

6. Reifications of Social Structures on Platforms and Their Effects on Deliberative Systems

Platforms and their architectures are not independent islands of communication in a vacuum. Conversely, democratic practices that structure communication

are not confined to a given democratic space but are always interwoven with society. The bodies, performances, and ideas of democratic subjects circulate through societies mediated through digital and other communication devices and through everyday talk with family, friends, and wider networks (Asenbaum 2023: 163).

Therefore, the communication processes are not structured by the platforms' architectures alone, but there are additional, social influences and contexts that structure any communication process. In an interplay with the platform architectures, they produce specific patterns in the communication processes on the platforms and affect the deliberative qualities of these processes. These digital-specific reifications, in turn, affect the social world beyond the digital spaces. Firstly, the specifically digital patterns represent the possibilities of interaction and therefore become a horizon for interaction, generally. Secondly, the individuals that interact within these patterns transmit contents and perspectives that have been generated and processed within these patterns to sites beyond the platforms. The individuals gain experiences within these patterns of, for instance, polarisation, platform communities, heterogeneous communication processes and interactions where they can explore new identifications. The transmitted contents and perspectives affect the individuals' personal stances and feed back into communication processes beyond the digital spaces. Moreover, the systemic effects of these patterns affect the systemic communication process on a higher level; their influence within the decision-

making process increases as the share of platform communication within the system increases. These new patterns thus disseminate into the communication processes and the social world beyond the platforms. Hence, in the terminology of the digital constellation, “society and technology interact dynamically and continuously” (Berg et al. 2020b: 17).

I will address three such influences that are especially significant for communication processes on social media platforms and that have varying effects on the deliberative qualities of these processes. Firstly, platforms are embedded in the temporal structures of societies. They operate within the frameworks of these general structures, they produce new temporal patterns in the digital communication processes and they thereby simultaneously reform the implications of, for instance, speed within the wider societies. The affordances that allow one to communicate instantly with a large number of people that are not in geographical proximity generate the expectancy that, for instance, political actors will immediately and publicly react to events and enquiries and that they will generally act more speedily (cf. Rosa 2009). Secondly, the platforms are embedded in their users’ innumerable communities, which all have their own sets of communicational conventions. These conventions can originate both externally and internally to the platforms, and they structure the communication processes within and between the communities interacting on the platforms. Both the conventions and their structuring effects disseminate back into the wider social world. Thus, for instance, dog-whistling terms like “unalive” (a euphemism for killing and suicide), which circulate on the major platforms¹ as a means of avoiding automatic deletion by algorithmic content moderation, can now be witnessed in the spoken-language vocabulary of their users beyond the platforms. Thirdly, the platforms are embedded in each user’s life individually. They are a tool to express or negate specific aspects of a user’s identity and to explore new ones through interaction with other users, and this, of course, also has repercussions beyond the digital realm. The anonymity architectures, specifically, allow individuals to explore various aspects of identity, and these experiences and connections with like-minded individuals likewise shape their offline life (cf. Asenbaum 2023: 14). In the following chapters, I will address these social influences. I will describe their structuring effects on the communication processes, and I will illustrate their effects on the qualities of deliberative sites and connections on the platforms, as well as for the deliberative systems.

1 However, the term originated in comics like *Deadpool* and *Spider-Man*.

6.1 Reifications of Time

Platforms and the communication processes on them are embedded in the general temporal structures of societies. But there are also temporal patterns that are specific to these communication processes due to the affordances and architectures of the platforms. These patterns affect the deliberative qualities of these processes and the deliberative systems beyond them.

Within digitisation research, time seems to be a rather tangential issue that is addressed frequently, but seldom very thoroughly. It is a common observation that digital technologies speed up most aspects of life due to their affordances of high-speed communication, even over long distances (cf. Barassi 2020: 1548–1549; Jungherr et al. 2020: 22–23; Lee 2021: 79). Slightly less frequent is the observation that the internet never forgets (cf. Jungherr et al. 2020: 24). The scholars that *do* elaborate more on the nexus of time and the digital constellation agree that digital technologies afford different temporalities in interaction and that temporal patterns seem to grow more complex. “Media technologies thus constitute [...] *temporal* infrastructures, architectures, and systems” (Stine/Volmar 2021: 9, orig. *emph.*).² In consequence, the linear clock time that has dominated the world’s conception for so long is complemented by a more complex version of time, by a construct of asynchronous but interconnected temporalities. Terms such as “timescape” (Pond 2021; Kitchin 2023), “temporal geography” (Stine/Volmar 2021), “chronotopographies” (Crang 2007) and network time (Hassan 2003; Pond 2021; Starosielski 2021) have been used to try to describe this phenomenon. But in spite of this illustrative terminology, there is neither unity nor clarity on the core of the matter. For questions such as those surrounding what exactly is implied by this complexity, what the different temporalities are, how they are connected and whether there are regularities, the answers remain rather elusive.

However, time is a very important structuring influence in any communication process:

Gesellschaft besteht aus der zeitlichen Fortsetzung von Sequenzen kommunikativen Handelns. [...] Handlungssequenzen sind ihrer schieren Natur nach wesentlich zeitliche Strukturen kommunikativen Handelns. Sie schaffen Zeitlichkeit durch ihre Abfolge, sie nehmen in ihrer Wechselseitigkeit

2 The technical foundations of the temporal patterns produced by these infrastructures are expounded in Ernst (2021), Sprenger (2020) and Volmar/Stine (2021).

besondere Formen an, und sie schaffen durch ihre Typik bzw. ihre Rekursivität soziale Strukturen, auf die im zeichenhaften kommunikativen Handeln wieder legitimierend so Bezug genommen wird, dass sie eine Ordnung annehmen. (Knoblauch 2017: 292)

A similar view can be found in the deliberative systems approach. On the one hand, sequenced models of deliberative systems imply a chronology on a systemic level, that is, between communication processes. On the other hand, Bächtiger and Parkinson stress that, within the sites, “particular communicative events are also sequenced” (2019: 43–44). Hence, temporal structures shape the communication processes on all levels of deliberative systems.

In this section, I will unravel the temporalities that reify in digital communication processes specifically and that are most dominant in what little literature there is on the matter. On first sight, there seem to be two basic paces of digital communication that are afforded by the properties of digital technologies: high-speed communication and long-term accessibility of posts. But the algorithmic ordering systems circumvent and counteract these chronological conceptions of time and produce more complex timescapes.

6.1.1 High-Speed Communication and Long-Term Accessibility

Digital technologies are usually associated with high-speed or even instantaneous communication (cf. Jungherr et al. 2020: 22–23). The “desire spawned by digitalism for speedier, multiple interconnectivities is also considered utilitarian in a world of complex searches and research” (Lee 2021: 79; cf. also Barassi 2020: 1548–154). High-speed communication is afforded by different factors. First, “the processing power of modern computing combined with incredibly low latencies in the network architecture construct hyper-fast, polymorphic and networked temporalities that have a self-propelling logic” (Pond 2021: 1203).³ Moreover, the contributions themselves become shorter, and some platforms even have maximum character counts, with Twitter/X being the most prominent example. On these platforms, participants can use only a limited number of characters per post, which makes the communication

3 The time-lag that occurs due to technical reasons, as described by Lohmeier et al. (2020: 1522), is a question of only fractions of seconds and thus does not affect communication processes between human participants.

faster. But even on platforms without limited character counts, the posts tend to be shorter than newspaper articles or parliamentary speeches.

In addition to this, the attention span for individual posts is potentially very low, shifting the focus to current events. Thus, posts “will either be picked up within seconds, minutes (or hours) or they [will] probably perish without echo in the masses of messages” (Laux/Schmitt 2017: 494, author’s translation). This speed and ephemerality of interaction and topics is manifest on a systemic level as well. Users are quick to adopt political causes, but their commitment to these causes tends to be short-lived and superficial. “Rather than identifying with issues, forming collective identity and then acting to support the interests of that identity (or voting for a political party that supports it), in a social media world, people act first, and think about it, or identify with others later, if at all” (Margetts 2019: 110). This is supported by the platforms’ architectures. As I described above, social media users participate in political discourse partially through “tiny acts” of political participation. It is not only that such tiny acts, which demand less collective identification, are convenient for the users themselves (cf. Hofmann 2019: 39). It is also that these acts are promoted and prioritised by the platforms themselves, which give such acts prominent places in their interfaces and comparatively high weights in their algorithmic systems (see chapters 4.1 and 5). Because of this heightened accessibility, tiny acts of political participation can scale up in phenomena like attention spirals and can thus result in large-scale mobilisation. Yet, this kind of mobilisation remains ephemeral, and

even when a mobilisation does succeed in getting a million people on the street, or signing a petition, or even a revolution of sorts as in Egypt, the very fact that it is possible to get there without the normal organisational trappings (such as nascent parties or leaders) of a movement or revolutions means that it will usually be unsustainable. (Margetts 2019: 110)

The shift towards these unpredictable and ephemeral forms of mobilisation based on tiny acts of digital participation has brought about an era of political turbulence, where politics become ever less predictable (cf. *ibid.*: 109–110).⁴

4 Hartmut Rosa has argued in a similar but more general way that technologies have enforced a social acceleration, which has led to a tendency towards situationalism even in the work of political actors: “The very idea of an ‘institution’, whose Latin root indicates its static, durable character, is incompatible with the idea of total acceleration

The brevity, speed and ephemerality of contributions affect the deliberative qualities of the communication processes. Where there is not enough room to broach an argument in a fundamental way, participants must give their reasonings an abbreviated, more superficial form, and comprehensibility might therefore be impaired. Moreover, a tiny act of communication such as liking “typically records a user’s positive first-impression response to a tweet” (Nguyen 2021). Thus, it

seems far more likely that a user will Like a tweet if it, say, expresses a view that they already agree with, than one that presents a challenging or subtle view that the user will have to wrestle with for a while. This is not because tweets somehow can’t be profound by their very nature. Rather, it is a feature of how Twitter’s interface captures the data to feed its metrics. A user might eventually come to appreciate a challenging tweet, but they are far less likely to go back and find that tweet, weeks later, to press Like (ibid.).

Therefore, posts that incur reflection rather than quick reactions are less appreciated within the recommender systems, the posting user is less rewarded by high metrics and the post itself will reach fewer other users. Thus, such posts have lesser influence in communication processes and users are discouraged from posting them in the first place. This is detrimental to qualities like *reflection* and *rationality* in the communication processes.

Yet, on the other hand, speed and simultaneity are not detrimental to all deliberative qualities. More users will be willing to participate if they do not have to commit for longer stretches of time, making tiny acts of participation more *inclusive* (see chapter 5.1). Furthermore, unlike in face-to-face situations, fast or simultaneously posted contents do not become *incomprehensible* because a speaker talks too fast, nor do they drown each other out – at least not due to the simultaneity of their conveyance. If two posts are published at the same time, other users can simply read them consecutively. This leads me to the counterpart of speed and ephemerality – and the second specific temporality of digital communication: the long-term accessibility of posts.

Almost everything that has been posted on social media is accessible in the long term, and messages remain stably connected with the sites they have been

[...]. As a result, politics, too, has become situationalist: it confines itself to reacting to pressures instead of developing progressive visions of its own” (2009: 102).

linked with.⁵ Even if a user deletes a post from a service, almost every platform stores the meta-data on the original post, and copies might also be saved in other parts of the platform or other parts of the internet.⁶ Long-term accessibility likewise applies to connections between users. “There is little decay of network connections in digital media. Once connected, users normally stay connected” (Jungheer et al. 2020: 24). So, social media platforms’ architectures enable both high-speed interaction and long-term accessibility. Long-term accessibility likewise affects the deliberative qualities of digital communication processes. Users can be held accountable in the long-term for their posts and might thus be motivated to communicate more *truthfully* and *respectfully*. Violations of the platform rules and laws that support these qualities can be sanctioned in the long term. On the other hand, the speedy attention spirals on social media platforms undermine the much slower sanctioning efforts. Due to the scale of data and posts, the platforms need to scan for violations:

Nearly all platforms must embrace a “publish-then-filter” [...] approach: user posts are immediately public, without review, and platforms can remove questionable content only after the fact. This means that even heinous content may get published, at least briefly, and criminal behavior may occur (and have its intended impact) before anything is done in response. Plenty of content that violates site guidelines remains online for days, or years, because of the sheer challenge of policing platforms as immense as these. (Gillespie 2018c: 265)

So, violations might be sanctionable in the long term and this might prevent users from violating the rules and regulations; but posts that represent violations can still take effect before being sanctioned with lower visibility or deletion.

The long-term existence of connections between users has effects on deliberative qualities as well. It leads to ever-larger numbers of network ties of which individual users remain aware, in consequence of which “information

5 However, there are platforms, such as Snapchat, that revolve around the automatic deletion of contents after a certain timespan. The different platforms have different policies and architectures for handling storage, remembering and forgetting.

6 Of course, the links that are connected to the posts might not be indefinitely available, due to technical changes such as the discontinuance of the host server. But this applies more to the free internet and less to the large and centrally organised social media platforms.

can travel much more quickly and broadly among communities of interest” (Jungherr et al. 2020: 24). Hence, the originally time-consuming process of political opinion formation and positioning in the public sphere is likewise speeding up. This affects the connections and overlaps of these high-speed parts of a deliberative system with those parts of the system that work inherently more slowly, like political institutions and the traditional media, resulting in processes of desynchronisation (cf. Laux/Schmitt 2017: 517). Regarding the quality of these connections, this affects systemic *reciprocity* and *equality* between the sites. The faster digital sites are almost able to constantly transmit information to the slower sites, which are forced to decide between reacting under pressure or not reacting at all.⁷ The slower sites are thereby put at a disadvantage in reacting to other ideas, in developing their own ideas and in transmitting these ideas throughout the system.

In spite of the possibility of high-speed communication and due to the long-term accessibility of posts, communication on social media platforms is often asynchronous. Digital technologies enable users to individualise their leisure-time behaviour, since users do not have to be present at a certain time in order to experience a certain event. In other words, “individual temporal regimes took the place of centrally produced rhythms” (Engels 2020: 80–82, author’s translation). These individualised temporal regimes affect the communication processes on social media platforms. Participants do not necessarily answer immediately to a post, and communication processes thus often stretch over longer time periods. The effects of this asynchronicity have been empirically tested by deliberative theory scholars, with mixed results. On the one hand, asynchronicity of communication processes has been found to “enable broad participation in debates” (Jungherr et al. 2020: 229) and thus increase *inclusivity*. On the other hand, the “possibility of stepping back and revisiting assumptions or finding new information has been associated with greater *reflexibility* in debates” (ibid., own emph.). Some scholars have found that greater flexibility enhances deliberative qualities such as *reflection*, *rationality* and *respect* (cf. Janssen/Kies 2005; Stromer-Galley/Martinson 2009; Stromer-Galley/Wichowski 2011), while other scholars have found “no evidence for a positive influence of asynchronous discussion on the provision of reasons” (Esau et al. 2017: 336). The differences between these results probably

7 Studies on how political actors handle time pressure have been presented, for instance, by Luhmann (2018) and Schimank (2011).

have a variety of reasons.⁸ The one reason I want to stress here, once again, is that asynchronicity is only one – not at all omnipresent – attribute of digital communication. There are many confounding factors that interact with each other and that influence the qualities of communication processes on all levels of stability.⁹

6.1.2 Timescapes

On social media platforms, these basic paces also combine with the content moderation systems that structure interaction. New temporal patterns of interaction emerge. One of these new patterns is the detachment of communication processes from chronology. As I have already described, social media platforms order the contents posted on them, at least in part, with the help of algorithmic systems. The contents that an algorithmic system predicts to be currently most interesting to a specific user will be favoured in her feed. In the temporal dimension, therefore, “most social media platforms are more concerned with delivering information at the right-time, not necessarily as soon as something has been posted” (Bucher 2020: 1699).

The order of contributions to a communication process thus adheres not to chronology but to timeliness. This phenomenon has been explained by Taina Bucher (2020). According to her, the algorithmic systems on social media platforms try to predict when a user is most likely to interact with a post. Timeliness, therefore, “is about probabilistic projection or likelihoods of getting the timing right” (ibid.: 1706). The right timing depends on several factors, including: the platform that is trying to predict the right time and that is steered by specific practices and a specific business model; the kind of services for which

8 Among other factors, the differences in empirical findings probably occur because of different operationalisations of rationality and the possibly misguided assumption that there is a fundamental difference between Facebook news pages and other news forums and news websites. For instance, in the estimation of Esau and colleagues, “[d]ue to technical infrastructure and social practices, the response time on Facebook is shorter and the rate of commenting is higher, which may result in the experience of a quasi-synchronous discussion in which many participants contribute posts at the same time” (2017: 329).

