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The „Virtual Coffeehouses”?
Social Networking Sites
and the Public Sphere – An Empirical Analysis

Thesis for the Degree of a Master in Media and Communication Studies (M.A.)

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I. Abstract

This paper deals with online political discussion on social networking sites. Drawing from Habermas’ concept of the public sphere and former adaptations of public sphere theory to Internet research, the study examines to what extent political discussion on social networking sites displays public issue focus as well as deliberative, liberal and communitarian characteristics.

The empirical analysis is a case study that scrutinizes two opposing Facebook pages created in the context of the topic ‘Stuttgart 21’ – a construction project that evoked a local civic protest movement in the city of Stuttgart in the south of Germany. Using an ethnographic approach, the study takes into account the architecture, culture and discussion style on the two pages and aims at describing the pages in terms of their degree of reciprocity, contestation, ideological homogeneity, rationality and contextualisation with the offline protest movement.

The results show two polarized pages that lack deliberation and dialogue, but feature ideological homophily and identification. The results back the fragmentation theory of Internet audiences, while not maintaining the fear of losing the common ground in society. On the contrary, the study suggests that civic political engagement on social networking sites should be discussed in the context of radical democratic processes. It concludes that the utilization of social networks in order to politically inform, stimulate and mobilise scalable publics is desirable.
II. Contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4

2. Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 5
   2.1 The Public Sphere ............................................................................................................. 5
   2.2 The Digital Public Sphere .............................................................................................. 8
   2.3 Online Political Discussion ........................................................................................... 11
   2.4 Social Networking Sites ................................................................................................. 12
   2.5 Terminology and Summary ............................................................................................ 14

3. Case Study ......................................................................................................................... 15
   3.1 Network against Stuttgart 21 ....................................................................................... 17
   3.2 Network in support of Stuttgart 21 ............................................................................... 19

4. Research Aim and Questions ............................................................................................ 20

5. Methods ............................................................................................................................. 21
   5.1 Methodology .................................................................................................................... 22
      5.1.1 Virtual Ethnography ................................................................................................. 22
      Qualitative Content Analysis ............................................................................................. 22
      Quantitative Content Analysis .......................................................................................... 23
      Interviews .......................................................................................................................... 23
   5.2 Sampling .......................................................................................................................... 24
   5.3 Operationalisation .......................................................................................................... 25
   5.4 Implementation ............................................................................................................... 27

6. Results ................................................................................................................................. 28
   6.1 User- and Usage-Statistics ............................................................................................. 28
   6.2 Thematic Analysis .......................................................................................................... 32
      6.2.1 Topics on the Pages ................................................................................................ 33
      6.2.2 The Discussion of Stuttgart 21 .............................................................................. 35
      6.2.3 Likes, Comments, Links ....................................................................................... 37
   6.3 Reciprocity and Contestation ....................................................................................... 38
      6.3.1 Architecture ............................................................................................................. 38
      6.3.2 Arguments ................................................................................................................. 38
      6.3.3 Discussion .................................................................................................................. 39
   6.4 Ideology ........................................................................................................................... 40
      6.4.1 KEIN Stuttgart 21 .................................................................................................... 40
      6.4.2 Für Stuttgart 21 ....................................................................................................... 41
      6.4.3 Rhetoric .................................................................................................................... 42
   6.5 Rationality and Discussion Style .................................................................................... 43
      6.5.1 Flaming & Trolling .................................................................................................. 44
   6.6 Contextualisation with the Whole Movement ............................................................... 45

7. Discussion ........................................................................................................................... 45
   7.1 Public Issue Focus .......................................................................................................... 45
   7.2 Ideological Homophily .................................................................................................... 46
   7.3 Deliberative Indicators ................................................................................................... 47
   7.4 Communitarian Indicators ............................................................................................. 49
   7.5 Liberal Indicators ............................................................................................................ 50
   7.6 The Digital Public Sphere in a Radical Democracy ....................................................... 51

8. Conclusion & Limitations .................................................................................................... 55

References .............................................................................................................................. 57

Appendix ................................................................................................................................ 64
Codebook Quantitative Analysis .......................................................................................... 64
1. Introduction

The Iranian opposition movement uses Twitter to mobilise, organise and report the revolts after the 2009 election. 17 year-old Felicia Margineanus gathers more than 5000 people in Stockholm to demonstrate against the right-wing Sverigedemokraterna after the Swedish elections 2010 by posting an event on Facebook. Egyptian activist Whael Ghonim uses social media to organise the protest on 25th of January 2011 against Hosni Mubarak. These are the stories that e-democracy enthusiasts refer to, when writing about the boundless possibilities of political deliberation, participation and mobilisation on the Internet. The rise of personal media that is located in a semi-public space between phatic, personal communication and mass media broadcasting, allows individuals to get their voice heard over space, time and issue boundaries (Reese et. al, 2007; Lüders, 2008).

This development has been covered by a fair amount of research in media, communication and political studies. The interdisciplinary field of online democracy scholars can be categorised into three major lines of research: Firstly, those authors concerned with the Internet as a space for political discussion and deliberation (e.g. Connery, 1997; Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002 & 2004; Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Freelon, 2010), secondly, the Internet as political instrument for mobilisation and political participation (e.g. Bennett, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Aeron, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010) and thirdly, citizenship and civic culture in the online realm (e.g. Sassen, 2006; Chadwick, 2006; Tremayne, 2007; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Independently of the research emphasis, there is no consensus whether the Internet plays a democracy-enhancing role or not and works range from optimistic (Benkler, 2006) to very pessimistic scenarios (Sunstein, 2001).

In my thesis, I want to follow the line of works on online political discussion and the digital public sphere. Empirical studies in this field deal mainly with newsgroups and online forums, however, in this project, my research interest will lie on so called ‘Social Networking Sites’ such as Facebook or Twitter – a communication technology that has, in this context, not been empirically analysed yet. In my study, I am going to examine the political discussion on two Facebook pages dealing with a local civic protest movement in Germany.

The aim of this case study is to provide empirical data on political discussion on social networking sites. Using virtual ethnography as the methodology, the study’s goal is to
explore how users actually interact on social networking sites in political contexts and if and how political deliberation takes place. The analysed case is a recent civic protest against parliamentary politics in Germany that is known under the keyword “Stuttgart 21”. In this local conflict, the inhabitants of the city Stuttgart in the south of Germany have been protesting against the construction of a new central train station that is to be located completely underground – a long-term project that costs approx. 5 billion euro and that would reshape the city lastingly.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Public Sphere

In his book from 1962 *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Jürgen Habermas presents a historical analysis of the rise and fall of the public sphere over the past 400 years. Having its roots in the no more solely feudal, but still elitist salons, coffeehouses and high societies of the 18th and 19th century, the function of the public sphere is to legitimise institutional politics through reason and critical argument. Being the space for public discourse, the public sphere is supposed to decide on public issues, form public opinions and thus to influence politics. Habermas describes the public sphere to be one condition of modern democracies, a sphere that “operates as an intermediary system between state and society” (Habermas, 2006, 412).

According to Habermas (1990, 71ff), there are three major factors that allowed the public sphere to emerge. Firstly, the public sphere drew from Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment idea of reason and rationality that requested a sovereignty that was bound to rational argumentation. Secondly, capitalism and the resulting accumulation of private capital through trade led to a craving for private autonomy and liberalism. The third factor is the advent of the newspaper press, which itself was a product of the information needs of early capitalism (ibid.). Being independent from the sovereign, the bourgeois public sphere consisted of wealthy private people who held interests towards the sovereign in order to protect their private capital. The function of the public sphere was, thus, from the beginning to control politics and not to govern itself (ibid., 87). The instruments of the bourgeoisie were rational-critical argument to form a public opinion and publicity either in the form of the press or in public institutions such as the parliament in order to stress that opinion (ibid., 175f).
According to Habermas, institutionalisation, however, is one of the crucial factors for the decline of the public sphere starting at the end of the 19th century and this is where his historical analysis turns into a critical analysis of contemporary mass (political) culture (cf. Kramer, 1992, 253). The negotiation of power has been increasingly taking place between private institutions, parties and public administration. The public as represented by private people has been increasingly excluded from this process, and deliberation of politics, which Mendelberg (2002, 153) describes as “egalitarian, reciprocal, reasonable and open-minded exchange of language”, has been in decline among citizens.

The other factor for the decline of the public sphere is the transformation of publicity from an opinion-distributing to an opinion-making industry. The mass media and the cultural industry have, by means of economical, technological and organisational concentration, itself become an instrument of power (ibid., 284). With this conclusion, Habermas puts himself into the context of the Frankfurt School and other authors from critical theory arguing that the cultural industry has transformed the critical public into a dull commodified mass culture.

Considering that Habermas himself was more than doubtful about the functioning of the public sphere and even almost denied its existence in the modern welfare state¹, the question evolves, how the concept can be utilized after all. Is it solely a normative category or is it actually an analytical concept that has empirical relevance? The public sphere literature is ambivalent on this point (e.g. Dahlgren, 2001 & Sparks, 2001 in the same volume). Referring to Habermas himself, Geoff Eley (1992, 289) points out that the public sphere remains historically unattained or has only been realised in “distorted” ways.

Habermas mentions in the preface of his 1990 edition of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* that the ‘political public sphere’ is a term that serves as a main normative category in democracy theory and gains its empirical relevance through the definition of prerequisites for equal communication² (1990, 41). He later specifies how normative democracy theory can contribute to empirical research and which topics can be addressed with the concept (Habermas, 1996). Stressing this practical usage of

¹ This is a point that he partly takes back in his later work (Habermas, 1990).
² He particularly refers to his own discursive-ethical approach developed with K. O. Apel in *Diskurs und Verantwortung*, 1988.
normative theory, the question whether or not there actually exists a public sphere seems to be of less importance and many authors agree that the public sphere still serves as an integrative concept for empirical analyses (e.g. Schudson, 1992; Sparks, 2001). Public sphere theory must be understood as a melting pot of approaches – “not only the public sphere, but also related themes such as communicative rationality, deliberative democracy and civil society” (Dahlgren, 2009, 5).

Independently of the question whether or not a public sphere exists or has existed at all, there is a huge body of criticism of Habermas' concept. Most prominently in this discussion is the accusation that Habermas idealizes the accessibility and the universality of a singular public sphere. Obviously, the public sphere that Habermas describes was initially an elitist sphere that was inherently exclusive along the lines of class, gender and status (e.g. Landes, 1988; Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Garnham, 1992). As a result, Geoff Eley (1992) as well as Nancy Fraser (1990) argue for a multi-sphere scenario: “It is important to acknowledge the existence of competing publics not just later in the nineteenth century, when Habermas sees a fragmentation of the classical liberal model of Öffentlichkeit, but at every stage in the history of the public sphere and, indeed, from the very beginning” (Eley, 1992, 306).

Fraser (1990, 67) suggests the term ‘counterpublics’ to describe “subordinated social groups” such as “women, workers, peoples of color and gays and lesbians”. In opposition to Nicholas Garnham (1992) and Colin Sparks (2001), who emphasize the importance of a singular public sphere as common ground for public opinion, Fraser (1990, 66) welcomes the multi-sphere society stating that “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public.” In recent contributions to the public sphere theory, there is a tendency to speak of public ‘spheres’, i.e. in the plural.

Fraser’s positive evaluation of contestation between different publics is reflected in another critical approach of the public sphere model and of deliberative democracy in general. Drawing from critical discourse analysis and Post-Marxist theory, some authors

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3 Moreover, there is criticism by historians, which is directed against the first part of his book and assumes historical flaws in his analysis (see Baker, 1992; Zaret, 1992).

