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**Citation:** Hellmueller, L., Lischka, J. A. & Humprecht, E. (2021). Shaping (non)-discursive social media spaces: Cross-national typologies of news organizations' heavy commenters. *New Media and Society*, 23(11), pp. 3249-3267. doi: 10.1177/1461444820946454

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**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820946454>

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## **Shaping (Non)-Discursive Social Media Spaces:**

Cross-national typologies of news organizations' heavy commenters

### **Abstract**

This study examines the role of heavy commenters on social media. We propose typologies of heavy commenters on Facebook pages of six news organizations in two systems that historically embraced different discourse cultures—the U.S. and Germany. We find that discourse cultures are impacted by news outlet and country: U.S. discourse is more participatory in terms of comment frequency, but further characterized by a strong non-discursive culture compared to a participatory liberal discourse culture in Germany. Frequency of commenting as normative ideal of social media sites (e.g., web traffic) does not lead to higher amounts of deliberation. On the contrary, it may contribute to what we conceptualize as the non-discursive model. As an expression of this, heavy commenters in the U.S. more often perform hate watching that manifests in hostile commenting on stories that are incongruent with their political ideologies. Implications for the democratic function of media organizations on social media are discussed.

*Keywords:* comparative research, digital journalism, discourse culture, Facebook, heavy commenters, social media

News on social media provides an opportunity for public debate by letting users comment on news stories. While user participation in public debates can indicate a thriving democratic society, hate speech and trolling, often performed by heavy commenters, indicate an unhealthy discourse culture (Quandt, 2018). This research focuses on the role of heavy commenters that arguably set the tone of online discourse cultures. Most recent studies, with few exceptions (Sahar & Diakopoulos, 2016; Coe et al., 2014), relied on quantitative methods focusing on *comments* as unit of analysis rather than *commenters*.

Heavy commenters are particularly important in the context of social media commenting, acting as opinion leaders and playing an active role in shaping the course of discourse (Cho & Kwon, 2015). They obtain influential roles in networks and have the ability to persuade as well as guide information diffusion (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). While the majority of users stays passive or participates with very low frequency in online discussions (Kalogeropoulos, Negrodo, & Picone, 2017), hyperactive users externalize their political attitudes more than others (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Hence, normally active users become less visible potentially creating a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1991), while heavy commenters have a significant role to play in political discourse as they become opinion leaders, thus creating an alternate picture of public opinion (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020).

To examine discourse cultures that heavy commenters co-create in a comparative perspective, we theoretically rely on the discourse models proposed by Ferree et al. (2002). Historically, different understandings of normative criteria for the public sphere in Germany and the United States presumably impact the public understanding of who should participate in public debates, and to what extent as well how such content and form should look like (Benson, 2008). Understanding commenting cultures is highly relevant for media organizations that

attempt to engage in constructive interactions with their users; however, in many cases having to devote resources to monitor and delete hate speech expression on social media pages (Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2019). Our analysis sets out to examine the discourse elements in the online sphere to propose typologies of commenting cultures that shape news organizations' Facebook comment sections across Germany and the U.S. We focus on Facebook because this platform continues to remain the most important social network for news (Newman et al., 2018).

### **Discourse Cultures in the Online Sphere**

#### **Digital political discourse cultures**

We argue that online discourse cultures are determined by the discourse tradition of a political system (Ferree et al., 2002). We understand discourse cultures as *political* discourse cultures, which are “thickenings” of cultural production, representation and appropriation patterns that determine discourse formations of political communication (Hepp et al., 2016, p. 27). Political discourse cultures go beyond situational discourses on a specific topic but refer to journalists' professional practices, citizens' everyday practices, and the exertion of influence through those practices (Hepp et al. 2016). Thus, discourse cultures inhabit political qualities and are political per se.

Discourse cultures manifest on multiple levels, including country and outlet-specific levels (Pfetsch, 2014). National political discourse cultures refer to the stability of national cultural patterns of political discourse, while outlet-specific discourse cultures relate to a stability regarding transnational outlet types (Hepp et al., 2016). Yet, cultures of political discourse also manifest in “citizens making this discourse their own” (Hepp et al, 2016, p. 28), for instance, on social media. Global platforms such as Facebook are both providers and engineers of a national or transnational digital public sphere (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018) and thus act as intermediaries to the multiple

levels of digital discourse cultures. Therefore, comments on news articles on social media platforms represent a manifestation of discourse cultures created on the citizen level, shaped by the outlet as well as national levels, and mediated by a transnational platform (e.g., Facebook) level.

### **The national level of discourse cultures**

Among comparative work on discourse cultures, Ferree et al. (2002) argue that different political systems lead to different conceptions of the public sphere. Their analysis follows a framework to understand (1) who participates (2) in what sort of process, (3) using which way of communicative presentation, (4) with what discursive outcome. For example, discourses in Germany follow different criteria than discourses in the U.S. In Germany—a representative democracy—elite dominance in the public sphere is more pronounced, whereas discourses in the U.S. follow more an egalitarian dynamic, including popular voices in the form of civil actors and alternative opinions. Ferree et al. (2002) compared abortion discourses in German and U.S. media proposing four models of the public sphere applied in a comparative context:

*Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist* (see Table 1).

While the four models were developed almost two decades ago, their application in recent research highlights the theoretical value for explaining differences among discourse cultures (Humprecht & Esser, 2018) and the impact of social bots on normative traditions of public sphere (Keller & Klinger, 2019).

German discourse in most respects meets the criteria highlighted by the *representative liberal model*. In other words, discourse is dominated by accountable state and party actors, and supplemented by experts. In the representative liberal theory tradition, public participation is limited and largely indirect. This liberal representative tradition may explain why only about every

seventh user in Germany as compared to every fourth online user in the U.S. writes comments on news (Newman et al., 2018).