9 In fact, asynchronous communication is just as much a mere affordance of digital communication as high-speed communication is. Whether the interactions include time lags may vary even within one communication process, and therefore it is not at all a stable factor.

timing is needed (ads, updates from pages, stories); the individual attributes and habits of a user; the status of the post (i.e., new, read, popular, or missed); and the system's optimization goals at a given point in time (cf. *ibid.*: 1705). Of course, chronology is still relevant, and to "receive fresh and recent updates still matters[,] but, arguably, not more than receiving relevant news and updates at the right-time" (*ibid.*: 1708).¹⁰ Therefore, chronology and timeliness are intertwined. To determine the right timing of a post, algorithmic systems must consider, for example, the temporal habits of a user, which are measured in clock time, that is, chronologically. But such a system

slices and dices time to fit its purpose of delivering the right content at the right-time [and] algorithms expand *chronos* [meaning chronological time] in rather creative ways. Sometimes, a user may have already read or seen a post, but that does not mean, therefore, that it loses its relevance. More important than when it was posted for the first time is the extent to which a post remains important. It is one thing to read an interesting post by a friend, it is another to follow the post as it evolves and changes over time as others are reacting to it. (*ibid.*: 1709)

Thus, content moderation systems bring a new temporal order into the communication processes on social media platforms, one that relies on the platforms' support of high-speed communication and long-term accessibility but goes beyond both these chronological conceptions of time.

From a deliberative systems perspective, this has several implications for the qualities of communication processes. First, the content moderation systems' orientation towards timeliness resurfaces posts and news items that are deemed important by the system because they have triggered many reactions, even though they might not be the most recent contributions to a communication process. Thus, users "can rely on the system to deliver the most relevant updates that have [...] taken place 'while you were away'" (*ibid.*: 1709–1710). Consequently, asynchronous communication processes can take place in which users

10 Hence, the prediction technologies that estimate timeliness lead to the collision of past, present and future, since they "*draw[...] on past data traces to inform present decisions in order to mitigate future risks*" (Barassi 2020: 1550, orig. *emph.*) or, in the case of content moderation systems, reaction counts. Thus, the data "fold-back into future interactions and connections [and] through these feedback loops, the data take on an active or performative role in the shaping of networks and social relations" (cf. Beer 2020).

are presented with the contents that have been considered most important, or most worthy of reactions, as well as the contents that are predicted to be most important to the individual user. On the one hand, the timeliness orientation therefore equalises the communication process and makes it accessible to more participants, thereby enhancing deliberative quality regarding *equality*, *inclusivity* and *comprehensibility*. On the other hand, users are made aware of specific posts in a personalised manner, which might give minor argumentations a second chance of succeeding, thereby increasing qualities such as *listening*, *reflection* and the probability of a “forceless force of plausible reasons” (Habermas 1996: 24–25, own emph.). Moreover, the whole communication process will appear more interesting to each user if the proposed contents of the personalisation systems are selected well, and it might thus enhance qualities such as *listening*, *reflection* and *respect*. On the flipside, most of the communication will never resurface through the algorithmic systems. To notice these posts, users would have to actively follow a chronological feed of a communication process (or a specific author) in the moment the posts are published. Thus, qualities such as *reciprocity* and *interactivity* are impaired, since posts that have not been seen cannot be answered. Furthermore, the posts that actually do resurface are not necessarily the ones with the highest levels of *rationality*, *truthfulness* or *respect*. Rather, reactions can be triggered by various kinds of posts (see chapter 5.1); and the algorithmic systems sort posts not according to their deliberative qualities, but according to their potential to keep users on the platforms and to generate ad revenue (see chapter 4.2).

Overall, the timeliness aspect of content moderation systems seems to have rather positive effects – or at least the potential for positive effects – with regard to the deliberative qualities of many-to-many communication processes on social media platforms. Where there is a large number of participants communicating over long stretches of time, content moderation systems can help to keep the participants apprised of the most important events and thereby increase *comprehensibility* and *reciprocity*. But whether the effects are actually positive or negative depends on the aspects that factor into the specific content moderation system and the concrete context of the communication process in question.

The different temporalities do not exist independently of each other, of course, but interact and are intertwined. “Digital interconnectivity brings independently running time orders into a relationship of mutual visibility and disturbability” (Otto 2021: 113). Thus, “social temporalities are structured and

challenged by the (micro-)temporalities of digital infrastructures" (ibid.: 112).¹¹ Consequently, there must be an

infrastructural and infrastructuring process [that] consists of the continuous weaving of a relational assemblage between disparate entities and their different temporalities, which does not harmonize them, but makes them relevant to each other in their heterogeneity and plurality, in the first place. (ibid.: 108–109)

In communication on social media platforms, these processes reify in different ways with different implications for the interaction. Firstly, temporal relations "between technologies as maintained through standards and protocols" (Stine/Volmar 2021: 11) are needed, for example, for the synchronization of internet traffic, and thus they "create[...] an artefactual tempor(e)ality" (Ernst 2021: 92).¹² In fact, the technologies themselves "are in a crucial sense time machines", for they "pattern the movement of mechanisms, the flow of electrons, or the operations of symbols to meet temporal demands such as synchronism, succession, repetition, and pace" (Stine/Volmar 2021: 9). Secondly, there are procedures, such as schedules and working hours, that "coordinate the relations between technologies and human beings, who serve as interlocutors, care givers, proxies, and delegates" (ibid.: 11). Both these types of processes affect communication on social media platforms in so far as they secure the infrastructure needed for the interaction. Thirdly, the algorithmic content moderation systems themselves connect chronology and timeliness. By presenting contents at the "right time" to each user, they enable, for example, interaction for users with different temporal habits. They thus connect the

11 However, though digital technologies produce many unique forms of temporalities, the multiplicity of temporalities is not necessarily tied to the digital constellation. The multiplicity "could also be described from the sociological perspective of Barbara Adams, who sees a variety of other times included in the shaping of social time, 'a multitude of times which interpenetrate and permeate our daily lives,' including memories, anticipations, travel, and mobile working hours, as well as weather conditions and temporalities of the involved media" (Otto 2021: 112).

12 Central among these processes is the UTC protocol that is synchronising the time protocols of the majority of existing technical devices and that regularly inserts a leap second in order to synchronise astronomical and atomic clock time. This has severe implications, for example, for financial transactions that depend on millisecond-level timing (cf. Otto 2021). But temporalities on social media platforms are – though appearing high-speed to users – too slow for the leap second to signify.

different temporalities that have emerged due to the differentiation of leisure-time behaviour that is afforded by digital technologies (cf. Engels 2020: 80–82) or due to the time differences between participants from different time zones.

In sum, there are different temporalities at work in the communication processes taking place on social media platforms. There is the chronological clock time that still builds the basis for societal and technological processes. But some of these processes are vastly sped up while others slow down, so that asynchronous communication becomes possible. Moreover, the content moderation systems of the platforms reassemble the chronological timeline according to timeliness. The various temporalities – within platform communications and in comparison to other sites beyond the platforms – are connected through various social and technical temporal infrastructures.

6.2 Reifications of Communicational Conventions

The next set of social structures with specific reifications in the communication processes on social media platforms are the social and communicational conventions, that is, the unspoken rules and practices that permeate interaction between users. I have already introduced the forms of expression that are afforded specifically by the platforms' architectures (chapter 5.1). Within these architectural frameworks, platform users have developed communicational conventions that are specific to communication on these platforms. They have done this by using a combination of conventions that are known from contexts beyond platforms and the various available forms of expression.

Generally, the degree to which the participants of a communication process know and can apply social and communicational conventions determines the degree to which they can grasp the meanings of each other's contributions and convey their own meanings. In the extreme, the sharing and not sharing of communicational conventions determines if a communication process is at all possible. Communicational conventions therefore structure communication processes. This has also been addressed by deliberative theorists. Goodin observed that "[i]nsofar as we each have an interest in communicating with one another at all, it is in the interests of each of us to share the same conventions about the usage of words (and other signs and symbols)", and he added that we usually "want our messages to be *meaningful* to one another" (Goodin 2008: 189–190). Dryzek refers to the capability of making one's own messages meaningful to others as "discursive accountability" (2010: 74–75). According to

him, this capability is especially important if an individual acts as transmitter between different sites that hold different sets of conventions: such a transmitter has “to communicate in terms that make sense in the discourse being represented, even as he or she makes representations to other actors, institutions, or discourses” (ibid.). Bächtiger and Parkinson – using the term scripts for what I call conventions – observe that the capability to make oneself understood differs from individual to individual.

The range of scripts that an individual can draw on is causally significant to their actions in that it defines the strategies of action available to them. Yet because societies contain diverse and conflicting scripts, which change over time, this “repertoire” interpretation of culture does not imply a uniform direction in which scripts influence members of a group, [...]. Likewise, the same scripts may not be available in equal measure to all participants: some may have more “cultural capacities” than others (2019: 26–27).

In other words, different sites communicate on the foundations of different scripts that are available to their participants to a different degree.¹³ Habermas, finally, connects conventions with structures and deliberative qualities by observing that

the rules of a *shared* practice of communication are of greater significance for structuring public opinion. Agreement on issues and contributions *develops* only as the result of more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with. (1996: 362)

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- 13 A very fitting metaphor in the context of digital communication has been proposed by Bruno Latour. In his book *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2007a), he uses the term “plug-in” to refer to discursive requirement topographies that provide standardised patterns of behaviour, thinking and perception and guide processes of socialisation (cf. Gertenbach/Laux 2019: 139). These plug-ins circulate in the networks; participants can subscribe to them, and they can download them in order to “become locally and provisionally competent” (Latour 2007a, orig. *emph.*). “Individuals thus acquire their social action competence via such plug-ins. A download of the current standard profile generates social recognition, [while] a permanent disregard of the updates, on the other hand, leads to social exclusion [...]. The more frequently a plug-in is downloaded and installed by actors, the more likely it is to be said to be an effective rule or a social standard of behaviour” (Gertenbach/Laux 2019: 139, author’s translation; see also Latour 2007a).

That is, the different sets of conventions – or rules of shared practices of communication – structure communication processes by allowing for a different level of rationality in deliberating on proposals, information and reasons.

This certainly rings true, yet there are even more ways in which different sets of conventions structure communication processes. For example, Berger and Luckmann argue that “[l]anguage builds up semantic fields or zones of meaning that are linguistically circumscribed” and that “[v]ocabulary, grammar and syntax are geared to the organization of these semantic fields” (1980: 39). Similarly, scholars of discourse analysis more fundamentally suggest that “ordering works through linguistic systems, through ‘vocabularies’ or ‘repertoires’ that shape the way in which people perceive and judge concrete situations” and that “[t]hese linguistic regularities [...] provide stability and organizational orientation as actors collaborate in interpretative communities that share a particular way of talking about policy situations” (Hajer/Laws 2009: 261). For deliberative qualities, this means that *comprehensibility* is enhanced for all those who know and can apply the respective scripts and vocabularies, which, in turn, can support interactivity. However, participants are only capable of participating in the communication processes in so far as their knowledge of the scripts and vocabularies allows them to. This introduces a hierarchy between users and decreases *equality* between the participants.

In the following sections, I will address different types of communicational conventions, how they structure communication processes on social media platforms and how that affects the deliberative qualities of these processes. First, I will describe the structuring effects of different official languages on the communication on social media platforms. These languages produce the larger patterns on the platforms. Second, I will turn to platform communities and how their specific sets of conventions structure digital communication into more granular patterns.

6.2.1 Languages

The variety of official languages used on social media platforms is the most obvious structuring influence within the realm of social and communicational conventions. The interest in studying language diffusion and structuring in social media platforms peaked in the early and mid-2010s and has considerably

waned since then.¹⁴ Though these studies must be taken with a grain of salt,¹⁵ the fundamental logics have prevailed, and the studies can still give an approximation of how language structures communication on these platforms today.

The users of most of the major social media platforms are spread all over the world. Consequently, they are positioned in countries with a great variety of official languages, and this variety is also displayed in communication on the platforms. The differences in language heavily cluster the users, and they structure the communication processes on social media platforms. In fact, “language is a key force [in] structuring ties in the network” (Hale 2014: 833). Different types of studies have found that users tend to communicate with users who primarily use the same language.¹⁶ According to these studies, users are much more likely to connect with users of the same language than with users of a different language.¹⁷ Similarly, most digital sites “are composed of a single, dominant language” (ibid.: 837),¹⁸ or display reference-induced patterns

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- 14 In this period, computational text analysis tools were still in their infancy and scholars were constantly developing new tools for detecting and analysing different languages and their application in social media platforms. In comparison to today's tools, such as Large Language Models, the techniques that approximate a user's dominant language use via a user's self-description (cf. Hale 2012) or self-reported location and time zone (cf. Lotan et al. 2011; Poell/Darmoni 2012) seem a little wooden, but they are nonetheless effective.
 - 15 Ten years is a long time in the life of such a platform, and platform architectures as well as user demographics and behaviour can change significantly in this time.
 - 16 This includes follower-following studies (Takhteyev et al. 2012; Kulshrestha et al. 2012), studies that analyse anchoring and referencing patterns (Hale 2012; Hale 2014; Hong et al. 2011) and studies that analyse specific sites (Bruns et al. 2013; Poell/Darmoni 2012).
 - 17 These tendencies manifest themselves irrespectively of how many people in the world use a specific language (cf. Hale 2014: 839).
 - 18 Nonetheless, the dominant language within a site can shift over time, depending on the participants within the site. Thus, Axel Bruns and colleagues found that – in the course of the Arab Spring – the site of #egypt displayed “a substantial shift over time, from a comparative dominance of users tweeting in Latin characters to an overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking user base. This shift may be driven in part by the early prominence of alternative hashtags [...]. But our analysis has also shown the already considerable presence of an Arabic-speaking elite among the top 1% of most active contributors to #egypt even at this early stage; [...] and as long-term interest by international participants waned, this established elite became the nucleus around which a largely Arabic-language discussion unfolded” (2013: 894). Poell/Darmoni (2012: 19) have made similar observations in their own study of #sidibouzid in connection with the Tunisian revolution of 2011.

that cluster around the occurring languages (cf. Poell/Darmoni 2012: 28). This finding is to be expected, since “[s]ocial interaction depends on the two parties’ ability to communicate, which nearly always requires that they are competent in the same language” (Takhteyev et al. 2012: 75). Communication processes are thus clustered around languages.

From a deliberative systems perspective, the language-based clustering of users and communication processes means that information, reasons and opinions tend to flow within the boundaries set by languages: they are exchanged within sites whose participants share a primary language and between sites with the same dominant language more often than is statistically expected for a network with randomly distributed network ties (cf. Hale 2014: 836). Since social media platforms are among the primary spaces where groups of participants who are from all over the world and who speak all kinds of languages can communicate, these findings can be taken as an indication that even deliberative systems operating under the conditions of the digital constellation tend to be structured by language. Deliberative sites, as a space for exchanging opinions and information, are inclusive only of participants who understand the languages in which the contents are expressed. Technically, tweets in any language can be anchored on any hashtag, but qualities such as *interactivity* and *reciprocity* occur only if the contents are comprehensible to the participants.

On social media platforms, users communicating in different languages vary not only regarding their grammar, syntax and vocabulary, but also regarding their preferred use of the platforms’ architectures. Hong and colleagues “discovered cross-language differences in adoption of features such as URLs, hashtags, mentions, replies, and retweets” on Twitter (Hong et al. 2011: 518). For example,

German users were distinctively more likely to include URLs and hashtags than users of other languages [...]. In contrast, Indonesian and Malay users were more likely to retweet and include mentions [...]. Thus, German users appeared to have a stronger propensity for content-related behaviors. Indonesian and Malay preferred social and message-broadcasting behaviors. This shows two distinctive ways of using Twitter for either information sharing or social networking (ibid.: 520).

This, in turn, affects the structures of sites and connections across the platforms, as well as their embeddedness in the wider system. The content-related

behaviour of the Germans in the study rather resembles blog-type posting (though posts might be anchored on a hashtag), but it is less interactive than the behaviour of the Indonesians who tended more towards using retweets as a form of reaction to content and using @-referencing as a form of specifically addressing other users. In the first case, deliberative qualities such as *inclusivity* and *reason-giving* are at the fore, while the second kind of behaviour rather supports qualities such as *interactivity* and *reciprocity*. Moreover, including URLs embeds the respective sites in the wider system and thereby supports systemic inclusivity.