4 Actually, so does Habermas. In the preface of the 1962 edition, he clarifies that he will focus on the bourgeois public sphere and neglect the plebeian public sphere. Criticism from the multi-sphere advocates is thus rather directed towards the neglect of other public spheres than the bourgeois one (Fraser, 1990, 78).
point out that Habermas’ claim of rationality in political discussion restricts in fact democratization processes and neglects the democratic power of contestation and disagreement on the one hand (Mouffe, 1992; Papacharissi, 2004; Dahlberg, 2005 & 2007) and informal talk between citizens on the other (Dahlgren, 2006). The advocates of radical democracy claim that pluralism and difference in society are not sufficiently acknowledged in discourses whose main goal it is to strive for consensus (Dahlberg, 2007, 836).

Habermas is strongly criticized, but the main challenge of the public sphere as an empirical category results from a media critique that Habermas himself encouraged: The lack of face-to-face interaction, high degrees of mediatisation, commercialisation and concentration of mass media, political intervention and indeed the lack of feedback loops are problems that communication in society has been faced with in the second half of the 20th century (Habermas, 2006). At the same time, authors have bemoaned a decreasing civic engagement and a decline of social capital in late-modern societies. “Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century” (Putnam, 2000, 27). Social capital, a social resource that establishes through relations in a community and leads to social action, is, according to Putnam (2000, 28), crucial for the economy, democracy, health and happiness of a society. It is thus no wonder, that the Internet was highly welcomed as a technology to reverse the commercialised logic of mass media and as a social institution to re-connect citizens with each other and with the political. Public sphere researchers, on the one hand, were excited about the Internet as a new unauthoritative and informal space for political discourse and welcomed online forums as the new “virtual coffeehouses” (Connery, 1997). On the other hand, scholars from sociology and political studies recognised the Internet’s potential for virtual communities and civic engagement (Castells, 1996; Sassi, 2000; Delanty, 2003; Sassen, 2006).

2.2 The Digital Public Sphere
Scholars from all fields have highlighted the semi-public and personal communication of Internet technology that was considered to produce a less manipulated and more active political public. “Current technological developments in communication (…) are legitimated in terms of a desireable move away from mass communication and back forward toward forms of interpersonal communication” (Garnham, 1992, 367). However, not only de-mediatisation was accounted for the “new media” in terms of
democratic potential. Also other inherent characteristics of the Internet technology such as the flat network structure, interactive potential, spatial boundlessness and open access were in the centre of optimistic technological deterministic perspectives as for instance presented from Rheingold (2000). However, in recent works, the positive attitude towards the technology as the rescue of unhealthy democracy have turned into more circumspect views (Dahlgren, 2009, 159), in which especially questions of access and equality in the Internet have been a matter of critical consideration (i.e. Brundidge, 2010).

Andrew Chadwick (2009, 11f) summarizes the wide academic discussion of e-democracy as follows: “Scholarship has proceeded through several waves, from early enthusiasm to pessimistic reaction, and to recent, more balanced and empirically driven approaches of the post-dotcom-era.” Besides a body of empirical research on Internet activism (see Hills & Hughes, 1999; Bennett, 2003; van de Donk et. al., 2004), there has been some recent empirical work on the digital public sphere that stresses the democratic potential of online political discussion (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Pickard, 2008; Price, 2009; Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Davis, 2010; Brundidge, 2010). However, even though some empirical evidence has backed up the highly theoretical discussion, there are still some problems remaining with the concept of a digital public sphere and two of them are discussed in the following.

(1) It might be no coincidence that Cass Sunstein (2001) released his book Republic.com just in the crash of the new economy. After the deconstruction of the economic hopes of the new media, he deconstructed the political hopes that were connected to the Internet. His claim is that the personalisation of media experience leads to enclaves of like-minded groups that eventually lose the common ground that is needed for democratic processes. Fragmentation processes are also discussed in television studies, where the TV audience as an (imagined) community is considered to be dissolving into fragments of “individualised forms of asynchronous consumption” (Buonanno, 2007, 70). According to Sunstein (2001, 199), this development can lead to group polarization and extreme positions, “a more balkanized society”. Azi Lev-On and Bernhard Manin (2009, 107) stress that these enclaves have “enhanced abilities to (…) filter out opposing views”. Besides Sunstein’s scenario of active Internet users and their craving for cognitive consonance, filter algorithms have recently been in the focus of fragmentation
scholars (i.e. Sack et al., 2009; Lev-On & Manin, 2009) and social filters such as for instance Facebook’s “Edge-Rank”\(^5\) cater for a revitalisation of the discussion. A prominent example of algorithmic polarisation is Valdis Krebs’\(^6\) network analysis of buying patterns from book retailer customers that manifests for instance in Amazon’s recommendation system. Empirical studies, however, point to ambivalent evidence (Dahlberg, 2007, 830f). In a study on political USENET groups, John Kelly et al. (2005, 23) found out that “regardless of how balanced or unbalanced the population of authors in a political newsgroup, the strongest conversational links are across political divides”. In opposition to Sunstein, the study states that newsgroups augment cross-ideological debate. But besides empirical studies, theoretical approaches from radical democracy argue against a dramatisation of fragmentation processes and in fact celebrate the development towards participatory plurality (Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlgren, 2007).

(2) In her book *A private sphere*, Zizi Papacharissi (2010) deconstructs the dichotomy of private and public that serves as the core principle in public sphere theory. Drawing from former public sphere criticism as well as post-modern notions of citizenship, Papacharissi points out that private and public must implode as categories. While the private sphere is increasingly commodified in the face of commercial and public use of personal information (a recent example is the rise of ‘Social Commerce’\(^7\)), political activities that were initially subscribed to the public are performed privately. She refers in this context to the concept of ‘identity politics’, which John Corner & Dick Pells (2003, 7) describe as followed: “Political style increasingly operates as a focus for post-ideological lifestyle choice, (…), which favour more eclectic, fluid, issue-specific and personality-bound forms of political recognition and engagement”, a phenomenon that Lance Bennett (1998) also refers to as ‘lifestyle politics’. According to Papacharissi, citizens use the Internet and mobile technology to present their identities publicly in a “show, not tell”-mode. That means that the expression of political opinion is more important than the discussion of public issues. In this scenario, deliberation plays a minor role, since the political is not negotiated through collectivity, but through social

\(^5\) The „Edge-Rank” measures the relevance of a status update for every Facebook user and takes into consideration former interaction with the item’s creator. (Kincaid, 2010, Techcrunch [http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/22/facebook-edgerank/][22/04/2011])

\(^6\) [http://www.orgnet.com/divided2.html][20/04/2011]

contacts (ibid., 141). Personal media help citizens to gain the autonomy to make private issues to public issues. Considering this shift towards egocentric political expressions, Papacharissi poses the question, if the public sphere concept is still appropriate as a model after all. Papacharissi’s analysis fits into a techno-cultural move away from communities centred on issues to more identity-driven social networks (Boyd, 2009, 27). However, by putting all the emphasis on the question, WHAT a public issue is, the analysis neglects HOW these issues are discussed. Even though Papacharissi (2010, 154) makes clear that a virtual “thumbs-up-or-down” does not account for deliberation, she neglects, for instance, the commentary sections of blog entries, YouTube videos or Facebook posts.

2.3 Online Political Discussion

I argue that even in social networks, online political discussion is a relevant field of research, but the literature analysis makes also clear that deliberation should not be the single category, when analysing online discussions. According to Deen Freelon (2010), deliberation is the most prominent research interest in this field, however, empirical research points to very different kinds of political expression.

Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) identifies three “camps” of research: the (1) communitarian that “stresses the possibility of the internet enhancing communal spirit and values” (ibid., 616), the (2) liberal, mainly concerned with the expression of individual political performance and close to Papacharissi’s scenario of identity politics, and the (3) deliberative. In a recent article, Freelon (2010) elaborates on these three models. Conducting a meta-analysis of works in the field, he identifies key characteristics of each model such as intra-ideological (communitarian) vs. inter-ideological reciprocity (deliberative) or personal revelation (liberal) vs. public issues focus (deliberative). He presents thus not only a theoretical framework of research schools, but also an analytical instrument that should encourage scholars not to “unilaterally declare [...] a forum more or less ‘deliberative’”, but develop “more concise conclusions such as ‘communitarian with some deliberative aspects’” (Freelon, 2010, 1177). Both authors do not include a category that accounts for radical democracy in their models (even though for instance Pickard (2008) serves as an empirical reference labelling the Internet service *Indymedia*\(^8\) as ‘radical democratic’).

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\(^8\) *Indymedia* is a publishing platform for alternative and citizen media.
The liberal individualist model  
Liberal individualism encompasses all characteristics of online conversation involving personal expression and the pursuit of self-interest. From various literatures, four features can be placed into this category: monologue, personal revelation, personal showcase and flaming.

Monologue. In a study of the deliberative potential of several political Usenet news-groups, Wilhelm (1999: 98) found that users' contributions generally lacked 'the listening, responsiveness, and dialogue that would promote communicative actions'. Similarly, Jensen (2003: 357) holds that 'one of the common complaints about net debates is that...

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Figure 1: The three models of online democratic communication and their indicative metrics according to Freelon (2010, 1178).

The challenge for scholars in this interdisciplinary field is not only the fast transformation of empirical and theoretical knowledge, but also the fast transformation of the matter of examination itself. Within the last fifteen years of research on Internet politics, the Internet has evolved dramatically as a technological and cultural phenomenon. While the early analyses from, for instance, Rheingold (2000), Hill & Hughes (1998) and van Dijk (1997) focused on static websites, later research had to take into account dynamic, platform-independent Web 2.0 environments as well as the Social Web. While some of the research questions might be the same, the social and cultural context changes and so do the analysed entities. While research has focused on USENET groups, E-Mail lists, online forums and MUDs, the work on social networking sites is so far rather small.

2.4 Social Networking Sites  
Danah Boyd & Nicole Ellison (2007) define social networking sites (SNS) as web-based services “that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate lists of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (ibid., 211). Unlike forums and communities, SNS are not built around certain topics, nor do the participants necessarily get in contact with strangers. The main

9 see O'Reilly (2005)  
10 MUD stands for Multi-User Dungeon and describes a category of text-based Online role-playing games.
category is inclusion into or exclusion out of one’s network. However, the borders between online communities and SNS are blurry and there are many online communities that feature SNS characteristics (for instance profile pages for discussion board members) as well as SNS that feature community characteristics (for example the Facebook pages function).

According to Boyd & Ellison (2007, 214), SixDegrees.com was the first SNS to launch in 1997 and soon SNS emerged all around the world, most prominently the networks Friendster (Launch 2002), LinkedIn (Launch 2003) and MySpace (Launch 2003). Interestingly, SNS emerged as national or regional phenomena and in the beginning of social networks, many countries had their own prevalent SNS, so for instance LunarStrom in Sweden, StudiVZ in Germany, Hyves in the Dutch speaking countries, Gono in Portugal, Mixi in Japan, Orkut in Brasil and India, QQ in China (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, 218). In recent years, there has been a development towards niche SNS on the one hand and consolidation and concentration of the SNS-market on the other. Today, Facebook (Launch 2004) is, with its 585 million users, worldwide the largest SNS. 187.7 million users are in the age group of 18 – 24 years. However, all age groups grow rapidly with between 59% to 124% (age group over 65 years) growth rate in the last year.

According to Boyd & Ellison (2007, 219), research on SNS can be comprised in the following themes: Impression Management and Friendship Performance, Networks and Network Structure, Bridging Online and Offline Social Networks, and Privacy. The dichotomy of private and public is a major category to describe different SNS. Twitter in comparison to Facebook has for instance a much higher degree of publicness, which is indicated by a higher public interest orientation of the statuses and weaker ties between the users.

There are only few studies on the relation of SNS and politics, but since the campaigning for the presidential election in the US in 2008, scholars recognised the importance of SNS even in political contexts. “Key features provided on Facebook, such as linking, Wall-posting, or resources timely updated on video-sharing websites such as YouTube have created previously unimagined opportunities for young people to exchange their political views and become more politically active” (Wu, 2010, 6). According to Weiwu

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11 See Boyd & Ellison (2007) for a thorough history of SNS.
Zhang et al. (2010, 80), 40% of all SNS users have used their network for political information during the presidential campaigning 2008. However, the study concludes that reliance on SNS encourages rather civic participation – that is non-governmental and non-electoral – than political participation or confidence in the government (ibid., 87). Empirical studies on the question, if the use of SNS affects political attitudes and behaviours or not, point in both directions (Johnson et al., 2011).

