What are Opinions? Integrating Theory and Methods for Automatically Analyzing Opinionated Communication (OPINION)



**WG1: THEORY**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**(DELIVERABLE D1.1)**

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**Contents**

**Introduction**

**Part I: Linguistics**

1. **Definitions of opinion**
2. **Models: key elements**
3. **Linguistic expression of opinion**
4. **Opinion research and measurement methodology**
5. **Effects**
6. **Final comments**

**Part II:** **Opinion in Public Opinion Theory and Research**

1. **Definitions of (public) opinion**
2. **Models: key elements**
3. **Types and typologies**
4. **How are opinions formed?**
5. **Expressions of opinions**
6. **Methods used to investigate and measure opinions**

**Part III: Political Communication and Culture Studies**

1. **Definitions of opinion**
2. **Theoretical implications of the study of opinion**
3. **Models: key elements**
4. **Qualitative and quantitative methods**
5. **Conclusions**

**Part IV. Opinions in Communication and Media Studies**

1. **Definitions of opinion**
2. **Theoretical foundations**
3. **Models**
4. **Methods of expressing opinions**
5. **Conclusions**

**Bibliography**

**INTRODUCTION**

To resolve difficulties riddling the operational and technical extraction and analysis of opinionated content, it is necessary to aim for a consistent, theoretically grounded understanding of opinions, their formation, expression and diffusion in online and other digital realms. Therefore, one of the goals of the WG1 (THEORY) of this COST Action is an extensive literature review of existing theory and research on opinions and their textual/discursive expression (D1.1).

Participants of the WG1 represent several disciplines: linguistics, media studies, political science, psychology and cognitive studies, psycholinguistics, information science, data mining, marketing, etc., as well as different perspectives, approaches, and methods. Working closely in such an interdisciplinary environment, WG1 aims in facilitating an integrative understanding of opinions that connect the different traditions of existing theory and support an integrated terminology as well as precise, coherent operationalizations of opinion analysis using computational methods, enabling a concise and efficient exchange of ideas and insights across disciplinary and academic traditions.

The ***Literature Review*** is an outcome of collaborative work of more than 30 scholars from 13 countries and regions. For the previous 18 months, participants of WG1 have been working in four subgroups, arranged around four areas of study, namely: (1) linguistics, (2) political communication & cultural studies, (3) public opinion, and (4) communication & media studies. Their main task was to bring together the necessary theoretical perspectives to foster the exchange of knowledge and develop a common understanding of opinions and their expressions in digital information environments. All subgroups used the same template to report the literature.

The ***Literature Review*** is divided into four parts, focused on three main areas of studies, that is: (1) linguistics, (2) public opinion, (3) political communication and cultural studies, and (4) communication and media studies. Each part consists of three main sections: (a) definitions of opinion, (b) models of opinionated communication, and (c) methods used to study opinion. Furthermore, each part includes some additional aspects related to specific disciplines.

The four parts of the ***Literature Review*** are followed by a collected bibliography. This part serves not only as a list of references to books, book chapters, and papers mentioned in the ***Literature Review*** but also as an element of the *knowledge hub* for scholars interested in studying opinions. The ***Literature Review*** is accompanied by the ***Glossary*** of key definitions and terms.

The ***Literature Review*** will serve as a starting point for a joint manifesto on conceptual criteria and dimensions of textually expressed opinions and resulting research agenda (D1.2) and several book chapters to be included in the joint publication on a comprehensive theoretical framework for the study of textually expressed opinions in different kinds of discursive contexts (D1.3).

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**PART I. LINGUISTICS**

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**1. DEFINITIONS OF OPINION**

There are numerous, varying definitions of the concept of opinion. Linguistically opinion is treated as a polysemous concept, i.e., ‘having a number of (related)-meaning sense’ or, in cognitive linguistic models, opinion is a radial category (Wittgenstein, 1963; Lakoff, 1987) with a number of different prototypical peaks. Generally speaking, opinions are subjective interpretations, having subjective conclusions and contain preferred (often biased) options, not necessarily evidence-based.

On the other hand, facts are evidence-based or logically derived from evidence. They are statements that can be confirmed by proof, while opinions are statements of belief, attitude, value, judgment, or feeling. Furthermore, opinions contain judgments preferred by the opinion holder (biased). Prototypical opinions need no verification.

* Opinions are judgments not necessarily based on facts or evidence (e.g., on intuition, on biased preconditions e.g., conspiracy theories).
* A personal belief or judgment that is not founded on proof or certainty, a vague idea in which some confidence is placed.
* A belief or sentiment shared by most people; the voice of the people (public opinion).
* A message expressing a belief about something; the expression of a belief that is held with confidence but not substantiated by positive knowledge or proof.
* The legal document stating the reasons for a judicial decision.

Professional opinions, similarly to prototypical opinions, contain preferred/subjective (biased) choices. However, they are inferred from logical premises and often stem, as in some legal documents, from implicit or ambiguous language used as an opinion source.