Of course, social media platforms are not entirely fragmented by language. There are different forms of bridges between language divides, but they all hinge on a number of users being proficient in more than one language. Multilingual users “play a unique bridging role in the network and are critical to the global connectivity of the network” (Hale 2014: 838).¹⁹ These bridges exist across all languages, but the language with the most important bridging role is English (cf. Hale 2012: 1365; Hale 2014: 840–841; Takhteyev et al. 2012: 80). Several studies found that multilingual users are more active than monolingual ones (cf. Bruns et al. 2013: 875; Hale 2014: 836; Poell/Darmoni 2012). These users author content in different languages (cf. Hale 2014: 841), share URLs across languages (cf. Hale 2012: 1366–1367) and are instrumental in bridging the language divide in information exchanges (cf. Bruns et al. 2013: 894).²⁰ They thus play a central role – both literally and metaphorically – for parts of deliberative systems that operate via social media platforms. They act as carriers of transmissions, with all the power and effects I described earlier (see chapter 2.3). They establish connections between sites formed around different languages, and they use the different languages strategically. In the context of the Tunisian revolution of 2011, for example, one of the most active multilingual users reflected:

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- 19 There do not seem to be any recent studies surveying the share of multilingual users on social media platforms. Hale's 2014 study calculates them to be at around 11% (cf. Hale 2014: 836). The percentage varies across languages but independently of the number of users writing in a specific primary language (cf. *ibid.*: 838); that is, the specific share of multilingual users in a language is independent of the overall number of users who use this language primarily.
- 20 However, the overall importance of English for the World Wide Web has been declining with the introduction of internet access all over the world, which has led to ever more users communicating in their respective native languages (cf. Hale 2012: 1364).

In English, we mostly tweet about news and facts, no debates. We also tweet about human rights, since this issue makes a lot of “noise” in the West. We used French mostly to criticize and “insult” the French because of their cowardice at the beginning of the revolution. For us Classical Arabic was more important than the Tunisian dialect. We wanted the rest of the Arabs to understand us, and our actions. Even when we communicate with Tunisians we use Classical Arabic, if we think it’s a matter that concerns all Arabs. Tunisian dialect is only used, if we consider the tweeted information as a local matter. About 20 to 30% of our communication is in Tunisian dialect, mostly to make jokes and use irony. (Poell/Darmoni 2012: 22–23)

These individuals, thus, have used different languages strategically to address and connect with different communities. They have furthermore translated contents and transmitted them to clusters and sites with other primary languages, again addressing different language clusters strategically, as becomes apparent from the interviews:

[one multi-lingual Twitter user] recounted that he and his collaborators were first translating all of the relevant news on Twitter from Tunisian Arabic to English. “That’s when the Western media started taking us seriously. All of a sudden, the media power structure was reversed: the western media became dependent on us because we were giving them valuable information.” In addition, he said they posted the information in Classical Arabic and “asked all our Arab contacts to tweet about this: in Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya, Lebanon, et cetera.” (ibid.: 23–24)

By thus selecting the contents and transmitting them between sites of different primary languages, multilingual users can shape what contents come to the awareness of the receiving sites. Moreover, they can influence the perspective according to which these contents will be received by commenting on them or stressing certain aspects within them (cf. Hale 2012: 1365; Hale 2014: 840–841). In this manner, the interviewed multilinguals that were central to Twitter communication during the Tunisian revolution “understood their task as one of ‘information escape’: reproducing and structuring information from Tunisia and making it accessible to international media [as well as] to media and publics in the Arab world and France” (Poell/Darmoni 2012: 28–29). So, multilingual users are important bridges across language divides, and they strategically use this position within the deliberative system; they increase the *connectedness* between its sites and thereby the *systemic inclusivity*.

But multilingual users are not the only drivers of transmissions between languages. The platforms' architectures, likewise, can support cross-language communication. As Scott Hale observed, Twitter's "single data store across all languages seems to facilitate the sharing of links" (2012: 1367). Moreover, a "[s]earch occurs irrespective of the majority language of the tweet or the language of the user", and this "results in users of Twitter more likely encountering foreign-language information and then reposting that information" (ibid.). The role of platform architecture in bridging language divides will most probably increase in the nearer future, as soon as the platform companies integrate translation tools in the platforms' interfaces and recommender systems. Already, deliberative theory scholars attribute these technologies to bridging effects, as can be seen, for example, with the situation in Ukraine since 2022:

Google translate has created a European public sphere where journalists, pundits, and citizens communicate instantaneously across multiple language barriers. Millions of Europeans follow Zelenskyy whose tweets are automatically translated into the followers[] native language[s], and social media are creating links between ordinary Ukrainians and Europeans where they are exchanging information in real time. Google translate has an enormous potential for the future of supra and intra national debate. (Chambers 2023: 65–66)

Tools such as Google Translate are still external to social media platforms, which means that there are frictions in communication across language divides that take the shape of copy-pasting text between the platform and a translation website or app. These frictions will be reduced when platforms start to integrate MML-based AI systems for real-time translation²¹ into their interfaces and recommender systems; users might be able to seamlessly communicate across language divides, and inter-linguistic, supra-national communication processes might increase, which would increase the *systemic connectedness*. The importance of multilingual users would decrease with such a development. However, language divides often correlate with the follower-following clusters of users (cf. Hale 2014: 836) and with the issues discussed (cf. Poell/Darmoni 2012: 19–21). The causalities and dependencies between these factors – along with the question of whether seamless communication

21 An example of such a system is DeepL.

across language divides actually decreases language-based clustering – will become apparent only when such systems are integrated and when scholars are consequently able to negate the role of language as a structuring influence.

Lastly, platform architectures afford forms of expression that are independent of official languages, such as one-click reactions, images and sounds. These more universal forms can also serve as bridges. Thus, the example of the sprayer meme I cited in chapter 5.1 demonstrates how images can convey political messages without spoken or written language. Though non-verbal forms of expression hardly allow sound and detailed debates, they can serve as bridges across language divides.

In sum, communication is structured by the specifics of the languages that users employ to communicate with each other on social media platforms, since the use of different languages comes with different ways of communicating and different uses of the platforms' architectures. Users of the same language can understand each other better and therefore tend to prefer communicating among each other over communicating with users of a different language. Multilingual users and translation systems act as bridges between language divides. But even if users communicate in the same language, they do not necessarily communicate in the same way. This is because varying communicational conventions also develop in different platform communities of the same primary language – that is, they develop different jargons and institutionalise specific ways of using rhetoric. Thus, within these broader patterns along language divides, there are more granular patterns that develop around platform communities, with their respective sets of communicational conventions. I will address these communities and their conventions in the following section.

6.2.2 Communicational Conventions of Platform Communities

The more specific sets of communicational conventions that are developed within the various platform communities can have similar effects on the structures of communication on the platforms. Platform community is one of the buzzwords, especially in journalistic works on social media platforms. The term often refers to the entirety of users on one platform, and indeed, on a platform like Twitter, “all tweeps belong to the worldwide set of tweeps who understand Twitter’s norms, language, techniques, and governing structure” (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1312–1313). Papacharissi applies the concept of *habitus* to this understanding of platform affordances and their utilisation:

the habitus informs the manner in which the capabilities of a particular platform are utilized and thus informs the texture of digitally enabled forms of expression and connection. [...] The dialectical and relational practices adopted as people express themselves and connect online are the product of what the technology invites and of pre-established practices that people feel comfortable engaging in. (2015: 123)

However, I have already described various instances of how platforms are furthermore composed of a multitude of sites and user clusters that are interconnected but still distinguishable. These clusters and sites form “multiple and shifting communities, across multiple nations and cultures and religions, each participating for different reasons, often with incommensurable values and aims” (Gillespie 2018d: 176). These communities “do not independently coexist on a platform. Rather, they overlap and intermingle – by proximity, and by design” (ibid.). These platform communities largely form around specific sites or sets of sites that are rather homogeneous regarding their perspectives on political issues. In the deliberative systems terminology, these are partisan sites. Moreover, platform communities can be shaped by more general social groups that “are parts of a structured society” and that precede the individuals (cf. Stets/Burke 2000: 225).²² But not all sites produce platform communities. There are also more heterogeneous sites where different communities can interact with each other.

Platform communities can vary with regard to their communicational conventions. Different studies from digitisation research have addressed the interaction patterns and communicational conventions that develop in platform communities, with their specific sociocultural contexts. For example, Gruzdt and colleagues studied in detail the follower network of one specific user called Wellman and observed that the members of this community “regularly meet, talk, provide support, and help each other on Twitter” (Gruzdt et al. 2011: 1313). These users display a sense of belonging to the community, and they have the ability to influence others in the network through their communication (cf. ibid.). Moreover, this community has developed specific communicational conventions, in addition to the conventions widely accepted on the entire platform (cf. ibid.: 1302). “These specific conventions were introduced by either Wellman or his followers and were adopted by others in his personal community” (ibid.). Papacharissi, likewise, found that the “role of

22 With regard to group identifications, see chapter 6.3.

sociocultural context in shaping the outcome of digitally enabled expression and connection cannot be emphasized enough” (2015: 122). In her various case studies, “the discursive affordances of Twitter supported diverse practices that developed in a variety of directions because they were born out of singularly combined sociocultural conditions” (ibid.). Thus, different communities interact in different sociocultural conditions and develop specific conventions by which community members interact within the platform’s architectures.

In the deliberative systems approach, a similar idea is presented by stressing the importance of the diversity of deliberative sites within a system. This diversity refers not only to the different contexts, but also to the inner workings of these sites. Many of these diverse sites within a deliberative system are the regular spaces of communication for a specific community, especially in the informal sites of civil society. They are the spaces where communicational conventions develop. Thus, not only do “people behave very differently in a courtroom than a bar-room” (Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 26–27), but even within one barroom there might be different groups and communities, with their own specific conventions, that form separate sites within the barroom – much like the patterns that form within one hashtag-anchored site. All the bar guests must abide by the rules within the bar, but each community and site has its own additional set of rules and scripts that shape the communication processes. The distinctions between the communities and their conventions thus “extend beyond institutions and institutional rules to encompass informal beliefs, customs and practices, too” (Boswell/Corbett 2017: 810).

But even though the political cultures and communicational conventions of platform communities can differ widely, they do not necessarily do so. On social media platforms, user networks and communities often overlap, communities can be present in several sites and the recommender systems additionally connect sites. Through these connections, not only contents but also communicational conventions are transmitted between sites and communities (cf. Gruzdt et al. 2011: 1302). This implies that sites that are strongly connected also transmit more communicational conventions and tend to converge, with regard to these conventions, over time. Moreover, a similar political culture – including a similar set of communicational conventions – in both sites will enhance unbiased and correct transmission and its inclusion in the consecutive deliberation.²³ Applied to communicational conventions, this means that already similar political cultures will converge further and that changes in one

23 I have described this effect in chapter 2.3.

set of community conventions will quickly transmit into other communities with similar conventions.²⁴ Thus, for example, “it is well known that the social networks that matter for language change are often strongly homophilous in terms of both demographics and geography” (Eisenstein et al. 2014: 11).²⁵ Conventions thus spread across a multitude of sites, and as more users and communities use a convention, it spreads more quickly.²⁶ Simultaneously, the platforms’ recommender systems are mostly based on similarity metrics and the individual user’s past behaviour, which means that they tend to confront users with contents that are similar to what users already reacted to. Moreover, these systems rely on individual users’ networks of friends and followers, who likewise tend to interact in similar communities with similar conventions. The recommended contents therefore usually pertain to ever more similar communicational conventions. Consequently, platform users will be more exposed to sites and contents that are communicated through similar conventions.

So, there are different sets of communicational conventions that are used in platform communication. They partially overlap and partially differ greatly, and they thus structure the communication process within and between digital sites. These sets of conventions contain both jargon and the institutionalised use of rhetorical means.

By *jargon*, I refer to the specific terminologies, linguistic patterns and phrases that belong to the communicational conventions of a community. In this regard, it is not only differences between national languages that

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- 24 Conversely, if the initial similarity of conventions is lacking, transmission of jargon and phrases may be hindered, even though they are intended to be spread. For instance, the study by Parkinson and colleagues showcases an example of an anti-Brexit campaign page on Facebook whose author team had composed a selection of talking points and “was pushing its talking points, come hell or high water, with little direct impact on the language of ordinary citizens” (Parkinson et al. 2020 // 2022: 556).
 - 25 Some rhetorical means even spread across sites of different communities. Rossini and colleagues, for example, found “that candidates’ rhetoric can influence public discourse by setting the tone and fueling attacks across party lines in an already polarized scenario. In turn, the amount of incivility in public comments can undermine the potential for citizens to effectively talk about politics on social media, and at the same time, it makes it even harder for candidates and political elites to benefit from informal conversations among citizens and understand the core issues that affect the electorate” (Rossini et al. 2020: 104).
 - 26 This also shows in the findings of Eisenstein et al. (2014: 10), who observed that jargon changes on Twitter have been transmitted from larger cities to smaller ones, as well as from demographically younger cities to older ones.

are relevant. Deliberation is additionally structured by differences between the jargons of various fields of knowledge (cf. Nguyen 2018), for example, or between elites' cultivated forms of language and the language available to the masses (cf. Dryzek 2009: 1395). Research on social media platforms has produced many accounts of diverse jargons in platform communication.

Firstly, there are jargons that are used specifically in digital communication or on a specific platform, that is, there are jargons that belong to the common sociocultural context of the diverse platform communities. For communication on social media platforms, "[w]ritten language has been forced to adapt to meet the demands of synchronous conversation, resulting in a creative burst of new forms, such as emoticons, abbreviations, phonetic spellings, and other neologisms" (Eisenstein et al. 2014: 1). Due to differences in platform architectures, different adaptations to these specific platforms have also developed. Gruzd and colleagues, for example, found that "Twitterspeak is important for facilitating productive conversations and identifying oneself as part of the overall Twitter community" (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1303).²⁷ Similarly, TikTok users share a jargon based on images and humour that allows them to communicate across geographical and political borders, while still identifying as part of the TikTok community (cf. Dornis 2020). Moreover, Tommaso Trillo and colleagues found that "people consistently recognize genre-specific values in portraits and evaluate them through a narrow set of communication-related criteria" (Trillò et al. 2023: 235). They added that "[s]uch evaluations vary across cultures" (ibid.). Hence, images can be part of a jargon, too, as they are interpreted according to the communities' conventions and values.

Secondly, there are jargons that are primarily used within specific communities on a platform. For instance, the Wellman community analysed by Gruzd and colleagues identified the language convention that

when a user replies to somebody else's message, he or she often uses initials (e.g., "Wellman") or "Me" followed by colon (:) to indicate where the answer begins. For instance, in the following message, Barry Wellman replies

27 Most of the example terms presented there are by now either obsolete or no longer limited to the architecture of the website formerly known as Twitter. They include the use of Hashtags, as well as of "RT" [...] to signify a 'retweeted' or forwarded message, 'via' to signify a highly edited message, and @name to identify the username of whom you are talking about" (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1301).

to a user with a username redlog: “RT @redlog does the ASA have an official twitter stream? Wellman: Yup, @asanews.” (Gruzd et al. 2011: 1302).²⁸

Sometimes, such jargon development is pursued intentionally by one or more participants. Thus, another example has been presented by Parkinson and colleagues, who analysed political campaigns in the context of Brexit and found that the “Better Together Facebook team seems to have deployed [talking points] in language that combines short, sharp ideas in entirely idiosyncratic ways [...] with little direct impact on the language of ordinary citizens” (Parkinson et al. 2020: 555–556). One of the multilinguals interviewed by Thomas Poell and Kaouthar Darmoni likewise “tried to develop an Arab Twitter language that is informative yet personal” (2012: 23).

Thirdly, there are jargons that are used in communities interacting on platforms and beyond. This accounts for the finding that “despite the fact that social media facilitates instant communication between distant corners of the earth, the adoption of new written forms is often sharply delineated by geography and demographics” (Eisenstein et al. 2014: 1). Thus, for example, Eisenstein and colleagues found that, in their corpus of Twitter messages,

the abbreviation *ikr* (I know, right?) occurs six times more frequently in the Detroit area than in the United States overall; the emoticon *^ ^* occurs four times more frequently in Southern California; the phonetic spelling *suttin* (something) occurs five times more frequently in New York City (*ibid.*).

