Abstract

Recent work demonstrates that hostile emotions can contribute to a strong polarization of political discussion on social media. However, little is known regarding the extent to which media organizations and media systems trigger hostile emotions. We contentanalyzed comments on Facebook pages from six news organizations (N = 1,800) based in the United States and Germany. Our results indicate that German news organizations Facebook comments are more balanced, containing lower levels of hostile emotions. Such emotions are particularly prevalent in the polarized information environment of the United Statesin both news posts and comments. Moreover, alternative rightwing media outlets in both countries provoke significantly higher levels of hostile emotions, thus limiting deliberative discussions. Our results demonstrate that the application of technologysuch as the use of comment sectionshas different implications depending on cultural and social contexts.

Keywords

hostile emotions, partisan hostility, political news, social media, user comments, comparative research

Introduction

Currently, more than onethird of adults in the United States are consuming news on the worlds largest social network, Facebook (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017). This makes the platform a prime engagement tool for news organizations to publish news stories and allows users to comment on those stories. Essentially, news organiza tions hope to engage with their readers through their comment sections on Facebook and to drive traffic to their own websites. While social media was initially praised for providing a plat form for public discourse, user comments on social media often contain high levels of negative emotions, incivility, and antipolitical rhetoric (Anderson et al., 2014; Ceron, 2015; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Rowe, 2015b). Particularly when political topics are discussed on social media, negative emo tions seem to thrive (Trilling, 2014; Ziegele, Quiring, et al., 2018). Commenting on political news represents an engage ment with journalistic content that is important to analyze, as these comments may reveal the opinions of those who are will ing to engage in public debates and attempt to influence public opinion (Buckels et al., 2014).

In addition, research in political communication has pointed out the potentially detrimental impact of negative

emotions, cynicism, and incivility in political discourse and electoral politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). However, negativity in comments is not inevitably challenging online discourses. While passionate disagreement is considered a deliberative opportunity for online communication, it is hos tility, including anger, contempt, disgust, frustration, and hate, that violates the norms of deliberative conversations (Oz et al., 2018). Hostile emotions include the direct or indi rect attribution to another person of negative or blameworthy features (DErrico & Poggi, 2013). In online conversations, hostile emotions function as strong partisan identifiers (Miller & Conover, 2015). Partisans behave like sports team fans who strive to preserve the status of their teams rather than [being] thoughtful citizens participating in the political process for the broader good (Miller & Conover, 2015,

p. 225), and express hostile emotions. It has been argued that hostility undermines the preconditions for deliberation

because it limits personal freedoms, promotes stereotypes, disrespects opposing views, and threatens democracy (Hwang et al., 2018; Popan et al., 2019). Moreover, an envi ronment of hostile comments triggers more hostile com ments, which creates a downward spiral regarding comment hostility over time (Cheng et al., 2015). This makes hostility a particularly important research area of online debates because hostile emotions potentially promote harmful and aggressive behaviors as they feature medium to high arousal that can progressively increase (DErrico & Paciello, 2018). While previous research has analyzed drivers of hostile comments on news on the content level (DErrico & Paciello, 2018; Ziegele, Quiring, et al., 2018), not much is known regarding the influence of the macro and mesolevel con texts on hostile emotions in online comments. However, pat terns of discussion among readers vary depending on the country they live in (Walter et al., 2018). In this article, we therefore examine the prevalence of hostile emotions in user commentsincluding anger, contempt, disgust, frustration, and hateand relate the sentiment of comments to the senti ment of news posts of six news outlets in two different coun tries, namely, Germany and the United States. We focus on Facebook due to its wide reach and heterogeneous readership and compare news outlets with varying political leanings and degrees of market orientation (massmarket, upmarket, and alternative rightwing). We argue that political leaning and market orientation of news outlets as well as country differ ences, such as different levels of audience polarization, can impact the extent of hostile emotions in user comments. Therefore, we follow the social informatics perspective that explains social consequences of information and communi cation technologies (ICTs) based on cultural and institutional contexts (Kling, 2000). In contrast to technological deter minism, the social informatics perspective suggests that ICTs have different outcomes when introduced to different cicum stances. That is, ICTs social consequences, such as the knowledgebuilding capacity of communication on social media, depend on the the meso and macrolevel contexts of

technology use (Greyson, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019).

This study is therefore the first to shed light on factors at the national and organizational levels that potentially foster hostile emotions in user comments and thus emphasizes that the microlevel as well as the meso and macrolevel con texts are relevant when analyzing interdependencies between people and technology.