According to Zhang et al. (2010, 76), civic and political engagement are both positively influenced by social capital. There are several studies that examine this particular aspect of social networks (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008) with the result that there is a positive correlation between the use of SNS and the deepening of social ties (bonding social capital) as well as creating new social connections (bridging social capital). The sociality of SNS and questions whether or not SNS make people more social or how they affect social relations and social behaviour in general are major research trends in the field (Papacharissi, 2011, 309). Johnson et al. (2011, 203) also suggest examining local civic engagement in relation to SNS and the social use of the Web.

2.5 Terminology and Summary

In this literature review, I have mentioned the terms “digital public sphere”, “e-democracy”, “digital citizenship”, “online deliberation” and “online political discussion”. All of them refer to the study of online politics. Even though it is hard to draw a line between these research fields and some of the terms are used synonymously, the first three terms rather apply as theoretical frameworks, whereas the latter two describe empirical categories. Following Freelon (2010), I want to stick to the term “online political discussion” in the following analysis, when referring to the empirical interest of the study, and I use the term “digital public sphere” as the theoretical framework. This categorisation has a bias from radical democracy theory implying that not only deliberation, but also contestation and informal talk are relevant categories for the digital public sphere.

The literature review shows that research on online political discussion in the context of public sphere theory has a fairly distinct tradition. However, it also shows that the transformation of the medium and the way it is adapted socially, change the (empirical) focus of the academic discussion. Considering all the iterations in public sphere theory and discussions of the digital public sphere, the review makes clear that it is not enough to ask “What would Habermas say?”, but to look at the matters of inquiry in their social
and cultural contexts. In the following, I want to introduce the case study before clarifying, what the research questions are.

3. Case Study

The analysed case is a recent civic protest against parliamentary politics in Germany that is known under the keyword “Stuttgart 21” or “S21”. In this local conflict, many inhabitants of the city Stuttgart have been protesting against the building of a new central train station that is to be located completely underground. The calculated costs for the long-term project range between 4,1\(^{13}\) billion to 9 billion Euro\(^{14}\). The project is supposed to reshape the city lastingly.

The project Stuttgart 21 was first presented in April 1994 by the Federal State Minister Erwin Teufel (CDU) and enacted in November 1995. At the same time, the first initiative against the project “Leben in Stuttgart – Kein Stuttgart 21” (Life in Stuttgart – No Stuttgart 21) was founded with the aim to conduct a public referendum about the project (Lösch et al., 2011, 187). The municipal council denied the referendum in September 1996 due to insufficient signatures collected. After negotiation about the funding of the project, a financing agreement was made in July 2002 and building permission was given in 2005\(^{15}\). Two years later, an alliance against Stuttgart 21 gathered 67,000 signatures for a referendum, which the municipal council denied again. After several varying calculations of the project’s overall costs, the construction officially began in February 2010\(^{16}\).

During the year 2010, the critical press coverage and the rising costs of the project, created a tremendous growth of the protest movement, which continued demonstrating against the project every Monday in Stuttgart. The main arguments of the protest movement are: 1. Criticism towards a miscalculation of the costs and expected costs of more than 5 billion Euro with at the same time high public debts. 2. An actually lower capacity of the new central station due to fewer train platforms. 3. Less comfort for train

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\(^{13}\) Official number from Deutsche Bahn. [http://content.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/stz/page/2314733_0_9223_-grube-wir-bauen-tunnels-und-keine-bunker.html][27/05/2011]

\(^{14}\) In a statement of the German Federal Environmental Agency


travellers. 4. An undemocratic procedure and politics against the will of the public. 5. The removal of public parks surrounding Stuttgart castle as well as other environmental risks such as a negative affection of the city’s climate and water resources\(^{17}\) (Wolf, 2010, 10ff). The protest movement suggests instead an alternative model called “Kopfbahnhof 21”, which advocates basically a modernisation of the existing central station.

The protest against Stuttgart 21 is mainly directed against political and economic institutions such as the federal state government consisting of a coalition between CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union\(^{18}\)) and FDP (Freie Demokratische Partei\(^{19}\)), Deutsche Bahn AG\(^{20}\) and the supporting parties. However, as a reaction to the increasing civic opposition against the project, a civic movement in support of the project has also emerged. It aligned in September 2010 under the name “Wir sind Stuttgart 21” (We are Stuttgart 21). The arguments of the project supporters, which mainly correspond with the official statements, are: 1. The underground station creates new urban space directly in the city that is going to be designed in dialogue with the citizens. 2. A higher quality of train travelling not only due to a higher capacity of the station, but also due to new connections to the airport and to destinations in the region. 3. The futuristic project adds to the prestige of the city and the region as an engineering metropolis\(^{21}\).

The conflict escalated on 30\(^{th}\) of September 2010, when a massive police operation used water cannon and tear gas to disperse the protesters that had blocked parts of the station and the near palace garden\(^{22}\). After this incident, in which around 400 people had been injured, the federal government stopped the deconstruction of the station and called for an arbitration between the authorities (the federal state government and Deutsche Bahn) and the project opponents (the alliance against Stuttgart 21) led by Heiner Geißler\(^{23}\). On November the 30\(^{th}\), Geißler released his arbitration statement. It said that Stuttgart 21 should be pursued, however, with some changes and not before


\(^{18}\) Christian Democratic Union

\(^{19}\) Free Democratic Party

\(^{20}\) German national railway company.


\(^{22}\) Spiegel Online. Josef-Otto Freudenreich: Bürgerkrieg im Schlossgarten. [http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,720581,00.html [27/05/2011]

\(^{23}\) Heiner Geißler is a party member of the CDU that rules together with the liberal party FDP in Baden-Württemberg. At the same time, he is a member of ATTAC, which grants him credibility in the left-wing scene.
Deutsche Bahn has conducted a ‘stress test’ in order to ensure the sufficient capacity of the new station. The statement has been regarded as a defeat for the project critics\(^\text{24}\).

The conflict around the central station has also been perceived as an ideological conflict in the federal state parliament (“Landtag”) between the conservative and industrial-near camp represented by the governing coalition and Deutsche Bahn versus the left-wing, environmentalist camp represented by ‘Die Grünen’ (the environmentalist party) and civic organisations\(^\text{25}\). The conflict has thus become one of the most important topics in the election campaign for the new Landtag. In September 2010, Angela Merkel denied a referendum about the building of the central station with the argument that the elections in 2011 will decide about the project anyway\(^\text{26}\).

The ongoing dispute about the central station has split the city into two opposed fractions. However, there is an interesting dynamic of the public opinion influenced by the arbitration. According to a representative study by the German opinion researcher *Infratest dimap* in September 2010, 54% of people living in Baden-Württemberg were against the project. In the same study one day after the arbitration statement on the 1\(^{\text{st}}\) of December only 38% were against the project, while 54% supported it.

![Figure 2: The acceptance of Stuttgart 21 over time. Source: Infratest dimap on behalf of SWR and Stuttgarter Zeitung: LänderTREND Baden-Württemberg\(^\text{27}\).](http://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundeslaender/baden-wuerttemberg/laendertrend/2010/dezember/)

### 3.1 Network against Stuttgart 21

The protest movement against Stuttgart 21 is driven and organised by an alliance of political, civic and cultural organisations calling themselves ‘Aktionsbündnis gegen

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\(^{24}\) Spiegel Online (2010). Ende der Schlichtung: Stuttgart 21 bekommt das Geißler-Gütesiegel. [http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,732135,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,732135,00.html) [27/05/2011]

\(^{25}\) However, the biggest opposition party SPD (Social Democrats) supports the station.

\(^{26}\) Angela Merkel (15/09/2010): „Die Landtagswahl im nächsten Jahr, die wird genau die Befragung der Bürger über die Zukunft Baden-Württembergs, über „Stuttgart 21“ und viele andere Projekte sein“.

Stuttgart 21’. Even though the alliance consists of independent institutions, they have a common spokesperson and a web presence. The main actors in this alliance are ‘Aktive Parkschützer’ (‘active park guards’ - a civic organisation of activists against S21 and the rather radical core of the protest movement), ‘Initiative Leben in Stuttgart – Kein Stuttgart 21’ (a civic organisation that was founded already in 1995 in opposition to the project), the local party organisations of the two political parties Die Grünen and ‘Die Linke’ (leftist party), of whom Die Grünen are also represented in the federal state parliament, and the regional group of the environmental organisation ‘BUND e.V.’.

The alliance is supported by many professional groups such as for instance “Architekten gegen Stuttgart 21” (architects against Stuttgart 21), “Demokratie-Initiative 21” (initiative for democracy 21) or “Initiative-Barriere-Frei - Gegen Stuttgart 21” (initiative for handicapped people against Stuttgart 21). Moreover, in connection to the alliance, there are more than 20 regional protest groups in all parts of Baden-Württemberg and even in other parts of Germany. Independent observers have underlined the protest’s civic and nonviolent character.

The online protest network is just as diverse as the offline network. However, there are three major websites of the alliance which are [www.kopfbahnhof-21.de](http://www.kopfbahnhof-21.de) (which serves as information portal about the protest movement as well as a collection of important documents and news), [www.parkschuetzer.de](http://www.parkschuetzer.de) (which serves as an activist network and allows activists to register and get in contact with each other as well as to organise events – so far there are 32 719 activists registered) and the Facebook page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” (which serves as both information and discussion platform). In addition, the alliance launched the website [www.infooffensive.de](http://www.infooffensive.de), a platform that distributes information and arguments to the press and the public outside of Stuttgart. Besides these major platforms, the site [www.parkschuetzer.de](http://www.parkschuetzer.de) links to more than 50 websites that are associated with the protest movement and cover all sorts of topics including documentation of the art scene that has developed around the protest.

The visual network below shows the link structure of the online network. The website [www.kopfbahnhof-21.de](http://www.kopfbahnhof-21.de) is the biggest node and receives 2215 links, followed by [www.parkschuetzer.de](http://www.parkschuetzer.de) and [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com). Interestingly, the second most popular pages are [www.unternehmer-gegen-s21.de](http://www.unternehmer-gegen-s21.de) (entrepreneurs against s21) and

28 The Website [www.parkschuetzer.de](http://www.parkschuetzer.de) lists 24 of such groups.
www.gewerkschaften-gegen-s21.de (worker unions against s21). The following diagram indicates the wide and diverse protest movement that is mirrored online.

Figure 3: The online network against Stuttgart 21. The bigger the nodes, the more links they receive from other nodes in the network. Diagram created with IssueCrawler (http://www.issuecrawler.net).

3.2 Network in support of Stuttgart 21

The alliance against the protest movement is called “Wir sind Stuttgart 21” and consists of five civic organisations. Since summer 2010, the alliance has conducted many activities to support the project that range from information stands over demonstrations to collectively removing stickers of the opposition movement from public places.

The alliance runs the websites www.fuerstuttgart21.de, www.wirsindstuttgart21.de as well as the Facebook page “Für Stuttgart 21”. All of these websites serve as information portals. www.wirsindstuttgart21.de has, in addition, an online forum, in which both project supporters as well as critics lead discussions.
Figure 4: The civic network in support of Stuttgart 21. The bigger the nodes, the more links they receive from other nodes in the network. Graph created with IssueCrawler (http://www.issuecrawler.net).

4. Research Aim and Questions

In the following study, I want to analyse the online political discussion about this local protest movement on the two Facebook pages “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and “Für Stuttgart 21”. The overarching aim is to examine if and how the Facebook pages fulfil criteria of the public sphere and if and how public opinion is created. Following the line of research on online political discussion, this project contains three aspects that seem to be promising to add to the academic discussion. Firstly, the project examines a local protest movement that features polarized positions, secondly, it focuses on the social networking site Facebook, thirdly, it uses an ethnographic approach.