[Table 1 about here]

However, discourse cultures may change over time. While, for example, civility characterizes representative discourse, incivility is found to increase in German online discussions. Frischlich et al. (2019) show that most community managers at German newspaper organizations perceive the volume of deviant user comments to be increasing. Those authors focused on so-called ‘dark participation’ characterized by “negative, selfish or even deeply sinister contributions such as ‘trolling’” (Quandt, 2018, p. 40). Examples include spreading misinformation and hate campaigns, trolling and cyberbullying. This increasing range of discursive styles indicates an evolution towards a non-discursive discourse culture.

According to Ferree et al. (2002), U.S. discourse, much more than German discourse, meets the criteria emphasized by the *participatory liberal model*. In this tradition, discourse is more inclusive, providing a balance of center and periphery. Ideological strength is positively associated with inclusion, i.e., political partisans are more likely to engage in commenting on news stories on social media (Kalogeropoulos, Negrodo, & Picone, 2017). This can lead to an overrepresentation of polarized voices grounded in political ideology, which eventually limits plurality (Kim et al., 2018).

According to Ferree et al. (2002), U.S. discourse is stronger in diminishing the distinction between the public and private realm than German discourse and shows more signs of the *constructionist model*. Rather than dialogue and formal argumentation, constructionists value narrative as a characteristic of content and style that challenges both the diffusion of power relations of daily life, and the concentrated power of formal political institutions by revealing the

connection between them. However, this ideal is threatened by commenters that solely comment to support certain political ideologies. Discourse becomes impossible and can turn into a travesty (Keller & Klinger, 2019; Post, 2019).

Expressions in online public debates enhancing the participatory liberal and constructionist discourse cultures have become frequent, especially linked to popular and controversial topics. Siapera, Boudourides, Lenis, and Suiter (2018) reveal that the refugee discourse is framed from two major perspectives. First, a far-right perspective describes refugees as criminals and appeals to security and safety. These themes can be interpreted as belonging to the participatory liberal discourse tradition as they reveal an extreme style and empower speakers from the political periphery, i.e., the far right. The second major theme, the humanitarian frame, revolves around human rights, which indicates the narrative inclusion of the marginalized social group, the immigrants. This theme represents a counterweight to the far-right perspective, representing a constructionist ideal of discourse.

Finally, as Ferree et al. (2002) show, neither Germany nor the U.S. fits the *discursive model* well. Its central value consists of the process of deliberation with popular inclusion (e.g., giving voice to the marginalized) and diminishing “the boundaries between the public and private” (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 311). The ultimate goal is a public sphere in which better ideas prevail over weaker ones because of the strength of these ideas rather than the strength of their proponents. In this model, news organizations would encourage diverse voices to speak up to provide a new perspective on a topic. A threat to this model are non-discursive expressions such as hate speech and hostile emotions, phenomena occurring in discourses targeting marginalized voices, which make such voices therefore less likely to speak up (Post, 2019).

Against the background that heavy commenters are central actors in determining the digital public discourse and reproduce or alter its discourse culture, we ask the following:

(RQ1) *Which discourse culture do heavy commenters co-create?*

(RQ2) *How do heavy commenters' discourse cultures differ on the national level?*

### **The outlet level of discourse cultures**

We presume news organizations to extend normative assumptions about discourse cultures to their comment sections through their approach of addressing audiences. A recent study found that comments on Facebook pages of “liberal” news media were less uncivil than those on conservative ones, and non-partisan outlets for national news did not exhibit a greater level of civility than partisan ones (Su et al, 2018). In contrast, partisan outlets “strongly impact not only the level of commenting activity, but also the content of comments” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 484). These results underline the importance of studying organizational factors such as news outlets' ideological stance and standpoint diversity. In sum, organizational level factors are important contextual factors when analyzing online discourse cultures (Humprecht, Hellmueller, & Lischka, 2020). We therefore add the following research question:

(RQ3) *How do heavy commenters' discourse cultures differ across news outlet types?*

## **Methodology**

### **Country and news outlet selection**

Following previous research pointing out different levels of polarization and media commercialization in Germany and the U.S. (Fletcher et al., 2019), we focus on these two countries. Furthermore, they historically show different commenting cultures: participatory liberal vs. representative liberal providing an interesting starting point to examine discourse cultures in a digital environment.

The following news outlets were sampled: one mass-market type in each country (*USA Today* and *WAZ*), one up-market type in each country, which some authors have also referred to as liberal mainstream media (Jutel, 2016) (*NYT* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*), and one alternative right-wing ideology type in each country (Breitbart and Kopp) (see Table 2). Thus, we sampled functional equivalent media organizations across both political and media systems.

[Table 2 about here]

### *Routine Coverage*

We identified the news outlets' official Facebook pages and collected 244,562 user comments and their original posts ( $n = 1,438$ ) within one week in January 2017. The main idea was to focus on routine coverage, rather than to sample by topic. Our data reveal a focus on immigration issues during that week in January 2017. The topic of immigration has been dominating media agendas in both countries. In Germany, a heated public debate on refugees seeking asylum during the "refugee crisis" has revived within news media and on social media since 2015, often owned by right-wing political actors and framed through their populist ideology (Ernst et al., 2018). Meanwhile, in the U.S., the topic of immigration crossed party lines in the 2016 election and both parties considered it an important issue.

### *Heavy commenters identification*

By focusing on heavy commenters instead of regular commenters, we applied intensity sampling. Intensity sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy widely used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases for the phenomenon under study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The goal was not to identify average cases but cases that represent one extreme end of a variation. Heavy commenters represent extreme and information-rich cases for online commenting within a political discourse culture.

We aimed to analyze between 20-30 heavy commenters per outlet, following Boddy's (2016) suggestion for reaching theoretical saturation in qualitative research. Therefore, we take the outlet-specific commenter community into account. Based on a long tail analysis of all commenters' commenting frequency, we identified outlet-specific cut-off points using the visual elbow criterion, i.e., identifying a graphical angle where the commenter frequency drops. For *NYT*, we found that 25 comments serve as a good dividing point, which includes 23 heavy commenters (see Table 2). For the *USA Today*, we see that 27 comments provide the best dividing point, including 28 commenters. For Breitbart, we found that 39 comments serve as the best dividing point including 20 heavy commenters. For the German outlet *SZ*, we include 26 commenters, cutting off at 9 comments. For *WAZ*, the cut-off point is 5 comments, including only 4 heavy commenters. For *Kopp*, the cut-off point is 6 comments, which includes 18 commenters. A range of five to ten comments is necessary according to our qualitative pre-test to build meaningful typologies of commenters.