But while geographical aspects are prominent, “the absolute difference in the proportion of African Americans is the strongest predictor”, and “[a]bsolute difference in the proportion of Hispanics, residents of urbanized areas, and median income are also strong predictors” (*ibid.*: 10). The analysis “suggests that such differences persist in the virtual and disembodied realm of social media” (*ibid.*). In some regions, users have even started to mix languages in their platform communication in order to adapt to the platform’s architectures. Thus, Arabic writing users had to use Latin characters on Twitter, since the platform did not support right-to-left hashtags for a time (*cf.* Bruns et al. 2013: 873–874). Even more translingual practices have been developed by university students in contemporary, post-socialist Mongolia – practices that

28 There were further conventions to accommodate Twitter’s limitation of tweets, at that time, to 140 characters (*cf.* Gruzd et al. 2011: 1302).

are “exceedingly mingled with an array of English, Russian, Japanese, Korean and Turkish linguistic, cultural and semiotic resources” and include “japanized Mongolian phrases, twisted Verlan-like Mongolian terms, anglicized Korean jargon and emotional and mood signs” (Dovchin 2015: 455–456). Each one of these translingual practices “has its own sociolinguistic history, culture and background” (*ibid.*).

Prashanth Bhat and Ofra Klein (2020) presented yet another highly interesting example of community jargon that has developed in the specific conditions of the digital constellation. The scholars analysed how a community of white supremacists developed strategies of dog whistling, which may be defined as follows: “the use of words, phrases, and terminology that mean one thing to the public at large, but that carry an additional, implicit meaning only recognized by a specific subset of the audience” (*ibid.*: 153–154). This kind of jargon is thus strategically developed in order to afford covert communication in a specific community, allowing “the speaker and their audiences to violate certain social norms while plausibly denying doing so” (*ibid.*: 154). Dog whistling is not specific to the digital constellation, but digital technologies – and social media platforms in particular – have eased the dissemination of the codes (*cf. ibid.*: 166). Moreover,

dog whistling has also become a popular online strategy, especially after the introduction of Google’s Perspective tool aimed at detecting insults and online toxicity. The automated removal of explicit insults forces hate groups to use symbols and keywords so as to circumvent these forms of detection (*ibid.*: 156).

Thus, a group of users on the (controversial and relatively small) platform 4chan set out to create “a coded language that would circumvent such A.I. systems”, and they “came up with a list of words, where seemingly innocent terms, most of which were names of computer-related tech companies, were used in lieu of racial slurs” (*ibid.*).²⁹ Individuals have used other terms of this jargon “to (1) signal belonging to a political group; (2) identify as a strong male; (3) express identification with and pride in one’s (supposed) cultural heritage” (*ibid.*: 162); generally, they have used such terms “to extract themselves from the mainstream discourse while still injecting ideas into that same discourse” (*ibid.*: 167). The

29 Moreover, the community used specific symbols and numbers as dog whistles (*cf. Bhat/Klein 2020: 160–161*).

scholars found that elements of this jargon partially originated in and eventually diffused to other platforms and even political speeches (cf. *ibid.*: 159).³⁰

To deliberative theorists, the implications of different jargons for deliberation are neither new nor specific to digital communication. But true to the scholars' focus on vertical connections, they mostly address the obstacles to deliberative qualities that occur "when elites cultivate a form of language unavailable to the masses as a way of bolstering their standing and power" (Dryzek 2009: 1395). More generally speaking, the development of jargon in communities can be seen to have a twofold impact on deliberative qualities. On the one hand, communication within the communities is facilitated for all participants that are familiar with the jargon and able to actively use it (cf. Goodin 2008: 189–190). Thus, *comprehensibility* is enhanced among participants that use the same conventions. It might be even furthered if communication is simplified through certain codes and terms that stand proxy for larger ideas, so long as all participants understand the deeper meanings behind the language. This dynamic becomes more extreme as the community becomes more specialised regarding a specific field or common ground of knowledge, for "each field requires not only its own technical jargon and specialized knowledge, but its own specialized form of reasoning" (Nguyen 2018: 107). Moreover, participants might grant *authenticity* and *listen* more readily to a speaker who uses their common jargon "correctly" in expressing her view on the common issues and perspectives. On the other hand, the use of jargon inherently *excludes* potential participants that are not fluent in the jargon, or it at least sets these participants at a disadvantage regarding comprehensibility. *Comprehensibility* and *rationality* cannot be secured where fields of human knowledge "are mutually incomprehensible to one another" (*ibid.*) and where conceptions of a good argument vary radically from field to field (cf. *ibid.*). *Publicity* and *accountability* are likewise impaired, even more so in cases of dog-whistling jargons that are explicitly developed in order to exclude individuals by lowering comprehensibility and publicity and to avoid accountability.

30 In the introduction to chapter 6, I also mentioned a current example of dog whistling: the term "to unalive", which is taken from traditional comic books (*Deadpool*, *Spider-Man*), has been introduced rather widely in platform communication in order to serve as a dog-whistling term for "to kill" or "to commit suicide" and thus avoid automatic blocking of posts by the platforms. Often, such terms have counterparts in other languages (for example, "unlebensdienlich" in German).

Besides the specific terminology and signs involved in jargon, communicational conventions can also include institutionalised uses of *rhetoric*. That is, the members of a community and participants in the respective sites may have formed habits of using rhetoric in specific ways. From a deliberative systems perspective, rhetorical means can serve different functions; they have different effects on the communication processes, and their use is context-dependent.³¹ Depending on their intentions for and perceptions of the communication process, participants can use different means.³² Moreover, the use and acceptance of specific rhetorical means depend on the site's position within the deliberative system and sequence. Thus, for example, Esau and colleagues found that positive emotions were more often expressed in more formal arenas, whereas negative emotions were more often expressed in arenas of informal communication (cf. Esau et al. 2021: 104). Consequently, different rhetorical means also have a different influence within a site, "depending upon how those modes manage to tap in to, or disrupt, group norms" (Kuyper 2020: 24). Graham, for example, found that

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- 31 Though scholars have addressed these specific means occasionally, they have more commonly addressed rhetorical means and their effects in a more general fashion, especially in the discussion on the value of non-deliberative acts (see chapter 2.1).
- 32 For instance, "[w]e will see actors who use language and symbols to bolster formal arguments when needed, who are respectful because they learnt something during the process but simultaneously have strategic impetuses, who use reasons to persuade but also to mobilize an audience" (Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 75). Different rhetorical means help the participants with "the formation of better arguments[,] as individuals can express themselves in ways that attach to their cultural, social, and psychological make-up" (Kuyper 2020: 24). Regarding the individual speaker's intentions in using rhetoric, Chambers stresses the distinction between deliberative and plebiscitary rhetoric. Deliberative rhetoric "makes people think, it makes people see things in new ways, it conveys information and knowledge, and it makes people more reflective" (2009: 335); it "creates a dynamic relationship between speaker and hearer" (ibid.) and "treats its audience as autonomous deliberators deserving of respect" (ibid.: 337). Plebiscitary rhetoric, on the other hand, "refers to speech that is concerned first and foremost with gaining support for a proposition and only secondarily with the merits of the arguments or persuasion for that matter" (ibid.). It "seeks to attract voters and as such treats its audience as means to power" (ibid.), that is, in more general terms, it creates inequality between speaker and audience. But even deliberative rhetoric "is still rhetoric and so embodied in an essentially asymmetrical relationship between speaker and hearer" (ibid.: 335).

forums where the topics of discussion are represented by more conventional “hot” issues, which are grounded in a competitive communicative environment, may tend to foster the use of [rhetorical means] in a more impeding fashion than those forums where the topics of discussion are more personal, which tend to foster a more supportive, affirming, and encouraging communicative space. (2009: 161)

Thus, the use of rhetorical means often adapts to the communicative conventions within the site and its community.

Within a site, rhetorical means can serve to foster bonding within a community. For example, Lawrence and Bates have analysed the use of cooperation metaphors that “emphasize[...] the importance of friends, helpfulness, open-mindedness, understanding, and working cooperatively to affect change” (2014: 10). Therefore, the structuring of communication on a more systemic level, through the use of rhetorical means, is twofold. On the one hand, rhetorical means can be used directly to establish and express affiliations and entrenchments between users, independently of platform communities. In fact, “bonding rhetoric is the kind generally feared by democrats, because it is likely to deepen divisions with out-groups, to invoke dangerous emotions, to mobilize passions, and to move groups to extremes” (Dryzek 2010: 76–77). On the other hand, platform communities can institutionalise specific uses of rhetorical means. The similarities and dissimilarities between these institutionalised uses determine the comprehensibility of the meanings behind the rhetorical figures for the participants in the sites or the recipients of transmissions containing these transmissions – which additionally structures communication at the level of site and system. I will exemplify these more general observations on rhetorical means for humour, affect and (in)civility.³³

Digitisation scholars have found and analysed a large variety of humour types that serve a large variety of ends, especially in political communication on social media platforms. They include “parody accounts, sarcastic content, gifs, memes, and clever intertextual remixes” (Davis et al. 2018: 3899), as well

33 Of course, there are other rhetorical means that structure communication processes and affect deliberative systems. For example, several scholars have addressed the role of symbols and metaphors for communication processes within and between deliberative sites in the digital constellation (cf. Ercan et al. 2017: 203; Lawrence/Bates 2014; Parkinson 2012a: 75). But humour, affect and incivility have been the means that have been most addressed in digitisation research.

as “[j]okes, sarcasm, wordplay, irony, and mockery” (ibid.: 3904). In these reifications, “humor on social media is indeed a vehicle for serious political engagement” (ibid.: 3905–3906), including political discussion as well as civic support such as voting, fundraising, rallying and mobilisation (cf. ibid.: 3910). All in all, scholars have found humour to be “a widely used and highly valued practice within political deliberations as they take shape through intersecting social platforms” (ibid.: 3900).

Users apply humour to convey not only their thoughts and political opinions but also their identifications with platform communities.³⁴ One does this “by ‘reclaiming’ derogatory labels, connecting one’s political preferences with other valued statuses, and establishing oneself as part of a political bloc” (ibid.: 3909). This can also involve “creating a sense of shared experiences, which participants would occasionally allude back to during the course of a discussion or later in another thread” (Graham 2009: 158). On the other hand, humour can unify by demonstrating opposition to groups and opinions (cf. Davis et al. 2018: 3907; Graham 2009: 158–159). Davis and colleagues even found that

humor on social media [is] a distinct cultural form. Humor remains tied to cultural bounds, but those bounds are perhaps loosened through articulation on the Twitter platform. At the same time, social media’s shared vernacular and convergence culture may emerge more bounded when articulated through humor, politics, and/or their combination. (2018: 3912–3913)

In other words, though there seems to be such a thing as, for example, Twitter humour that converges across the platform, there are also humour styles specific to communities that are shaped by their respective cultural backgrounds. Thus, like jargon, humour distinguishes communities and thereby structures communication processes. Rodríguez came to similar findings in his study of affiliative humour, that is, humour that “involves jokes that [...] are shared to improve relations between people” (2020: 268). He found that affiliative humour “can be argued to foster a sense of community” (ibid.: 272), as it “focuses on enhancing social interaction through the use of inside jokes” and can “help process reality and share a common cause” (ibid.). Affiliative humour is therefore highly contextual and comprehensible only to users who know the current

34 In chapter 6.3, I will address further forms of group identification and ways of conveying it on social media platforms.

political situation and what has been going on in the site (cf. *ibid.*: 279).³⁵ For example, in October 2016, a user posted on Twitter: “Mother of 2 strong girls, business owner, feminist, caring, does for others, stays informed, leader, voter, proud ‘NASTY WOMAN’ #imwithher” (Davis et al. 2018: 3909). To understand the implications of this tweet, users had to know that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton had been publicly called a “nasty woman” by her opponent Donald Trump, that her candidacy to become the first female president had great symbolic implications, that the role of women in society has still been controversial and mostly underestimated in society, that some of Clinton’s supporters among Twitter users had started to reclaim and reinterpret the label “nasty woman” and so on. As the platform community becomes more stable, the knowledge that participants need in order to understand the allusions becomes more specific – like community history or some personal knowledge about individual members. Hence, contextualisation, by excluding users that are not familiar with these contexts, represents another instance of structuration. Consequently, such expressions of humour structure communication “by generating collective identities, dividing insiders from outsiders, and galvanizing political positions” (Chevrette/Duerringer 2020: 249).

Several deliberative theorists have long since acknowledged the worth of humour for communication within deliberative systems.³⁶ Some digitisation researchers have even reflected on the effect that humour in digital communication processes has on deliberation in more detail. They found that humour on social media can lower barriers to political participation – and thus increase *inclusivity* – since “humor ‘softens’ discursive style, [while] digital social platforms provide an alternative to elite-controlled broadcast conglomerates” (Davis et al. 2018: 3901). In Todd Graham’s study, humour “acted as a social lubricant, creating a friendly and playful atmosphere, and was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate” (2009: 158). At the same time, the contextuality of humour can lead to the *exclusion* of certain users: “If social media are increasingly relevant to political action and if humor is central to social media communication practice, then exclusion from either due to

35 In fact, it seems safe to say that all styles of humour are contextual. This is why it is next to impossible to present meaningful examples in a comprehensive way. However, the studies I cited here contain an abundance of examples along with detailed descriptions of the respective contexts.

36 See, for example, Dryzek (2000: 1–2, 2009: 1381, 2017: 612); Graham (2009: 148); Hendriks et al. (2020a: 79).

access, skill, or media literacy will be increasingly detrimental to already marginalized voices” (Davis et al. 2018: 3912).³⁷ In addition, humour in digital communication has been suspected to “foment cynicism, apathy, and general distrust in the political process” (ibid.: 3901; see also: Baumgartner 2007; Shifman et al. 2007), which would decrease qualities such as *listening*, *respect* and *common-good orientation*. Often, humour also derails conversation by either igniting “humor fests” or “degrading exchanges” (Graham 2009: 158–159). In such cases, humour decreases qualities such as the communication’s *rationality* and *common-goal orientation*.

A second rhetorical means in political communication on social media platforms is the conveyance of affect and emotion. For example, “[m]aking one’s emotions known through the Twitter love icon has become a norm to express one’s point of view and to comment on others’ tweets” (Bouko/Garcia 2020: 177). Next to these one-click reactions, users can also express their emotions within their posts through emoticons (e.g., “:-)”), emojis (e.g., “😊”), emotive hashtags like #headdesk (cf. Bruns/Burgess 2015: 20) and, naturally, any means that are generally afforded by text-based communication. The latter include, for example, “fixed figurative expressions (e.g., my heart sank) or psycho-physiological descriptions of emotional experiences, like in ‘my voice trembled’” (Bouko/Garcia 2020: 179), as well as “linguistic markers that conventionally signal the speaker’s emotions: punctuation, interjection, intensifiers, swear words, for example” (ibid.). Finally, emotions can also be expressed more indirectly through narratives, that is, by “telling stories, helping others feel what it is to be in another’s shoes, and making public claims on the basis of those experiences” (Parkinson 2012b: 153). The use of storytelling to convey arguments and affect in political communications has been found to be especially prevalent in deliberative sites on social media platforms (cf. Esau et al. 2021: 104).

Besides expressing opinions, emotions and affect have other functions in political communication processes. On an individual level, emotions are used to “signal to other participants how one would like to be perceived” (Bouko/Garcia 2020: 177). By displaying emotions, users can convey personal views regarding an issue as well as their identification with specific perspectives and communities. Furthermore, emotions can be utilised to mobilise support for perspectives and communities. For example, by portraying viewpoints on public issues in an emotional and passionate manner, these viewpoints

37 Similarly: Jacob (2017: 33), Risse (2023), Wacjman (1991).

“are staged to appear personal; ordinary people and townsfolk are cast center stage, and the performances rely heavily on their stories and experiences”, as Hendriks and colleagues (2016: 1120) found in their analysis of communication processes that took place on Facebook with regard to an environmental controversy. Likewise, Esau and colleagues observed that “negative emotions in the [digital] sample deliberations were often used to mobilize likeminded readers to also participate in the discussion, whereas positive emotions were primarily used in support of other participants’ statements” (Esau et al. 2021: 107).³⁸

Thus, the expression of emotions can structure communication by enforcing a distinction between “us” and “them”. This kind of enforcement is especially intensified by the platforms’ architectures. These architectures provide emotive one-click reactions that are prominently placed and very easy to use. Moreover, users are encouraged to avail themselves of these possibilities to react, because these reactions noticeably have relatively heavy weights in the platforms’ recommender systems.³⁹ By prioritising emotional expressions, platforms hope to generate more engagement and therefore, ultimately, more profit (cf. Merrill/Oremus 2021; Roose 2020b).⁴⁰ The result of the users’ deployments of affect for mobilisation purposes and the platforms’ preference for emotional expressions in their algorithmic systems is

the emergence of political clusters that resort to binary affective rhetorics. In a political condition where polarizing binary politics and/or binary discourse are entrenched, affective political enclaves – especially those that are based on extreme emotions such as hate and love – are more likely to emerge on social media. Each of these enclaves is [...] a discursive arena where individuals,

38 In turn, Aragón et al. (2017) have found that negative communications statistically induce more – and even deeper and more complex – discussion. In another interesting study, Duguay (2022) analysed positive and negative political communication on Reddit and found that a) sites tend to be composed more heterogeneously in terms of political leaning when the overall tone of the posts is more extremely positive or negative (cf. *ibid.*: 1193) – implying that more extreme expressions seem to induce more extreme answers – and that b) new users of the platform, in particular, tend to be more extreme in their positive and negative expressions (cf. *ibid.*: 1199).

