Rational-critical user discussions: How argument strength and the conditions set by news organizations are linked to (reasoned) disagreement

ONLINE APPENDIX: CODING PROTOCOL
(Translated from German)

| NEWS ITEM LEVEL | NEWS ORGANIZATION | DATE | ISSUE | TITLE |
|-----------------|-------------------|------|-------|-------|
| USER LEVEL      | ACCOUNT NAME      | REAL NAME |
| COMMENT LEVEL   | ID                | POSITION |
|                 | CATEGORY FOR REPLY COMMENTS: ID OF INITIAL COMMENT | VISIBILITY |
|                 | REASON FOR MODERATION | LENGTH |
|                 | ARGUMENT STRENGTH | CATEGORY FOR FIRST-LEVEL-COMMENT: ARGUMENT STRENGTH |
|                 | CATEGORY FOR FIRST-LEVEL-COMMENT: ARGUMENT STRENGTH AND TYPE OF REPLY | TYPE OF JUSTIFICATION |
|                 | MISSING RESPECT | NEGATIVE EMOTIONS |
1 NEWS ITEM LEVEL

1.1 NEWS ORGANIZATION

The news organization is coded which published the news item and which hosts the discussion thread.

1 zeit.de
2 welt.de
3 focus.de
4 tagesspiegel.de
5 spiegel.de
6 sueddeutsche.de
7 rp-online.de
8 huffington-post.de
9 taz.de

1.2 DATE

The exact date of the article is coded, which can be found in the PDF file. The format is dd-mmm-yyyy, the month being entered with the first three letters (e.g. March 13, 2016 is given the code 13-Mar-2016).

Abbreviations for all months: Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

xx-xxx-xxxx Date

1.3 ISSUE

The issue that is discussed in the journalistic article and the comment section is coded.

1 Upper limit on refugees
2 Pension reform

1.4 TITLE

The title of the news item or the discussion forum is entered.

Attention: Caption and subtitle are coded, colon and blank lines in between

Example: Rentengipfel im Kanzleramt: Die großen Fragen landen wohl bei den Experten
2 USER LEVEL

2.1 ACCOUNT NAME

The account name of the commenter is copied from the PDF file. The account name can be a nickname, behind which a real name is hidden. However, the account name is noted.

If the account name is no longer present in a deleted comment, the field is left blank.

Attention: In this case the value 9 must be coded in the category "2.2 REAL NAME"!

2.2 REAL NAME

It is coded whether a user profile is given a clear name or a nickname. Clear names can only be identified if first and last name are present and sound realistic.

Attention: Real names are for example "Mike Dennstädt", "Michael Müller".

The following do not count as clear names: "Fett Sack", "Meine Meinung", "Rubinsky" etc.

Attention: If the comment has been deleted by the moderation, so that the user name is no longer available (for Welt and SZ), a 9 is coded here.

0 No real name used as account name
1 Real name used as account name
9 Not sure or identifiable
3 COMMENT LEVEL

3.1 ID

The position of the comment is coded by numbering the comments one after the other. The first comment (sorting: the numbering always starts with the oldest) is numbered 1, and so on. The order of the codes thus reflects the order of the positions in the discussion thread. This numbering also serves to uniquely identify each comment and is entered here openly.

3.2 POSITION

The comment is identified either as a first-level or a reply comment.

Definition of first-level comment: A first-level comment is (1) a comment that is located on the first discussion level after a news item (see comment numbers in brackets in figure 1: 1, 9, 10). It may, but does not have to, elicit one or more responses on an underlying discussion level.

Definition of reply comment: A reply comment is always characterized by the fact that it responds in some way to another comment (initial comment). It is irrelevant whether this takes place on the second discussion level (in the diagram: 2, 3, 6), the third discussion level (in the diagram: 4, 5, 7, 8) or on a deeper discussion level.

Attention: A first-level comment can of course contain a response to the news item. However, this kind of reference is not considered in our definition of first-level and reply comment.

Figure 1: Schematic arrangement of comments in the discussion thread

Each comment must first be classified according to its position. If a comment is classified as a reply comment, it will be coded with the "categories for reply comment" in case of a decision. In this case, its initial comment must also be coded (see 3.3).
How do I recognize the initial comment to a reply comment?