### *Analysis*

Our analysis follows a procedure to build typologies using central characteristics of Ferree et al.'s (2002) four public spheres, i.e., (1) who participates (2) in what sort of process, (3) using which way of communicative presentation, (4) with what discursive outcome.

We inductively identified emerging themes by close-reading of all comments, summarized comments into groups of discourse themes, and clustered types of heavy commenters according to these themes. This step was first conducted independently for the U.S. and Germany arriving at a set of granular themes, which were then summarized and refined until data saturation was reached. Then, we compared type, themes, communication strategy, and discursive intention to Ferree et al.'s (2002) four ideals of the public sphere. We asked questions referring to Ferree et al.'s (2002)

discourse cultures: “Is the citizen’s role diminished by heavy commenters’ discursive strategies?” (representative liberal), “Are heavy commenters aiming at discursively empowering themselves or other speakers?” (participatory liberal ideal), “Do heavy commenters enhance mutual respectful dialogue?” (discursive ideal), and “Are socially marginalized individuals narratively included?” (constructionist ideal) (see Table 1).

For the representative liberal culture, the dominant characteristic is the discursive goal to silence the debate among non-experts. An exemplary expression could read, “You have no idea what you are talking about. Be quiet!” The dominant characteristic of the participatory liberal type is the empowerment to construct a certain idea of society without enhancing disrespectful dialogue. A prototypical statement represents, “Our country would be better without Democrats/Trump/illegals/news from the *NYT*.” The discursive culture’s main characteristics is dialogue and the absence of uncivil expressions, for instance, “No Amanda, I think Trump’s policy is ineffective. Why do you describe it as useful?” In contrast, indicators for a *non*-discursive culture impedes argumentation, for instance, by using incivility. An exemplary non-discursive comment could state, “These morons are all liars!” The constructionist type’s dominant characteristic is the discursive inclusion of marginalized groups, for instance, “Before you ban immigrants, remember that our country was founded by them.” Moreover, commenter types are classified based on discourse repetition (how often the type of discourse appeared in the comment sections of a heavy commenter), whether there was an identifiable target of discourse, and how the heavy commenters positioned themselves. Finally, we compare the distribution of heavy commenter types across outlets and countries against Ferree et al.’s (2002) description of ideal types of democratic public spheres.

## **Findings**

## Summary of Observations

In the U.S., a total of 143,882<sup>1</sup> comments were posted on *Breitbart*'s Facebook page during one week (1,247 by heavy commenters, less than 1% of the overall comments), while a total of 60,809<sup>2</sup> comments were posted on *NYT* (855 by heavy commenters, 1.4 % of all overall comments), and a total of 19,896<sup>3</sup> comments were posted on *USA Today* (1,090 by heavy commenters, 5.5 % of all overall comments).

In Germany, the commenting community on Facebook is much smaller: a total of 716 comments were posted on *Kopp*'s Facebook page, of which the 18 heaviest commenters account for 178 comments (24.8 %), 869 on *WAZ*, of which the four heaviest commenters posted 20 comments (2.3 %), and 6,316 on *SZ*, of which the 26 heaviest commenters wrote 312 comments (4.9 %). *Kopp* posted 78 news stories, *WAZ* 155, and *SZ* 186. One post by *Kopp* received 2.3 comments by heavy commenters on average, one post by *SZ* about 1.7 heavy commenters' comments, and *WAZ* heavy commenters write a comment to every 8th *WAZ* post on average. Thus, the discussion on *Kopp*'s Facebook page is comparatively more impacted by its heavy commenters while heavy commenters are less dominant in the *WAZ* discussion.

## Heavy commenters' discourse cultures

With regard to our first research question (*Which discourse culture do heavy commenters co-create?*) we find, in contrast to Ferree et al. (2002), only participatory liberal and constructionist discourse cultures. Meanwhile, our analysis suggests that heavy commenters co-create an additional model that is opposite the discursive discourse model introduced by Ferree et al. (2002). We label this discourse model "non-discursive" because heavy commenters impede a discussion

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<sup>1</sup> 64 of these comments had an unidentifiable author (random signs or symbols) and had to be excluded from the dataset.

<sup>2</sup> 105 comments had to be excluded.

<sup>3</sup> 1150 comments had to be excluded.

using incivility, absolute social exclusion of constructed groups, and apocalyptic forecasting. Social bots contribute to this discourse model with repeated messages such as “kill them all”.

### *Participatory liberal discourse culture*

We identify two prevalent commenter types across both countries that empower their ideas of society reproducing a participatory liberal discourse culture: *the national security supporter* and *the concerned monetarist*. However, the manifestation of these types is country- and outlet-specific.

First, the majority of commenters in the U.S. fall in the *national security supporter* typology that focus on national security interests to protect the U.S., combined with superior feelings towards refugees (“Americans are citizens of the United States, and illegals do not count”)<sup>4</sup>. In the U.S., the national security supporter often refers to the national memory of 9/11 (“Do you people want another 9/11 in our country”). National security is further projected onto President Trump (“Trump keeping us safe!”) and discrimination is rejected: “Not discrimination, but national security”. In many instances, the national security argument is closely linked to the superiority of Christianity.