39 The impact of the different weights on communication processes and their developments in Facebook’s recommender systems has been comprehensively described by Merrill and Oremus (2021).

40 Bouko and García (2020: 176–177) – among others – term this kind of reasoning “digital affective capitalism”.

afforded by social media algorithms, voluntarily form an affective political cluster that is exclusively developed to promote the wellbeing, rights, and interests of their own, while negating the rights of “the Others.” (Lim 2021: 198–199)

In other words, the formation of platform communities is furthered by the users’ expression of emotions and the platforms’ prioritisation of these emotions in their architectures.

Both deliberative theorists and digitisation researchers have addressed the effects of emotion on deliberative qualities of digital communication. In this regard, there are two dominant trains of thought. Firstly, many scholars agree that emotion and affect have a positive influence on qualities such as *listening*, *comprehension* and *authenticity* (cf. Chambers 2009: 336; Wright et al. 2018: 78). Graham found in his study “that emotions tended to enhance political talk by providing a sense of genuineness and realness to these arguments” (2009: 160). In Hendriks and colleagues’ study, likewise, “identities, voices, and images of ordinary people [were] crafted into personal stories for the audience to relate to” (2016: 1119).⁴¹ This applies not only to communication processes within a site, but also to connections and systemic composition. Thus, for example, “[f]or marginalized cultures, affective statements are part of performing identities that otherwise become further repressed” (Papacharissi 2015: 119), and, over time, “affect may lead to subtle disruptions of power hierarchies, which cumulatively may produce considerable energies of resistance and renegotiation of boundaries” (ibid.: 120). Of course, the contrary can likewise be observed. Where emotion is primarily used to oppose other views and to degrade other participants, it decreases the qualities of *listening*, *respect* and *equality* (cf. Graham 2009: 159–160).

Secondly, many scholars caution that the prioritisation of emotion on social media platforms is detrimental to the qualities of *truthfulness* and *rationality*. Affect may “distract from factuality” (Papacharissi 2015: 120), since “[a]ffective mechanisms increase awareness of an issue and in so doing amplify the intensity of that awareness [and] do not inherently enhance understanding of a problem, deepen one’s level of knowledge on a particular issue, or lead to thick forms of civic engagement with public affairs” (ibid.). Thus, for example, “Facebook’s data scientists found that angry reactions were ‘much more

41 This effect is intensified when emotions are conveyed through narratives (cf. Gastil/Broghammer 2021: 16).

frequent' on problematic posts: 'civic low quality news, civic misinfo, civic toxicity, health misinfo, and health antivax content'" (Merrill/Oremus 2021).⁴² Relatedly, scholars stress the distinction between rational deliberation and the affective communication on social media platforms (cf. Ananny 2020: 358; Cohen 2017: 148; Papacharissi 2015: 116–117). Mansbridge, on the other hand, has argued that "emotions always include some form of appraisal and evaluation, and reason can proceed only rarely without emotional commitment, if only an emotional commitment to the process of reasoning" (1999: 225–226). In sum, the influences of emotion and affect, as well as the influence of their structuring capacities, are mixed.

The third rhetorical means often discussed with regard to social media platforms is incivility. "Uncivil discourse is a pervasive feature of online political talk and can be found in nearly any venue where people engage in discussions" (Rossini et al. 2020: 92). This loss of civility was one of the reasons why Parkinson professed "to be extremely cautious" (2012b: 165) in stating that digital communication has value for deliberative systems. On social media platforms, incivility "regularly takes the form of personal attacks, name-calling, pejorative speech, and vulgarity" (Rossini et al. 2020: 92–93). Obviously, these rhetorical means are closely related to – and have a similar structuring effect as – the expression of anger, for example, since they create a distinction between "me/us" and "you" in a like manner.

"In the context of deliberative democracy, civility refers to interpersonal respect and to one's ability to engage in respectful interactions and to recognize others' views as legitimate even when faced with disagreement" (ibid.: 93). It is therefore connected with the deliberative quality of *respect*. However, both deliberative theorists and digitisation researchers caution against directly condemning incivility as detrimental to democracy. "Both in a public forum and in everyday talk, there are justifiable places for offensiveness, noncooperation, and the threat of retaliation – even for raucous, angry, self-centered, bitter talk, aiming at nothing but hurt" (Mansbridge 1999: 223). Uncivil expressions can promote mutual respect in the long term, achieve *authenticity* and reveal negative emotions, the expression or knowledge of which might further the other participants' *understanding* of and *openness* to the expressed perspectives (cf. ibid.). This applies especially to like-minded participants. As Alan Finlayson observes with regard to digital communication, "[t]he more

42 Similar observations have been reported by Bakir/McStay (2021), Graham (2009: 159–160) and Marres (2018: 430).

a speech act violates norms and provokes a reaction, the more it can be experienced as a heroic instantiation of ‘free speech’ and self-expression, and considered intrinsically valuable regardless of its content or actual contribution to ‘public reason’” (2020: 5). Thus, incivility in and of itself has a bonding effect on communities, it conveys the authenticity of the expressed opinion without regard to the contents, it expresses a certain liberty of the speakers and it can promote the *equality* of the speakers with other participants. These latter thoughts can also be found in Mansbridge’s work:

uncivil forms of talk are also often necessary as means to the end of approaching both liberty and equality in deliberation. Sometimes only intensity in opposition can break down the barriers of the status quo. No one always listens attentively to everyone else, and members of dominant groups are particularly likely to find they do not need to listen to members of subordinate groups. So subordinates sometimes need the battering ram of rage. (1999: 223)

Thus, incivility can serve as a flagpole for issues, opinions and minority groups that might otherwise be overlooked (cf. also Mansbridge et al. 2012: 21). Similarly, Patrícia Rossini and colleagues observed that participants use incivility “as a rhetorical device to amplify their opinions” (2020: 101).⁴³ Rossini has counselled in a further study that

it is important to disentangle expressions of incivility, which refer to tone, from expressions of intolerance, which refer to substance, to understand the conditions in which online speech is dangerous and democratically harmful from the ones it is not. Unlike incivility, which is contextual, not inherently offensive, and subject to interpretation [...], intolerant discourse that threatens, harasses, or silences people or groups, particularly based on personal or cultural characteristics, undermines the positive outcomes of political talk. (2020: 417)

43 They found that “[p]eople are significantly more likely to be uncivil in their posts that are attacking candidates, the news media, or other members of the public, and less likely to be so when posting messages that are supportive of others or the news media”, which suggests that “uncivil discourse is strategically employed by the public to emphasize negative views” (Rossini et al. 2020: 100).

Thus, while intolerance – along with its expression in hate speech – is detrimental to deliberative qualities in general, and specifically to respect, mere incivility can have positive effects on deliberative qualities such as *comprehensibility*, *authenticity*, *respect*, *listening* and *inclusivity*. Yet Rayza Sarmiento and Ricardo Mendonça observed in their study on YouTube comments that “the great majority of disrespectful comments [...] serves uncivil purposes of stigmatizing and humiliating collectivities” (2016: 724) and thus falls into the intolerance category. Possibly healthy incivility therefore seems well outweighed by definitely unhealthy intolerance.

All in all, rhetorical means can express identification with platform communities, enhance bonding between community members and produce and demonstrate distance from other users and communities. But they can also be used to build bridges between communities and to facilitate the conveyance of ideas between communities. Platform communities can interact in basically two ways: within heterogenous sites, where the participants identify with different communities, and via transmissions between largely homogeneous sites, that is, sites whose participants usually belong to the same community. These types of interaction handle the disparities of communicational conventions differently.

Heterogenous sites on social media platforms can be, for example, large hashtag-sites, comment columns on controversial posts or pages set up by government agencies to interact with the public. Social media platforms are not mini-publics with rules and facilitators that enforce pure deliberation. However, the wider framework that governs both the platform rules⁴⁴ and the more general conventions of the platform community (e.g., “Twitterspeak”) still applies. In such contexts with fewer and looser conventions, “it may (often) be necessary that people try different means of communicating, even deliberately disruptive means, before decision-makers [or other participants] start listening” (Parkinson 2012b: 158). For example, in a Facebook page set up by the US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs to answer questions on travelling abroad, participants who were not interested in travel questions high-jacked the site to express their frustration with the current US immigration policies, using humorous contributions that intentionally misinterpreted the aim of the page (cf. Rodríguez 2020). They thus effectively built a counterpublic in this site and used humour “as a way to strengthen bonds while interrogating existing power structures” (ibid.: 280). In a further study, Rossini found that

44 See chapter 4.1.

incivility is also a frequent means to generate attention in heterogeneous sites. According to Rossini, “online incivility does not prevent participants from engaging in [...] heterogeneous conversations in which people are exposed to different views” (2020: 417).⁴⁵ So, rhetorical means can be used within both homogeneous and heterogeneous sites. By raising awareness and making the contents accessible to the various participants, rhetorical means serve deliberative qualities such as *listening*, *authenticity*, *comprehensibility*, *respect* and *inclusivity*. Though deliberative theorists have initially marked them as detrimental to deliberative qualities, they have been shown to enhance deliberative qualities in certain contexts, including the communication processes on social media platforms.

Platform communities can also interact with each other through connections between their homogeneous sites. As I explained above, homogeneous sites are often positioned in clusters of similar sites where similar communities interact based on similar communicational conventions. Within these clusters, users can presume that the other participants understand certain allusions, terms and codes that are specific to these conventions and the dominant political culture. Transmissions between similar sites can thus be more poignant, less descriptive and more rhetorically artistic. They convey more meaning to the other participants, since much of this meaning is implied and transmitted via the conventions. But they will also convey fewer variant experiences, opinions and reasons (cf. Kuyper 2020: 8–9). Within the receiving sites, these kinds of transmissions are therefore more *comprehensible* but less *diverse*.

Yet I have already described that communities on social media platforms can also be quite different and, therefore, that not all sites on social media platforms pertain to the same conventions. A more decided division between communities can be enforced, for example, by language differences or fundamental discrepancies regarding political views. Thus, there are platform communities and site clusters that hardly overlap, and their political cultures and communicational conventions can differ widely, developing various slang and rhetorical standards. Transmitting contents between such varying sites necessitates translation processes – even if both sites operate in the same national

45 She reasoned that “the pervasiveness of uncivil discourse online might be a reflection of the types of people who opt to engage in these debates, who are more likely to experience positive emotions when faced with incivility, and who are not necessarily offended by it” (Rossini 2020: 418).

language. Without efforts of translation or other kinds of bridges, differing conventions and political cultures can hinder *comprehensibility* of and *openness* to transmissions in the receiving site. Scholars of both deliberative theory and digitisation research have observed several ways of bridging and thus transmitting contents between sites with different communicational conventions in a manner that allows these contents to remain comprehensible to both sites.

Firstly, the contents can be translated into a common language that is equally accessible to all sites. Most societies have some kind of ordinary language that “is available, circulating throughout society and lying beneath the threshold of the special codes” (Habermas 1996: 352). Such a language is “necessary for the perception and articulation of the relevant issues and standards of evaluation that apply to society as a whole” (ibid.). In other words, contents pertaining to the issue of a deliberative system can be translated into ordinary language in order to be understandable and to potentially be considered by all sites and participants throughout the system.

Secondly, contents can be directly translated from one set of conventions to the other. Much like the multilinguals I described above, individuals can act as transmitters by purposely translating contents. For example, Poell and Darmoni described how – to the multilingual Twitter users they interviewed – “[d]eveloping Twitter communication in particular languages entailed active negotiating between specific language cultures” and how, consequently, these users “indicated that beyond addressing particular publics through a specific language they were communicating differently in the various languages” (2012: 23). In other words, these users had to translate not only linguistically but also in terms of the respective communicational conventions.

Thirdly, “rhetoric can play an essential part in communicating across and so linking differently situated and differently disposed actors, forums, and institutions” (Dryzek 2010: 73). Such “bridging rhetoric takes seriously the outlooks (ideally, the discursive psychology) of an intended audience that is different in key respects from the speaker – and from the kind of people or discourses the speaker represents” (ibid.: 77).⁴⁶ Boswell and colleagues, for instance, found that narrative that is composed for a diverse audience “is indeed a key mechanism of transmission in deliberative systems” (Boswell et al. 2016: 274). According to their case studies of transmission mechanisms across a range of deliberative sites, narrative “facilitates a ‘communicative miracle’ of sorts [...],

46 To Dryzek, the counterpart to bridging rhetoric is the aforementioned bonding rhetoric (cf. 2010: 76–77).

allowing lay actors, scientists, professionals, policymakers, NGO and industry representatives a common language with which to assess the problem [...] and prescribe policy solutions” (ibid.). However, their analysis also shows the distortion of narratives that are transmitted across a system, how they are “invariably blunted, muted and emptied of specificity as they enter or approach empowered space” (ibid.).

Similarly, memes can transmit ideas and perspectives between different sites, as I have explained earlier. They can “supplement argument [...] with visuals, humor, and intertextuality, while coalescing into narratives that penetrate mass media and public dialogue [and thereby] connect discussions occurring across networks, sites, and spaces in the greater deliberative system” (Lyons 2020: 17). Benjamin Lyons gives the example of Occupy Wall Street’s “99%” meme, which

is likely OWS’s most enduring contribution to public discourse[.] It is now a broadly adopted narrative, the result of a collaborative series of memetic anecdotal storytelling that is both the product and origin of deliberation. 99% memes followed a formula featuring a handwritten statement concerning an individual’s economic hardships, held up for the camera (ibid.: 15).

This has not only had an inclusive effect; “it also opened the message up to appropriation” (ibid.). Another group has created the very similar “53%” meme in appropriative critique (cf. ibid.). “The inclusive mimetic-narrative ‘Percenter’ structure allowed both those who identified as marginalized at the hands of bankers and those who felt put-upon by the entitled protesters to enter into the discussion and respond to one another through meme” (ibid.).

Thus, the role that rhetorical means play in the structuring of communication processes is twofold. On the one hand, they can be part of communicational conventions that are specific to platform communities and therefore might be incomprehensible to outsiders to this community. On the other hand, they can facilitate interactions and transmissions between different communities. They can advance the *comprehension* of and *openness* to the transmitted contents in the receiving site. Yet they can also be misinterpreted and modified in their reception, which often hinders the full transmission of contents and undermines qualities like *authenticity* and *truthfulness*.

In sum, communicational conventions reify in specific ways on social media platforms and produce patterns within the sites and on a platform level. Conventions include both jargon and rhetorical means. They can be used to

bridge and divide the platforms' users and to express a user's identification with a platform community. While different platform communities can develop different sets of communicational conventions, the closer the communities are connected, the more their conventions converge. Platform communities can interact with each other either in heterogeneous sites or through the connections between their distinct, more homogeneous sites. In these interactions, rhetorical means can serve to facilitate the exchange.

6.3 Reifications of Identity

Individuals' various possibilities of identification constitute the last set of social structures that permeate communication processes on platforms while also producing specific patterns there. How users identify and are identified by others structures the communication processes on the platforms and beyond. Yet there are specific ways of identification that are unique to digital communication, and the degrees to which platform users can reify their identities in digital communication go beyond those of face-to-face interaction.

On one end of the spectrum, digital communication affords users the capacity to not disclose anything about their person beyond the contents they post. Incidentally, research on anonymity and pseudonymity has produced a considerable share of digitisation research.⁴⁷ The statement "on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Christopherson 2007) is emblematic for how this discussion was led in earlier times of digital communication. On the other end of the spectrum, platform architectures potentially afford a high degree of visibility and identifiability. Machine-learning systems can recognise patterns in contents and language that might not be perceptible to humans, and they can thereby identify and categorise users independently of their portrayed identity. Moreover, platforms give potentially any user a vast audience, making potentially any one of them identifiable even beyond the platform.