While opinions are statements of belief, attitude, value, judgment, or feeling, opinions are not necessarily evidence-based. However, they are often opposed to knowledge, evidence, or facts. Facts on the other hand, are evidence-based or logically derived from evidence. They are statements that can be confirmed by proof, while opinions are statements of belief, attitude, value, judgment, or feeling.

The expression of an opinion on a subject is considered a judgment. While opinion is linked to accuracy, assertion is linked to truth. Knowledge, on the other hand, is described in terms of varying definitions. One definition that many philosophers have considered to be standard since Ancient Greece is that knowledge is a mental state characterized by *justified true belief*.

**2. MODELS OF OPINIONS: KEY ELEMENTS**

**2.1. Prototype**

The process of communication among humans is an intriguing process which allows us to express our opinions, sometimes based on generalizations, which might affect the degree of persuasiveness of an argument or judgment. According to the prototype theory, some of the cases that belong to a certain category are more typical members of that category than other cases (Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Gärdenfors, 2000). An opinion prototype, defined as a most representative mental representation of a typical or idealized cognitive opinion model (ICOM) about a particular topic or issue, can be useful in guiding individuals' opinions and attitudes based on their similarity to the prototype. However, given the fact that opinions are based on limited or biased information, they can also lead to oversimplification or stereotyping of different facts.

Different contexts in which opinionated discourse takes place, different agents engaged in the discourse, and the different individual judgements they make, lead to substantial variations of the characteristics of the typical opinion prototypes. For example, a typical opinion prototype about politics may include beliefs such as "government should provide better basic services to all citizens" or "people should have the right to express their opinions and ideas freely." Opinion prototype includes opinion necessary and characteristic properties and encompasses the presence of opinion peripheral senses based on family resemblance (Wittgensein, 1953). Due to the fact that opinions are based on different sources and engage distinct persuasive appeals (Aristotle), logical arguments, emotions, appeal to authority, or else are based on rumors or hearsay, they form rather a set of prototypes, i.e., a *radial category* of prototypical concepts (Lakoff 1987), linked by a family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1956) of the presence of (incomplete) knowledge, and varying framing, defined as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p. 4). For instance, in cultures that value collectivism over individualism (cf. Hofstede, 2011), opinionated discourse may prioritize the group's interests and values rather than individual perspectives. On the other hand, in cultures that prioritize individualism, opinionated discourse may place more emphasis on personal opinions and experiences.

A study by Dahlman et al. (2016) is concerned with situations where a generalization is used in argumentation to make an audience agree with a certain judgment. The authors investigated to what extent the agreement is influenced by prototype effects. They conducted two experiments that investigated how the activation of the prototype affects the persuasiveness of the argument. This prototype effect increases the persuasiveness of the argument in situations in which the audience finds the judgment more warranted for the prototype than for the actual case (positive prototype effect) but decreases persuasiveness in situations where the audience finds the judgment less warranted for the prototype than for the actual case (negative prototype effect).

Opinion prototype includes necessary and characteristic properties of opinion, while opinion peripheral senses are based on family resemblance types. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al. (2023) propose the following structure of *opinion* prototype:

Necessary properties:

* *Individual judgment or Community judgment;*
* *Reference to proven facts/evidence;*
* *Agent’s (speaker’s) [opinion holder’s] conviction as to the truth expressed;*
* *Goal:* evaluation, persuasion by logic (arguments), emotions, appeal to authority (references) (Aristotelian persuasive appeals);
* *Characteristic properties*: face *effects* [face maintenance - praising (positive opinion), face threat/losing – criticizing, blaming, etc. (negative opinion)].

**2.2 Schema**

Schemas, or *Idealized Cognitive Models* (ICMs) (Lakoff, 1987), in cognitive linguistics, referred to originally as knowledge *frames* (Goffman, 1974; Schank & Abelson, 1977) and *framing* in other subject domains e.g., in media studies, where frames contextualize selected topics in terms of values, themes, stereotypes, ideological principles, or visual icons (Tuchman, 1978), are relatively stable knowledge structures that represent its generalized abstract representation. They are built up over time and through repeated exposure to experience. When shaping opinions, individuals rely on their existing *opinion schemas* (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2023). An *opinion schema* is a cognitive framework that people use to organize and interpret information related, in some part, to external evidence, but primarily to their attitudes, beliefs, and values. It is a mental structure that helps individuals process new information and form judgements about a particular topic or issue. What needs to be added at this point is the role and impact of properties which function as constitutive factors in opinion formation. They include external evidence from multiple sources and can present logical argumentation, emotional appeals, appeals to authority, and other possible shades of persuasive appeals (Aristotle).

**2.3 Speech Event [Opinion Speech Event]**

Although opinions are generally characterized by lexical, syntactic, and semantic/pragmatic markers, single discourse properties are generally not sufficient. As a semiotic act, opinion expressing can lend itself to a more effective identification in face-to-face contexts in which all signs of body language as well as other modalities can be more easily observed. From a linguistic viewpoint, the presence of paralinguistic signals, such as prosody in particular, can contribute to a more effective multimodal - verbal, visual, auditory etc., identification of opinionated, as opposed to fully factual, evidence-based statements.

Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al. (2023) propose that an opinion is a communicative Speech Event which can be defined in the following terms:

Source [Human/Thing/Property/Event] >

Opinion Author [Opinion Holder] > Affect (Interest/(Dis)pleasantness))> OPINION (mode) > Persuasive appeal > Addressee [default] >>

Communicative Intent [sharing, (mode); Receiver > Results/Consequences [Human Source [Pragmatics (Face maintenance (praising) Emotions (joy/satisfaction/happiness/encouragement);

/Face threat (blaming)<<Emotion (sadness/humiliation/anger/discouragement)]

Change: individual/public opinion persuasive effects with the Addressee

In other words, an Opinion Speech Event assumes the presence of an Author, i.e., opinion holder, who expresses his/her (positive or negative) judgment/evaluation of a Theme to an Addressee. The Addressee may play either the role of an opinion receiver or an opinion Theme (subject), or else function in both the interactional roles. The term ‘speech event’ is neutral as to the communicative medium - it can refer either to spoken or written communication. This type of speech event assumes the presence of both a Theme and an Addressee, as well as a transfer medium, together with a persuasive force presence in the Opinion expression act. Effects of such a Speech Event are either positive or negative, embodied in raising the Human Theme, and the Addressee’s emotionality and raising his/her potential of a particular evaluative judgment. Opinions thus are meant to exert a change: both pragmatically (face maintenance or else face threat or loss) and emotionally via their affective impact polarity.

**3. LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF OPINION**

**3.1. Multimodal expression**

The multimodal expression of opinions refers to the diverse range of communicative channels individuals employ to articulate and convey their perspectives, extending beyond traditional, verbal communication to encompass visual, gestural, and other non-verbal forms of expression. This approach to communication recognizes the integration of various modalities in the construction and dissemination of opinions. Multimodal expression is influenced by social, cultural, and technological factors, shaping how individuals choose to convey their viewpoints. The fusion of words, images, and gestures allows for a richer and more nuanced articulation of opinions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in individuals' beliefs. Scholars such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have examined the semiotic dimensions of multimodal communication, highlighting the significance of visual elements in opinion formation. The exploration of multimodal expression contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways opinions are communicated, interpreted, and shared in contemporary society. The current literature review refers to multimodality from the linguistic aspects.

**3.2. Verbal expression of opinions**

Considerable research has been conducted to discover what verbal resources are used to express opinions and how they are used by different speakers and in different contexts. Some linguistic categories, such as stance markers including hedging and boosting, are especially tightly linked to the language of opinion and thus have received more attention than others. However, some categories, such as impoliteness formulae, started being approached more systematically only recently. Depending on verbal expression, opinions can be categorized into different types in terms of their explicitness (explicit vs. implicit), directness (direct vs. indirect), politeness (polite vs. impolite), extremity (neutral, positive or negative, where the latter includes dangerous, offensive, uncivil, and hateful opinions), and specificity (specific vs. fuzzy or vague).

**3.2.1. Stance markers: Softening and strengthening the opinion**

In the last several decades, stance markers have become an indispensable linguistic category in opinion research. The concept of stance, proposed by Biber and Finegan, refers to “the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message” (1989, p. 93). Stance is studied under such paradigms as evidentiality, affect, attitude, evaluation, appraisal, and metadiscourse (Shen & Tao, 2021). All these approaches have the same aim – to uncover how writers express themselves in their writing and indicate their attitudes towards the ideas presented. However, they focus on different aspects such as the source of information, emotional expression (affect), speaker’s stance (attitude), judgment or assessment (evaluation), linguistic expression of evaluation (appraisal), and self-reflexive discourse commentary (metadiscourse) (for more detail, see, for instance, Hunston & Thompson 2000).

Hyland’s (2005) stance framework comprises four categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. Hedges and boosters (e.g. may, possible, can) refer to the writer’s commitment to the precision and reliability of their claims and assertions. By means of *hedges*, information is usually presented as opinions rather than facts. *Boosters* (e.g. indeed, undoubtedly), meanwhile, are used to convey certainty and show a high degree of commitment to the arguments provided. *Attitude markers* (e.g. agree, disagree; importantly, fortunately; astonishing) are used to express the speaker’s affective meanings such as amazement, agreement, importance, annoyance, rather than their commitment to propositions. *Self-mention* refers to the extent to which a writer chooses to express him/herself in a text using first-person pronouns (e.g. I, we, my, our).

Originally, the term hedge, introduced by George Lakoff (1972), referred to words or expressions which are used to “make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (1972, p. 195). According Lakoff (1972), hedges are used to attenuate the meaning of an expression (with such items as sort of, a little bit), or, on the contrary, to reinforce certain characteristics (with such items as very, really, extremely). In the vast contemporary research on hedging, the original concept evolved into a clear distinction between hedges (used to “make things fuzzier”) and intensifiers (used to make “things less fuzzy”) (for initial endeavors to differentiate between the two categories, see, for instance, Wright & Hosman, 1983).