In Germany, national security supporters are less frequent and rather part of the *SZ* than the *Kopp* or *WAZ* discussions. They require immigration control at borders (“We see in Germany where uncontrolled immigration leads us to.”<sup>5</sup>) and justify their claim with suggesting the incompatibility of Muslim and Western culture. The commenters convey a cautionary tale (“80% of [today’s] Muslim immigrants decline Western values.”) and refer to other countries as examples

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<sup>4</sup> To that extent, one comment of a heavy commenter may not be sufficient enough to describe the discourse culture a heavy commenter is co-creating. Some heavy commenter definitely crossed the line to non-discursive comments with spreading hate as a way to empower themselves (for example: “Americans are citizens of the United States, and illegals do not count”). While these examples could potentially fall in both categories, when considering the overall discourse, we argued that the inclusion is stronger (“Americans are citizens of the United States”) and the exclusion was used to reinforce that argument (illegals do not count, because they are not citizens).

<sup>5</sup> Comments from the German news outlets were analyzed in German but translated into English here.

for failed integration (e.g., Sweden). In their view, President Trump takes the necessary measures to protect the U.S., while the German Chancellor Merkel refrains from protecting the German people. These heavy commenters are disappointed that the people's interest in national security is not considered by the Chancellor.

We theorize this as an example of the *participatory liberal model* because of its mobilizing aspect (“keep us safe”), attempts to integrate various non-elite voices (the people), and references to rational argumentation (legal and historical documents, statistics), which allows counter argumentation. In both countries, the focus is on exclusion and how inclusion of immigrants bears a problem for the country, constructing immigrants as a social periphery.

Second, *concerned monetarists* empower their stance through economic evaluation, expressing capitalist values and discontent over sharing “their” welfare with refugees (“when thousands of American children go to bed hungry”). While for the U.S., we observe this type among *Breitbart* heavy commenters, we did not find it among heavy commenters on the other two sites. This reflects to some extent the economic logic on which *Breitbart* depends to a much higher extent than the *NYT*.

In Germany, this type is particularly evident within the *Kopp* discourse, which shows the similarity between the alternative right-wing media of both countries. *Kopp* monetarists frequently attack the political elite, as German mainstream parties present refugees as the solution to the shortage of skilled workers because of their high level of education. For example, a *Kopp* heavy commenter states, “Merkel’s skilled workers again. THEY are of greater value than gold ??????”

This commenter type is specific for *Kopp*, indicating that the *Kopp* heavy commenter community structurally differs from heavy commenters of *SZ* or *WAZ* regarding political diversity.

Monetarists use economic evaluations to discursively construct refugees as undesired societal periphery, similar as national security supporters.

We relate this discourse type in both countries to the *participatory liberal model* because of its mobilizing aspect with an impact on “the people” (e.g., U.S. taxpayers). However, the plurality of voices remains limited to a populist dichotomy of the people of the country (insiders) versus the immigrants (outsiders).

Further examples of participatory liberal aspects include a *Kopp* comment referring to Christian crosses hanging in Bavarian schools: “Controversial news! That today something like that actually hangs in classrooms after all.” A *SZ* heavy commenter criticizes the Social Democrats: “Who rubber-stamps TTIP and CETA, lost any legitimation for social politics for me.” These individual examples do not form specific types but empower the commenter and thus reproduce participatory liberal characteristics.

#### *Constructionist culture*

While commenters often empower their views when confronted with opposing ideas in liberal participation manners, commenters favoring invisible voices reproduce the constructionist culture. Within our sample, such commenters focus on empowering attacked social groups using personal and moral narratives.

First, *unifiers* in the U.S. define the attacked social group (“MUSLIM IS NOT RADICAL ISLAM”), show empathy with Muslims relativizing immigration (“WE ARE ALL REFUGEES; work on your empathy”). They emphasize that society is dysfunctional if it is non-inclusive. This type of heavy commenters was predominantly found on the *NYT* Facebook page. Similarly, unifiers in Germany warn of social exclusion and polarization, conveying a cautionary tale (“exclusion has always caused harm”), and hold a mirror up to the anti-refugee commenters (“A

country formed of immigrants, selects immigrants based on religion.”). German unifiers are found within the *SZ* heavy commenters; however, they are a rare type.

This moral evaluation aims at constructing unity and integration across society in contrast to the narrative segregation strategy of national security supporters and monetarists and we therefore group these heavy commenters under the constructionist model.

Second, *civil moralists* consider travel bans for certain ethnic groups a violation of American values, i.e., democracy, freedom, and human rights (U.S. commenter: “Jenny most of what he [Trump] is doing is illegal and against American values”; German commenter: “Upside-down world. [...] USA, Great Britain and France had to free Germany from National Socialism and now Germany has to preserve its values and cosmopolitanism against these countries mutated into nationhoodism.”). Furthermore, we find a call for action as seen on the *NYT* platform: “... email your congressional representatives and deliver them a terse and demanding message asking them if THEY stand with this insecure, weak ass president!”. In Germany, moralist expressions are frequent within the *SZ* heavy commenters. Civil moralists tell a cautionary tale about Trump’s wrongdoing? and express calls for actions requesting resistance. Thereby, moralists warn members of society to “be vigilant” and attempt to construct a moral society. In the *SZ*, civil moralists frequently refer to Nazi history and Holocaust to tell a cautionary tale: “It didn’t start with gas chambers! It started with politicians who talked about US versus THEM. It started with intolerance and hate speech,” revealing the non-discursive style of anti-refugee commenters. A *SZ* story about the Canadian President Justin Trudeau’s criticism of the travel ban triggers heavy applause from civil moralists (“Thank you, Trudeau! The real heroes stand up against hate. The real idiots glorify hate.”).

Civil moralists are a comparatively strong group in the *SZ* discourse, representing a counterweight to the national security supporters. German civil moralists often obtain their arguments from the national memory of the Holocaust and remind of a moral society.

Beyond both types, there are a few further comments reproducing the constructionist culture. A *Kopp* heavy commenter refers to personal experience on the Christian cross article explaining, “In our classrooms were no crosses. We had self-painted pictures. This kind of shit can only be found with Catholics.” This commenter uses a personal narrative to construct an alternative, while including uncivil language to express an oppositional stance. On an abortion article, a *SZ* commenter extensively explains the decision process for or against an abortion, neutrally constructing options without condemning any stance on the issue. We include these comments as representing the constructionist culture.

