According to the deliberative theory of democracy, rational-critical discussions are key for the legitimacy of political decisions (Mutz, 2006). Expected effects are a broad knowledge of the presented arguments and mutual understanding (Graham, 2015).

User comment sections on news websites can provide the framework for rational-critical discussions. Encountering opposing opinions is very likely due to anonymity and lack of preference-based filtering. Previous research has found that arguments and disagreement vary depending on the context (Graham, 2015). The decision to engage in a critical-rational exchange of arguments also depends on users’ comments. So far, we don’t know which characteristics are decisive.

Which user comments promote rational-critical discussions?

If users perceive opinions or facts that conflict with existing beliefs, they have a feeling of cognitive dissonance. If these opinions or facts are considered relevant, a need for dissonance reduction comes into effect (Festinger, 1957). Relevance can be attributed to potentially convincing comments on a higher abstract level. Dissonance reduction can be achieved by expressing disagreement. In order to prevent that these comments are left uncontested and influence others (Lu, 2019), and justifying the disagreement in order to convince others.

H1: The stronger the argument of a comment, the more likely it receives disagreement and reasoned disagreement.

News sites set the ground for user discussions by enforcing norms and setting the technical design. In their discussion guidelines, news sites publish the criteria for accepted comments (Książek, 2015). Violations of these rules can be a motivation for removing comments, which can be taken out in a visible manner (Yeo et al., 2019). Design factors that promote rational-critical discussions are a reply function (Peacock et al., 2019) and a hierarchical view (Aragón et al., 2017). When users read a dissonant comment and have to decide whether to write a disagreeing reply, the social norms and technical features can influence this decision.

H2: Norms and design features promoting rational-critical discussions influence the effect between argument strength and (reasoned) disagreement.

We conducted a manual relational content analysis of 175 discussion threads with 14,690 user comments. For the analysis, we chose two controversial issues:

- Upper limit on refugees (November 2015 – November 2016)
- Pension reform (November 2016 – September 2017)

Categories:
- Argument strength (no justification / subjective / objectively verifiable justification, K=92)
- Reply direction (disagreement / agreement / other, K=a=77)
- ID of initial and reply comment (K=a=93)

We conclude that a higher argument strength of a dissonant comment is perceived as more relevant and potentially influential and thus evokes the need to argue against. Concerning the news sites, we assume that their norms and design do not have an effect in specific situations, but influence user discussions in the long term. Over time, users learn which rules are enforced and how to use the provided technical features.

While previous research found that discussions often do not live up to the deliberative ideal, our results show how individual comments can stimulate others to participate in critical-rational discourse through stronger arguments. News sites can help creating communities where critical-rational discourse is practiced. Setting up a technical infrastructure which promotes replies and makes sequences of arguments visible is already helpful, however, strong guidelines and visible moderation can further increase this effect.

LITERATURE