Research questions:

1. Which possibilities and drawbacks do social networking sites constitute in terms of political citizen discourse?
2. To what extent can the pages be described as communitarian, liberal or deliberative?
   a. To what extent do the discourses on the pages express public issue focus?
   b. Does inter- and intra-reciprocity take place on the pages?
   c. To what extent are the groups ideologically homogeneous?
   d. Is the style of discussion rational and to what extent does flaming take place?

5. Methods
As mentioned in the literature review, online communities are increasingly centred on networks rather than topics. “Rather than relying on interests or structure-based boundaries, current social groups are defined through relationships” (Boyd, 2009, 27). *Facebook* and *Twitter* are social networking sites that certainly share this characteristic. However, in this particular case, the emphasis of the study lies on people who gather around the topic Stuttgart 21 by joining the Stuttgart 21 pages29 on *Facebook*. This implies that the conducted research is not a network analysis (that means not an analysis of ‘who speaks/listens to who’), but rather the analysis of a cross-section of conversations.

In the particular technological and cultural setting of a social networking site with community characteristics, the question of adequate methodology is also of theoretical relevance. Within the last ten years, it has become more and more popular to think of the Internet not only as a technology, but also as a culture that can be studied with ethnographic principles. This methodology that authors refer to as ‘virtual ethnography’ has been used in the analysis of online communities (Sundén, 2002; Kanayama, 2003) as well as social networking sites and online issue networks (Boyd, 2007; Dirksen et al., 2010; Farnsworth & Austrin, 2010). “You can study the Internet as a form of milieu or culture in which people develop specific forms of communication or, sometimes, specific identities. Both suggest a transfer of ethnographic methods to Internet research” (Flick, 2009, 272).

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29 I use the term ‘pages’ as *Facebook* calls them, even though the terms ‘group’ or ‘community’ would be more fitting considering that these pages are used to group and interact with people that are interested in a common topic.
5.1 Methodology

5.1.1 Virtual Ethnography

Virtual ethnography uses principles of conventional ethnography like the use of a range of methods, aiming at a holistic picture of the culture, understanding daily routines, values and practices of the studied group (cf. Fetterman, 1998, 16ff). According to Christine Hine (2000, 7f), who rendered outstanding service to the adaptation of ethnography in online research, the Internet features meaningful relationships and “true sociality” that allow ethnographic approaches to online cultures and groups. If we perceive of a Facebook page as an ethnographic field, we are in better shape to not only analyse the textual content, but also to understand the social relations between the group members, the organisation of the group as well as characteristics of group culture, rituals and symbols. “Looking at what people do and talk about with others is an ideal unit for examining social behaviors, (...), and reveals aspects of groups that are not evident from aggregations of individual behaviors” (Haithornthwaite, 2005, 127).

The study presented here is an ethnography on two Facebook pages, which I call the two virtual fields. I spent one week on the two pages using several methods such as discourse analysis, interviews with group members, as well as a small-sampled quantitative content analysis in order to analyse the discussion style, interaction dynamics, interconnection between the two pages, prevalent discourses as well as the offline-online relation of the protest movement. The study is both exploratory and analytic and no hypotheses were formulated beforehand. Even though ethnography aims at a holistic picture of a culture, the study focuses on certain aspects that will be discussed below.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The two Facebook pages feature solely textual information, so what is the difference between virtual ethnography and content analysis? I argue that the difference is the theoretical assumption of Facebook being a place and a culture in itself and not solely a cultural product. Moreover, virtual ethnography can combine a range of methods as presented in this study. Certainly, content analysis plays a major role (see Fine, 2000). In this study, I conduct both a qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

The qualitative analysis is a discourse analysis that follows the discourse concept of Norman Fairclough & Ruth Wodak (1997), who advocate a critical consciousness of language practice and define critical discourse analysis as “the analysis of linguistic and
semiotic aspects of social processes and problems” (ibid., 271). Papacharissi (2009) used critical discourse analysis in the study of SNS to find out, what language individuals develop, when they “introduce, present and connect themselves” (ibid., 204). In the context of this study, critical discourse analysis is especially useful to analyse ideological inclusion and exclusion, reciprocity, the discussion style as well as the use of rational argumentation and flaming. All of these concepts will be looked at more closely in chapter 5.3.

**Quantitative Content Analysis**

The quantitative analysis in this study must be understood as complementary to the qualitative part. It was conducted in order to clarify the public issue focus of the pages and to classify the wall posts according to the topics addressed. The categories were developed inductively that means during the analysing process. This method is also described as empirical categorization (Merten, 1999, 247) and requires rather strong interpretation by the coder in order to eliminate textual ambiguities and decide about the contextual meaning of a wall post. It follows a design that Philipp Mayring (2003, 19) describes as an ‘integrative approach’ to quantitative content analysis: while the research questions, categories and instrument have been deduced qualitatively, the data can be analysed quantitatively.

**Interviews**

David Fetterman (2007, 40) describes interviews as the “ethnographer’s most important data gathering technique”. He distinguishes informal interviews from structured or semi-structured⁵⁰ interviews. Whereas the former are the most common in the fieldwork and especially when entering a field, the latter are more useful in the middle or end stages of a study.

In this study, it was possible to establish a trustful contact with one of the administrators of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”. I was able to conduct a structured interview via E-Mail with this administrator as well as to share several informal phone calls, one of them in the week before the observation, which turned out to be very useful for the actual fieldwork, and one of them right after the fieldwork. Unfortunately, it was more difficult to ‘get through’ to the administrators of the page “Für Stuttgart 21”. In the end, I was able to conduct a structured interview with an anonymous administrator of

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⁵⁰ Structured interviews follow a questionnaire with specific research goals (Fetterman, 2007, 38).
the page via Facebook with very short answers. During the fieldwork, I tried to contact some page members over Facebook and received several answers.

5.2 Sampling

The challenge in virtual ethnography is to retrace the network structure of the field and multi-sited ethnography is a common methodology to accomplish that (Farnsworth & Austrin, 2010). Kirsten Foot (2006) also speaks of a ‘Web Sphere Analysis’, a method that puts the highest emphasis on links and linking structure in an actor or issue network. This study, however, is not an actor network analysis, but an analysis of discussions in a particular virtual environment. The virtual field is thus restricted to the two Facebook pages, where the ethnography took place. The reason why I limit the field to the pages is determined by the research interest rather than by theoretical definition. “Deciding where to start and when to stop can be an intrinsic part of the ethnographer’s attempts to ensure that his or her research questions are both coherently addressed and adapted to the cultural landscape that emerges” (Hine, 2009, 2). Even though these fields are restricted (one has to actively ‘like’ the pages in order to contribute), they are not independent islands on the web. They link to a lot of other websites as well as to each other and the outgoing links have also been analysed in the study. In that regard, the fields had some web sphere characteristics.

The examination took place in the week from the 20th to the 27th of March 2011, which was the week before the federal state elections on the 27th. The time period was chosen because the conflict was supposed to play a major role in the final election campaigning as well as the voting decision. One week proved to be a time frame that allowed the investigation of social relations on the pages as well as the understanding of discussion patterns, while at the same time keeping the data to a considerable amount.

The main matters of examination were the two ‘walls’ of the pages, where the page administrators as well as page members can post short singular messages. These wall posts receive comments and ‘likes’ so that a single wall post including comments can be described as a conversation. In addition, every page has a discussion board and some additional static information such as for instance links to events, activist groups etc. The additional information (on the page they are organised as tabs in the head section of the page) was also taken into account in the research. However, main attention was paid to the wall posts, the discourses they covered, the links they contained as well as the responses they got.
For the quantitative analysis, 250 wall posts on each page were chronologically analysed beginning Monday, 20\textsuperscript{th} of March, 9 a.m. On the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, the 250 wall posts covered almost three whole days until Wednesday. On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, the 250 wall posts covered one and a half days until Tuesday morning.

5.3 Operationalisation

The gathered data in ethnographic research is usually unstructured. The aim is to get a holistic picture of a culture and especially to see things that were not asked for beforehand. That is why the applied methods such as, for instance, participant observation or interviews are usually conducted and documented in a structured way, but not coded according to a structured scheme. However, considering the particular research interest and the restricted time span, I went in the field with an instrument that I want to call the ‘research emphases’.

Overall, I focused on (1) the page structure and architecture, (2) the topics of the conversations and (3) the language used in the conversations. The main goal was at first to describe these three levels, so the organisation of the group, the topics covered as well as overall rhetoric. In addition, I applied Freelon’s indicative metrics (see figure 1) to the study. On all of these three levels, I analysed the degree of reciprocity between the groups, contestation between opposing opinions, ideological inclusion or exclusion, the use of rational arguments, the use of accusations and flaming, personal revelation, as well as contextualisation with the whole civic movements. All of these operators could be more or less retraced on the three levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page structure</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Language/Rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contestation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rationality vs. flaming</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal revelation</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contextualisation with protest movement

Figure 5: The research emphases. This form was used for coding and structuring of the data during the ethnography.

Reciprocity: Reciprocity is analysed on two levels: Firstly, how the groups deal with arguments from the opposing side and secondly, how each page deals with the other page and if there is an interaction between the pages or not.

Contestation: Contestation focuses on the direct contact of opposing arguments. I want to analyse if and how members of each position engage directly in discussions on the pages.

Ideology: As mentioned before, the conflict arose along the lines of political ideology. The question here is, how strongly the pages are ideologically shaped and to what extent a certain political orientation is presupposed for an active participation in the respective group.

Rationality vs. flaming: Papacharissi (2004, 269) describes flaming as an affront against the online etiquette that is an “offensive, nonsensical, albeit passionate online response”. On the other hand, I want to analyse to what extent rational arguments are used in the conversations and how these arguments are critically questioned.

Personal revelation: Freelon (2010, 1179) describes personal revelation as “simply disclosure of information about oneself in a public forum”. This factor is of importance especially on the thematic level, when analysing to what extent the pages feature a public issue focus.

Contextualisation: Here I want to analyse how the protest movement on the two pages puts itself in context with the whole online protest network as well as the local activities.

The quantitative analysis was conducted after the qualitative discourse analysis, which helped to understand the context and characteristics of the wall posts. After analysing and interpreting the wall posts according to their topics addressed, the data were grouped into more and more abstract categories until they could be quantified and coded. I coded every wall post with only one topic. First, I checked, if the posts name Stuttgart 21 or if they are related to the issue. If not, I formed categories that I conflated later on. Wall posts that addressed several topics were reduced to the main topic, which
was sometimes the topic that received the most feedback in the commentaries and could sometimes be determined by the context\textsuperscript{31}. The categories are sometimes not disjunct and I will point to these ambiguities in the results section. Besides this thematic analysis, quantitative analysis was applied in order to describe the wall posts formally. In sum, five variables were coded. They are: topic, links, pictures, number of commentaries and number of likes\textsuperscript{32}.

5.4 Implementation

I started the investigation with an interview with one of the page administrators in the week before the actual data collection, when I also received user and usage statistics of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”. I entered the field on Monday, 20\textsuperscript{th} of March, and spent most of the day on both of the pages, which allowed me to capture approximately 75\% of all activities on the pages. The main task was to analyse the conversations using my research emphases as orientation as well as the documentation form. I took screenshots of wall discussions that seemed to be relevant for my research emphases and I numbered the screenshots and referenced my field notes accordingly. During this process, I also sent messages to two page members and asked them about their intentions and their usage of the pages.

Having identified major discussion patterns and relations between the members, I started the quantitative part of the analysis on Thursday in the same week analysing all wall posts (the majority of which I had already analysed or at least read) according to their topics addressed and developed a category system. The whole ethnography can be pictured as followed. The arrows symbolise the process timewise. I started the fieldwork with an informal interview with one of the administrators. Then the pages were observed and the discourses analysed, while at the same time getting into contact with page members. After the discourse analysis, the quantitative analysis of 500 wall posts was conducted.