But anonymity and identifiability are not absolute statuses. There are different degrees and different reifications of identification, especially in digital communication. On the one hand, individuals can be identified – or not identified – in an absolute sense. That is, authors of posts can be connected

47 Though anonymity and anonymous communication have been addressed even before the rise of digital technologies (cf. Moore 2018: 172), "[t]alk of anonymity abounds in the twenty-first century" (Ponessa 2014: 304).

with their legal identities; they can create pseudonyms that might be connected across sites or platforms but distinct from their legal identities; or they can be anonymous in the sense that they are neither identified nor even identifiable (cf. Thiel 2017: 153). On the other hand, individuals can be identified in a relative sense, meaning that they can identify with or be identified with specific groups and roles and thus position themselves relative to other members of society. Due to the anonymity and pseudonymity architectures of platforms, users can emphasize specific identity aspects, negate other aspects and explore new aspects. In the following sections, I will elaborate on both absolute and relative identification and consider their effect on the structures and deliberative qualities of digital communication processes.

6.3.1 Author Identity, Anonymity and Pseudonymity

Scholars of anonymity mostly use “identification” in the sense of “identifying the author of a post”, that is, connecting a communication with an individual author’s legal identity. Thus, Thiel describes anonymity as a situation in which it is impossible to identify an author:

Anonymität lässt sich verstehen als Zustandsbeschreibung in einer intersubjektiven Handlungssituation, in der es unmöglich ist, eine Handlung oder Kommunikation, die selbst sichtbar ist, einem Individuum oder Subjekt korrekt zuzuordnen und es hierdurch über diesen Kontext hinaus erreichbar/verantwortlich zu machen. (ibid.: 152)

In other words, anonymity means that an actor is neither identified nor even identifiable. While identification is a state an individual is usually aware of, identifiability refers to a situation in which the identification can occur later, possibly even without the knowledge of the actors (cf. ibid.: 154). Therefore, individuals might assume they are both unidentified and unidentifiable in a specific communication process and act accordingly; yet, they could be proven wrong with regard to identifiability and be identified post factum (cf. ibid.). Author identification – or the lack thereof – can have different implications for communication processes and the behaviour of the participants. For instance, the knowledge of identification, or at least identifiability, influences how individuals communicate. Empirical studies have found that participants in anonymised communication processes “tend to express emotions more explicitly [...] than in face-to-face interactions, given that they are less scared

of face-threatening acts, especially in anonymous or pseudonymous environments” (Bouko/Garcia 2020: 176). Other studies found that participants express less respect and use less civil language if they presume themselves unidentified and unidentifiable (cf. Jungherr et al. 2020: 229–230; Moore 2018: 178; Sarmento/Mendonça 2016: 724–725). Thus, it seems, “anonymity is performatively deployed to express renditions of identity dissociated from a user’s legal identity and overall reputation that they could not otherwise perform” (Curlew 2019: 11).

Author identification and author identifiability do not have to be fully reified on social media platforms. Different platforms have different architectures that limit author identification – and sometimes author identifiability – to varying degrees. Some platforms’ terms of services require the use of the everyday name for the creation of an account, and the platform displays this name for any post that is published from the account (cf. Facebook 2024). The platforms thereby connect each post almost⁴⁸ directly with the individual that is represented by the account. This means that authors are identified and identifiable at all times. Other platforms do not ask for a real name (Twitter 2024). In principle, users can communicate with each other anonymously; they are neither identified nor identifiable. However, these platforms still collect large amounts of data from which identity information can be inferred (cf. Reddit 2022; Twitter 2024), and users are free to share their identities on the platform and their handles beyond it. Lastly, there are platforms that ask for a real name when individuals create new accounts and then provide them with the possibility of creating a pseudonym for their account (Instagram Help Center 2024). Users are thus not identified within a communication process, but they are generally identifiable. Hence, the dominant platforms differ with regard to their author-identification architectures and policies.⁴⁹

Arguably, all of these identification architectures involve the creation of pseudonyms. Platforms that implement real-name policies – for both account creation and ordinary interaction – still have access only to the information that they can scrape with the available technologies from the user’s behaviour;

48 The communication is still mediated, and there are still ways to circumvent real-name policy, so that accounts are not created or operated by the individuals they are supposed to represent.

49 The cited platforms and their policies are mere examples. As I already explained in chapter 4.1, platform rules and policies are rather dynamic. Therefore, the policies on identification for creating user profiles can change.

they cannot actually read the user's thoughts.⁵⁰ Conversely, most of the platforms that allow their users to interact in a fully anonymous manner still create pseudonyms to give continuity to each user's communication and make them addressable. But these pseudonyms differ regarding their traceability to the individual behind them, their durability and their connectedness with the pseudonyms the same individual has created in other sites. This distinction has been brought forward by Alfred Moore (2018: 170–177), and the differences he describes create varying effects on communication structures on the platforms.

For Moore, traceability refers to “the extent to which your contributions can be traced to your real identity” (ibid.: 175). But in the context of deliberative systems, I propose to widen the view to the different positions that are involved in pseudonymisation. The question asked here is: who is anonymised by whom and to whom? Hence, the first two positions are the anonymiser – or creator of the pseudonym – and the anonymised or pseudonymised (cf. Anon Collective 2020: 26). In digital communication processes, the pseudonymised are the individual users, while the pseudonym creators can be the users themselves or the platforms. Moreover, there is a third position: the potential identifier who necessitates anonymity or pseudonymity in the first place (cf. ibid.). Without someone from whom identities need to be concealed, anonymity and pseudonymity are obsolete. In digital communication, this third position includes other users, platform companies and governmental organisations. Anonymity vis-à-vis other users is horizontal, whereas anonymity vis-à-vis institutions with larger resources and power, such as platform companies and governments, is vertical (cf. Thiel 2017: 153).⁵¹

50 In an elaborate – and methodologically highly interesting – study on the political communication of social media users, Christopher Bail describes several examples of inconsistencies between what is known to the platform about a user's behaviour and that user's general opinions and offline behaviour (cf., e.g., 2021: 7–8).

51 It can moreover be argued that there is a fourth position, since the anonymity of an individual in an action is only secured if there are other individuals who likewise could have performed the action (cf. Thiel 2017: 152–153). Transferred to pseudonyms, this means that there must be other individuals that could potentially be represented by a pseudonym. On the one hand, social media platforms have millions of users that might occupy this position. On the other hand, most of the platforms create pseudonyms for each user, and the platforms' data-scraping technologies are more than equipped to identify each individual user, if not by legal name then at least regarding a large range of attributes. In this light, every user is unique, and no one can serve as a potential

Anonymised or pseudonymised individuals do not have to be equally unidentified to all potential identifiers. For example, masked participants in a physical protest march can be horizontally identified to fellow protesters while being vertically anonymous to the authorities (cf. *ibid.*: 152–153). Conversely, there are social media platforms that require legal identification for creating an account and then allow the individual to create one or more pseudonyms. There, identification reifies only vertically, while the users horizontally interact under pseudonyms. In the digital constellation, generally, vertical anonymity vis-à-vis a platform company is very rare.⁵² The possibilities for actors with many resources to trace the individuals behind pseudonyms have increased, and only a few data points are needed to attribute various characteristics to an individual – including group and role identifications (cf. Anon Collective 2020: 17–18; Moore 2018: 175–176; Thiel 2017: 154). Moreover, some platforms accredit verifications to many of their accounts, showing that these accounts have been verified to actually be operated by the individuals and companies they claim to represent (cf. TikTok Help Center 2024; X Help Center 2023). The economic models of platform companies, meanwhile, incentivise the platforms to collect, store and processes as many data as possible and thus to increase the vertical identification – or traceability – of their users. Moreover, within many platform communities, a culture of self-portrayal and identity curation has developed (cf. Curlew 2019; Gorea 2021; Thiel 2017: 154). The occupants of the three positions in pseudonymous communication processes, together with the relations between them, structure these processes; they “change[...] the conditions for actions, enabling desirable and undesirable practices, contributing to the shape that organizations [or platform communities] take, modifying collectivities and social behaviour” (Anon Collective 2020: 27).

From a deliberative theory perspective, traceability and the types of potential identifiers have implications for the deliberative standards of *accountability* and *inclusivity*. Untraceability allows participants to avoid accountability, which can have both positive and negative effects on the communication processes. “The same feature that enables a teenager from a repressive religious community to talk freely about his sexuality without fear of exposure also enables cruel and abusive responses that may inhibit such expressions”

substitute for the anonymised or pseudonymised. This demonstrates how improbable vertical anonymity is in comparison to horizontal anonymity.

52 This is the case, at least, for users of the internet, as opposed to the darknet.

(Moore 2018: 169). In other words, untraceable participants are insulated horizontally from soft social pressures and vertically from hard sanctions and punishments, which enables them “to speak in public in a way that is consistent with their own private views” (ibid.: 181). This, in turn, increases inclusivity by “(1) affording marginalized individuals access to public speech or (2) expanding the ‘marketplace of ideas’ by protecting unpopular perspectives” (Forestal/Philips 2020: 574–575). Hence, untraceability can support inclusivity regarding both participants and perspectives.

On this basis, Jennifer Forestal and Menaka Philips furthermore argue that untraceability – or, in their terminology, anonymity – has an associational function, which “concerns the processes by which people generate and negotiate collective identities, discussions and actions as part of wider publics or social spheres” (ibid.: 575). In their case studies,⁵³ they found that

anonymity helped citizens define and internalize common aims and experiences as the basis for new modes of cooperative engagement which rested not on individual, but on collective accountability – whether aimed at ratification or else organized around calling attention to realities of university life. [For the users in both case studies,] anonymity shifted participants away from their individual inclinations and towards the negotiation of public issues through the identification and articulation of shared concerns or experiences. (ibid.: 576)

Hence, the associational function of untraceability is twofold. First, it “works to draw individuals out of their singular perspective and forces them to engage in public debate from an alternative, collaborative position” (ibid.: 590). It thus supports participants to develop a *common-good orientation* that is aimed at the specific collective. Second, untraceability “disseminat[es] responsibility differently within and between smaller collectives and the broader public sphere” (ibid.). It “disrupts the narrow chain of accountability that ties actions to distinct individuals and thus invites reconsideration of the mechanisms of responsibility that underlie democratic politics” (ibid.: 590–591). Perceived problematic behaviour is tied not to the individual speaker but to the entire community. Once again, the content of what is being said is decontextualised, arguments can “stand or fall on their own merits rather than the social position

53 They studied communication processes on two smaller platforms that build on full anonymity, that is, on platforms whose architectures support neither identification nor identifiability (cf. Forestal/Philips 2020).

of their authors” (Moore 2018: 172–173) and the inherently better argument may win and be transmitted to other sites. Public networks and arenas emerge “in which anonymous circuits of communication are detached from the concrete level of simple interactions”, and this provides spaces “for free-floating opinions, validity claims, and considered judgments” (Habermas 1996: 171), that is, *rational* communication.

But there are also negative sides to the circumvention of accountability. First, many deliberative theorists consider accountability itself an important standard of deliberation.⁵⁴ These authors mainly refer to political decision-makers’ accountability vis-à-vis the public sphere, that is, to top-down, vertical accountability. Demands of horizontal accountability within deliberations have been challenged among deliberative theorists for the inclusivity-related reasons I just cited (cf. Chambers 2003: 322; Mansbridge 1999: 222). But if social media users are protected from social or legal sanctions by the platform’s anonymity architectures, they are more likely to behave *disrespectfully* (cf. Sarmiento/Mendonça 2016: 724–725; Jungherr et al. 2020: 229–230; Moore 2018: 178). Disrespect, in turn, can impair *inclusivity*, since it might deter individuals from participating in a communication process. Consequently, disrespect in digital anonymous communication processes “not only inflicts harms on particular individuals; it also degrades discourse” (Moore 2018: 179–180). Scholars have stressed that moderation techniques that determine acceptable behaviour within a community – such as Reddit’s up- and down-voting technique – are important for retaining untraceability’s positive effects and preventing its negative ones (cf. Forestal/Philips 2020: 591), and they have proposed that “an intermediary platform could hold the user’s identity, reserving the possibility of revealing it to the relevant authorities, but masking that identity from other users” (Moore 2018: 179–180).⁵⁵

The second aspect Moore proposes for distinguishing different kinds of pseudonyms is the durability of these pseudonyms. Durability refers to “the ease or difficulty with which identities” – that is, pseudonyms – “can be acquired and changed” (ibid. 170). Hence, the “concept of durability opens

54 For example: Boswell et al. (2016: 278), Dryzek (2009: 1386), Elstub et al. (2016: 145), Mansbridge (1999: 221–222), Bächtiger/Parkinson (2019: 7), Mendonça (2018: 36).

55 The latter is a practice that has already been adopted by all platforms that request a real name for account creation and allow a different account name for pseudonymous communication (cf. Instagram Help Center 2024).

up a distinction between easy anonymity, in which actors are able to easily create new and multiple identities, and stable or durable pseudonyms” (ibid. 171). Some platforms even process every post individually, creating new pseudonyms for each one of them or naming each pseudonym “anonymous” per default.⁵⁶ From a deliberative systems perspective, this range holds different implications.

The effect of varying durability on deliberative qualities is at least twofold, and it concerns the individuals’ accountability and the reciprocity of communication. The ease of creating new pseudonyms influences the individual’s *accountability* for their actions – “for claims they make” – and it thereby “enabl[es] challenges in terms of consistency, and [challenges in terms of] exposing uncivil or abusive commenters to sanctions” (Moore 2018: 176). Less durable pseudonyms provide a lesser degree of horizontal accountability, because “if you acquire a reputation for abusive or untrustworthy behaviour you can just create a new pseudonym and start again” (ibid.).⁵⁷ But

[w]here hurdles such as registration and verification are introduced, it remains possible to create new identities [that is, pseudonyms], but it becomes a little harder and more time-consuming. Users are more likely to stick with a particular name. This opens them to the reputational consequences of their behavior. (ibid.)

56 This concerns smaller platforms such as 4chan and YikYak. They come very close to actual horizontal anonymity, but still provide the possibility of using more stable pseudonyms.

57 In this context, Moore cites an extreme case presented by Auerbach (2012). It shows that on platforms like 4chan, which provide untraceable and ephemeral pseudonyms, a distinctive community develops that is “characterised by what he [Auerbach] calls anonymity as culture or ‘A-culture’. [...] A-culture removes the possibility of distinction by characteristics and instead relies ‘on interests rather than the personalities of users’ to sustain a community, and involves an ‘intentional disconnect between one’s real life and one’s online persona (or, frequently, personae)’. The evanescence of pseudonymity in these spaces [...] creates an ‘economy of suspicion’, as ‘pervasive gaps in information and this focus on masquerade produce a general sense of unreality’. With so little stability and a pervasive decontextualisation of statements, it is not only hard to tell true from false, and sincere from insincere; the instability generates a ‘conflicted co-existence of sincere personal involvement and detached spectatorship’” (Moore 2018: 184–185). From a deliberative perspective, therefore, *accountability*, *authenticity*, *rationality* and *truth* are questionable within A-culture.

These consequences might motivate participants, in turn, to behave *respectfully* but also more in line with the more common views, as I have described above. Therefore, longer durability increases horizontal accountability and respect but potentially decreases *inclusivity*.

Closely connected with horizontal accountability is *reciprocity*, as “[m]aking a demand for justification requires a continuity of identity such that one can get a response or recognise the absence of a response” (ibid.: 187). That is,

when you say one thing and then immediately say something contradictory, or something which implies a contradictory position, you can be called out on it. Others can extrapolate and make claims about the implications of your position, and challenge you to either defend those implications or refute the reasoning that would connect those implications to your position (ibid.: 187–188).

Therefore, “[d]eliberation requires an exchange of arguments, which is to say, a degree of back and forth over time in response to arguments, information, and demands for clarification and justification” (ibid.: 187). In architectures of ephemeral pseudonyms, participants will be less able to directly address each other or to note inconsistencies in users’ posts and question the *authenticity* of these posts. Consequently, durability, at least for the continuation of one communication process, is necessary for achieving reciprocity within this process.