1. Formal reference (visible in the thread):

2. Content-related reference: Recognizable if a comment picks up words, opinions, or arguments from a previous comment

Attention: If formal and content-related references fundamentally contradict each other in the definition of the reference, the content-related reference is to be preferred.

If a comment represents a first-level comment, it is coded with the "categories for first-level comment" in case of a decision.

If a user answers to an own comment, e.g. because he wants to correct or complete something, this comment is also coded as an answer comment. In terms of content, only the content of the reply comment is coded, but the source comment can be used as the context unit. Self-confirmations, rejections or corrections should not be coded here.

0 First-level comment
1 Reply comment

3.3 CATEGORY FOR REPLY COMMENTS: ID OF INITIAL COMMENT

In the case of a reply comment, the ID of its initial comment is openly coded here.

3.4 VISIBILITY

It is coded whether the content of a comment is visible or has been deleted and/or commented on after publication by the editorial staff due to rule violations.

Attention: In the case of deleted comments (code 0), most of the other categories cannot be coded and are therefore left blank. The following category, 3.5 reason for moderation, should be coded if the information is available.

In case of shortened comments, the remaining categories are coded for the still visible part of the comment, if possible.

0 Comment removed/deleted by the editorial staff (e.g. welt.de; zeit.de)
1 Comment shortened or partially deleted
2 Comment visible (without additional moderating commentary)
3 Comment visible (with additional moderating commentary)
9 Not clearly identifiable (e.g. heading is "$Heading", text is "$Text$"

3.5 REASON FOR MODERATION

Here, if present (i.e. if a 0, 1 or 3 has been coded in 3.4), the type of justification for the deletion or shortening is coded.

Attention: If a 2 was coded in 3.4, the value 0 must be coded here.
|   | Reason for Removal                                                                                       | Example                                                                 |
|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 | Comment was not deleted, therefore no reason is given.                                                    |                                                                        |
| 1 | **Deleted at user's request**                                                                             | The comment was removed by the moderator at his own request.           |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** Removed at own request. Thanks, the editorial staff/nw     |
| 2 | **Removed due to a double posting**                                                                        | The comment was removed by the moderation due to double posting (multiple posting of the same comment). |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** Removed due to a double posting. Thanks, the editorial staff/nw |
| 3 | **Removed because initial comment was deleted**                                                            | This comment has been removed by the moderation because its initial comment has been deleted and therefore, its reference is missing. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** The comment you are referring to has already been removed.  |
| 4 | **Removed because off-topic**                                                                             | The comment has been deleted because it does not refer to the issue discussed in the news item and the discussion thread. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** Please refrain from writing comments that are not related to the topic.                           |
| 5 | **Removed due to lack of objectivity**                                                                     | The comment was removed by the moderation because of unobjective content. Examples are references to hatred, incivility, personal hostility or insults. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** Please remain objective.                                  |
| 6 | **Removed due to polemics**                                                                               | The comment was removed because it shows characteristics of a poor discussion style, such as generalizations, insinuations or inappropriate comparisons. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example 1:** Please refrain from comments that aim to condemn certain nationalities and ethnicities in a sweeping manner. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example 2:** Removed. Please refrain from insinuations and polemics. |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example 3:** Removed. Please refrain from inappropriate comparisons. |
| 7 | **Removed, due to data without source reference**                                                          | The user comment was removed by the moderator due to the mentioning of data without a credible source.          |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** If you explicitly mention numbers, please back them up with credible sources.                      |
| 8 | **Removed for other reasons**                                                                             | If none of the previous characteristics apply, this category is coded.                                        |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** Please do not use mocking nicknames.                                                                |
| 9 | **Deletion without naming a specific reason**                                                              | The comment was deleted by the moderator without giving a specific reason (usually the case with sueddeutsche.de and welt.de). |
|   |                                                                                                         | **Example:** This comment was deleted.                                                                            |

### 3.6 LENGTH

The length of the post is coded by entering the number of words openly.

_Not to be counted:_ Account name, date, time and title of the comment and other features in the context of the discussion post, additional comments by the moderator

_To be counted:_ Greetings at the end of the comment, direct quotes from previous comments
3.7 ARGUMENT STRENGTH

Definition of opinion: Opinions are subjective personal value judgments and therefore not accessible to proof. Opinions can be recognized by personal expressions: "I think ...", "In my opinion ...", "I believe ...".