\textsuperscript{31} For example: The wall post: „Sunday are the elections. You know what that means. Put an end to Stuttgart 21 and nuclear power.” Technically, the post combines three topics: The federal state elections, Stuttgart 21 and nuclear power. However, it does not deal with the issues Stuttgart 21 or energy politics in particular, but can rather be understood as an election endorsement. That is why I would code the topic to be related to the federal state elections.

\textsuperscript{32} The Codebook is part of this paper in the appendix.
6. Results

This chapter shows the results of the ethnography. The results will be analysed and put into theoretical context in the next chapter. Here, I want to gather and structure the results according to the research questions.

6.1 User- and Usage-Statistics

The usage-statistics were gathered by Facebook Insights, an integrated tracking tool for page administrators provided by Facebook. The first diagrams show the total number of Facebook users, who like the page, and their activity on the page over time. Both pages were launched on the 1st of September 2010 and extended their member base exponentially after the escalation of the conflict on the 30th of September 2010. The page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” raised its members from 27,666 to 89,546 members within one month. After that, the page grew slower until it reached a saturation around the 100,000 member mark. The same applies for the page “Für Stuttgart 21” although the page gathered a lot of members in the week before the federal state elections, when the rate of new members jumped up to 1000 new members per day for almost a week. The page crossed the 100,000 members mark already in October 2010 and was able to gather more than 140,000 members in the sum.

The activity of the page members is heavily dependent on the status posts by the administrators. This is especially striking on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”. The activity of the page members has been increasingly unsteady after the end of the last year. This can mainly be explained with a change of wall post strategy of the page administrators. Facebook Insights defines activity of members not only by page visits, but also by their responses to wall posts. Wall posts that are written by page administrators do not only
appear on the wall of the particular page, but also in the news stream of every page member. Andreas Bühler, one of the administrators of the page, speaks of a conscious change of strategy. In the beginning, the administrators posted up to three wall posts a day in order to spread information about the protest. After the 30th of September, they restricted themselves to a maximum of two posts a day and decided to only share certain information. Then they reduced the number of wall posts again. “Around the turn of the year, more and more users jumped off after posts. That is why we tried to reduce the frequency of the posts to every two or three days. If there were really relevant news, we still posted daily.” (Andreas Bühler, Administrator of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”).

The same ups and downs in page activity can be seen on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”. Here, the difference in activity is even more dependent on the administrator’s posts. The standard deviation of active members on this page is about 6000 members higher compared to the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”.

The diagrams show how similar the respective developments of daily comments and ‘likes’ are over time on the two pages. The numbers can also be explained with the posting strategies. However, they even more correlate with the events and the general media discourse about the conflict. The first peaks can be explained with the media attention that was caused by the events around the 30th of September. The next peaks can be put into context with the arbitration ending with the call of the arbitration statement on November, 30th. The last peak occurred on the date of the federal state elections on the 27th of March.

Unfortunately, Facebook Insights does not allow a correct measuring of the overall number of wall posts posted on a page per day, because the program does not identify wall posts that contain links or pictures. Therefore, it is not possible to provide comparative diagrams as for the other parameters.
Figure 7: The development of page members, daily active members, daily comments and daily “Likes” on the pages “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and “Für Stuttgart 21” from the 1st of September 2010 to the beginning of April 2011.
The presented diagrams resemble each other strongly, but there are yet some remarkable differences concerning the page usage. Even though the page “Für Stuttgart 21” was continually up in page members, the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” has a slightly higher average of active members (KEIN Stuttgart 21: 28 077; Für Stuttgart 21: 27 717). The average numbers of daily comments and “likes” are remarkably higher on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”.

A significant difference is also obvious in the demographic constitution of the pages. The page “Für Stuttgart 21” has more male members and is generally younger compared to the other group. On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, women and men are almost evenly represented. The age structure of the group is slightly older than the overall Facebook average in Germany. The users over 34 years are slightly overrepresented. 30.6 % of the page members are older than 34 years, whereas this age group makes up only 24% of German Facebook users (state April 2011). Even though age plays no role in the group and among the group members, the profile pictures suggest that many people over 34 years of age take part in the page activities.

Average daily “Likes” “Für Stuttgart 21”: 1871; Average daily “Likes” “KEIN Stuttgart 21”: 2341; Average daily comments “Für Stuttgart 21”: 1779; Average daily comments “KEIN Stuttgart 21”: 1952 in the time frame September 2010 to April 2011

http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/germany [27/05/2011]
Figure 8: The age structure of the groups divided by male and female. Unknown users are not included. State: 18th of March 2011, n = 136 002; n = 97 783.

6.2 Thematic Analysis

To understand the discourses on the walls of the pages, the week of the data collection has to be put into the context of the events that happened during and before that date. There were several events that influenced the discussions of the week strikingly. First of all, the federal elections were approaching, for which the Stuttgart 21-opponents had high hopes. Secondly, the catastrophe around the nuclear power plant ‘Fukushima’ that occurred after the earthquake and tsunami in Japan on March 11th was heavily discussed during that week. Thirdly, on the weekend before the data collection, the federal elections in the state ‘Saxony-Anhalt’ had taken place.

The events around Fukushima influenced the German energy policy strongly. After extending the life-span of nuclear energy in Germany in autumn, the government announced a moratorium of the extension and shut down seven of the oldest nuclear power plants immediately after the incident in Japan, two of them in the state Baden-Württemberg. This was relevant for the federal state elections in Baden-Württemberg. Not only has the biggest opposition party Die Grünen always been against the use of nuclear power, Stefan Mappus, head of the federal state government (“Ministerpräsident of Baden-Württemberg”), has always greatly supported nuclear energy and played an important role in the extension of the use of nuclear power. The events in Fukushima and the u-turn in energy politics by Chancellor Angela Merkel and the federal government hit him right during the election campaign35. Political commentators agreed after the elections that the energy policy was the main topic that had cost him the elections and lead to the first “green” Ministerpräsident in Germany. This is backed by a study of Infratest dimap and ARD, which states that 45% of the voters declared environmental- and energy policy as the most important topic in the elections36. In the elections on the 27th of March, Die Grünen received 24,2% of the votes and came second after Mappus’ CDU (39%) followed by SPD (23,1%) and FDP (5,3%). Grüne and SPD were thus able to form a coalition so that, now for the first time in the history of the state, the CDU is not in power.

The federal state elections in Saxony-Anhalt played a subordinated role on the pages during that week even though they had taken place on the weekend right before the data collection. Only 6 of 500 wall posts dealt with this topic.

Concerning the actual conflict about the station, a demonstration with between 18 000 (official number by the police) and 60 000 (number published by the organisers) participants took place on the Saturday before the data collection. The demonstration was also officially directed against nuclear power. On Monday, the 20th, the alliance against Stuttgart 21 gave a collection of 35 000 signatures for a referendum to the city mayor. A similar petition had been denied before.

6.2.1 Topics on the Pages
The most important topics that were addressed in the wall posts were Stuttgart 21, the upcoming federal state elections as well as the debate about the use of nuclear power and energy policy in general. Both Stuttgart 21 and energy policy were crucial for the federal state elections, however, according to the coding, a wall post addressed the elections only in case it dealt explicitly with the event such as for instance endorsing a party, pointing to election campaign events, commenting on the election campaigning, commenting on opinion polls for the election or posting media commentaries on the upcoming elections.

Comparing the two pages, it is striking that the page “Für Stuttgart 21” was more issue-centred, whereas the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” showed a bigger variety of topics. In the description of the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, the administrators state that posts that are not related to S21 might be deleted. The page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” does not have such a restriction. Energy policy was highly discussed on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” with a clear bias against the use of nuclear power, whereas the topic played a minor role on the other page. 33 of 250 wall posts on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” addressed the nuclear power debate, while for instance pointing to protest events against nuclear power (7 posts) or discussing the energy policy of the federal state government (12 posts).

Both pages addressed the current federal state government (which was at that time still a coalition of CDU and FDP) in several wall posts by means of criticism on the “KEIN Stuttgart 21”-page and general statements to “keep up the good work” on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”. Facebook was addressed surprisingly often either in self-reference to the group for example by commenting on the number of page members or links to other Facebook pages.
Both pages had some posts that featured general political positions and were not explicitly linked to Stuttgart 21 or any other political issue. On the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, 10 posts discredited the party Die Grünen on a general level, whereas the other group featured criticism of party politics in general (4 posts) as well as of elites (2 posts).

Figure 9: The topics addressed on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” in %. n = 250.
The actual issue Stuttgart 21 was of course the main topic on both pages. While analysing the posts that dealt with the conflict around the central station, the focus was particularly on whether or not people used concrete arguments that advocated the building of the station or that dismissed it. Stuttgart 21 and the protest around the topic were discussed very differently on the two pages this is why different categories were chosen. The following figures 11 and 12 can thus not be compared to each other.

On both pages, 38% of the posts that addressed Stuttgart 21 contained argumentation for or against the station or discussed detailed questions about the project such as, for instance, the inclination of railway tracks, legal aspects of a referendum or questions of project funding. The protest movement was also a matter of discussion on both pages.

One third of all posts on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” informed about, commented on or mobilised for protest activities that took place during that time. On the other page, the protest activities were also heavily discussed. However, the page members did not only debate about the activities of the protest movement, but also about the protest movement as such, the manners of its members and how the protest presented itself publicly. Those posts were biased and discredited the protest movement, for instance, as undemocratic, subversive and terrifying.

Seven of the 250 posts on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and two of the posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” quoted posts from the other page. Those posts received a lot of feedback on both pages. The 9 posts received in average 14,1 comments whereas the overall average of comments to a wall post was 3,9 on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and 6,9 on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”.

Interestingly, 8% of the 250 posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” featured criticism towards the media coverage of the conflict especially directed against the largest regional newspaper Stuttgarter Zeitung. Most of these posts claimed that Stuttgarter Zeitung had a bias towards the project critics. However, the newspaper was subject to criticism even on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”.
Figure 11: The discussion of the issue Stuttgart 21 on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” divided by topic in %. n = 133.

Figure 12: The discussion of the issue Stuttgart 21 on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” divided by topic in %. n = 102.
6.2.3 Likes, Comments, Links
During the time of the data collection, more posts were written on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”. However, the posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” received more commentaries on average. 78 posts of the 250 on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” received no comments at all, whereas on the other page this applied only to 38 posts. In terms of ‘likes’ there was no difference between the pages. All posts received around 6,5 likes on average. It is hard to identify any correlation between the comments and the topics addressed, only that wall posts which were self-referential to the Facebook page received less comments on average.

There was a huge difference between the pages in terms of including links in the wall posts. Almost two thirds of all wall posts on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” contained a link to an external website. Often, the same links were posted at different times just to keep the stream updated. The page can thus almost be described as a publishing platform. The most common domain that received links from the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” was www.facebook.com followed by www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de, www.youtube.com and www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de. Other popular media outlets such as www.stern.de or www.spiegel.de received several links as well. The remainder of the links split up on minor news websites as well as websites from the protest network (among those most prominently the website www.bei-abriss-aufstand.de, which received six links). In comparison, only 67 posts of the 250 analysed wall posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” contained a link.

Figure 13: The use of linking in wall posts on the two pages in %. n = 250 each.

To summarize this part, three interesting points have to be stated: Firstly, the wall posts featured a wide variety of topics, especially in the group against Stuttgart 21. This is partly a mirror of the protest movement in general, which can rather be described as a political movement than an issue network. On the topic Stuttgart 21, it is striking that
the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” is rather self-referential, whereas the group “Für Stuttgart 21” refers very much to the protest movement and its activities, but considering that the alliance in support of Stuttgart 21 was founded in reaction to the protest movement, this may not come as a surprise. In other words: The page would probably not exist, if there was not a countermovement.