#### *Non-discursive culture*

While participatory liberal and constructionist commenters enable discourse to some extent, various comments impede a discussion using incivility, absolute social exclusion of constructed out-groups, and apocalyptic forecasting. We therefore propose the non-discursive model to the theoretical framework of Ferree et al., 2002.

*Anti-Muslim/refugee activists* ask for the deportation of refugees and define Islam as the main problem (“Islam is not only a problem but serious threat if it is not checked in time”). This type is highly frequent within the *Kopp* discourse. Anti-Muslim/refugee activists focus on making a connection between the majority of refugees coming to the U.S. or Germany as well as their status as terrorists, illegals and threat to the Western world. There are some extreme non-discursive examples including calls for actions which presumably originate from social bots because of their

redundancy<sup>6</sup>. For example, one *NYT* commenter posts “deport” about 20 times followed by a comment on how “God will erase the radical islam [sic]”.

Contrary to the national security supporter that is supportive of its national values and safety, the anti-Muslim/refugee activist rejects the presence of so-called out-groups and thus attempts to silence their appearance in the public sphere (i.e., discourse is focused on exclusion). Deliberation is threatened by polarized political issues that limit consensus, but most importantly by silencing impacted voices (e.g., refugees and Muslims) as not being valuable for public discourse. Avoidance of non-consensus-based closure is replaced by partisan consensus closure established by enforcing partisan ideas (e.g., deporting refugees).

Taking the anti-Muslim/refugee stance one step further, the *doom prophet* develops apocalyptic projections about the future nation (“Europe will die”, “USA is going down”). In Germany, doom prophets use conspiracy narratives suggesting an Islam invasion of the Western world, often writing extensive comments requesting the reader to “wake up” and explaining that the Western world is “at war with Islam”. Heavy commenters referring to a conspiracist tale appear most frequent in the Kopp discourse compared to the other U.S. and German outlets.

Three types are characterized through hating specific targets, i.e., opposing political parties, Trump, and the “mainstream” media. These commenters use uncivil expressions, de-humanize their target, and depict it as incapable. For instance, we find *Trump haters* within the *SZ* heavy commenter community who frequently use incivility to delegitimize their target. With *NYT* we find *mainstream media haters* and self-claimed fact-checkers (“President Trump needs to sue *NYT* and Washington Post, CNN and all the other news that lie about him.”). Especially *NYT*

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<sup>6</sup> For this research, we treat social bots as part of the discourse cultures because social bots mimic and potentially manipulate humans and their behaviors in social networks (Keller & Klinger, 2019). As social bots become more sophisticated it makes it even harder to distinguish them from human commenters as they are co-shaping discourse cultures just the way commenters do.

heavy commenters target media, refugees, religious minorities, or foreigners in general, which stands in stark contrast to the stance of the news outlet. These heavy commenters strategically reject information that contradicts their worldviews and construct an alternative reality that counterbalances the media reality constructed by the news outlet by using hate speech. This non-discursive strategy of *hate watching*, i.e., monitoring news content that is oppositional to one's own stance and responding with hate messages, is prevalent in comment sections of outlets such as the *NYT*. The concept of hate watching describes how audiences use the discourse to distance themselves from the content they consume (Gray et al, 2017).

In Germany, *SZ* heavy commenters partly criticize the *SZ*: “WRONG ! AGITATION ! The press is uncivil and agitational towards Trump who just does his duty and protects land and people.” Media haters also target Breitbart on its own platform: “Having Breitbart on your FB feed is like being stuck in the grocery store line by the tabloid rack, except uglier and more evil” and prognosticating the future of Breitbart: “Breitbart’s [sic] days are numbered. Bye Bye. And don’t let the door hit your racist asses on the way out.” Overall, these non-discursive commenters intend to oppress the social periphery, which is constructed by participatory liberal commenters to promote an alternative reality and delegitimize the undesired.

Beyond these types, further derogatory comments about several targets including religion, public figures, state institutions, and cultural events are made, which unwelcome a discussion and enhance a non-discursive culture.

Lastly, heavy commenters often reproduce more than one type of discourse culture (see bars in Figure 1). For instance, heavy commenters use styles that fall into the participatory liberal culture and combine it with non-discursiveness to emphasize a stance. In few instances, heavy commenters add statements to this mixture that reproduce the constructionist culture.

## **Discourse culture differences on the national level**

Having outlined typologies of heavy commenters and the discourse culture of respective typologies, we proceed with mapping the comparative differences to answer RQ2.

Across countries, the absolute numbers of comments by heavy commenters are considerably higher in the U.S. This greater activity indicates foremost a stronger participatory culture in the U.S. than in Germany.

The U.S. and Germany's discourse cultures co-constructed by heavy commenters considerably differentiate in their share of non-discursive and constructive comments (Figure 2). While in the U.S. heavy commenters co-create a predominantly non-discursive culture, Germany's discourse culture is predominantly participatory liberal. In both countries, the constructionist culture that discursively creates social unity plays a minor role. Hence, the country differences do not reveal the absence of a certain discourse culture types but a unique relative combination of discourse cultures in each country.

In the U.S., numerous comments (51%) were short (e.g., phonetic expressions like "Oh!") or blank (both "non applicable" in Figure 1). These non-applicable comments were rare in Germany (8%). Specifically, empty comments were widespread in the U.S. (all heavy commenters #1), which may have been posts of visuals or left intentionally blank, expressing emotions (e.g., anger or speechlessness) or being jokes to disturb the discussion.