With regard to the distinction between hedging and intensification, alternative and closely related terms can be encountered in the existing body of research. Due to space limitations, the present paper cannot provide an exhaustive overview of the intricate network of such terms, but some of them include mitigation (e.g. Fraser, 1980; Caffi, 1999; 2007), understatement (Hübler, 1983), attenuations and approximation (Bourdieu et al., 1994), tentative language and emphatics (Recasens et al., 2013), boosters (Altenberg, 1990), and approximators and shields as subcategories of hedges (Prince et al,. 1982). For instance, in Hübler’s (1983) approach, in addition to hedges, the term ‘understatement’ is used, which is perceived as a device deliberately used to minimize the importance or intensity of something that the speaker refers to in their proposition. Hedging, meanwhile, is more related to the speaker’s attitudes and includes categories used to express uncertainty and tentativeness.

It is also worth noting here that emphatics and tentative language serve as useful indicators of bias: (1) tentative language (e.g. just, only) is a category of epistemological bias, and (2) emphatics (e.g. very, absolutely) are a category of framing bias (Recasens et al., 2013). Emphatics are also associated with sensationalism and are used as part of propaganda techniques aiming to persuade users at an emotional rather than cognitive level (Damstra et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2021).

In any case, it has now become an established research tradition to examine hedges and intensifiers as two distinct categories. In this tradition, the term ‘hedge’ typically refers to linguistic categories that reduce the force of a statement, while intensifiers are perceived as those that tend to increase it. Following Hyland’s (1994, 2000) framework, hedging is viewed as a communicative strategythat is employedto soften the force of a statement, to modify the degree of certainty, and to make the statement less direct, rude, or impolite. Hedges are claimed to ‘withhold writer’s full commitment to statements’, e.g. might, perhaps, about, and emphatics ‘emphasise force or writer’s certainty in message’, e.g. in fact, definitely (Hyland, 1998, p. 442).

Hedging can take different forms, including both lexical and grammatical means of expression. More specifically, hedging can be realized via the use of modal verbs (e.g. might, could), adverbs (e.g. perhaps, maybe), passive voice constructions, and other lexical or grammatical markers. Hedging devices are deliberately used by a speaker or writer to be less precise, because it is usually safer to express one's opinion equivocally, for example by using different distancing introductions to a statement, which can signal different degrees of indirectness. Wardhaugh (1985), for instance, contrasts such expressions as I believe or I know and phrases like I’m told, I’ve heard, or It may be that, where the former expressions are more straightforward than the latter ones. The latter set is either based on impersonal structures or the opinion is redirected to somebody else. Hence, distancing can be expressed not only on the lexical level, but also grammatically; for instance, the past tense makes an utterance more tactful [e.g. I was wondering (instead of I am wondering) if you could help me] (Taylor, 1995). The hedging function can also be achieved graphologically, i.e. by using inverted commas, namely scare quotes in writing or air quotes in spoken interaction.

Unhedged language can be an indication of dogmatic beliefs, rejection of different views, and reluctance to negotiate (Wardhaugh, 1985). On the other hand, too much equivocation can be irritating and a sign of too little cooperation. Any extreme is disadvantageous. Therefore, speakers are to know appropriate degrees of definiteness and have to be aware of the situations when to be definite.

There is considerable research indicating that hedging is strongly situation-bound and is especially important in interactive communication. Regarding the distribution of hedges in different modes of discourse, Stenström (1990) observes that hedges (e.g. kind of, sort of) are considerably more frequent in dialogues than monologues. Based on substantial research exploring different genres, such as political talk, scientific discourse (including different academic disciplines and sub-disciplines), courtroom discourse, medical discourse, and other genres, it has become commonly agreed that hedges are genre-dependent (e.g. Aijmer, 1986; Kay, 1997; Biber, 2006; Fetzer, 2010; Fu & Hyland, 2014).

Hedging as an important pragmatic category is often explored from the point of view of politeness, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1978). For instance, in instances of face-threatening acts, hedging can serve as a strategy of positive politeness as it can help speakers avoid giving straightforward criticism by highlighting friendliness and solidarity. Thus, we now move from a lexis and grammar (or stylistics) oriented approach of opinion to a more pragmatic perspective.

**3.2.2. Expressing opinion in a polite or impolite manner**

Opinions can be expressed in polite and impolite ways. To explain mechanisms of politeness in opinion expression, Politeness Theory, introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987), is usually resorted to. A central concept upon which this theory is based is that of ‘face’, which was introduced by Erving Goffman (1976) and later developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) to refer to the positive public image an individual seeks to establish in a given social interaction.

Face represents a person’s sense of self-esteem, dignity, and social value, which is a dynamic category. When expressing opinions, speakers may challenge their own or the hearers’ face; thus, in opinion research this concept plays a pivotal role. Face can be maintained, threatened, lost, or enhanced in a social interaction through different face-saving strategies. For instance, hedges, indirectness, and tag questions are used to reduce imposition and thus face-threatening behavior.

Face involves two related aspects: positive face and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face refers to the person’s need that their self-image is appreciated and approved of by interlocutors. Negative face, meanwhile, refers to the person’s need not to be impeded or imposed by other interactants and the need to maintain their freedom of action.