Secondly, it is interesting that the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” received more posts in the time of the data collection, however the posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” received more comments on average. Finally, the high number of links posted on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” is remarkable, when comparing the two pages.

6.3 Reciprocity and Contestation

One of the research aims was to find out to what extent contradictory arguments and opinions were discussed on the two pages and how the pages dealt with each other.

6.3.1 Architecture

The “Info”-Tabs of the two pages both link only to biased websites such as www.kopfbahnhof-21.de, www.parkschuetzer.de, www.stuttgarterappell.de on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” or www.fuerstuttgart21.de, www.prostuttgart21.de and www.stuttgart21-kommt.de on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”. There are no links to neutral or contradictory websites. Contradictory opinions can thus only be expressed either as a wall post, a commentary to a wall post or a discussion post on the discussion board.

The page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” states in the section ‘Company Overview’ that the page is a meeting place for everyone who is against Stuttgart 21. The page “Für Stuttgart 21” states that the page should provide a constructive atmosphere of dialogue on the basis of supporting Stuttgart 21. The design of the pages is thus to cater for a community of like-minded people rather than discussing the issue from different perspectives.

However, both administrators stated in their e-mails that there is still a dialogue between supporters and critics on each page.

6.3.2 Arguments

The discussed issues on the two pages were very similar and often links to the same newspaper articles were posted. However, the discussion and commentaries to the issues were of course completely opposing. The collection of signatures that was handed

37 The section is named by Facebook. Obviously, the pages do not belong to any company.
to the city mayor of Stuttgart on Monday, the 21\textsuperscript{st} of March, was posted and discussed several times on both walls. On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, this was seen as a symbolic event that showed the broad criticism against the project among the citizens of Stuttgart, whereas on the other page, the event was mainly discussed under legal aspects accusing the alliance against Stuttgart 21 to raise expectations with the referendum, which could never be fulfilled.

On the same day, Die Grünen released their own stress test of the new station plans stating that the capacity of the new station would be insufficient. The study was discussed on both pages from completely different points of view. On the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, the commentaries pointed to a lack of competence on the side of Die Grünen and discredited the study as an obvious manoeuvre in the election campaign (“Durchsichtiges Wahlkampfmanöver”). On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, the study was seen as a new argument against the construction of the station.

This shows that both pages were indeed well-informed about the arguments of the other party and even talked about it. However, the discussion was one-sided and advocated mostly one opinion only. Especially the page “Für Stuttgart 21” was very much oriented towards the activists and in particular their behaviour and the supposedly aggressive appearance of the protest movement in general. Some members of both pages seemed to follow the other page as passive readers and referred to the other page with “over there” (“drüben”). Among the sample of the quantitative analysis, 6 wall posts on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” as well as 2 wall posts on the page “Für Stuttgart 21” picked up discussions from the other page and sometimes even featured screenshots of the particular posts. The commentaries to these posts were harsh and in one case, members of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” even thought of legal steps against a member of the other page.

6.3.3 Discussion
Discussions that featured opposing arguments were rare, however, they occurred from time to time. It seemed that they would rather take place on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, that means that members of the other page would ‘come over’ to leave a comment. One of the supporters of Stuttgart 21 was already well-known to the community on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and his comments were dealt with sceptically or sometimes ironically. In a private message, he revealed that he consciously chose to get in contact with the project critics and that he understood his role not to be provoking, but instead
to de-escalate. According to the page administrators of “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, discussions between supporters and critics have often escalated and ended in verbal bashing. As a result, the administrators had developed a netiquette and started banning members from the page, who behaved inappropriately. According to the administrators, they enforced these new rules very strictly against supporters of S21. Regardless of how page members dealt with opposing arguments, it was obvious on both pages that members with contradicting opinions were considered not to ‘belong to the group’, but to be strangers, who ‘came over’ from the other page.

During the observation, some discussions could be found, which did feature opposing arguments. However, they were not about the issue Stuttgart 21. In one case, a page member argued for the energy policy of his favoured party FDP on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” and received a lot of criticism.

An explanation for the lack of rational discussion about the issue S21 could be the time of the study. After such a long debate about the station, everybody had probably already formed her/his opinion. In one wall post, a member of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” even encouraged the page members to ignore the supporters of the project and to rather turn to those, who are still undecided. Unlike the experiences of the page administrators, the discussions that featured opposing arguments were less insulting towards the counterparts than some of the other wall posts at least during that week.

It can be summarized that both groups talked about each other, but not really with each other. There seemed to be many members, who followed both pages, thus, a controversial discussion seemed to be theoretically possible. However, instead of commenting on the posts on the page, they took the input to their own page and discussed it there, but not always in a rational or persuasive way.

6.4 Ideology

6.4.1 KEIN Stuttgart 21

Out of the four administrators of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, one is active for Die Grünen, one stands close to the local political group SÖS (ecological and social Stuttgart) and one is part of the protest group ‘Aktive Parkschützer’, who forms a rather radical part of the protest movement. Yet, the page was created independently and under a private initiative and until now there has never been an official commissioning by the alliance against Stuttgart 21 regarding the page. Even though the alliance against
Stuttgart 21 consists of political parties and other organisations with agendas that go beyond the issue Stuttgart 21, the protest movement has attracted people from all political camps and opposition to the project has been found in all political parties, but mostly among members of Die Grünen and Die Linke. According to the administrators, left-liberal and environmentalist ideas are prevalent on the page, which was proved for instance by the strong position against nuclear power that was expressed even before the catastrophe in Fukushima and the broad support of Die Grünen, when discussing the upcoming federal state elections. In addition, the page members criticised the former Ministerpräsident Stefan Mappus and the federal state government strongly hoping for a change of governments. 4 of the 250 analysed wall posts discredited Mappus personally. The ideological consensus along the lines of energy and federal state politics was evident.

However, there were wall posts that showed ideological heterogeneity. Especially the military intervention in Libya was discussed controversially on the page and even created an alliance between one supporter of S21 and some opponents. Also interesting was the fact that the social democrats (SPD) were completely missing in the discussions on the wall. Among the parties who support Stuttgart 21, the members of the social democrats were the most critical. Even in December 2010, when the project reached its highest acceptance in the opinion polls, still almost 40% of the SPD partisans were against the project. However, the only sign of the SPD on the page were two other pages that the page likes (“SPDler gegen S21” & “SPD-Wähler gegen S21”). Even though it can be assumed that voters of the SPD were members of the page, they did not reveal their party preference.

6.4.2 Für Stuttgart 21

According to the page administrators, the page is designed as a forum above party lines and supporters of S21 can be found in every political party. In fact, the page appeared to be far less ideologically shaped compared to the other one. This was showcased by a wall post against Die Grünen, which received more than 70 comments within one hour. The wall post featured the headline “Die Grünen, no thanks!” and described in drastic rhetoric, why the party is not able to bring the country forward. The first reply to the post came from the page administrators who encouraged the page members to do less

“party-bashing” even in times of election campaigning and instead focus more on the issue S21. The following comments featured all kinds of positions from “green” S21-supporters, who complained about the political exploitation of the page, over a general discussion about environmentalist ideas to posts that agreed with the initial party criticism. The discussion even developed into a debate about nuclear power and revealed controversial positions there. After a while, the administrators emphasised again that they do not want any party politics on the page. This is only one example that showed ideological ambiguities. Other wall posts exposed discontent with Ministerpräsident Mappus or the governing parties.

However, there was still an overall bias against Die Grünen which was just not as strong as the support of Die Grünen on the other page. A strong consensus existed concerning the image of the protest movement that was pictured as undemocratic, hostile and dangerous, as well as concerning the importance of the economic strength of Baden-Württemberg. Moreover, members expressed pride in their federal state and showed a high degree of local patriotism. Interestingly, the page displayed a harsh media critique mainly directed against Stuttgarter Zeitung presuming biased conflict coverage as well as an infiltration by the project critics.

6.4.3 Rhetoric

Inclusion and exclusion from the pages could be retraced by the accusations and nicknames that the members of the pages had for the opposing groups. Especially on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, the members of the protest movement were called very harsh names. One expression that appeared to be rather standard, when speaking of members of the protest movement was “Keintologen” – a blend of the words “Kein” (KEIN Stuttgart 21) and “scientology” as an ironic reference to the naïve faith the protest movement put into the protest. Die Grünen as well as Die Linke were called “communists” several times and were accused of making “propaganda” (a term that has a strong negative connotation in German) as well as of “agitating” (“hetzen”). On the other hand, Die Grünen were described as romantic dreamers, who “want to trade economic strength for bonfire romantic”. In one case, someone named Die Grünen “left-fascists”, but the person remained isolated.

On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, especially Stefan Mappus was the target of name-giving and it could be considered as standard not to call him by his name, but by one of his nicknames, for instance “fatso” (“Fettsack”), “beet face” (“Steckrübengesicht”) or “Don
Mappioso”, a reference to the common accusation on the page of him acting on the very edge of democratic legitimation. There were no particular names for the members of the supporter page and they were most often referred to as “Pro’ler”. However, some pointed to a “hate campaign” on the other page and in another post, users made fun of an exaggerated fear that the other page displayed towards the protest movement.

6.5 Rationality and Discussion Style

According to Habermas’ Communicative Rationality, the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments is the most promising way of coming to a consensus and rational decision-making (Mouffe, 1999, 6). The discourse analysis at hand looks at how arguments were used in the discussions on the walls and if the discussions strove towards a consensus.

Arguments for or against Stuttgart 21 were generally commonly used on both pages. Among all posts that dealt with the issue Stuttgart 21, 38% of the posts on each page contained arguments for or against the project or expressed factual arguing, which could also be information on the project in general. On the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, one link was shared several times which led to a speech by one of the actors in the alliance against S21, in which he recites 60 lies about Stuttgart 21. The link was often shared with the comment to use it in order to convince people to join the protest movement. Several times users requested information on the protest or particular questions concerning the project. The members on both pages reacted quite critically to flawed conclusions. In one case, a member of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” stated that the radioactivity measured in the south of Germany was slightly raised. He received the criticism that this was an inappropriate comment and had by no means any connection to the Fukushima-catastrophe.

As mentioned, discussions that exchanged arguments and counterarguments were rare. When they did take place, these kinds of discussion often escalated according to the administrators of the page, who stated that a factual exchange took only place in 25% of the cases. This rate was higher during the ethnography and most of the contributions still received at least one serious reply. In fact, the discussions seemed to be more fact-based, when a counter-position was involved.

The reaction to counter-arguments depended very much on the rhetoric used. In one case, a user asked the group “KEIN Stuttgart 21” in a wall post “what their problem is?” and stated that there were, in his opinion, far more important issues than a central
station in some city. This comment triggered a storm of outrage about his unqualified comment and only when he clarified that he was actually interested in “their problem”, he received some factual arguments against the station. One of the users on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, who was known for his opposing position, mentioned in a private message that he consciously tried not to formulate his comments in a way that could cause personal affront. However, his profile seemed to be a fake profile not featuring any personal information at all, a typical characteristic of ‘trolls’.

6.5.1 Flaming & Trolling
Flaming took place on both pages, but it was not mainly directed against other page members, but against politicians or actors and members of the protest movement in general. In the description of the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, it says that the page is not meant to be a place of agitation against the other group. However, the rhetoric was oftentimes rather rough. There were several references to Nazi-Germany and the Third Reich between the lines of the posts, which would start for instance with statements such as “there was another time in Germany, when people just followed their leaders without reasoning...”. In one case, a member of the page “Für Stuttgart 21” pointed to the linguistic similarity of the names “Gangolf” and “Adolf” referring to Gangolf Stocker, one of the protest leaders. Posts like that also appeared on the other page. In one case, a member referred to Mappus as a baton-nazi (“Schlagstocknazi”). Those posts, however, remained isolated and in one case, a user complained about this rhetoric. Generally, people were aware of the language that should be used and if users broke these rules, other users reprimanded them. Considering the extreme polarisation of the conflict, flaming did, overall, not happen all that often.