Literature Review

News Content as MicroLevel Driver of Hostile Emotions in User Comments

DErrico and Paciello (2018) reveal that user comments that contain annoyance, irritation, and contempt, that is, aspects of hostility, are related to antisocial opinions that manifest in blame attribution or dehumanization of victims.

Thus, impoliteness, incivility, and hostility are closely related (Naab et al., 2018; Oz et al., 2018). Building on this literature, we conceptualize hostile emotions in user com ments as impolite emotional expressions that aim at insult ing individuals or social groups. This definition combines aspects of impoliteness and incivility to determine an unconstructive and extremely negative sentiment in user comments. Emotional components of hostile user com ments include anger, contempt, disgust, frustration, and hate (Oz et al., 2018; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Soroka et al., 2015).

On a microlevel, the type of news content explains vary ing levels of hostile user comments (Oz et al., 2018; Rowe, 2015a; Sydnor, 2018). News coverage on controversial top ics, such as immigration or public policy, is often followed by high numbers of user comments, among them often those including hostile emotions (Farkas et al., 2018; Oz et al., 2018). News outlets might provoke hostile comments on their Facebook pages by posting articles that contain nega tive emotions or scandals. Negativity is an important news factor as well as a discussion factor (Weber, 2014). By favor ing dramatic, conflictemphasizing news reporting, news outlets might generate followup communication reflecting their negative tone (Soroka et al., 2015). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Higher levels of negative emotions in posts trigger higher levels of hostile emotions in user comments.

Moreover, hostility as an emotional expression is usually targeted toward a specific group or actor, and commenters frequently attack certain actors, such as immigrants, the media, or the political elites (Coe et al., 2014). Meanwhile, populist movements often rely on such negative emotions as a key strategy for their continuous support (Blassnig, Engesser, et al., 2019; Rico et al., 2017). We therefore pose the following hypothesis:

H2. Comments referring to immigrants, the media, or political class contain higher levels of hostile emotions compared to other comments.

However, content alone may not be sufficient to explain different levels of hostility in user comments across news outlets and media systems.

Drivers at the Organizational Level: Market Orientation and Political Stance

Previous research found that the level of incivility in com ments differs across news outlets (Ziegele, Quiring, et al., 2018). Two aspects may cause news outlets to accept or trig ger deviant comments, including hostile emotions in com ments: the market orientation and the position of an extreme political leaning.

News outlets have been found to differ in the degree to which they strive to maximize their reach and revenue (Benson, 2016; Humprecht & Esser, 2018). The market ori entation of some media types is reflected not only in the news content they produce, but also in the comments they moderate or allow (Benson et al., 2018; Blassnig, Engesser, et al., 2019; Walter et al., 2018). Previous research has high lighted the differences between massmarket and upmarket media companies in terms of market orientation and its impact on news production (Dunaway, 2013; Humprecht & Esser, 2018).

Most news organizations run their own Facebook pages, but the purpose of these pages is often simply to increase readership (Rowe, 2015b). Therefore, news making for social media adapts to the logics of social networks, and edi tors are more likely to select news stories that have the potential to be popular and trigger engagement (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Provocative, negative comments may serve as a means to increase the popularity of and engagement with an article. Although media companies often complain about negative emotions in user comments, they tolerate them (Cheng et al., 2015) because such comments attract audi ences (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Rowe, 2015a), trigger attention, and broaden the reach of news stories (Weber, 2014; Ziegele, Weber, et al., 2018).

When professional norms are subordinated by financial goals, market orientation is likely to be reflected in the mod eration of user comments (Weber, 2014). Previous research has shown that news outlets employ various strategies to manage comment sections (Ksiazek, 2015). Interestingly, news outlets pre and postmoderation strategies have been found to differ between their websites and Facebook pages (Naab et al., 2018; Rowe, 2015b). On their own websites, outlets often have guidelines for commenters and might even suspend users who do not comply with these rules. On Facebook, however, other rules seem to apply. The rules on Facebook are often not made explicit and are, in many cases, less strict (Hille & Bakker, 2014). This lax handling of devi ant commenting on Facebook pages is likely to be driven by the aim to increase audience reach and thus may differ across news outlets depending on their goal to maximize reach (Carlson, 2018). Hence, while massmarket outlets target a broad audience and are often highly marketoriented (Humprecht & Esser, 2018), upmarket outlets often have distinct professional standards and are less massmarket oriented (Benson et al., 2018). Therefore, we assume the following:

H3. Facebook pages of massmarket outlets contain higher numbers of hostile emotions in user comments compared to upmarket outlets.

Recent research has shown that populist actors deliber ately fuel negative emotions to crystallize grievances, often toward political elites or immigrants (Hameleers et al., 2017;