In interaction, interactants need to cooperate to maintain the face of both the speaker and the hearer. To address this need, the Cooperative Principle was proposed by Paul Grice (1975). It was modified and extended in later theories by suggesting, for example, that cooperation may not always be necessary. Instead, it is proposed that the principle of relevance is more fundamental (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

When expressing opinions, people are constantly involved in *face-work*, understood as the speakers’ attempts to have or maintain a certain image of themselves or other participants of the interaction. Goffman defines it as “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (1976, p. 12). Its purpose thus is “to counteract ‘incidents’ – that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face” (ibid.). To avoid harm for one’s face, face-saving acts are performed to mitigate the potential effect on one’s self-image or the hearer’s image.

There is no exhaustive and finite list of face-saving strategies, either verbal, non-verbal, or paraverbal (mimics, non-ironic smile, posture, low voice volume, intonation, etc.) that could be used in opinion research. As Goffman (1967, p. 13) observes, different individuals, subcultures, and societies have different means for face saving. The repertoire of face-saving resources also depends on the type of face speakers aim to protect when expressing their views. To protect or appeal to someone’s *positive face*, speakers may resort to such strategies as exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy with the hearer), being optimistic, intensifying interest to the hearer (exaggerating facts, telling stories in present tense), using in-group identity markers (e.g. in-group address forms), making offers and promises, complimenting the hearer, agreeing with the hearer’s point of view, or giving gifts (for more detail, see Culpeper, 2011). Typical face-saving strategies used to protect one’s *negative face* include such negative politeness strategies as hedging and indirectness, using nominalizations, minimizing or avoiding imposition on the hearer, apologizing, and being pessimistic (for more detail, see Culpeper, 2011; for a taxonomy of the main verbal softeners and strengtheners, see Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, 1994).

Argumentation and the expression of certain opinions is a particularly delicate communication situation at the *Face-Threatening Acts* (FTA) level since it presupposes an identified disagreement. The regulation of exchanges prefers to focus on maximizing agreements and minimizing disagreements, which is a source of threat (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980). As social networks are communication environments essentially dedicated to argumentation and disagreement, we are more likely to find more expressions of difference of opinion and FTAs.

When communicating opinions, just like in communication in general, speakers can (consciously or unconsciously) follow or violate (‘flout’) a set of principles, or ‘maxims’. The main conversational maxims proposed by Paul Grice (1975) include: Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Manner, Maxim of Relevance. In Leech’s (1983) extended model, six maxims are proposed:

* *The maxim of tact* minimizes the expression of opinions, thoughts, or ideas involving a cost to the receiver, and maximizes the expression of those with a benefit.
* *The maxim of generosity* focuses on the sender maximizing the expression of opinions, thoughts, or ideas involving a benefit to the receiver, and minimizing the expression of those involving a benefit to him/herself.
* *The maxim of approval* recommends minimizing the expression of opinions, ideas, or thoughts that disparage the receiver, and conversely maximizing the expression of those that praise him/her.
* *The maxim of modesty* asks the sender to minimize statements in which he/she puts him/herself forward, and to maximize those in which he/she depreciates him/herself.
* *The maxim of agreement* recommends to the interlocutors to maximize the expression of their agreement, and to minimize points of disagreement.
* *The maxim of sympathy* stresses that an exchange must be of interest to its recipient.

*Impolite opinions*, which are face-threatening and usually result from a violation of the above-mentioned conversational maxims, are arguably best viewed from the perspective of impoliteness theory. With regard to impoliteness, an important shift occurred in the mid-1990s and later, when, instead of being viewed as a politeness failure, it began to be regarded as a strategic and deliberate use of impolite forms. It was addressed comprehensively by Culpeper (e.g. 1996, 2010, 2011a, 2011b)and Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003). In their framework, impoliteness is defined as “the use of strategies that are designed to have the opposite effect [of promoting social harmony] - that of social disruption” (Culpeper, 1996, p. 350).

In this model, impoliteness includes interactive strategies aimed at attacking face, and those deliberately leading to conflictive communication (Culpeper 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Culpeper et al., 2003). Due to its direct relation to conflict, language aggression, and intentionally disruptive behavior, impoliteness is related to hate speech and can serve as a useful category in hate speech identification (Culpeper et al. 2017; Ruzaitė, 2023a).

In theory of impoliteness, the following types of conventional impoliteness formulae are distinguished: insults [personalized negative vocatives, personalized negative assertions, personalized negative references, and personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target)], challenging or unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions, condescensions, message enforcers, dismissals, silencers, threats, and negative expressives (e.g. curses, ill-wishes) (Culpeper, 2010, pp. 3242–3243).

Considering the degree of impoliteness and *extremity of opinions*, recent research has been focusing extensively on the continuum of neutral opinions, offensive opinions, and hate speech (see, for instance, Fišer et al., 2017). The taxonomy of negative and offensive opinions has been proposed by different scholars from the perspective of (im)politeness theory, pragmatics, and corpus and computational linguistics (see, for instance, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2022, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2023, Ruzaitė, 2021, 2023a), but the majority of this research focuses on automated hate speech detection and its distinction from offensive language (e.g. Kocon et al., 2021; see also Schmidt and Wiegand (2017) for an overview).