Moreover, Moore and colleagues found that cognitive complexity is affected by the durability and traceability of pseudonyms. Cognitive complexity is a concept from psychology literature that “refers to the degree of perception of the multidimensionality of a given problem” (2020: 52), and it captures the quantity of information and problem dimensions as well as the degree to which interrelationships within a problem are understood (cf. ibid.). Cognitive complexity can therefore be interpreted as an aspect of *reason-giving* or *rationality*. In their study, Moore and colleagues observed that different phases⁵⁸ of the pseudonymity architectures of the comment section of an online newspaper afforded different levels of cognitive complexity (CC):

The most striking finding from our data set is that the CC of comments shows a marked improvement in the shift from non-durable to durable

⁵⁸ The newspaper experimented with different kinds of anonymity architectures over time (see the quote below).

pseudonymity. But CC reduces again in the “real-name” phase, when comments are made under the users’ Facebook names. We find this pattern repeated when we restrict the analysis to those present through all three phases under study. (ibid.: 58)

Hence, the rationality of posts was lowest in posts under ephemeral pseudonyms, considerably higher in architectures that afforded untraceable pseudonyms and slightly lower when pseudonyms became traceable. In this study, longer durability therefore caused a decided increase in the cognitive complexity aspect of rationality.

The last aspect Moore proposes for distinguishing different kinds of pseudonyms is the connectedness of pseudonyms across different sites. “Connectedness refers to bridging and linking communication across different social contexts” (2018: 171), or, in deliberative theory terms, sites.⁵⁹ For example, the use of real names in different sites “opens the possibility of connectedness in the sense that your statements can potentially become known to your family, colleagues, friends, and other social groups with whom you are associated” (ibid.). But pseudonyms can also be connected across different sites without being traceable to the individual. Thus, the consistency of one user’s contents can be determined across various sites, while the pseudonym remains disconnected from the individual’s legal identity. Within the dominant platforms, individuals normally use the same pseudonym for all sites, especially if a real name is required to create the account. Between digital sites operating within different architectures, a pseudonym can be connected, for example, by using the same name or (hyper-)linking the profiles from a different platform, though there is always the possibility that an individual will link to a pseudonym that is not their own or that an individual uses a pseudonym that is used by another individual on another platform. Yet there are even ways to securely link pseudonyms between digital sites. For example, such links are afforded by architecturally connected platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Threads. Moreover, blockchain procedures can accredit

59 In contrast the deliberative quality *connectedness*, Moore’s concept refers to the connections between the sites that may be forged through individuals but may also reify in different ways. Moore’s connectedness is therefore a part of a deliberative system’s connectedness, if the connected sites belong to the same system.

an individual's identity with or without revealing their legal identity.⁶⁰ Thus, a pseudonym can be linked with or without reference to the real name and legal identity of an individual, that is, they can be traceable or untraceable. Due to the connections of pseudonyms between sites, an individual's statements can "travel with them" (cf. *ibid.*) – or be referred back to – across the various sites. So, other participants may check an individual's context and consistency across different sites.

From a deliberative systems perspective, connectedness across multiple sites has effects on accountability, authenticity and the filtering mechanisms for transmissions between sites, in cases of both traceable and untraceable pseudonyms. The *accountability* and *authenticity* in question here are global rather than local, as well as rather horizontal than vertical. If other participants can retrace a pseudonym's remarks within other sites and check them for consistency, they might give more credit to the sincerity and *authenticity* of the posts, even though they might not be able to trace the pseudonym to the individual behind it. Thus, participants can build up "a cross-referenced, cross-platform (including real-life) reputation, of the sort you would want if you were renting out your apartment to someone you didn't know (as in Airbnb)" (*ibid.*: 177). This also transfers to the questions of whether you want to include other users' experiences in your political opinion formation and decision-making and whether you want to be sure that these experiences are authentic.

On the other hand, Curlew found that connectedness across sites and with an individual's real name is exactly what leads to a perceived lack of authenticity. Exposure "to lateral levels of surveillance [...] leads to scrutiny over the various curations performatively deployed by a social actor"; as a result, these curations "are aggregated into a reputation system" (2019: 11).⁶¹ Such scrutiny shapes the individual's behaviour and prompts the use of identity curation techniques, which has – in turn – consequences for the individual's perceived authenticity:

60 For instance, they can display a blockchain-accredited Reddit avatar in their Instagram account (cf. Newton 2022c), which ensures that the actual owner – who is blockchain-accredited, as well – is the individual behind both these accounts.

61 Moore (2018: 184) calls this surveillance the "tyranny of intimacy": connectedness allows interaction partners from different parts of an individual's life – such as work, family and friends, public political discussion, etc. – access to an individual's statements in different sites, while disconnected pseudonyms can provide a protection against the social sanctions and pressures arising from this tyranny.

All respondents expressed their concern for the forms of identity curation they were made to partake in when they used social media platforms that subscribe to “real name” conventions. Furthermore, respondents had largely made clear that they considered performative acts over Facebook and Instagram as disingenuous due to the identity curation involved in the presentation of self over the respective platforms[, and] these results do indicate that users reflexively understand their curation of self as largely artifice. (ibid.: 11)

So, both the individuals performing identity curation for their connected pseudonyms and their audiences seem to feel that the connectedness of the pseudonyms leads to the compulsion to curate a consistent and likable pseudonym that is disingenuous and thus unauthentic.⁶² Thus, the effect of pseudonym-connectedness on deliberative qualities is ambivalent.

In sum, the reification of author identity can take many forms. It is “often partial, situational, fragile, and temporal” and “often not simply a binary state but situated in the gray areas of practice” (Anon Collective 2020: 24–25). Prominent among these reifications is the creation of pseudonyms, and this is especially the case in digital communication. These can have varying degrees of traceability, durability and connectedness across sites. Depending on these aspects, pseudonymity can have different and ambivalent effects on the deliberative qualities of digital communication processes.⁶³ As I have described, these effects vary depending on the degrees and configurations of traceability, durability and connectedness, as well as on the moderation techniques within the sites (cf. Forestal/Philips 2020: 591). In the following sections, I will focus more specifically on the influences of group and role identifications.

6.3.2 Group and Role Identifications

Group and role identifications are aspects of identity that have been addressed by social identity theory (from social psychology) and identity theory (from sociology). Jan Stets and Peter Burke have found that, in both theories, “one’s

62 This is supported by Timur Kuran’s (1995) more general observations on preference falsification. He states that individuals tend to misrepresent their private preferences in order to align with perceived public opinion, which, in turn, leads to a decrease in societal *inclusivity* regarding more unconventional views.

63 When experimenting with digital communication processes, Janne Berg (2016) found that pseudonymity had no effect at all on qualities such as rationality and reciprocity.

identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular *groups or roles* (2000: 225–226, orig. emph.).⁶⁴ On one hand, the social-psychology idea of group identification refers to the idea that “the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (ibid.: 224). These categories or groups “are parts of a structured society” and precede individuals (cf. ibid.: 225). Each of them “has more or less power, prestige, status, and so on” (ibid.).⁶⁵ On the other hand, the sociological identity theory states that the core of an identity is the individual’s self-perception “as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (ibid.). These meanings and expectations “form a set of standards that guide behavior” (ibid.). Both these theoretical approaches conceptualise the self-perception and self-expression of individuals.

However, group and role identifications also affect the individual’s interaction with others. An individual herself will approach others according to its own self-perceptions, and it will be treated according to the identities that others ascribe to it. With regard to group identification, for example, there are countless studies that empirically observe how behaviour in online communication processes differs according to demographic markers such as gender, ethnicity and age – all of which are at least partially connected with bodily attributes.⁶⁶ For instance, Ryan Kennedy and colleagues (2021: 78–79) found that they could improve their predictions of gender, age and race by analysing the language of the social media users. Gender and race differences have also been observed regarding the number and length of comments and posts from users in political debates (cf. Heger et al. 2022: 4; Kennedy et al. 2021: 74–75). Specific aspects of a user’s group identification can therefore be deduced or emulated, even though the user may not have explicitly disclosed them. Social media platforms in particular “rely on revealing users’ characteristics such as age, race,

64 In order to structure this chapter and clarify the influence of identity reifications in digital communication, I will lean on some aspects and terms of these theories, but without elaborating or being overly precise in doing so.

65 Platform communities are examples of such groups.

66 However, it is debatable whether there actually is the kind of homogeneity that is often presumed for such social categories, as – among others – Haslanger (2000) illustrates.

gender, and level of education, and thereby connect users to offline sources of social status” (Moore 2018: 184).

In the concept of role identification, the adaptation of behaviour is already implemented in the theory, as “the basis of role identity resides in the differences in perceptions and actions that accompany a role as it relates to counterroles” (Stets/Burke 2000: 228). The reification of identity is thus performed both by the self-identifying individual and by others that ascribe identities to an individual. In a deliberative site, such roles include proponent, opponent, moderator, decider and audience, and participants can change roles throughout and between the communication processes (cf. Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 76; Knops 2018: 124–125. Group and role identifications structure communication processes within and between deliberative sites by ordering individuals in clusters and in specific relations to each other.

Arguably, “one always and simultaneously occupies a role and belongs to a group, so that role identities and social identities are always and simultaneously relevant to, and influential on, perceptions, affect, and behavior” (Stets/Burke 2000: 229). But both types of identification produce different relations with interaction partners. While the concept of group identification stresses the similarities and the homogeneity within the group and the differences to out-groups, the concept of role identification describes an individual's position and functions within the interactional context (cf. *ibid.*: 226). This context can be a homogeneous group that serves as basis for group identification (cf. *ibid.*: 225–226), for instance, a platform community. Hence, though group and role identification overlap in an individual and may even overlap in an interaction,⁶⁷ they are analytically distinct.

Digital techniques and social media platforms provide users with new ways of expressing and exploring identifications. On the one hand, users can express their identification with specific groups on their profile spaces. Or, they can do so in the communication processes themselves “through avatars, pictures, videos, emoticons, and other digital reifications of corporeality”

67 Individuals do not – and cannot – usually activate all their group and role identities in every kind of situation. Identifications can be salient and activated depending on the current situation and context (cf. Stets/Burke 2000: 230). Usually, only some of the identifications reify in a specific communication process. In a discussion on the disadvantages of patriarchal societies, for example, an individual's identification as male, white and heterosexual, as well as his roles of mediator and activist, might be salient identifications in the context of his contributions, while his identification as a fan of the local football club or his role as a bartender might be latent.

(Asenbaum 2020: 244–245). They can also form or join groups on a platform, or they can follow certain accounts and thus join the respective platform community. Most of the biggest platforms are based on such community formation, or at least they heavily lean on it for their recommender systems.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the platforms usually include architectures that differentiate various roles of users. Some platforms appoint moderators among the users (cf. Duguay 2022: 1189; Reddit Help 2023), some distinguish between verified and non-verified users (cf. X Help Center 2023; YouTube Help 2023a), some provide certain advantages and affordances to users with more followers (cf. YouTube Help 2023b) and some have architectures specifically for groups, which differentiate between the members, visitors and participants of these groups (cf. Facebook Help Centre 2023). Thus, various platform architectures extrinsically identify users with specific groups and roles or allow the users to do so intrinsically.

Within these architectures, users can choose to express a specific set of group and role identifications. With the help of anonymity and pseudonymity architectures, they can negate identifications, they can continue identifications from other contexts and they can explore new identifications (cf. Asenbaum 2020: 244–245). Identity reifications can therefore be indirect, partial and incongruent.⁶⁹ All these forms of identity management are unique to communication processes via digital technologies. And while identification and anonymity are handled differently by the various platforms, anonymity architectures “continue[...] to be a critical feature of popular social media platforms from Twitter to Reddit; the proper relationship between anonymity and the democratic public sphere therefore remains a pressing issue for democratic theorists and citizens alike” (Forestal/Philips 2020: 590).

68 Facebook’s architectures, for example, have been tweaked to prioritise groups over public posts (cf. Newton 2020a). This shift was originally intended to depoliticise the platform (cf. Lima 2021b).

69 An example of such architectures for partial anonymity are Reddit avatars. “Reddit avatars [...] are aliens, meant to highlight aspects of a user’s personality without giving away their true identity. ‘You can reveal your hobby without revealing your race. You can reveal some of your style without revealing your age or your gender’”, which substantiates “the idea of capturing some of your own identity there, on your own terms”, said Reddit’s Steve Huffman (Newton 2022c).

Group and role identifications will be ascribed to a user independently of the user's intentions in presenting their identity.⁷⁰ This kind of extrinsic identification can be performed by other individuals and by the platforms. Other individuals assess whether their interaction partner's behaviour or habitus is similar to their own behaviour, or whether it is more similar to their stereotypes of out-groups (cf. Jacob 2017: 28).⁷¹ Based on this assessment, they will make certain assumptions on the interaction partner's attributes and preferences, and they will address the interaction partner accordingly. This kind of extrinsic identification draws from certain stereotypes and activates pre-established hierarchies (cf. Asenbaum 2018). Though platforms may prohibit explicit discrimination, they are unable to prevent the expectations, stereotypes and biases that are the foundations of group and role identifications and that structure interaction.

Moreover, extrinsic identification by other individuals raises expectations for and assumptions about the interaction with the identified individual. Thus, the extrinsically identified individuals are expected to take on the role of representatives for the group they are perceived to be a member of. This is because

every method of direct public engagement entails a selection of people who are expected to speak for others like them, or others who chose them, or who instructed them, or who endorsed their claims in some way. Even in the case of mass plebiscites the issues and options are structured into distinct clusters by [...] actors [who] make representations. (Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 11)

But if, for example, "black people are supposed to speak for black people by virtue of their corporeal attributes, the identity of the individual is fixed in accordance with the associated group identity, personal preferences are undermined, and stereotypes are activated" (Asenbaum 2020: 237). In sum, a specific group identity is ascribed to the users, they are expected to act in the role of representatives of this group and they will be approached according to the stereotypes associated with this group and role, rather than according to their

70 However, the identifications by the identifiers might well align with the intentions of the identified user.

71 There are large corpuses of literature focussing on such issues, and these texts are based, for example, on the works of Pierre Bourdieu, including his "Distinction" (1984).

individual experiences and preferences.⁷² This is because a “social actor can never be fully outside their social and cultural contexts [and users] still adhere to socialized sets of norms” (Curlew 2019: 11–12). Consequently, even the affordances of social media platforms that allow one to conceal identifications or adopt new ones do not allow users to exit the social structures that are formed beyond the platforms – and the expectation structures connected with them. Rather, the external structures are reproduced within the platforms, but they reify in new forms due to the anonymity and pseudonymity architectures of the platforms.

Moreover, extrinsic identification can be performed by the platforms, as their algorithmic systems emulate the group and role identifications of a user. The systems analyse the user’s behaviour and categorise the user accordingly. These analyses are based on training data that reflect the social structures and biases of the platforms’ users (cf. Prietl 2019: 311–315). Therefore, the systems can hardly avoid basing their predictions on these biases, even if the specific variables reflecting a bias are excluded from the algorithmic analysis. As a data scientist working in a large platform company puts it:

The machine isn’t doing anything wrong, and the algorithms are not doing anything wrong. It’s just that they’re literally amoral[, and] even if you remove those specific variables, if the signal is there, you’re going to find correlates with it all the time [...]. But I feel sensitive toward the machines, because we’re telling them to optimize, and that’s what they’re coming up with. They’re describing our society. (Tarnoff/Weigel 2020: 122)⁷³

Such correlates of racially biased data, for example, include the zip code of a person and the racial demographics of this zip code (cf. *ibid.*: 120–121). Thus, categorisations and algorithmic group identifications are based on the same stereotypes as the extrinsic identifications by other humans. Simultaneously, the categorisations performed by these systems are undercomplex and unable to capture the variability and disparity of human behaviour, and, moreover, they are blind to power structures and conflicts of interest (cf.

72 Hans Asenbaum argues that this is the case even if users assume new identities in anonymity architectures; this “new prison might benefit from an improved image, but it is a prison nevertheless” (2020: 237).

73 However, it must be noted that it is exactly the machine’s dependence on the data on society and the consecutive biases that make the machines, indeed, political and that attribute moral implications to them (cf. Risse 2023: 95–96).

Prietl 2019: 311–312). By disregarding contextual factors, algorithmic systems even exaggerate the original bias from their training data. For example, AI models for detecting hate speech have been found to be “1.5 times more likely to flag tweets written by African Americans as ‘offensive’ compared to other tweets” (Ghaffray 2021). So, the algorithmic systems reproduce and increase social biases, which affects the structures of communication processes on the platforms.