Herring et al. (2002, 372) define trolling as a contribution in a forum that “entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions”. According to Herring et al., trolls aim at triggering a high amount of responses by posting an incorrect, but not necessarily controversial, message. Generally trolls are more common on Internet discussion boards, where they take advantage of their anonymity. Because of the lack of anonymity, trolls are not common on SNS.

Both pages tended to discredit wall posts with opposing opinions as trolling and the mentioned S21-supporter on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” was called a “professional troll” by one of the page members. However, during the ethnography, no wall post could be identified as obvious trolling according to the definition by Herring et al.
6.6 Contextualisation with the Whole Movement

Even though there has never been an official commissioning, the administrators of the group “KEIN Stuttgart 21” think of the page as the official protest page. According to the administrators, the alliance against Stuttgart 21 underestimated SNS as a marketing instrument, so the administrators filled this gap in a private initiative.

The Facebook page, in cooperation with the alliance against S21, organised the “KEIN Stuttgart 21”-day on the 5th of March. The event followed the lead of the “No-Berlusconi-Day”, a Facebook-event in Italy, and featured mass rallies in almost all of the 70 electoral districts of Baden-Württemberg on the same day. For that reason, the page administrators worked together with the alliance and other protest groups.

The page organised several offline-meetings before demonstrations that attracted between 20 to 120 page members. The page administrators stated also that page members got in contact with each other through the page and met offline. Several wall posts on both pages during the ethnography suggested such offline-meetings. In one case, a member of the page “Für Stuttgart 21” proposed a meeting of the page members after the federal state elections in order to “get to know the people behind the Fb-profiles” and it was also common to invite people to party events or protest activities.

The relation of the page “Für Stuttgart 21” with the alliance for S21 did not become sufficiently clear in this study. Even though the press officer of the alliance seemed to be responsible for the page, the administrators stated that it is not formally intertwined with the alliance.

7. Discussion

The results provide a broad picture of the two pages, which show great similarities in certain aspects as well as essential differences. In this chapter, I want to sharpen this picture, while relating the pages to the theoretical dimension of the paper that is Freelon’s model of online political discussion as well as the concept of the public sphere.

7.1 Public Issue Focus

One of the key variables in public sphere theory is the public issue focus. Since both pages deal with the public issue Stuttgart 21, both pages clearly focus on topics of public concern. The amount of links to media articles accounts for a general dependence on public discourses related to the topic. In fact, the activity on the pages correlated even
with the media discourse about the topic S21 (see figure 7). 80 of the 163 links posted on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” referred to media services such as newspapers or TV and radio broadcasters. Interestingly, the variety of public issues appeared to be much broader compared to the other page.

There is no obvious reason for discussing topics other than S21 on a page that is dedicated to S21. However, such discussions seemed to be very normal and, unlike on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, members did not complain about ‘off-topic’ wall posts. Remarkable, though, is the fact that the members mainly discussed those topics that featured a fairly strong consensus of opinion among the members of the page. Even though the military intervention in Libya and the developments in the nuclear power plant Fukushima shared about the same amount of attention in the mainstream media, the intervention in Libya did not play any role in the page discussions. That could point to a general tendency to avoid provocative wall posts.

The same could be the reason for the smaller variety of topics on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”. If a simple wall post about Die Grünen creates a controversial discussion, it is unlikely to find consensus regarding any other ideologically shaped topic.

7.2 Ideological Homophily
This leads to the question to what extent the two groups count as ideological entities – or ‘enclaves’ (Sunstein, 2001) – after all. The discourses on the pages that were not related to S21 were over all consensual. Controversial topics were rare. However, the ideological shape of the page “Für Stuttgart 21” was blurry in comparison to the other group. Up to the federal state elections, the main consensus was the support of S21 and the disagreement with the protest movement. After the elections, it seemed that the group became more political in terms of an overall identification with conservative politics, industrial-near policies and the opposition to the new coalition.

The page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” displayed a higher degree of ideological homogeneity, which goes along with the characteristic of the protest movement that has always also been a protest against the political style of the right-wing federal state government. Topics such as energy policies showed a high identification with “green” topics and politics.

When it comes to the issue S21, the ideological homophily is remarkable on both pages. That is already partly implied by the names of the pages in combination with the act of ‘liking’ a page in order to become a member. However, it is striking that the pages keep
co-existing without actually interacting with each other. Unlike the findings of Kelly et al. (2005), who found out that the strongest conversational links in USENET-groups are across political divides, the members of the Facebook pages do not take the opportunity to actively take part in the discussions on the other page and according behaviour was sometimes even disregarded as trolling.

7.3 Deliberative Indicators
Even though both pages display public issue focus and a considerable number of factual discussions, the lack of opposing arguments on each page makes it hard to define any of the pages as deliberative. It is striking that the two camps talk only about each other and not with each other on their Facebook pages. The pages provide no opportunity for opinion-making, but request a biased opinion and identification with the protest/supporter movement in order to take actively part in the discussions. It is hard to say if the scepticism towards the members of the other page is a result of or a reason for the lack of interaction with each other. According to Mendelberg (2002, 157), “discussion between antagonistic groups can play an important role in reducing intergroup conflict and bias”. The Facebook pages do not provide this function and are generally not interested in negotiating between the two camps, but only in supporting one of it. It is crucial that the members of the pages are striving for cognitive consonance and there is a tendency of “filtering out” (Lev-Ov & Manin, 2009, 107) opposing views by not taking them seriously or discrediting them right away.

However, the simultaneity of the wall streams on both pages increases the probability of accessing opposing arguments. The opposing views are often only one click away. Unlike research on ideologically homogenous blog clusters (Lev-On & Manin, 2009, 112f), the links on the two pages provide a heterogeneous hyperlinked space that aims at keeping the page members up to date rather than advocating certain views. Especially links to the same newspaper articles lead to closeness to opposing views. Mutz & Martin (2001, 95) point out “that individuals are exposed to far more dissimilar political views via news media than through interpersonal political discussants”. However, in this case, it is rather interpersonal discussion on news media websites, which serve this purpose.
One example: An article from *Stuttgarter Zeitung*\(^{39}\) that was simultaneously linked on both pages received 244 commentaries in the commentary section on the newspaper’s website. The commentary section featured a highly factual discussion with opposing views and arguments that went on for over a whole week. It is not said that the discussants on the newspaper’s website came from the Facebook pages, however, this mere piece of online deliberation was accessible from both pages within only one click.

Many other newspaper articles concerning the issue received high amounts of commentaries that featured opposing views.

This shows that there is a general will to discuss the topic online in a controversial setting, however, the Facebook pages are not able to provide this opportunity. The assumed bias on the pages forbids an equal and undominated discussion that is, according to Habermas’ discourse ethics, crucial for rational-critical discourses (Blaug, 1999, 11). The pages seem to be, what Fraser calls “parallel discursive arenas” (1990, 67) that collect, gather and comfort certain argumentations and essential views.

Inter-ideological reciprocity and inter-ideological questioning is, according to Freelon (2010), crucial for deliberative online discussion. Concluding from the analysis and the discussion so far, this is not prominent on the pages, especially when we (as Freelon demands) exclude flaming and insulting posts. More interesting here is the aspect of contestation. Fraser (1990), Papacharissi (2002) and Dahlberg (2007) emphasise the democratic potential of contestation and conflict rather than consensus. The discussions that actually included opposing views can be read under this aspect. Participants were more likely to point out differences between the views than striving to a compromise or even consensus. The page members created very obvious ‘we-them dichotomies’. Especially on the page “Für Stuttgart 21”, the members put emphasise on distancing themselves from the protest movement and to create a stereotypical picture of the movement for instance by ascribing personality traits to the movement or inventing nicknames such as “Keintologen”. Even though flaming occurred not as frequently as one might expect (surely also due to a lack of interaction in general), name-calling and cynicism was a common way to set one’s own group apart from the other. Both pages showed a strong dogmatism.

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7.4 Communitarian Indicators

It is certainly no surprise that the pages have strong communitarian characteristics. Simply the fact that there are two pages on Facebook suggests the hypothesis of opposing groups of like-minded. The ideological homophily, the lack of opposing views and aspects of group identification display very closed interest groups that have an undeliberative self-understanding. These results are in line with former research on virtual communities for instance presented by Sunstein (2001). Identification with the aims of the groups is the entrance ticket to participation and more important than recruiting undecided members or convincing people with opposing views. The group identity creates a warm, homely atmosphere and close relationships between the page members that is only occasionally disturbed by “outsiders” with opposing views. Lev-On & Manin (2009, 111) consider this characteristic as typical for virtual communities, “where members are aware of their common group membership but may be otherwise anonymous to one another”.

However, there are some differences between the two pages. The page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” can be described as more communitarian. On the one hand, the page members show a higher ideological homogeneity, which manifests itself in the range of discussed topics as well as the political party orientation. On the other hand, the page is used to mobilise people to take part in demonstrations and other events (and even organising events themselves such as the “KEIN Stuttgart 21”-day in March). In relation to the other page, it also appears to be much more aim-oriented, which is no surprise considering that the protest movement aims at getting rid of the planned station, whereas the supporters do not particularly aim at anything, but rather want to express their support.

This favours the hypothesis that even though the page “Für Stuttgart 21” has a broader member base, the other page features a denser network and stronger sustainability. The hypothesis is backed by the usage data of the page that shows a higher activity on the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21”, despite a smaller member base. According to Ronfeldt & Arquilla (2001, 324 cited in Pickard, 2006), a network “is sustained by a winning story and a well-defined doctrine, and in which all this is layered atop advanced communication systems and rests on strong personal and social ties at the base”. The dense local offline structure of the movement and the public manifestation of the protest through demonstrations and camps in the park around Stuttgart castle makes the
network more tangible and points to public-private dichotomies in the description of the protest.

7.5 Liberal Indicators
Even though the protest/supporter movement was not part of the analysis as such, it is necessary to put the Facebook pages into the context of the whole movement. Considering that the supporting citizens were far less public/visible during most of the conflict (the official actors of course were), the Facebook page “Für Stuttgart 21” fulfils a slightly different function that seems to aim more at legitimating rather than advocating. In fact, the former federal state minister Mappus mentioned the group in an interview with the news magazine Focus in September 2010 as an indicator for the acceptance of the project\(^4\). The privateness of the supporters points to Papacharissi’s (2010) description of networked activism. Facebook offers the opportunity for supporters to express their opinion in a private or semi-public environment, without having to join an institutionalised network or to protest in the streets. This applies even more to those page members, who joined the page, but have not actively taken part in discussions.

Missing ideological preconditions and a clear issue focus lower the entrance barriers to the group, an observation, that is according to Bennett (2003), typical for post-modern protest movements. He points out that the “sentiment of ‘anti-ism’ is strong”, however, “‘ideology’ here functions more at the level of a shared normative perspectives on particular issues”. Being aware of the fact that the two Facebook pages do not represent the two movements in their sum, I argue that the page “Für Stuttgart 21” can be attributed with rather individualistic characteristics and that the barriers to join the page are lower considering that there are only two crucial positions necessary: the support of S21 and protest against the protest. This could provide an explanation for the higher number of page members.

To summarize this part, it can be stated that even though both pages are focused on public issues, none of the pages can be described as deliberative due to the lack of reciprocity. Both of the pages are clearly communitarian, whereas the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” represents a denser community due to the higher amount of ideological homogeneity and a higher degree of mobilisation and general will to physical action.

Facebook and especially the pages-function allows for identity politics (Papacharissi, 2010) or lifestyle politics (Bennett, 2003) due to the easy way of expressing one’s political statement. This is certainly the case on both of the pages, whereas the page “Für Stuttgart 21” features a higher degree of individualism in the sense of Freelon’s liberal-individualistic model due to weaker ideological preconditions and a stronger issue focus.