A distinct category of conflictual communication on social media is that of *flaming*. It is a phenomenon encouraged by the anonymity of social networks, and easily identifiable on a lexical basis. It consists in provoking and insulting other users for no apparent reason (Herring et al., 2002). It differs from trolling, which consists in engaging other users in pointless and uninteresting discussions, or in initiating topics with the sole aim of starting a controversy without any serious argumentation (Paveau, 2017).

**3.2.3. Explicit vs. implicit opinions**

The overview above primarily focused on explicit expression of opinions, but implicit realizations are just as important. Some typical implicit figures of argument and opinion include comparison and metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, humor, sarcasm, and mockery, among others.

*Comparison* is a frequently used figure in persuasion, as it helps to direct the meaning of the argument or the opinion (Bonhomme, 2009). It can be achieved with an explicit comparison with the conjunctions “like” or “as” or by comparing qualities with comparative structures such as *X is better than / is as good as / no better than Y.* A comparison can also be realized more implicitly using metaphor. Metaphors are a form of analogy that moves a concept from its own domain to a foreign domain with which it will interact and make the comparison by framing X as Y, as in the typical metaphoric framing of migrants as a natural disaster resulting from such formulations as *migrants have flooded X* (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; Tamine, 1972).

*Metonymy* is based on the conceptualization of a whole thing (animate, object, event, property) in terms of its part(s) or a part in terms of the whole thing.

*Hyperbole,* like all rhetorical figures, has a strong persuasive power (Salvan, 2014; Jaubert, 2014). In argumentation, it relies on a fiction of accuracy that makes an exaggeration seem like something appropriate to the referent. In argumentation, hyperbole is often used to emphasize an antithesis by increasing the tension between opposing viewpoints (Paissa, 2014). In rebuttal, it is strongly related to the absurd and is often the basis of ironic caricatures that aim to discredit the opponent’s position by placing the hyperbolic attractor at an implausible level (Romero, 2004).

*Humor* is based on semantic/pragmatic incongruity. As observed by Attardo, “jokes and humor at large are a violation of the cooperative principles, or of one of the maxims” (2017, p. 4). In general, humor is supposed to be funny and entertaining, but when it is not successful, it may result in failed humor which can be offensive. Thus, following Attardo (2017, p. 1), humor can have strongly conflicting functions as “[s]peakers may use humor pro-socially, to build in-group solidarity, or anti-socially, to exclude and denigrate the targets of the humor”.

Humor is a most common discoursal resource used for countering hostile opinions (Benesch et al., 2016; Rieger et al., 2018; Mathew et al., 2019; Ruzaitė, 2023b). As noted by Benesch et al. (2016, p. 27), humor can change the dynamics of communication, deescalate conflict, make the message more persuasive, and draw more attention to a message than it would otherwise do.

As some research shows, although humor can have a conciliatory effect, humorous internet comments are often very hostile, provocative, and aggressive and thus are not likely to deescalate conflict in communication (Benesch et al., 2016, p. 27; see also Ruzaitė, 2023b). In Attardo’s (2017, p. 9) terms, humor creates an in-group vs. out-group division and reinforces and upholds the power imbalance.

*Irony*, following Leech (1983), is perceived as stating the opposite of what is meant. Thus, irony expresses an intention or attitude opposite to what is stated literally and thus is based on contradiction or mismatch (similarly to humor, which is based on incongruity). Therefore, Berrendonner (1981) calls irony ‘contradictory argumentation’. As such, it can be used to express the speaker’s perspective (especially through (ironic) wordplay and mockery) and is considered a persuasive technique (Debyser, 1980). In persuasion and opinion expression, this figure is closely linked to the absurd and the ad hominem (Eggs, 2009). Similarly to humor, irony is associated with the expression of negative evaluation and thus tends to express negative judgements and feelings (for a more detailed discussion, see Taylor, 2017).

*Jocular mockery* is defined as “social actions (as opposed to simply (non)verbal acts) whereby the speaker somehow diminishes something of relevance to self, other, or a non-co-present third party, but does so within a non-serious or playful frame” (Haugh, 2010: 2108). It is noteworthy here that irony, mockery, and humor are common face-threatening strategies in hate discourses (Vasilaki, 2014; Ruzaitė, 2021; Ruzaite, 2023a; 2023b)

Although the terms ‘sarcasm’ and ‘irony’ are sometimes used interchangeably, these are distinct notions (Dynel, 2014: 634). The defining property of *sarcasm* is its aim to cause verbal harm (ibid). As Dynel further notes “[s]arcasm inheres in negative evaluation, which may be conveyed implicitly or explicitly but typically recruiting wit, yet it is not based on the overt untruthfulness typical of irony” (2014, p. 634).

