of the Syrian conflict, and 2) audience comments on these videos. We draw attention to the important intersections of RT's representations of the conflict and audiences' affective investments in those representations, and draw attention to the methodological issues raised. Our empirical focus is two critical junctures in the Syrian conflict: the commencement of Russia's military intervention; and following the announcement of plans to withdraw Russian troops. We conclude by discussing the utility of affective investments in war when assessing online coverage of conflict, and suggesting avenues for further development.

**Keywords**
affective investments; conflict; emotion; international broadcaster; RT; Russia; social media; Syria; war; YouTube

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue 'Public Discussion in Russian Social Media', edited by Olessia Koltsova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Svetlana Bodrunova (St. Petersburg State University, Russia).



## 1. Introduction

The affective turn in social sciences, media, and communication has seen increased engagement with the study of emotions (Ahmed, 2014; Clough & Halley, 2007; Crawford, 2000; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Harding & Pribram, 2009; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018; Massumi, 2015; Wetherell, 2012). In parallel, politicians, media pundits, and publics increasingly describe emotions as integral to the age of 'post truth' politics, or suggest that emotions and feelings have become more significant than rationality and facts in people's political decision-making (Crilley, 2018; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2018; Davies, 2018). Nevertheless, emotions have always been important in global politics, media and society: the novelty of the 'post-truth' age is the widespread recognition of this fact. Despite this, and despite the burgeoning literature on emotions and global politics (Åhäll, 2018; Åhäll & Gregory, 2015; Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Clément & Sangar, 2018; Fierke, 2013; Hutchison, 2016; Ross, 2013), there remain difficulties in both understanding how exactly emotions matter, and in methodologically analysing them. In light of this, we suggest that the study of online content can reveal the dynamics by which emotions and affect shape people's understandings of global politics and society. We build on the concept of 'affective investments' (Solomon, 2014), proposing a methodology that links analysis of how war is represented on so-

cial media with analysis of how audiences express emotions in response to these representations. Our focus is on YouTube videos of the Syrian conflict published by RT (formerly Russia Today) as well as 600 comments made on these videos by YouTube users.

How can social media content be studied in order to unpack the role of emotions in people's understandings of war? In order to answer this, we first outline the nascent literature on emotions, affect and war. We build upon the concept of 'affective investments' (Solomon, 2014) in media representations of war, outlining a methodology for studying affective investments in war on social media within both 1) the content of social media posts, and 2) comments made in response to these posts. Our methodology draws upon the study of discourse and emotions, and provides a three step framework of analysis for studying emotions and war on social media platforms. Our article provides two contributions: first, it proposes a framework for understanding how affective investments and war can be studied on social media, and proposes avenues for further development. Second, it provides empirical demonstration of the importance of affective investments in RT's media representation of the Syrian conflict.

## 2. Theorising Affective Investments in War

The unity implied by an affective turn (Clough & Halley, 2007) masks 'diverse and thoroughly different conceptions and approaches' (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018, p. 1) to the study of emotions across the social sciences. Scholars rarely agree on definitions of emotion and affect, or how to study them. Approaches range from the psychological, focused on biological expressions of emotion and affect using techniques developed in psychology and neuroscience; to the cultural, which view emotion not as something internal to the body but as 'social and cultural practices' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 9). Such cultural approaches have been simultaneously influential in the study of media and communication (Doveling, Von Scheve, & Konijn, 2010; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018; Wirth & Schramm, 2005) and international politics and security (Åhäll, 2018; Åhäll & Gregory, 2015; Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Hutchison, 2016; Solomon, 2014; Steele, 2007). Synergizing and building upon these multidisciplinary foundations, we propose a method that scholars from diverse traditions can apply to study emotion on social media platforms in the context of war.

A cultural approach to emotion often refers to three interrelated terms. *Affect* is a bodily sensation that happens prior to and beyond consciousness (Clément & Sangar, 2018, p. 5; Hutchison, 2016, p. 16); exemplified by hairs standing on end, crying, or a faster heartbeat. *Emotions*, in contrast, are intersubjective, culturally formed understandings and experiences of physiological change (Crawford, 2000, p. 125; Mercer, 2014, p. 516). *Feelings*, then, are the 'conscious awareness that one is experiencing an emotion' (Mercer, 2014, p. 516), and whilst one may internally attribute hairs standing on end as a feeling of fear, crying as sadness, or a faster heartbeat as excitement, the meaning attributed to them is culturally formed (Ahmed, 2014). Despite these distinctions, emotion and affect represent porous points along a continuum rather than binary categories (Ahmed, 2014, p. 207; Crawford, 2000; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Mercer, 2014), and we therefore draw both upon the concept of 'affective investments' (Solomon, 2014) and upon expressed understandings of emotion.