Example 1: I consider the introduction of national upper limits for refugees to be necessary.
Example 2: I think the introduction of national limits for refugees is nonsense.
Example 3: The government should also pay more attention to the quality of pensioners' lives.
Example 4: Here there is a redistribution from the bottom to the top, which I do not agree with.

Definition of assertion: Assertions are formulated in such a way that their validity can be proven. They can be recognized by absolute expressions that something "is like this" or "is not like this".

Example 1: National upper limits for refugees are not legal.
Example 2: The influx of refugees to Germany is not affordable.
Example 3: Minister Nahles' pension plans do not work out mathematically.

Definition of Justifications: Justifications provide appropriate evidence for or against an assertion. Justifications can be recognized by expressions like "because ...", "... for the following reasons ...". Sometimes, however, such linguistic indicators are also missing and must be concluded from what is said.

Example 1: National upper limits for refugees are not legal because they are not compatible with the human rights mentioned in the German constitution.
Example 2: The influx of refugees to Germany is not affordable because XY million euros must be raised for accommodation, integration courses, health, etc. that are not provided for in the federal budget.
Example 3: The system is totally broken, a completely new one would have to be developed, but nobody dares to do it, because this could mean that the SPD would be worse off than the SPD with Agenda 2010.

Attention: In everyday conversations, justifications are often not as cleanly constructed as this definition, but can be shorter and without linguistic markers.

For example, in subjective arguments, the justification itself is actually only an assertion and thus a weak justification.

Attention: Justifications are not always clearly recognizable. Hypothetical references to the past are not understood as justifications.

Example 1: I consider upper limits for refugees to be pointless. → Code “Comment with opinion/assertion” (here: opinion)
Example 2: Upper limits for refugees are pointless. → Code " Comment with opinion/assertion" (here: assertion)
Example 3: What's this about upper limits? They violate human rights. → Code " Comment with opinion/assertion" (here: assertion)
Example 4: I am against upper limits for refugees because they are not legal. Or in other words: What is the point of upper limits? They are not legal. → In the first step, code "Comment with assertion and justification". In the second step, code a weak justification type.

Example 5: Upper limits for refugees are not legal because they violate our constitution. (The corresponding article of the Basic Law is then referred to.) → In the first step, code "Comment with assertion and justification". In the second step, code a strong justification type.

Example 6: Exactly the same as I consider it correct that really ALL participate in this basic safety device. → Code "Comment with opinion/assertion" (here: opinion)

Example 7: In Germany, everyone is basically caught in the "social net". Whether he was self-employed or employed or did not do much at all during his whole life. → Code "Comment with opinion/assertion" (here: assertion)

Example 8: And no, more and more people cannot be a solution either. Because in the end, there is no suitable work for them, the days of HIWIs are over. → Code in the first step "Comment with assertion and justification". In the second step, code a strong justification type.

Example 9: To all those who demand the inclusion of civil servants in the statutory pension scheme here, we recommend that you take a look at the Basic Law (Art. 33 - Professional Civil Service). The further arrangement for alimony during active service - simply called salary - and after reaching retirement age is then regulated in the civil service law. → Code in the first step "Comment with assertion and justification". In the second step, code a strong justification type.

Attention: If there are different arguments in the same comment, the highest of them is coded.

3.7.1 CATEGORY FOR FIRST-LEVEL-COMMENT: ARGUMENT STRENGTH

The degree to which the comment contributes to a rational-critical debate is coded. For first-level comments, we distinguish between the following argument strengths:

10 First-level comment without assertion/opinion or justification

11 First-level comment only with assertion/opinion
The comment contains an assertion or opinion that is not substantiated with a justification. The assertion or opinion does not constitute a reply to another user post.

12 First-level comment with assertion/opinion and justification
The comment contains an assertion or opinion that is substantiated with a justification. The justification provides an argument that does not constitute a response to another comment.

Example: Well, that's what I call backbone, to stand by the principles laid down in our constitution in the face of so much headwind. What's the point of the "upper limits"? → User considers upper limits to be unimplementable (assertion) and justifies this with the basic principles of the constitution (reason/argument)
3.7.2 CATEGORY FOR FIRST-LEVEL-COMMENT: ARGUMENT STRENGTH AND TYPE OF REPLY

The degree to which the comment contributes to a rational-critical debate is coded. For reply comments, we distinguish different argument strengths and the direction of the reply to the initial comment.