Group and role identifications structure communication in so far as they group the individuals with a certain side of the argument or ascribe them certain functions in the communication process. Other identifications remain concealed. For example, the identification of a person with a group of plant-lovers will seldom be relevant in a communication process on feminism. Similarly, an identification with the role of mediator in one communication process may well be irrelevant for the same person's participation in another communication process. Therefore, identifications, as different aspects of one individual, reify according to context, and they structure communication by attributing to the participant specific sides or functions.

From a deliberative-theory perspective, group and role identifications have various implications for the qualities of communication processes. On the level of sites in general, deliberative theorists have reasoned that corporeal differences between the participants support *inclusivity* and *diversity*. Thus, Asenbaum argues that “political claims-making through embodied presence is valid because different bodies represent different social positionalities” (2020: 235–236; similarly, Kuyper 2020: 10). This consideration connects to presumed more visible group identifications such as gender, age and ethnicity, and it implies higher deliberative quality in face-to-face interaction. However, I have described other possibilities of expressing specific group and role identities for participants in digital communication processes, and these represent positionality in a similar way. For instance, avatars are as present in digital communication as corporeal attributes are in face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, inclusivity

is not just about class or race or gender or even intersectionality but about the experiences that people have in different roles and the views and values that emerge from those rich contexts. It is to treat people as the multi-faceted, role-playing beings they really are, rather than reducing them to a few, fixed categories. (Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 10)

In this line of thinking, inclusivity is achieved not through the inclusion of various groups and roles in a communication process or deliberative system, but through the acknowledgement of the variety of perspectives that individuals produce through their experiences and their specific sets of identifications with groups and roles. On the other hand, the possibility of enacting specific identifications “serves the freedom to rediscover and playfully express the multifaceted self [and] thus contributes to the inclusion of various aspects of identity into the democratic system” (Asenbaum 2020: 244–245). While social media platforms support this version of inclusivity by providing the architectures to reveal and conceal identifications at will, they also counteract it by broadly categorising their users and thereby reproducing the social structures and stereotypes in the process.

In other instances, deliberative theorists have argued that group and role identifications of participants provide context for their contributions, and this can make participants appear more authentic and comprehensible to other participants. Deliberative theorists have argued, for example, that information about an individual can give *authenticity* to her statements. On the basis of group and role identifications, other participants

might decide some people's information or experience is such that their opinions should weigh much more heavily than others'. [...] The opinion of a more reliable minority, if it is sufficiently more reliable, might weigh more heavily with you than the opinion of a less reliable majority. (Goodin 2008: 96–97)

Experiences from groups and roles can therefore give authenticity to a speaker and increase the probability that she will convince others.⁷⁴ Thus Mansbridge, for example, argued in 1993

that empathy, sensitivity, and intuition as female characteristics are constitutive for democratically organized communities, which rely on social connections of trust, love, and duty. Some difference feminists interpret this as a superior culture of women who excel at persuading, listening, asking ques-

74 Apparently, however, the speaking style of a participant and what it reveals about the participant's background does not affect that participant's influence over other participants' opinions (cf. Bächtiger/Parkinson 2019: 52).

tions, moderating, and integrating (Mansbridge, paraphrased in Asenbaum 2020: 236)⁷⁵

Though this might seem overly generalising from today's perspective, it illustrates how experiences can form roles and expectations in communication processes. Social media platforms, in particular, "rely on revealing users' characteristics such as age, race, gender, and level of education, and thereby connect users to offline sources of social status" (Moore 2018: 184).

Roles, too, can give context to the contributions of a participant. For example, there are activists in many communication processes, which means that there are persons who are "deeply engaged with certain issues and [who] end up taking part in multiple conversations that occur across multiple arenas and moments of a deliberative system" (Mendonça 2018: 46–47). These connective activists "tend to become well known (in a positive or negative way) within policy communities and are usually regarded as individuals whose positions cannot be ignored" (ibid.). Thus, their role as connecting activists is a relevant background for their contents. The weight and connotations of the respective groups and roles within a site depend, of course, on the given opportunity structures; that is, they depend on "the question of who is recognized as the main meaning-making body on the issue at hand" (Boswell et al. 2016: 269).

All in all, group and role identifications provide a context for the contributions of participants. Conversely, "[a]nonymous speech leaves the listener unable to judge the interests, agendas, and biases of the speaker, and thereby creates opportunities for strategic and deceptive communication" (Moore 2018: 182).⁷⁶ Architectures that afford users the capacity to mask and to stage specific group and role identifications separately can therefore decrease authenticity in the immediate interaction. For this reason, deliberative theorists have generally been sceptical regarding anonymous communication (cf. Thiel 2017: 157).

Furthermore, identifications affect the *equality* within communication processes, that is, the "extent to which arguments offered by all participants are considered on the merits regardless of which participants offer them"

75 A similar argument regarding the connection between roles and experiences has been made by Parkinson (2012a: 37).

76 According to Moore (2018: 182), it "is the logic behind the use of automated or paid anonymous commenters to intervene in public discussion, a practice that has recently been revealed in the case of the Chinese and Russian governments, and in Britain's EU referendum."

(Fishkin 2009: 34). Participants in digital communication might choose to opt out of revealing specific identifications. This is because these identifications

reinforce stereotypes, trap the individuals in the group in the images traditionally held of the group, make it hard for those individuals to treat their identities flexibly and performatively, de-emphasize lines of division within groups to the advantage of dominant groups within the group, and harden lines of division between groups (Mansbridge 2005: 623).

The implicit categorisation of participants into specific groups produces inequalities that derive “not only from economic dependence or political domination but also from an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others” (Young 1996: 122). To a certain degree, these inequalities can be avoided in digital communication.⁷⁷ The architectures of many social media platforms allow users to escape being identified by other users in ways they might experience as traps in a specific communication process. This “levels the playing field and promotes meritocracy” (Asenbaum 2020: 247). As a result, equality is enhanced and “[d]iversity is claimed discursively rather than visually” (ibid.: 244).

Thus far, I have demonstrated that group and role identifications structure communication processes within digital sites and affect their deliberative qualities. But there are also implications of identification for systemic communication processes. First of all, the emphasis of social media platforms on groups has been heavily criticised, even by platform engineers, for its resulting in pigeonholes. Casey Newton describes an interview with one of these engineers:

An engineer who worked on groups told me they found the group recommendation algorithm to be the single scariest feature of the platform – the darkest manifestation, they said, of data winning arguments. “They try to give you a mix of things you’re part of and not part of, but the aspect of the algorithm that recommends groups that are similar to the one that you’re part

77 Although the style of speech – which is also a basis for extrinsic identifications – is not masked by platform architectures, an individual can purposely adopt a certain style or a certain set of conventions and thereby express specific identifications (see chapter 6.2).

of are really dangerous,” the engineer said. “That’s where the bubble generation begins. A user enters one group, and Facebook essentially pigeonholes them into a lifestyle that they can never really get out of.” (Newton 2020a)

Here, the emphasis on group identification leads to the recommendation of groups that are similar to the ones a user has already joined, resulting in the strengthening of already existing connections between these groups and the neglect of connections with groups that express different views. As a result, homogeneous site clusters are fortified.

This dynamic is strengthened by other processes of group formation and community building. For example, I already described how communities develop their own distinct patterns of expression. Rhetorical means such as humorous memes “enact[...] citizenship by generating collective identities, dividing insiders from outsiders, and galvanizing political positions” (Chevrette/Duerringer 2020: 248). The developing communities are not necessarily centred around political issues, and though their contents “do not always engage with specific policies, legislation, or events clearly recognizable as ‘political,’ they nonetheless align political positions through affective resonances and affiliative identifications” (ibid.: 257). These processes thus simultaneously strengthen the intrinsic identification of the users with the specific groups through affective resonances and demarcate the political positions of the group in contrast to those of other groups.

Expressed in the terminology of the deliberative systems approach, these processes, due to both platform architectures and communicational conventions, lead to the formation of relatively stable partisan sites that provide users with a sense of security through homogeneity, but that are also disconnected from sites where different political perspectives are discussed. The first aspect is not implicitly problematic, since partisan spaces are described in the “manifesto” as “the lifeblood of any deliberative system designed along adversarial lines to advance the flow of information and insight through the marketplace of competition in ideas” (Mansbridge et al. 2012: 20). Partisan sites within a system “enhance deliberation by offering new reasons or making it more likely that old reasons are considered in an equitable way” (ibid.: 24). However, a disconnection of these spaces – that is, a *lack of connections and systemic integration* – would raise concerns from a deliberative systems perspective. On social media platforms, such a disconnection can appear on a technical level, where partisan sites and participants are discouraged from seeing or unable to see arguments from other perspectives. Disconnection furthermore arises on a social

level if individuals are unwilling to listen to other perspectives. Consequently, “the deliberative system suffers when citizens, legislators, and administrators are so divided, by ideology, ethnicity, religion, or any other cleavage, that they will not listen to positions other than those emanating from their side” (ibid.). The stronger the technical disconnection is in a system, the more distinct the perspectives of the groups are, and this intensifies the social disconnection.

Both these kinds of disconnection sustain the spread of misinformation. In a connected system, the partisan sites “may contain their own partial corrective for this pathology, as the other side is always looking for the false move of its adversary” (ibid.: 21). Without connections to “the other side”, however, this corrective is precluded. Especially on social media platforms, the spread of misinformation is a main concern, as is demonstrated by a large and ever-growing body of scientific literature and by the attempts of platform companies and legislative bodies to regulate these platforms. However, academic studies and regulation experiments by the platforms show that intentionally connecting partisan sites does not necessarily prevent misinformation (see chapters 5.2 and 6.1). Therefore, in addition to a lack of *systemic transmission flow* and *effective sluicing*, the disconnection impairs *rationality* within the affected communication processes.

There are, moreover, specific deliberative roles in digital communication processes that have a systemic impact, most notably the role of an individual carrier of a transmission. As I introduced in chapter 2.3, individuals can themselves act as carriers of transmissions, influencing the *selection, framing and reception of these transmissions*. According to deliberative systems scholars, individuals who act as connections “participat[e] in both sites [by] carrying the outputs or insights from one site to the other, and vice versa” (Doberstein 2020: 5).⁷⁸ These transmissions can also be found on social media platforms. For example, users can indirectly reference the contents of other posts and sites, they can copy and paste parts of communication processes in other sites or they can just be inspired by the community of a site or set of sites and then paraphrase the ideas of other sites. As in other parts of deliberative systems, social media platforms host “regular representatives” who are “deeply engaged with

78 This includes “(1) shared membership across venues, whereby some actors are participants in multiple venues in the system; (2) guest membership across venues, whereby some actors visit venues for a specific purpose; and (3) a public engagement broker, an individual whose primary task is to share developments across the policy subsystem” (Doberstein 2020: 6).

certain issues and [...] end up taking part in multiple conversations that occur across multiple arenas and moments of a deliberative system” (Mendonça 2018: 46). Generally, any user who interacts in more than one site acts as a carrier of transmission – this is arguably the whole point of these platforms. But there are users who interact with a considerably higher-than-average number of sites or contributions. Examples of representative roles that these users fill include the activist, the social media influencer, the expert, the journalist, the lobbyist, the political professional and so forth.⁷⁹ Moreover, these roles are important to the deliberative systems themselves (cf. Ercan et al. 2017: 200; Hendriks 2006: 495; Parkinson 2012a: 10), because the role carriers have a considerable influence on the systemic flow of transmissions.

This influence becomes even more immanent if the role is filled in a manner that is perceived by other users as more personal. Generally, role and author identity can be closely connected, but they remain conceptually separate (cf. Parkinson 2012a: 38). A more detailed knowledge about the role holder, for instance, leads other participants to perceive this person less as a role holder and more as an individual. Expectations and contextual information regarding the person's contributions change. Statements have a different ring depending on whether they come from a former president of the United States or from Donald Trump. More detailed knowledge about a role holder can thus be the result of higher scrutiny due to a role's high societal status. Familiarity can also be the result of repeated interaction in the same deliberative site or in others – the more people interact with each other, the more they know about each other and the more they learn to differentiate between role and individual. Furthermore, the perception of familiarity can be produced by the role holders themselves. One of the defining traits of social media influencers, for example, is that they produce and present themselves as a brand, in order to gain large follower counts, create the perception of a close and personal connection with these followers⁸⁰ and gain influence over their followers' perspectives.⁸¹ More-

79 Several studies have observed and explored these different roles in political communication processes on social media, including Poell/Darmoni (2012: 24).

80 This is called a “parasocial relationship” (cf. Balaban et al. 2019: 33; Duckwitz 2019: 4; Helbig 2021).

81 The perceived close connection induces the followers to revisit their pages and consistently view their contents and thereby generate ad revenue – which is the business idea behind both the platforms' allowing and supporting the role of influencer and the individual influencer's investment in filling this role (cf. Bause 2021: 298; Enke/Borchers 2019: 268; Helbig 2021; Schach 2018: 20).

over, scholars assume that there are “hidden influentials” (Waldherr 2017: 542) beyond the obvious influencers that adhere to this definition. These “influentials” act as brokers for parts that are less integrated in the system, and they can initiate large information cascades throughout a network due to this action (cf. *ibid.*). Both obvious and hidden “influentials” are therefore highly important for the systemic flow of transmissions.⁸²

Due to their centrality and widespread presence, the users who fill these roles have a large influence on the selection, framing and reception of the transmissions between sites.

By posting information, comments, or public exchanges on personalized websites or blogs and (semi-)public profiles on social networking platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, individual users are clearly part of the flow of political information. They pick up on news coverage and elite communication, or actively point out stories that in their view have been underreported. [...] Digital media thus increase the number of actors injecting and amplifying items in the flow of political information (Jungherr et al. 2020: 11).

Thus, central roles have a quantitative influence on the systemic flow of transmissions due to the large number of connections. Once again, this effect is increased by the logics of quantification – more followers lead to more reactions, higher rankings in the recommender systems and more views, which in turn indicate a higher capacity to spread messages across a platform and beyond (cf. Cardon 2017: 138–139). The role holders can gain additional qualitative influence if they also establish the perception of a positive, more personal connection with other participants (cf. Helbig 2021), which includes a shift from role to individual.⁸³ Both quantitative and qualitative influence can be viewed as social capital (cf. Duckwitz 2019: 4),⁸⁴ and these influences increase the probability that one can convince other users of one’s own perspectives.

This influence on the systemic flow of transmissions can have negative effects on the *rationality* of communication processes on a systemic level. The Election Integrity Partnership (2021: 218–219) found that

82 Conversely, they can be identified through an analysis of this transmission flow (cf. Jungherr et al. 2020: 24).

83 Such a shift can also have negative effects on the individual influence if the role holder falls short of the expectations connected with the role.

84 Though it remains to be explored whether the quantifiable digital contacts are as exploitable as social capital from other forms of interaction is.

the primary “influencers” in the online production and dissemination of false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election were verified, blue-check accounts belonging to partisan media outlets, social media influencers, and political figures. [...] These narratives persisted throughout our analysis [...] and spread through and across diverse social media platforms – and through the broader information ecosystem, including cable news.

In order to improve systemic rationality, this effect would need to be counteracted by parallel couplings and carriers of transmissions between the sites that transmit different contents. Such parallel structures strengthen the connections between the sites and increase the overall systemic connectedness.⁸⁵

In sum, users on social media platforms – as in other social interactions – can be identified with various groups and roles. Identification can be performed both intrinsically, by the users themselves, and extrinsically, by their interaction partners and the algorithmic systems of the platforms, and it is based on experiences and biases from social structures beyond the platforms. The various reifications of group and role identifications are enabled by the platforms’ anonymity and content moderation architectures, and therefore they differ from non-digital reifications of group and role identifications. The users’ identifications have an eminent influence on the structures and deliberative qualities of communication processes on social media platforms. Within deliberative sites, identifications affect how participants perceive each other’s perspectives, how they position themselves relative to other participants and, consequently, what contents are perceived as more valid and important. On a systemic level, identifications affect how information and perspectives flow across that system and how information and perspectives are framed by and selected for the transmission processes. These structures thus affect what contents are sluiced into the wider systems and thereby take effect in the social world beyond the platforms. Moreover, the experiences that these extrinsically and intrinsically identified individuals have on social media platforms, where they interact in terms of these groups and roles, are carried into their non-digital interactions. Thus, identifications reify in specific forms

85 Studies have shown, however, that a large share of these central “influentials” of various social media platforms are closely connected (cf. Baeza-Yates/Saez-Trumper 2015: 69; Zannettou et al. 2017: 415), which suggests that those individuals probably select similar transmissions and frame them in a similar manner.

on the platforms, and the effects thereof disseminate into the deliberative systems and social world beyond the platforms.