Sara Ahmed's work provides an avenue into studying emotions in media and communication. Her analysis is focused on 'reading texts that circulate in the public domain, which work by aligning subjects with collectives by attributing "others" as the "source" of our feelings' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 1). By studying media as texts and analysing how they represent emotions, scholars have provided a variety of insights into emotions and global politics by drawing upon interpretive methods, with discourse analysis being particularly prominent (Åhäll, 2018; Åhäll & Gregory, 2015; Eroukhmanoff & Fazendeiro, 2018; Hast, 2018; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Koschut, 2018; Ross, 2013; Van Rythoven, 2015; Solomon, 2012). Emma Hutchison offers a clear articulation of what this approach involves, arguing that emotions should be studied 'through representations, through the words and images in which emotions are expressed and in turn imbued with social meaning' (Hutchison, 2016, p. 18). Ultimately, representations are the closest one can get to apprehending emotions, because 'the internal, ephemeral nature of emotions precludes the possibility of understanding them through anything other than their instrumental display' (Hutchison, 2016, p. 18). Representations 'evoke feelings and affects, which in turn help to shape how one perceives of and belongs in the world' (Hutchison, 2016, p. 19). Representations therefore have social, political, and cultural significance, shaping how people think, feel, and act in the world.

To date however, there has been little progress in linking such emotive media representations with audiences' displays of emotion, in part because of the many methodological challenges for studying emotions, particularly in the context of war and conflict (Åhäll & Gregory, 2015, pp. 229–231). Scholars interested in the intersections of media, communication, emotions, and war have drawn attention to the importance of 'emotive media' in conflict (Robinson, 2005, p. 344; see also Maltby & Keeble, 2007; Zollman, 2017); theorized that war reporting that features 'emotive and graphic coverage' has greater influence over policymakers (Robinson, 2002, p. 25); studied how 'suffering is portrayed on screen and how the suffering is narrated' (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 3; see also Sontag, 2003); and explored how lives are visually represented as grievable or not (Butler, 2009; Hutchison, 2016). Yet, whilst media representations of emotion are undoubtedly important, we contend that in the age of social media, so too is how audiences ex-

press their emotions in online comments responding to media representations of war. Within this environment, media actors, host platforms and audiences (and the processes of interaction and circulation between them) all actively shape discourses, values and norms (Chatterje-Doody & Crilley, 2019, p. 81; Poulsen, Kvale, & Van Leeuwen, 2018). Thus, online comments produce interactions, commentary and framing which subsequent viewers also experience as they consume images of conflict online.

Our study fits within a tradition of research that is attuned to the study of media representations of war and audience interpretations of them (Gillespie, Gow, Hoskins, O'Loughlin, & Žveržhanovski, 2010). We use the concept of 'affective investments' (Solomon, 2014) to inform a framework of analysis that enables us to explore how the content of social media posts is imbued with emotive content that provokes emotional responses from viewers. This approach is particularly helpful because, as the social theorist Ernesto Laclau notes, when studying media, scholars often focus on the 'form' of media, or what is represented through language and how this shapes identities and social action (Laclau, 2004, p. 326). Such analyses overlook the 'forces' of media discourse—the emotional and affective ways in which representations actually appeal to audiences (Laclau, 2007, p. 111). As Ty Solomon notes in his work that builds upon Laclau, 'words alone often cannot carry the power that they often have—the force of affect is needed to explain how words resonate with audiences and have political effects beyond their mere verbal utterance as such' (Solomon, 2014, p. 729). Consequently, media do not simply have political and social significance because of how they represent the world, but because of how audiences feel about what they represent; how they become affectively invested in the media representations that they read, view, and hear. According to Solomon, affective investments are:

> Anchoring forces that bind subjects to their identities and particular kinds of discourses…affective investment is a key link between, on one hand, identities constructed in language [and media] and, on the other hand, the 'force' that imbues…identities with their potency and binding power. (Solomon, 2014, p. 729)