Further, U.S. heavy commenters more often seem to be social bots posting identical content over ten or twenty times (for distinct characteristics of social bot see e.g., Keller & Klinger, 2019). We identified social bots based on the criteria of repetition and unrelatedness to the article topic (Keller & Klinger, 2019) and found that for the U.S., there are higher amounts of social bots posting to *USA Today* and *NYT* compared to *Breitbart*. We found a total of six social bots accounts

among the heavy commenters replying to articles by *USA Today* (examples: “the media started this crap”, “kill them all”), five accounts that responded to *NYT* posts (examples: “deport”, “keep them out”) and two on the *Breitbart* page (examples: “Soros for prison”, “Everybody who not a Muslim need to grow the BALLS Harden up and fight back now, the longer we all wait the HARDER it will be”). This social-bot repetition practice reinforces non-discursiveness in the U.S. In Germany, two heavy commenters on the *SZ* site reveal social-bot characteristics of posting similar content over and over (example: “It did not start with gas chambers! It started with politicians, who spoke of WE against THEM. It started with intolerance and hate speech. [...]”). However, these commenters also posted messages that appeared only once. This bot-like repetition practice may be applied across discourse culture types in Germany.

Moreover, there is a country difference in non-discursiveness that plays out on the up-market-type news outlet: Hate watching appears to be a popular practice to exert influence over the *NYT* discussion. This hostile strategy to oppose a news-outlet’s viewpoint is also found in the German up-market outlet *SZ* and in the U.S. right-wing ideologist outlet *Breitbart*; however, to a much smaller extent. Hate watcher aiming at trolling ideologically opposite discussions add to the non-discursiveness of U.S. comment sections. Hence, while participatory, constructionist, and non-discursive commenter types aim at framing an issue, hate watchers protest against and disrupt a discourse.

Thus, the relative magnitude and variation of non-discursive practices is greater in the U.S. than in Germany, suggesting that non-discursiveness is the central characteristic of the U.S. discourse culture. To sum up, the U.S. discourse culture co-created by heavy commenters is participatory liberal regarding activity and non-discursive regarding execution while the German one is representative liberal regarding activity and participatory liberal regarding execution.

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

### **Discourse culture differences on the outlet level**

Comparing news outlets, the discourse culture diversity differentiates according to the ideological stance and standpoint diversity of a news outlet (RQ 3). The right-wing ideologists harvest the greatest share of non-discursiveness while the discourse cultures of legacy media of the up-market and mass-market types appear to be more balanced. The closest to evenly balanced proportion of all three discourse cultures can be found within heavy commenters of the German *SZ*, revealing a comparatively low share of non-discursivity (Figure 1). The typical *SZ* heavy commenter is a combination of civil moralist and an anti-Trump campaigner and hater. In contrast, the typical *NYT* heavy commenter is more likely to practice non-discursive strategies. Yet, both up-market news outlets converge the greatest diversity in discourse cultures within their country. At the same time, these are also the outlets attracting hate watchers not aiming at enhancing deliberation but to flame and troll and thus creating a non-discursive culture.

In contrast, the right-wing outlets *Breitbart* and *Kopp* unite a homogeneous community of heavy commenters that represent unique discourse types within both countries. *Breitbart's* and *Kopp's* heavy commenters combine participatory liberal with non-discursive cultures; however, the non-discursive heavily outweighs the participatory liberal discourse (Figure 1). Thus, an ideological stance of the news outlet involves a comparatively homogenous discourse culture focusing on non-discursiveness. Still, hate watchers troll *Breitbart's* homogeneous non-discursiveness in a few instances.

In comparison, the mass-market outlets *USA Today* and *WAZ* represent an average mixture of the heterogenous up-market and homogeneous ideologist discourse cultures, suggesting that the latter represent extreme examples of discourse culture diversity.

## Discussion

What type of public sphere nurtures and sustains democratic public life is an important question for digital platforms, the news industry, and citizenry. We examined the comment sections of news organizations' Facebook pages, revealing what type of discourse culture is created by heavy commenters. We followed a multi-level conceptualization of political discourse cultures and identified country- and outlet-level differences in discourse cultures and outline what type of discourse is being performed, and, importantly, what type of discourse culture is being *left out*.

The results of this study seem rather pessimistic, revealing high levels of non-discursive heavy commenters, foremost in the U.S. A healthy discourse is challenged particularly when it comes to political issues such as immigration coverage. Such topics are of high societal relevance and public discourse serves important functions for its deliberative discourse and public understanding of the issue at stake. However, right-wing outlets in this study seem to accept and even provoke non-discursiveness. At the same time, "liberal" news outlets face offensive, non-discursive commenters practicing hate watching and aiming at constructing an alternative media reality, foremost in the U.S.

This practice of hate watching supports previous research suggesting that exposure to inconsistent information does not guarantee a more balanced world view (Filer & Fredheim, 2016). Instead, hate watching and its subsequent hate commenting contributes to refining contrasting political ideologies or ideas in order to reinforce issue ownership through issue distinction. This can lead to the perception of increased polarization and polarizing views about certain issues (Anderson et al. 2014; Hwang et al., 2014). Hate watching and hate commenting deserves more scholarly attention. Important questions for future research could include the reasons hate watchers

have to go on opposing news sites representing a minority opinion and whether incivility is motivated by hate watching.

The results of our study confirm Ferree et al.'s (2002) classification of Germany as representatively liberal to some extent, which is reflected in the low public participation in the online discourse. Rather the participatory liberal culture takes central stage in Germany as they challenge the political status quo in challenging established elites (e.g., Merkel, established political parties). Popular inclusion among heavy commenters seems encouraged to achieve widest possible empowerment. This represents a shift away from a public sphere dominated by experts and elite discourse to a formally Anglo-American discourse culture of participatory liberal. Meanwhile, Kopp performs an extreme function in line with Breitbart in the U.S.

Heavy commenters are comparatively more active in the U.S. (e.g., post more), but are also more politically and ideologically driven as expressed in how issues are framed regarding party ownership, resulting in a non-discursive culture. In other words, issues such as the travel ban, the increasing amount of refugees as well as the protests against Trump are framed through the lenses of party ownership that suggest that political parties can 'own' certain issues, when voters and members of that party feel the most competent to deal with (Thesen, 2012). Modern nationalism can be used as a powerful ideology as a basis for powerful political movements and political violence as it largely remains unchallenged (Wade, 2014).