**Attention:** If a comment partly agrees and partly disagrees with different statements from the initial comment, the part that takes up more space is coded. If several speech acts take up the same amount of space, the first-mentioned is coded.

**Example:** “We do not have a constitution, but a basic law” Right-wing, conspiracy-theoretical nonsense. The Basic Law is not a constitution in the end. It fulfills all criteria of a constitution in function and content (Disagreement with initial comment). And yes, I am afraid of the decision of 'your people' (Agreement with initial comment). → Code disagreement, because it takes up more space.

**Attention:** The coded justification does not have to refer directly to the coded agreement or disagreement, but a justification can also be coded if a new argument is substantiated with a justification.

20 Reply comment without assertion/opinion or justification

201 Agreement
The comment contains an unrestricted or limited consent to an assertion/opinion or justification from the initial comment.

**Example:** „I agree with you!“

202 Disagreement
The comment contains an unrestricted or limited rejection of an assertion/opinion or justification from the initial comment.

21 Reply comment only with assertion/opinion

211 Unjustified assertion/opinion
The comment contains an unjustified assertion or opinion that does not directly refer to a previously made assertion or justification.

**Attention:** This category is coded if it is not clearly recognizable whether the comment agrees or disagrees with the initial comment.

212 Unjustified disagreement
The comment contains an unjustified assertion or opinion that directly disagrees with an assertion or justification in the initial comment.

213 Unjustified agreement
The comment contains an unjustified assertion or opinion that directly agrees with an assertion or justification in the initial comment.

22 Justified reply comment

221 Justified assertion/opinion
The comment contains a justified assertion/opinion that does not directly refer to a previously made assertion/opinion or justification.

**Attention:** This category is coded if it is not clearly recognizable whether the comment agrees or disagrees with the initial comment.

222  **Justified disagreement**
The comment contains a justified assertion/opinion that directly disagrees with an assertion or justification in the initial comment.

**Example:** What do the numbers you mentioned have to do with reality? Experts, e.g. the UNHCR, currently assume that there are about 60 million refugees worldwide, most of them as refugees in their own country. In Syria about half of the population is currently on the run, most of them in their own country or in neighboring countries. I can understand that you are afraid of the lack of planning by our government. Everything else I cannot understand. (→ *Unjustified agreement, but justified disagreement* → Code justified disagreement)

223  **Justified agreement**
The comment contains a justified assertion/opinion that directly agrees with an assertion or justification in the initial comment.

### 3.8 TYPE OF JUSTIFICATION

If a justification was coded in the previous category, the quality of this type of justification is coded here. We first distinguish between internal and external reasoning types. Internal justifications are based on personal perspectives and values, whereas external justifications refer to external sources as well as data and facts.

**Attention:** If more than one justification type appears in the comment, the strongest justification type (codes 2, 21-23) are prioritized, while the weakest justification type has lowest priority (code 1).

1  **Justification with a subjective point of view**
Own past personal experiences or those observed in others and personal examples from family, friends, acquaintances and/or colleagues (so-called storytelling according to Burkhalter et al. 2002)

**Example 1:** I don't want to have refugees in Germany, because then I can no longer feel safe here.

**Example 2:** Experience shows that there are two reasons not to get your hopes up too high: the word "reform" and then that in combination with Nahles.

2  **Justification that is potentially objectively verifiable in reality**
(e.g. statistical or legal facts)

**Example 1:** National upper limits for refugees are necessary because many refugees are criminals. Current statistics show that 60% of all crimes are committed by foreigners.
Example 2: Self-employed persons contribute a lot to the national economy elsewhere, but they bear the risk alone. The fact that if they fail, they have the same right to basic security as those who have never done anything... is more than fair.

Attention: This code is only used if either no source or cited content is available or it is not possible to decide whether a source is cited or not.

21 Justification potentially objectively verifiable in reality with cited source, but without cited content

Example: National upper limits for refugees are necessary because many refugees are criminals, as the latest figures from the Federal Statistical Office show.