Such an understanding of affective investments has several implications for the study of emotions, media, global politics, and war. First, it suggests that the study of media and war should focus on how identities are represented and made potent through appeals to affect and emotion. Second, it implies that studies should address how audiences feel about the ways in which the world is represented to them. This is especially pertinent in the context of conflict, because, as Solomon's research demonstrates, the power of media does not solely lie in the verbal and visual expressions of media themselves, rather, these media 'are politically consequential precisely because they touch upon—or are felt by audiences to touch upon—a deeper nerve or 'essence' that such [media] are believed by audience members to express' (Solomon, 2014, p. 735). Thus, whilst we do not argue that media representations cause specific audience reactions, in stimulating audience views and interactions, online videos act as discursive nodes; points of reference for emotive engagement with the reported topic.

There are two important gaps within the literature on affective investments and war which can both be addressed by attention to online content. First, despite the shift in attention to 'audiences' affective investments' (Solomon, 2014, p. 720), studies undertaken so far provide limited engagement with what audiences actually think and feel about the media representations of war that they view. To date, scholarship on affective investments and war remains focused on feelings expressed by members of the public quoted in media articles (Solomon, 2012, 2014) or on interviews that do not account for the specific media which audiences may have engaged with (Holland, 2009). Second, studies of affective investments remain focused on traditional media, and do not account for the changes in the media ecology that followed the development of social media technologies that have had major implications for how war is both represented and waged (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010, 2015). Our article addresses these gaps by highlighting how social media is used to represent war in such a way that audiences not only feel affectively invested in the use of armed force, but that they can record their impressions for future audiences to experience together with the initial source. Furthermore, we propose a framework for studying how social media audiences express emotions in the comments they post on social media sites. Our framework builds upon scholarship on affective investments by drawing upon research on media and communication (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015), audience studies and conflict (Gillespie et al., 2010; O'Loughlin, 2011; Pears, 2016) as well as work focusing on the importance of social media comments as a data source for understanding war and security (Da Silva & Crilley, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Shepherd & Hamilton, 2016). This enables us to contribute to theorizing and empirically studying affective investments in media representations of war.

The study of affective investments in war is, however, fraught with methodological issues. Emotions are 'hard to operationalize, hard to measure, and hard to isolate from other factors' (Mercer, 1996, p. 1), and understanding their effects on politics and the legitimation of war is difficult. Even with the concept of affective investments providing a foundation for analysis we are still left with important questions. For example, how can we study and systematically analyse how media representations of war represent emotions? How can we understand what emotions audiences feel when they view media representations of war? And finally, how can we understand the link

between the emotional content of media and the emotions felt by audiences? We now seek to address these questions by outlining a methodology for studying affective investments in war on social media sites.

## 3. Studying Affective Investments in War on Social Media

In order to understand how social media is used to represent war in such a way that its viewers feel affectively invested in the use of armed force, we propose a three-step method to integrate analysis both of the content of specific media; and of audience responses to it. Our empirical material is taken from the coverage of the Syrian conflict that the Russian state-backed international broadcaster, RT (formerly Russia Today) uploaded to YouTube. The Syrian conflict is important for understanding the contemporary dynamics of media representations of war and social media responses given that social media has been one of the primary ways in which people have found out news about the conflict (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014; Powers & O'Loughlin, 2015). What began as a revolutionary uprising against the Assad regime soon splintered into a violent civil war between competing factions including but not limited to the Assad regime, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and various Salafi Jihadi groups such as ISIS and al Nusra (Lister, 2015). Over time, Syria transformed from 'a significant regional player into an arena in which a multitude of local and foreign players compete' (Hokayem, 2013, p. 11), and both traditional and social media have been integral to how actors involved in the Syrian conflict have sought to gain support for their cause. The Assad regime effectively prevented professional media reporting of the revolution by denying visas to international journalists and by targeting the lives of those who remained (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012). The Syrian Opposition subsequently used citizen journalists to communicate their message to foreign audiences in hopes of achieving regime change and their revolutionary goals (Crilley, 2017; Saleh, 2018). At the same time, state funded international broadcasters reported events in Syria in ways that aligned with the foreign policy interests of their home states (Matar, 2014, 2017; Salama, 2012). Whilst the USA and other 'Western' states favoured the Syrian Opposition (Geis & Schlag, 2017), Russia preferred to preserve Bashar al-Assad's control of Syria (Orttung & Nelson, 2018; for an overview of international interests in Syria see Lynch, 2016, and Phillips, 2016).