Although irony, humor, and sarcasm are considered as different concepts, they are closely linked. An ironic expression can be sarcastic and intended for humor when it critiques someone or something other than the interlocutor. Humor and irony both involve a dual communicative approach aimed at mockery, but they differ in their focus (Rabatel, 2013). A humorist seeks solidarity in questioning principles of authority. Therefore, humor always targets the external world, questioning it with the complicity of the audience, who themselves are not criticized. Humor involves desacralization without a dominant stance, unlike irony, which implies a superior, judgmental position (Charaudeau, 2011). While the ironist ridicules their target, the humorist finds amusement in the world alongside others. Irony distances itself from its target to undermine it, while humor fosters a more harmonious coexistence (Jaubert, 2014b).

**3.2.4. Discourse structures**

Though a large body of research on opinion focuses on the lexical aspects of its expression (especially in some approaches, such as sentiment analysis), opinions are expressed not only at the level of lexis and grammar (or the micro-level), but also at the discourse level (or macro-level). As Van Dijk (1998a, 1998b) observes, a discourse analytical approach allows researchers to go beyond the analysis of lexical items and in this way explore how opinions are expressed in many other, much more intricate, ways, for instance in headlines, story structures, arguments, graphical structures, phonetic and phonological expressions, syntactic structures, structures of local and global coherence, and overall topics or themes.

Following Van Dijk (1998a, 1998b), to account for opinions, it is essential to consider the meaning of sentences (propositions) in which they occur as well as the whole text and context. Within propositions, opinions can be expressed through the main predicate and arguments with different semantic roles, and qualities and responsibilities attributed to actors appearing in the Agent role. Specific syntactic structures can de-emphasize the agency of an actor or group of actors, e.g. through passive constructions (e.g. The protesters were killed by the police, as opposed to, The protesters were killed). Opinions are not always explicitly expressed in a proposition; instead, they may also be implied (ibid.).

A major classic work that established the importance of syntactic aspects of negative outgroup description (including active versus passive sentences, among others) is the book by Fowler et al. (1979). Generally speaking, passivization is a grammatical process in which the syntactic structure of an active sentence is rearranged so that the subject of the active sentence becomes the object of the passive sentence; e.g. when passivized, the active sentence “The cat chased the dog.” is restructured into “*The dog was chased by the cat*.” or the agentless form “*The dog was chased*.”. This structure is used to emphasize the recipient of the action (“the dog”) rather than the doer of the action (“the cat”).

Critical discourse analysts have suggested that passivization (along with nominalization) has important ideological functions such as deleting agency (especially omitting the agents of negative actions), de-emphasizing the doer of the action, emphasizing the object or recipient of the action, or expressing detachment. This category is especially important when analyzing linguistic presentation of groups and their activities, especially concerning the questions of guilt or innocence (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

Regarding local coherence (the property of subsequent sentences or propositions in text that form a unity instead of being randomly arranged sentences), Van Dijk’s (1984) research has revealed some structures that can be indicative of opinions. For instance, his research shows that to express loaded opinions, people use such structures as Negators of Apparent Negation (*I have nothing against black people, but…*) and Negators of Apparent Concession (*Not all black people are criminals, but…*). Such formulations imply a Positive Auto-representation *(“We are not racist”, “We are tolerant”*), which is contradicted by the Negative Presentation of the Others, expressed in the part following the conjunction “but” (Cremades, 2007, p. 19).

Global coherence, following Van Dijk (1998a, 1998b; also, van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), is defined in terms of topics of larger or smaller fragments of text or whole discourses. Topics can signal what speakers or hearers perceive as the most important information of a discourse. To use Van Dijk’s example, what for some is termed, topically, as a race riot by a violent black mob, for others may be semantically expressed as an act of urban resistance against racist police officers (1984: 206).

To explain, justify, or delegitimize opinions, speakers use legitimation strategies. To examine these, research mainly resorts to the model of legitimation strategies proposed by van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) and Leeuwen & Wodak (1999), including:

* authorization, that is, legitimation by reference to some specific persons, the authority of tradition, custom and law,
* moral evaluation, that is, legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems,
* rationalization, that is, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action,
* legitimation conveyed through narratives/storytelling (Leeuwen & Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2007, 2008)

Using authority is also central in research focusing on *intertextuality* (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Bauman, 2004; Sclafani, 2008; Tannen, 2006; Oddo, 2014). In this research trend, intertextuality, either explicitly or implicitly represented by citations and allusions, is most explored in speeches of different political leaders.

A common model adopted in research on opinion, attitudes, and bias is the analytical framework proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) within the broader framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and Discourse Historical Analysis. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) propose a set of strategies to be studied as linguistic evidence of ideological implications manifested in discourse, which include nomination or referential strategies, predicational strategies, argumentation (including topoi), intensification and perspectivisation. Nomination is analyzed by considering references used to name social agents (individuals or groups of people) in a text. Predication refers to the relationship between a subject and a predicate in a sentence. The predicate typically includes the verb and any accompanying modifiers, objects, or complements. In discourse analytic approaches, predication is analyzed by examining how the social agents in a text are described and what qualities or characteristics are assigned to them. Argumentation strategies are understood as conclusion rules that can be drawn based on the referential and predicational strategies used in the text. Finally, it is considered if these expressions of attitudes and opinions are intensified or mitigated and from whose perspective they are expressed.