Regarding limitations, our study focused on heavy commenters' discourse practices and are based on extreme cases and cannot illustrate discourse cultures co-created by all users. Future research should investigate how heavy commenters interact with 'regular' users and how other users perceive heavy commenters. Further, whether and how heavy commenters, especially hate watchers, induce a spiral-of-silence effect should be addressed. Moreover, comparing heavy

commenters with regular commenters could shed more light on the prevalence of discourse cultures, especially regarding cultures that focus on including ordinary and marginalized voices. Differences in non-discursiveness may be due to distinct news outlet policies of deleting uncivil comments on their Facebook pages. On the other hand, comment sections may remain under-moderated or automatically filtered. Our method did not consider such practices. Yet, these practices exert power over citizens' discourse practices and may represent authoritative means to affect citizens' co-creation of discourse. Third, empty comments may have been visuals or intentionally left blank. Our analysis did not include visual elements such as slogan images, smileys, gifs, or pictures. The role of visuals and blank comments can be a valuable issue for future studies. Future research should also tackle the questions of the normative expectations of news organizations on commenting sections as well as the difficult task to understand how to improve the discourse quality of commenting spaces. Few studies have gone in that direction, showing for example how user registration, moderation of comments, and reputation management systems are effective facilitators of civil discussion (Ksiazek, 2015).

In addition, it seems important to point out that audience metrics that rely most dominantly on frequencies of comments do not actually provide any information on the quality of discourse. On the contrary, this study found that U.S. discourse that shows higher amount of comment frequency is characterized by a strong non-discursive culture. In other words, frequency of commenting as a normative ideal of social media sites (e.g., web traffic) does not lead to higher amounts of deliberation, but may have significant consequences for online discourse cultures, contributing to non-discursiveness. Hence, we propose for news organizations to further think and strategize on using more qualitative audience evaluations tools to actually understand how normative discourse ideas of news organizations' manifest in comment sections on social media.

Despite these limitations, our analysis shows how heavy commenters reproduce thick cultural discourse patterns in Facebook's comment sections, which are distinctly co-shaped by national and outlet-specific transnational discourse cultures.

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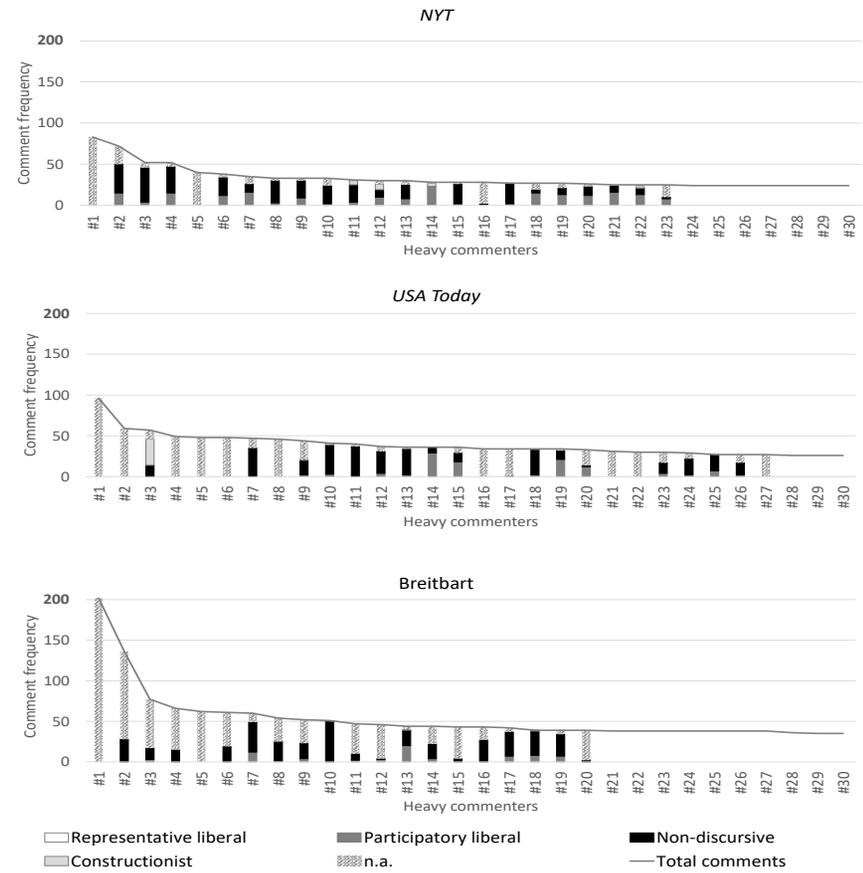
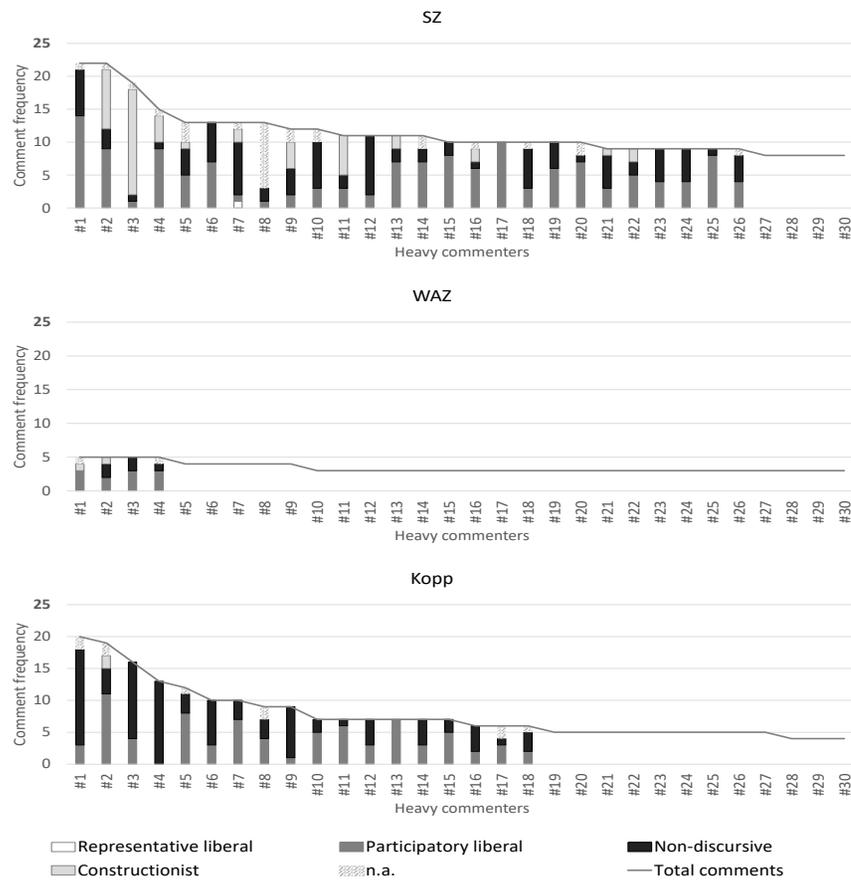
**Table 1: Discourse Cultures and Country Allocation**