For our theory-driven case construction (see Lai & Roccu, 2019, p. 11) we focused on RT's YouTube videos on the Syrian conflict. For several reasons, these provide a valuable case for studying emotion and affect in digital visual representations of war, and audiences' responses to them. First, RT's outputs reflect 'the Russian government's official position…one way or another' (Putin, 2013), so its Syria reporting had to claim legitimacy for foreign policy decisions that audiences knew were widely condemned by the international community (Orttung & Nelson, 2018, p. 3). The imperative to establish legitimacy is strongest during 'critical turning points' (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 44), so we honed down on two such junctures marking the start and end of Russian intervention. YouTube content was our specific focus, because international broadcasters' YouTube channels offer edited highlights that provide 'unique insight' into their brand identities and their attempts to set news agendas (al Nashmi, North, Bloom, & Cleary, 2017, pp. 169–70); the platform itself is central to RT's dissemination strategy (al Nashmi et al., 2017; Orttung & Nelson, 2018); and YouTube facilitates direct audience engagement via voting and commentary functions. For practical reasons, we restricted our analysis to the English-language international service. Though the vast majority of audience comments were made in English, we cannot accurately conclude their origin. Some bore hallmarks of non-native speakers (e.g., misuse of in/definite article); whilst others displayed perfect command of grammar and idiom.

### *3.1. Data Collection*

We began by collecting data on RT's YouTube playlists about Syria. At the time of data collection, RT had 10 YouTube playlists of videos on Syria, only one of which RT continued to update with new videos (see Table 1).

Where other playlists focused on specific actors, places, or events, RT's 'Syrian conflict & war against ISIS' provided an overview of RT's reports about the Syrian conflict from 2015 to the present day. We therefore analysed the 610 videos on this playlist in order to identify which videos reported the commencement of Russian intervention and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. We found six videos explicitly reported the announcement of Russian intervention in Syria, and four reported the announcement that Russian forces would be withdrawn (see Table 2).

From these videos we selected two for our analysis: 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria' (RT, 2015); and 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria' (RT, 2016). Both of these videos are breaking news reports marking critical junctures at which RT announces a change in Russian foreign policy in Syria. Thus, they provide insight into how RT claims legitimacy for Russian actions. Second, they both provoked a significant quantity of audience responses in terms of views, comments, upvotes and downvotes. Whilst RT's YouTube videos gain on average 66000 views and 1015 responses (Orttung & Nelson, 2018, pp. 9–10), the first video we selected had over sixteen times the number of average views and seven times the responses of the average RT YouTube video. The second video had around three times as many views and responses as the average. These videos thereby provide a valuable source of comments to analyse the affective investments of the viewing audience. We analysed

**Table 1.** RT playlists of videos on the Syrian conflict.

| Playlist Title | Number of videos | Dates of first and last video published |
|---|---|---|
| Syrian conflict & war against ISIS | 610 | 15 August 2015–still active |
| ISIS Uprising | 349 | 20 August 2014–23 October 2017 |
| Aleppo | 145 | 1 August 2016–6 March 2017 |
| Syria: Reports from the ground | 94 | 27 January 2014–18 December 2015 |
| RT reports from Syria | 86 | 26 October 2015–13 November 2017 |
| Russian Combat Cams | 33 | 30 September 2015–21 July 2016 |
| Russian warplane shot down at Syria-Turkey border | 32 | 24 November 2015–24 November 2016 |
| US missile strike against Syria | 24 | 6 April 2017–1 May 2017 |
| Russian Tu-154 plane crashes en route to Syria | 14 | 24 December 2016–28 December 2016 |
| RT crew under shelling, hit by anti-tank missile in Syria | 5 | 24 November 2015–28 November 2015 |

