

# 5 Media analysis: Public debates about climate change

## Divergent views and variable voices

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### 5.1 Introduction

This section presents the results of the media analysis, combining descriptive statements and direct quotes with interpretative efforts to ensure maximum readability, accessibility and analytical transparency. The data was initially sorted into two main groups of climate cultures. On the one hand, a comparatively homogeneous set of rather visible climate cultures was detected. These were associated with political elites, prominent public figures and well known influencers. These elite climate cultures reflect ways of knowing, sense-making and speaking associated with educated elites in German society, including choice of language and how scientific information is handled. What makes these climate cultures (including the subculture of young activists and influencers) ‘elite’ is their exclusionary nature (mainly with reference to cultural capital), given that only highly educated and media-savvy members of the public can follow and actively participate in these discourses.

This contrasts with a less visible, heterogeneous group of climate cultures ‘from below’ that encompasses diverse views held by members of the public. Here, various ways of understanding, arguing and reasoning can be detected, many of which relate to everyday experiences of lived efficacy and responsibility. Some of these public views explicitly contradict or challenge elite practices and dominant ways of knowing while others accept their supremacy while offering potential alternatives.

A subsequent fine-grained analysis of the data revealed four separate climate cultures – two linked to elite actors’ public statements, and another two from the general public. Additionally, some displayed certain variations or *shades* that were found to comprise a *subculture*. In this study, a subculture represents a variant or shade of the cultural leanings associated with the parent culture. Whilst internally the subculture strives to achieve some distinction from the parent culture, upon closer examination these deviations remain subtle enough to place them within the same general cultural category.

The first group (the elite climate cultures) finds expression in the three TV talk shows, online news portals, prestige print and influential political magazines and, perhaps more surprisingly, climate-related YouTube clips by young influencers that received significant attention<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast, the second group of climate cultures ‘from below’ features very prominently across different social media, including comments sections linked to the aforementioned talk shows. In addition, some of these ‘non-elite’ climate (sub-)cultures appear in ‘alternative’ media outlets such as print magazines focusing on green lifestyles and climate action and political magazines that endorse anti-establishment views. However, these were not included in this study, due to their extensive range and diversity. Admittedly, some degree of overlap exists between some of the climate (sub-)cultures, for example regarding trust in expert opinions. However, I nevertheless decided to distinguish between these four climate cultures and their respective subcultures because of fundamental differences in key areas such as attributions of responsibility and expectations of efficacy vis-à-vis actual experiences of ‘lived’ responsibility and efficacy.

## 5.2 Elite climate cultures

Two separate elite climate cultures – individualist and collectivist – emerged from the analysis, with the second displaying a distinct subculture of young activists and influencers. Amongst these elite climate cultures, similarities included a shared language associated with ‘official’ positions on climate change and action as well as more or less explicit acknowledgements that anthropogenic climate change existed and presented a serious challenge to humanity. At times, participants from this elite category saw themselves as well-informed and sufficiently competent to educate the public. For example, the arguments and terminology used by prominent influencers and YouTubers revealed their high educational status (Rezo holding a masters- and Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim a doctoral degree) and their commitment to informing the public about climate change. Rezo’s video clearly demonstrated his ability to ‘speak the language of science’ (e.g., citing relevant studies, summarising and synthesising studies). This was also evident when analysing the ‘open letter’ video ‘signed’ by 90+ YouTubers. Here, the authors of the letter spoke of ‘risk hierarchy’, ‘scientific consensus’ and being ‘discredited’. All three elite climate (sub-)cultures featured some or all of the following arguments, many of which related directly to the aspects of responsibility and efficacy discussed in chapter 2:

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1 Clicks to date (04/06/2020): Rezo: Die Zerstörung der CDU: 17.347.533. maiLab: Klimawandel: Das ist jetzt zu tun!: 866.947. maiLab: Die Klimawandel-Therapie: 88.652. Ein Statement von 90+ YouTubern: 4.395.518.