	<b>Representative liberal</b>	<b>Participatory liberal</b>	<b>Discursive</b>	<b>Constructionist</b>
<b>Discourse characteristic</b>	Elite dominance	Empowerment	Respectful dialogue	Challenging power relations
<b>Role of public</b>	Low participation	Extensive participation	Extensive participation	Minority inclusion
<b>Country prevalence</b>	Germany	United States		United States

*Note:* Based on Ferree et al. (2002)

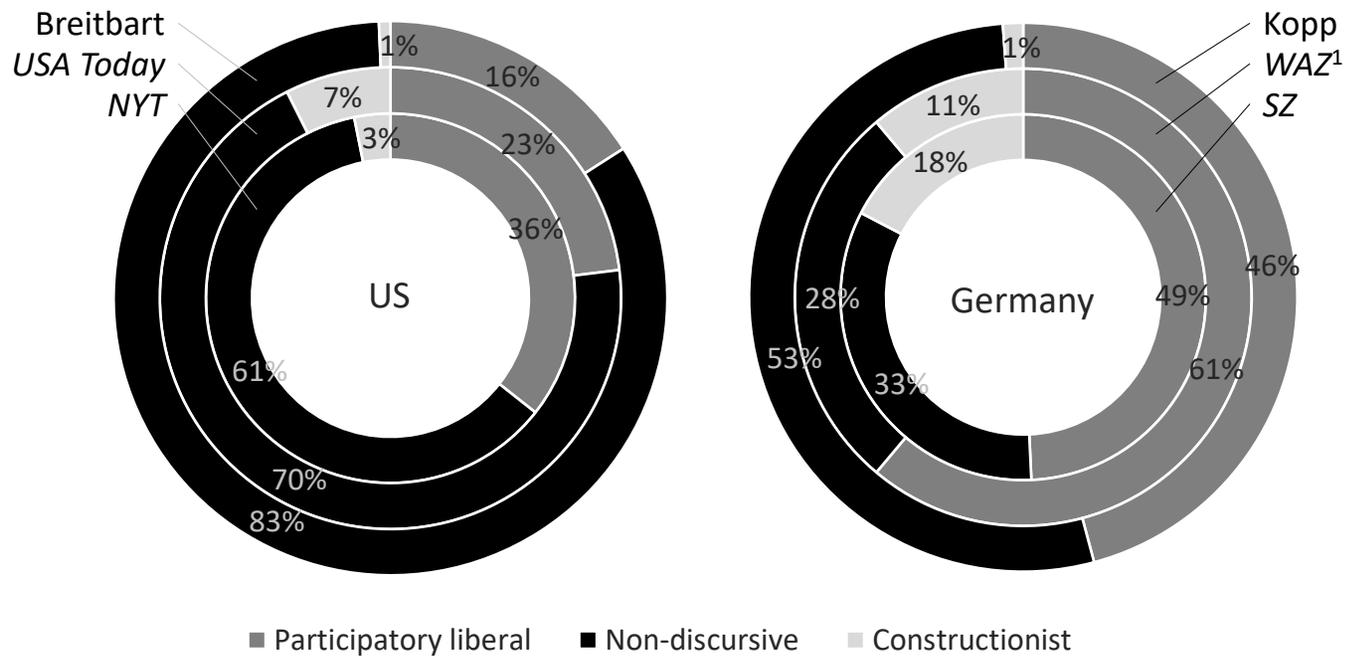
**Table 2: Selection of News Outlets per Country**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Type of website</b>	<b>News outlet</b>	<b>No. of heavy commenters</b>	<b>Total comments of heavy commenters analyzed</b>
<b>Germany</b>	Up-market	Süddeutsche Zeitung	26	312
	Mass-market	WAZ	4	20
	Alternative right-wing	Kopp Report	18	178
<b>United States</b>	Up-market	New York Times	23	855
	Mass-market	USA Today	28	1090
	Alternative right-wing	Breitbart	20	1247



**Figure 1: Heavy commenters' discourse cultures in Germany (left) and U.S. (right)**

*Note.* Reading example: The second-heaviest commenter of *NYT* (#2) posted 72 comments in total, of which 15 fall into the participatory liberal culture, 35 into the non-discursive culture, and 22 were not applicable.



**Figure 2: US and German online discourse cultures**

*Note.* Small basis: n = 18 comments.

Figures relative to total minus non-applicable comments: n = 570, 473, 446 for *NYT*, *USA Today*, *Breitbart*; n = 283, 18, 168 for *SZ*, *WAZ*, *Kopp*.

Reading example: The *NYT*'s heavy commenters' discourse culture is constructed of nearly two thirds of non-discursiveness (61%), just over one third of participatory liberal culture (36%), and a marginal constructionist culture (3%).