**Table 2.** RT videos announcing Russian intervention (videos 1–6) and the withdrawal of Russian forces (videos 7–10).

| ID | Date | Title | Duration | Views | Comments | Upvotes | Downvotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 05/9/15 | Are you Syrious? 'Putin admits Russia's aiding Syrian army in war'—western media claim | 3:39 | 208179 | 1962 | 1400 | 191 |
| 2 | 15/9/15 | 'We need to abandon double standards to combat ISIS'—Putin | 3:16 | 100432 | 738 | 1200 | 61 |
| 3 | 18/9/15 | Russia to consider sending troops to Syria if requested | 1:36 | 19860 | 390 | 499 | 30 |
| 4 | 30/9/15 | Russian parliament approves use of military in Syria to fight ISIS | 14:41 | 76233 | 583 | 729 | 39 |
| 5 | 30/9/15 | COMBAT CAM: First video of Russian airstrikes on ISIS in Syria | 0:50 | 420682 | 1436 | 2000 | 132 |
| 6 | 30/9/15 | Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria | 13:49 | 1095221 | 2801 | 4100 | 342 |
| 7 | 14/3/16 | BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria | 9:30 | 183345 | 2017 | 1600 | 140 |
| 8 | 15/3/16 | 5 years of war in Syria: Russia withdraws its military forces from Syria on conflict's anniversary | 1:22 | 21244 | 247 | 399 | 29 |
| 9 | 15/3/16 | FIRST VIDEO: Russian warplanes leaving airbase in Syria | 0:39 | 141444 | 383 | 554 | 57 |
| 10 | 26/10/17 | Putin: 90% of Syria now liberated from terrorists | 0:57 | 13927 | 321 | 595 | 15 |

the entirety of the audio-visual information presented in these videos (RT, 2015, 2016) using a combination of techniques (see Section 3.2).

Next, we used a publicly available YouTube scraper to gather all comments on these videos, before extracting a manageable sample for analysis. To do so, we exported all comments to a spreadsheet, and sorted them by popularity. For each video, our sample consisted of the 100 most and 100 least popular comments, plus 100 selected randomly. This enabled us to look at audience affective investments that resonated more/less widely (indicated by popularity) and to balance this with the general picture. One potential limitation of the selection is that RT may have moderated or deleted the most negative comments. However, our working assumption was that the 'upvotes'/'downvotes' on comments present, and the videos' viewing figures would be reliable, given the extent of YouTube's efforts to tackle bots and spam (Keller, 2018; YouTube, 2012, 2018). Our inclusion of a random sample of comments was intended to further mitigate against this eventuality. Furthermore, our choice of manual analysis of these comments (see Section 3.3) allowed us to exercise critical judgment on a case-by-case basis.

*3.2. Analysing Audiovisual Representations*

Automated sentiment analysis techniques can be applied to video content, however these are rarely geared to tripartite combinations of textual, visual and audio information, and have only limited capacity to take into account connections between discrete utterances (Poria, Cambria, Bajpai, & Hussain, 2017, p. 874). This means that the overall narrative connections that define how wars and conflicts are presented can be lost. Consequently, we developed a manual methodology for our audio-visual analysis, which combined elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 2011) and its application to visual media (Bleiker, 2018; Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006), as well as narrative analysis. These techniques were explicitly geared to uncovering relationships between knowledge and power; how supposedly objective facts are discursively constructed; and how the construction of stories about events and the actors involved in them can contribute to this process. Given that RT's coverage had to challenge dominant knowledge claims about the conflict, and that media texts work to 'construct acceptable knowledge' (Hansen, 2006, p. 8), we adapted Lene Hansen's (2006, pp. 73–83) three suggested foci for operationalising CDA: temporal moment/s; subject/s of discourse; and event/s. Two temporal moments were enshrined in our selection of reporting of 'critical junctures'. We therefore constructed two sets of research questions to establish how the 'facts' about identities and events in the Syrian conflict were discursively constructed via RT's YouTube videos:

> RQ1: Which actors and events are represented as being important in the conflict? How (and using what normative assumptions) are they represented? How are relationships between actors characterised?
>
> RQ2: What, if any, affective or emotional stimuli are involved in the representation of a) the actors involved; b) specific events; and c) the conflict as a whole?