7.6 The Digital Public Sphere in a Radical Democracy

The description of the two pages backs the fragmentation hypothesis. Even though both pages deal with public issues, they build up small interest groups that lack cohesion. However, the question remains to what extent this affects the public sphere and how this picture can be integrated in public sphere theory.

One of the main fears of the fragmentation pessimists is that society loses the common ground to decide on political topics. The analysis shows that the common ground is prominently given in the examined case. Both pages monitor the media environment of the topic and review media commentary carefully. Unlike the fear of Sunstein or Lev-On & Manin, the mainstream media serve as an important reference and ensure that both camps know about the arguments that exist in the elite discourse – if they promote their own view or not.

The analysis shows that the pages have an important informatory function, a factor that is not included in Freelon’s model. Asked for the importance of the page for the whole protest movement, one of the administrators of the page “KEIN Stuttgart 21” answered that the page is the “news ticker of the movement”. In fact, the analysis showed that especially in this group, members shared a large number of links and monitored almost the complete German media landscape. However, it is not only about information sharing, but also about reading media commentary together and discussing it in a community of like-minded. It is, thus, not the case that the pages sealed themselves off from opposing views. While being aware of the counter-arguments and movements, they choose to keep the discussion about them closed and one-sided.

On Facebook, both pages build semi-public enclaves, however, that does not mean that the members of the pages would not build a common public on other online occasions such as, for instance, the commentary section of major news websites. The discussed example above from Stuttgarter Zeitung shows that discourses can become
controversial and two-sided, when they happen on neutral and public ground. This interpretation leads to Fraser’s (1990, 68) perception of counterpublics, which on the one hand function as a base of identification and group-building and on the other hand as a “training ground” for the bigger discourse outside the comfort zone.

Fraser’s analysis is focused on marginalised groups, who miss the access or the ability to take part in the main discourse, a characteristic that does not apply to the researched case. Neither are the groups ‘resource-low’, nor can any of the sides unequivocally be described as the dominant opinion in this very complex conflict. While the members of the protest movement might perceive of themselves as the marginalised citizens, who have to fight against political and economical elites, the supporters might perceive of themselves as victims of biased media coverage and local campaigning. However, Downey (2007, 117) makes the point that counter-publics do not have to be composed of subalterns, but “may possess capital and cultural capital”. The main point is that they line up for radical change to society.

What is important here is that two differing groups exist that both share the same cultural input and discursive ground. In her work on an agonistic public sphere, Chantal Mouffe (2005) emphasises the need for confrontation of opposing political views in order to fight political apathy and support participation. “Consensus is needed on the institutions that are constitutive of democracy (…), but there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning and methods of implementing those values. In a pluralist democracy, such disagreement should be considered legitimate and indeed welcome” (ibid., 125). The analysed case does very much display such a radical democratic scenario, especially if we consider the pages not as marginalised group against a dominant political opinion, but as passionate exponents of citizen opinions. Dahlgren for instance argues: “Her [Mouffe’s] vision of a pluralistic democracy (...) emphasizes not only that subject positions change and evolve according to contingencies, but also that identities in the context of democratic engagement are rooted in antagonisms with other groups – ever-shifting we-they constellations” (Dahlgren, 2007, 61).

Mouffe’s and Dahlgren’s positive attitude towards fragmentation evolves from their wish to increase citizen engagement with politics. According to them, opposing opinions cultivate a more emotional and passionate political environment, where people feel
eager to make their point and not disencouraged by the rule of the best (and most rational) argument. Even though it was not the aim of this thesis to cover all the details around the conflict Stuttgart 21, the reader might have got an impression of the exceptionality of this citizen movement that even coined the ‘word of the year’ in 2010 “Wutbürger” (angry citizen), a reference to upper- and middle-class citizens, who openly express their anger about politics. The conflict on the whole can be described as extremely emotional and it is worthwhile mentioning that the voter participation in the federal state elections was 13 percentage points higher than in the elections five years before. The downside of the emotionality of the conflict is the high amount of dogmatism and inability to talk with each other that could be retraced on the Facebook pages. Moreover, in the group “Für Stuttgart 21”, members complained about a divided city and hostile atmosphere in Stuttgart that was even referred to as a “civil war”. It is up to the new government now to de-escalate the conflict and eventually bring together the opposing fractions again.

The question remains, what the role of social networking sites such as Facebook is in this radicalisation process? The fact is: The protest movement is not dependent on Facebook. Quite the reverse, the Facebook page was the last measure in the communicative strategy of the movement. According to the administrators, the main advantage is that information on Facebook is fast, easy to consume and easy to share. Especially the last point is the most striking. While counter-publics have existed before the Internet, social networking sites make it much easier for them to diffuse through the Social Web. Everyone who likes one of the pages automatically ‘recommends’ the page to her/his contacts – if s/he wants or not. Social networking sites allow the gathering of huge publics within a few days, which is not only confirmed by this case, but by a range of other politically motivated initiatives on Facebook such as the “Virtual ‘March of Millions’ in Solidarity with Egyptian Protestors” in February 2011 – an event that gathered almost one million participants within a short time. Political act on Facebook is evident in two contexts: One is the (counter-)public of the interest group, the other one is the rather private context of social contacts who take notice of the political statement. It is thus not possible to explain SNS politics solely with fragmentation theory, nor should it solely be declared a post-modern notion of identity politics that misses collective orientation. Depending on the individual motivation, the publicness of the political statement is scalable and so is the commitment to political action.
Can the pages be described as a digital public sphere in the Habermasian sense? The answer depends on how important one considers deliberation. Even though Papacharissi (2010, 157ff) recognises pluralistic counterpublics as typical for Internet activism, she concludes that Internet technologies augment the negotiation of politics in a private sphere and actually lead away from a deliberative public sphere. Dahlgren on the other hand rates citizen engagement higher than deliberation. Both views are contestable. Political discussion online is – with or without deliberation – a contribution to public negotiation of politics, but what is the point, if it does not lead to any consensus?

In my opinion however, this case serves very well as an example of a digital public multisphere scenario. This is especially due to the fact that the protest movement is not an Internet movement, but an actual physical protest. The Facebook pages reflect the protest and feature all defining characteristics for a public sphere: They are built up of private citizens, the groups are focused on public issues, they are independent of economic or political influence and they feature discourse about political topics. Only the deliberative function and thus the possibility to justify political decisions are not given, but as we saw, this is very well possible in other online contexts. The commentary function of news media websites plays an important role here that has to my knowledge been neglected in research so far. The pages do not resemble so much the neutral coffeehouses, but rather the closed partisan clubs that Habermas (1990) mentions in the remainder of his book.

According to the studied case, the fear of losing the common ground for political decision is not given – even in a polarised case as the presented one. The groups highly rely on mainstream media as well as on official actors, and arguments of the opposing groups are well known. The fear of radicalisation is given, if we decide to be afraid of it. If we, like Mouffe and Dahlgren, welcome radicalisation as a development towards citizen participation and politisation, we should bring the issue to the next level and
discuss how political decision can be achieved in a polarised society and what role the Internet can play in such.

8. Conclusion & Limitations

The analysed case offered a great opportunity to discuss important issues in current digital public sphere research. It opened the eyes for political qualities of social networking sites besides deliberation, which should also be incorporated in public sphere theory.

SNS politics feature the ambiguity of being both private, egocentric political statements as well as public negotiation of politics. The two analysed Facebook pages can be described as counterpublics and discussed under radical democratic aspects. At the same time, joining a page can be described as identity politics. Research should take into account both sides and locate political activities in their offline contexts.

In a recent article in the New York Times, Malcolm Gladwell made the provocative point that “the revolution will not be tweeted”41 and referred to the importance of physical action in a protest movements. The case of Stuttgart 21 also makes clear the importance of online-offline integration, when researching political activism. Deliberation scholars might be disappointed by the lack of controversial discussion, but in the context of a physical protest, SNS provide great opportunities which we could also seen in the recent Arab revolution, where SNS were intensively used for information, identification and mobilisation of the movement.

My suggestion for further research is to analyse online politics in connection to the offline contexts. This study focused solely on the Facebook pages to the topic Stuttgart 21. Additional research on the offline protest movement could help to better understand the online environments and clarify questions such as: “Are offline group differences mirrored on SNS?”, “Does group polarisation take place offline or is it an online phenomenon?”, “What impact do SNS have on the social ties between the protest members?”. The integration of offline and online research could either be achieved in systemic approaches or at the individual level of the protest members. Vanessa Dirksen et al. (2010) present an approach of connective ethnography that could be helpful to

41 http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell [16/05/2011]
methodologically grasp the online-offline connections, something that is missing in the presented study.

This study also neglects questions of accessibility of the public sphere as well as the digital divide discussion. Both play an important role in public sphere research and might be just as relevant in research on SNS. Especially in developing countries, the use of SNS for political initiative might be important to analyse under accessibility aspects.

The presented case is certainly uncharacteristic in online deliberation research due to the local and issue-centred orientation of the protest. This is why the study could look at the theory from a different perspective and add this perspective to the established research. It does not claim any generalisation on the SNS activities of other protest movements, but was meant to add new assumptions to the existing research. As Robert Yin (2003, 10) states: “Case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes”.
References


Sparks, C. (2001). The Internet and the Global Public Sphere. In: Bennett, L. W. &


Appendix

Codebook Quantitative Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Scale Level</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Links</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>0 = no link</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = link</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the federal state government in other topics than S21 and not related to the federal state elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = link + text</td>
<td>Wall posts that discuss energy policy or comment on the ongoing debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>0 = no picture</td>
<td>Wall posts that reflect on the Facebook page or other Facebook pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Comments</td>
<td>Interval</td>
<td>1 = picture</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the federal state government in other topics than S21 and not related to the federal state elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Likes</td>
<td>Interval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>1 = Nuclear Power</td>
<td>Wall posts that discuss energy policy or comment on the ongoing debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = Federal State Government</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the federal state government in other topics than S21 and not related to the federal state elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 = Facebook</td>
<td>Wall posts that reflect on the Facebook page or other Facebook pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 = Federal State Elections SA</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the federal state elections in the state Saxony-Anhalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 = Federal State Elections BW</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the federal state elections in the state Baden-Württemberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6= S21</td>
<td>Wall posts that deal with the topic Stuttgart 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>7 = General Political Position</td>
<td>Wall posts that express political statements independent of Stuttgart 21 or any other particular topic such as party preference, ideology etc.</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 = City Stuttgart</td>
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<td>8 = City Stuttgart</td>
<td>Wall posts that deal with Stuttgart independent of S21 or that address the city life during the conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 = Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 = Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuttgart 21 – Für S21</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Protest Activities</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the activities of the protest movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = Behaviour Protest Movement</td>
<td>Wall posts that are directed towards the behaviour and manners of the protesters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 = Arguments for S21</td>
<td>General claims why S21 should be pursuit that do not address particular details of the project or official statements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 = Information to S21 and Questions of Details</td>
<td>Wall posts that address particular technical parts of the project or provide information to the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 = Arguments against S21/Confrontation</td>
<td>Wall posts that pick up arguments</td>
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<td>Topic Stuttgart 21 – KEIN S21</td>
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<td>1 = Protest Activities</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the activities of the protest movement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = Arguments against S21</td>
<td>Wall posts that feature arguments against the project S21</td>
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<td>3 = Questions of Detail</td>
<td>Wall posts that address particular technical parts of the project</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 = Confrontation</td>
<td>Wall posts that deal with arguments for S21 or that address the Facebook page “Für Stuttgart 21”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 = Request of Information</td>
<td>Wall posts that ask for particular information</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 = Media</td>
<td>Wall posts that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>discuss the way the media covers the topic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 = Official Statements</td>
<td>Wall posts that address statements of official actors such as politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 = Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 = Event Note</td>
<td>Wall posts that include event invitations</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 = 30.09.</td>
<td>Wall posts that address the incident on 30&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; of September 2010</td>
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