Example: To all those who demand the inclusion of civil servants in the statutory pension scheme, it is recommended to look at the German constitution (Art. 33 - Professional Civil Service). The further arrangement for alimony during active service - simply called salary - and after reaching retirement age is then regulated in the Civil Service Act.

Attention: A link is only coded as a cited source if it is also the justification for an opinion!

22 Justification potentially objectively verifiable in reality without cited source, but with cited content

Example: National upper limits for refugees are necessary, "because 60% of offences are committed by foreigners," a new statistic shows.

23 Justification potentially objectively verifiable in reality with cited source and cited content of the source

(e.g. publicly accessible sources of political websites, media or written documents)

Example: We have no constitution, but a basic law.
Article 146 GG

“This Basic Law, which will apply to the entire German people after the completion of the unity and freedom of Germany, will lose its validity on the day when a constitution comes into force which has been freely decided by the German people.”

3 Comparisons or examples from real life or fictional or hypothetical claims

Examples and comparisons as a type of justification are coded as soon as they are public, social or political events of general knowledge.

Attention: Personal examples, hypothetical consequences and comparisons are coded under specification 1.

Example 1: If this people were given the change of law, they would change the law to become a single contradiction. To give an example; the majority (so it seems) is in favor of the death penalty. But the death penalty is contrary to our Basic Law and our attachment to human rights. There are many such examples.

Example 2: I personally think this is good and just. If the self-employed person is successful, he or she will sit in the fat villa at some point with their independence - if things go completely wrong, the community of solidarity may catch up with the people. And this is despite the fact that he has voluntarily and consciously left this community of solidarity.
Example 3: These statements may inspire the total failure of the SPD in the elections in September. Among the younger people, the election campaign statements will cause strong protest and the older people will no longer be fooled.

Example 4: What are your objections against the “black zero”? Who should pay back the debts? *(Rhetoric question as justification)*

4 Other justifications

9 No justification present

### 3.9 MISSING RESPECT

The comment contains statements that aim to disparage statements (opinions, assertions or justifications) of other discussion participants in the discussion thread or of third parties. The disparagement can refer to their character, position, esteem, etc.

Example 1: You have no clue!

Example 2: You are writing pure nonsense.

Example 3: What a load of rubbish you are saying!

Example 4: Seehofer is a babbler.

Example 5: "We will find a solution that is compatible with the household. It is clear that this task cannot be done by the contributors alone"! Then it must be done by the taxpayers, they are no contributors. Do you really think your former voters are completely stupid, Mrs. Nahles?

Counterexample 1: This assertion is wrong according to the entire legal literature. *(No disparagement, because the previously mentioned argument was called factually incorrect).*

Counterexample 2: They are populists.

Counterexample 3: To blame Ms. Nahles for this is highly dishonest.

**Attention:** Missing respect can be accompanied by emotional language or an unobjective discussion style, but it does not have to be (in the example above, no emotional language was used). The decisive factor here is the way in which other discussion participants and their statements are treated as degrading.

0 No disparaging treatment of discussants and their utterances

1 Disparaging treatment of statements of discussion participants

2 Disparaging treatment of the journalist’s statements

3 Disparaging treatment of statements by named/cited speakers

4 Disparaging treatment of statements made by several groups of actors

9 Disparaging treatment of statements made by other persons
### 3.10 NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

It is coded whether a comment contains negative emotions and which. Negative emotions can be expressed directly (e.g. "I hate taxes ..."); "It's annoying that ..."; "The result is disappointing.") or through the usage of very negatively connoted language (e.g. "Shut the f*** up!").

|   |   |
|---|---|
| **0** | No expression of negative emotions |
| **10** | Negative emotion contained, but type of emotion cannot be decided |
| **11** | Expressions of anger, rage or wrath |
| **Example 1:** | This government should be sent to hell! |
| **Example 2:** | Your comments are disgusting! |
| **12** | Expressions of sadness/disappointment |
| **Example:** | But for me, and certainly I dare to speak of millions of Germans, what counts is the content, which speaks to us from a sad heart! |
| **13** | Expressions of negative surprise |
| **14** | Expressions of fear or anxiety |
| **Example:** | I can understand that you are afraid of the politicians' lack of plan! |

**Attention:** The user’s own emotions are of interest, not the emotions of other actors or groups of actors.

**Counterexample:** The population could be worried!