We began by identifying all of the actors that the videos presented as being involved in the conflict. For each, we examined four aspects of the audio-visual stimuli used to represent them (see Table 3). These were the two forms of visual information (written text; still and moving images) and two forms of audio accompaniment (audio commentary; audio soundtracks). Where these were used to convey urgency or that something was unusual, we took this as a weak indicator of attempted affective stimulation. Where representations evoked a specific emotional orientation or conferred normative judgement (e.g., reference to an actor as legitimate/illegitimate), we took this as a strong indicator of attempted affective stimulation, following research that recognizes the interrelationship between emotions and normative judgements (Davies, 2018, p. 208; Schlag, 2018, p. 219). We separately tallied these strong, weak and absent attempts at affective stimulation, and analysed the strong attempts further to determine the specific nature of the emotional claim. For example, visual imagery including explosions would be categorised as a strong attempt at affective stimulation, oriented towards an emotion of peril, threat or fear. We closely examined which normative judgements and analytical conclusions were explicitly ascribed to actors/actions, and which were embedded as if objective. This would include whether actors were referred to by their official names (e.g., 'government', indicating legitimacy) or using normatively-inscribed terms (e.g., 'regime', indicating illegitimacy).

We complemented our CDA with narrative analysis of how the development of the conflict was explicitly narrated within the videos and/or inferred by what was implied to have taken place off-screen (Crilley, 2015). We did this by applying a method of timeline reconstruction (Chatterje-Doody, 2014) in which an implied chronology is reconstructed through attention to the time pegs and links that are built into the telling of a particular story (even though the story need not be told in a chronological order). This approach preserves important information that is encoded through the overall integrated content of a (visual) text, including judgements about whether events merely happened subsequent to other events, or directly because of them; and about which actors' actions were consequential in which conflict developments. Such information is routinely lost in analytical methods that split the subjects of study into smaller segments or themes for analysis. Afterwards, we categorised each episode/event in the narrative according to the schema outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Schema of affective and emotional representations.

| | **Written text** | | | **Visual images** | | | **Audio commentary** | | | **Audio soundtrack** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Affect (tally)** | strong | weak | N/A | strong | weak | N/A | strong | weak | N/A | strong | weak | N/A |
| | ↓ | | | ↓ | | | ↓ | | | ↓ | | |
| **Emotional claim/normative judgement (+explicit/embedded)** | | | | | | | | | | | | |

### *3.3. Analysing Audience Affective Investments*

Audience analysis is often based around measures of exposure to media content. However, such data cannot provide insights into audiences' feelings about the content that they consume. We must therefore consider how audiences actually act in response to images of war—for instance, when they choose to upload social media comments in response to media they view (Crilley, 2015, pp. 332–333; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010, p. 187). Whilst online commentators are not assumed to be representative of wider audiences, their comments remain discursive interventions, which reflect how media consumers make sense of contemporary world affairs (Ampofo, Collister, & Chadwick, 2015; Da Silva & Crilley, 2017), and can provide important evidence about the emotions that they express (Crilley & Manor, 2018). Automated forms of sentiment analysis are useful for summarising the general reception that certain online content receives from its audiences (Poria et al., 2017). However, the contextual sparseness of social media comments can reduce the reliability of such methods, and they cannot assess audience reactions to specific aspects of how content is presented (including the representations embedded within it). We therefore chose manual analysis to bring together investigation both of media content and of audiences' feelings about that content, undertaking deep, qualitative engagement with the representations that conveyed emotion from source (media) to target (audience). We paid close attention to the kinds of representations that audiences chose to express their opinions of the viewed content, especially those conveying an emotional response.

We approached our coding and analysis inductively. Given that RT's videos served to claim legitimacy for Russia's intervention in Syria, we sought to ascertain how far RT's account of the conflict and its characterisation of actors resonated with audiences. We began by coding audience comments on the basis of the analytical claims that they implied, according to whether they supported, opposed, or expressed neutral/unclear views on Russian intervention. So as not to impose the conceptual framework of affective investments onto the empirical data, we coded the comments separately for emotion. Since emotions are complex and online comments can be brief and idiosyncratic, we kept our three coding categories for emotion broad. We focused on: positive emotions (including expressions of joy, excitement, respect, pride); negative emotions (including expressions of anger, sadness, disgust, confusion); and neutral or unclear emotions. Within this analysis of audience emotion, we took as indicators of emotion the use of normatively-loaded language and judgements; expressions of an extreme degree (e.g., use of superlatives); employment of either emojis (i.e., text faces) or acronyms for emotion (e.g., LOL); and the use of swearing.

## 4. Affective Investment in the Syrian Conflict

Our analysis revealed many affective and emotional stimuli within RT's coverage of the conflict in Syria. These were used primarily to express the legal and moral justifications for Russian intervention. They were embedded as the background to reporting, via casually-ingrained normative references to the different actors. On one side, referred to in formal language, were the 'Syrian government' that requested Russian assistance; the 'Damascenes' who supported it; the 'Russian parliament' that approved air strikes; the named senior politicians (especially President Putin) involved in decisive developments; and the UN Security Council, which gave its multilateral backing to peace resolutions ultimately facilitated by Russia. On the other side, couched in normative terms, were 'anti-government militants'; oppositional 'groups like Islamic State' (IS); 'terrorists'; 'foreign fighters'; Western politicians motivated by 'regime change'; and their military forces, whose interventions had increased chaos on the ground.

These emotive representations were packaged within a very clear narrative of the evolution of the conflict, which was layered through a combination of visual, textual and audio stimuli, many of which had overtly affective elements. These affective stimuli included dramatic red and black colour ways; visuals of fire, explosions and military hardware; and audio soundtracks featuring gunshots, explosions and mortar attacks. According to the narrative of the Syrian conflict that RT chose to portray in their YouTube videos, initial civil unrest spiralled out of control, creating a chaotic environment that allowed groups like IS to thrive. Motivated by regime change, Western powers intervened militarily, but this escalated tensions, and contributed to making IS a global threat. Russian armed intervention into this conflict situation came at the request of the legitimate Syrian government, and in response to the chaos on the ground. It was legally and morally legitimate; targeted; short in duration; and effective. At the withdrawal announcement in particular, the central role of Putin in achieving this 'successful' intervention was highlighted.

Our analysis of social media comments on these videos revealed that audiences largely accepted both RT's narrative of the conflict and its characterisations of the key actors involved. To be clear, this is not evidence that the videos caused such opinions, merely that they stimulated their expression as such. On the 300 comments that we analysed on each of the two videos of breaking news in Syria, 71% (n = 213) and 60% (n = 179) respectively were supportive of the Russian intervention and/or suggested that it had been a success; 17% (n = 51) and 18% (n = 56) were opposed to it and/or suggested that it had been a failure. Just 12% (n = 36) and 22% (n = 65) were neutral or expressed no clear sentiment towards the intervention. The main swing between the commencement and withdrawal announcements appears to be a slight reduction in support for the inter-

vention, and increase in uncertainty/neutrality. This may be due to the wealth of alternative information available at the time of the withdrawal showing the situation not to be fully resolved. Nonetheless, negative comments at both points were similarly low.

Audiences of the two videos were *much more likely* to express an emotion of some kind in their commentary (81% [n = 244] and 77% [n = 230] respectively), than to remain neutral or to express no emotion (19% [n = 56] and 23% [n = 70]). Emotion-laden comments on the first video were almost evenly split between positive (n = 124) and negative (n = 120) emotions; whereas on the second video the balance was more towards positive (n = 144) rather than negative (n = 86) emotions. Yet, we have already established that this audience was overwhelmingly supportive of the intervention at both points. As it happens, the prevalence of emotional commentary from audiences was not related to their assessment of the intervention per se. Rather, it reflects the audience's affective investments (both positive and negative) in the identities represented within RT's coverage. The positive/negative split on the first video represented emotions expressed towards Russian actors; and towards oppositional 'terrorists'. As will be shown in detail below, the positively-weighted emotional responses to the second video ultimately reflected strong affective buy-in to the idea of a legitimate, effective and masculine Russian military.

Our qualitative analysis of audience comments revealed that the affective investments that audiences displayed strongly reflected RT's audio-visual representations of the Syrian conflict. Four key affective investments recurred: mistrust of global institutions (perceived within a conspiratorial framework); anger at US foreign policy; pride and gratitude towards Russia; and a heavily gendered understanding of Russia's intervention.

Table 4 exemplifies how audience comments on the videos replicate both RT's narrative of conflict developments and its characterisation of core actors. Significantly, however, it is via affective investments in core identities that commenters express their overall assessment of the conflict. These include negative sentiments about 'loser' NATO; the ineffective USA; and the 'terrorists' to be destroyed. Positive sentiments centre around the effective 'real men' of Russia, and particularly the personalised figure of 'Mr Putin'. Notably, as demonstrated in the final row, commentators frequently couched these identities specifically in terms of militarised masculinity, mapping gendered characteristics onto subjects and events at the moments of both commencement and withdrawal announcements.

Our article has proposed a new methodological toolkit to further the empirical study of affective investments in images of war—linking media sources to their audience. Our ensuing analysis of social media comments demonstrated that audiences were highly likely to express emotion in their responses to images of war, and that this emotion could be either positive or negative in nature. However, rather than being expressed in general terms as responses to the conflict itself, emotional engagements were closely linked to audiences' understandings of the actors involved in the conflict. Our empirical study indicates, therefore, that affective investment in the identities represented on-screen was a core component of the force with which the images of war were imbued. Neither video described the USA as homosexual and feminine, or Russia as a masculine 'real man'. Rather, this was how commenters expressed their feelings about the identities of the USA and Russia, and which bled into their assessments of the conflict. Individuals were affectively invested in the identity of a masculine, collective, effective, anti-terrorist Russia as opposed to a feminine, imperial, and out of control 'West' in Syria. Our analysis suggests that the concept of affective investment is crucial for helping to understand how audiences make sense of images of war, and how they relate to the audio-visual stimuli within which such conflict is represented.

## 5. Conclusions

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly aware of the importance of emotion and affect for understand-

**Table 4.** Examples of audience comments displaying affective investments in Russian military force in Syria.

| Affective Investment | Comments (Commencement) | Comments (Withdrawal) |
|---|---|---|
| Mistrust of global institutions | NATO = LOSER | Nice move Mr Putin, keep the globalist NWO trash guessing and confused… |
| Anger at US foreign policy | USA interference in Iraq created Terrorists, while Russia interference in Syria will end terrorism. | Russia—bombs destroys the shit out of terrorists and pulls out USA—bombs people left and right, replace governments and stay occupying countries for decades |
| Pride and gratitude towards Russia | Thank God for Putin. I don't even believe in God, but it sure seems like he was sent by a good force to stop this fucking insanity. | Great Job, Russia! |
| Gendered understanding of Russia's intervention | US gays can go home now to their boyfriends, real men are taking over :) | That's how you do it boys. Get in, get the job done, get out. |

ing world politics. Yet, there remain significant conceptual (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018, p. 1) and methodological difficulties for studying emotions, particularly in the context of war and conflict (Åhäll & Gregory, Chapter 17). These include the recurrent debates about whether emotions and politics should be studied as elite-led 'top-down' processes, or as being led from the 'bottom-up' direction of the individual (Delori, 2018; Schlag, 2018). Yet, how can we make any inferences about how audiences respond to images of war if we are not prepared to engage with both the content of those representations, and with audiences' reception of, and responses to them?

In this article, we have offered a way forward for investigating emotion and affect from media source to their audiences. Specifically, we have argued that one effective way to understand how audiences make sense of images of war is to engage directly with the reactions they express towards such images on social media. Social media comments are particularly instructive, since they represent audience members' direct engagement with the images they view. We cannot be sure of an actor's internal motivations, nor can we necessarily pick apart how an actor's emotional responses feed into their perceptions of what is a rational judgment (Mercer, 2006). Nonetheless, social media comments constitute an observable, empirical response to online content which can provide some insight into how such content is received (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Our approach to audience understandings of war is informed by the concept of 'affective investments' (Solomon, 2014), whereby media content stimulates emotional responses in its viewers by anchoring them to the identities and subjectivities it portrays. Our empirical analysis of breaking news videos and of audience reactions to them indicated that affective investments were crucial in how audiences interpreted and engaged with images of war. For, emotional responses to images of war were far more common than neutral ones. Yet, the character of such emotion did not necessarily correspond to the character of an audience's judgment about the overall nature of the conflict on display. It was not simply the images of war themselves that provoked an emotional reaction, but rather, the representations of the identities of the key actors involved with that conflict. These were related to how audiences assessed particular events.

It is becoming increasingly evident that images of war achieve their power amongst audiences as a direct result of the ways in which identities conveyed within images resonate with their audiences. Yet, to date there has been limited scholarly attention to bringing together empirical analysis of media representations of conflict, and audience responses to them—or to developing the methodological toolkit through which such a synergy may be made viable. With this preliminary study, we have provided some methodological suggestions for how the empirical study of affective investments in images of war—from media source to target audience—might be taken forward, and offered some foundations for future study of how links between media content and audience responses might be made.

**Acknowledgments**

The research upon which this article was based was conducted under the auspices of 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to 'Information War'?', funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, ref: AH/P00508X/1.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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