**4. OPINION RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT METHODOLOGY**

**4. 1. Linguistics**

While some types of opinion, for example public opinion research, uncover consumer preferences for products and services, or predilections in political issues and candidates or media campaigns, linguistic attempts to identify what opinions are and how they are different from knowledge are not always fullysuccessful. In both classic and computational linguistics language studies, though, there are types of specific approaches and methodologies that help illuminate such definitional issues and pave the way to a fully automated, opinionated, text identification.

In more classical approaches to linguistic meaning-in-context models, it is not a single opinion word or expression that undergoes scrutiny, but rather a speech act and, more recently, the whole speech event.

* Speech acts and speech events pragmatic methods (Austin, 1962; Atelsek, 1981) - opinion is expressing speaker’s beliefs in what is said in the proposition. Facts are not subject to dispute. Beliefs are undisputable, but propositions may be subject to discussion. Opinions can be presented as facts simply by using the language of fact, but facts too, and the extent to which information is factual, are not always easy to identify (viz. fake news), and so must be considered in relation to other data.
* Pragmatic complexity theories. Pragmatism and complexity can provide a positive alternative conception of the relationship between scientific knowledge and decision-making (Ansell & Geyer, 2017).

Any type of discourse has to be coherent; the ideas, arguments and thoughts have to be well related with one another so as to be easily comprehended by the audiences. Some of the most randomly used coherence methods are: narration, explanation, contrast, coordination, etc., which make the discourse utterances and parts be more logically and chronologically related. Also, the means that can help a piece of discourse achieve coherence are mainly linked with cohesive devices: grammatical cohesion (morphological and syntactic cohesion), lexical cohesion (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy) and pragmatic cognitive cohesive devices such as (repetition, collocation, ellipsis etc.).

Discourse markers and the sometimes “confusing” usage of pronouns can also be taken into consideration. Some further questions to be raised is this aspect: Can all types of political, opinionated discourse be coherent the same way? How do cohesive devices help in this respect?

* Corpus linguistics - Use of subjective, linguistic expressions (e.g., selected predicates or adjectives, see Kaiser and Wang, 2021) as a tool to systematically probe for potential effects of linguistic packaging on perception of subjectivity.
* Discourse theories.

From a cognitive point of view, opinions can be considered to involve beliefs and mental representations. However, they can also surpass the personal space and instead be social, institutional, and/or political. Thus, opinions derive both from socially shared opinions or attitudes as well as from people’s experience (represented in “mental models”).

Opinions are defined as ‘evaluative beliefs’ in the sense that they feature an evaluative concept. Any belief that presupposes a value, and that involves a judgment, is evaluative. Evaluative beliefs can be direct, indirect, or confined to specific situations. These beliefs may be factual, if socially accepted, and, in this case, general criteria can be specified. On the other hand, if the factual criteria are less relevant, and a specific concept is used to make a value judgment, then we deal with an opinion. Value judgements may be socially and culturally dependent, and as a result opinions can be ideologically oriented, especially when conflicting groups or interests are involved in the discourse space. This definition of opinions as evaluative beliefs (not to confuse with false beliefs), as opposed to factual beliefs, requires a larger discussion on the defining criteria of truth and falsity. Generally speaking, if a belief is based on cultural grounds as opposed to, for example, scientific grounds, then the belief is an opinion. However, specific cultures apply specific criteria of knowledge.

**4.2. Social psycholinguistics**

Social psycholinguistics as an interdisciplinary field investigates the interplay between language and social cognition, emphasizing how language use both reflects and influences social dynamics. Researchers in social psycholinguistics explore a variety of topics, including language attitudes, communication accommodation, and the role of linguistic cues in shaping social perceptions. Giles and Coupland (1991) have made significant contributions to the study of language attitudes and communication accommodation, elucidating the ways in which individuals adapt their language use in different social contexts. Labov's (1972) has paved the way for understanding how language variation mirrors and perpetuates social hierarchies. Additionally, Gumperz (1982) has explored the role of context in communication, emphasizing the importance of situational and cultural factors in shaping linguistic interactions. By integrating insights from psychology and linguistics, social psycholinguistics enriches the understanding of the intricate relationship between language, cognition, and social behavior.

Social psycholinguistics measurement and methodology involve the systematic examination of language use in social contexts to uncover patterns, attitudes, and cognitive processes underlying linguistic interactions. Researchers employ a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the complexities of language behavior in social settings. Techniques such as discourse analysis, experimental designs, and surveys are commonly utilized to study language attitudes, communication strategies, and the impact of linguistic cues on social perception.

Giles and Ogay’s (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory has been influential in shaping methodologies that explore how individuals adjust their language to either converge or diverge in communication. Investigating language variation and change, Labov's (2006) seminal work on sociolinguistics has provided a foundation for methodological approaches examining the social dimensions of linguistic variation. Myers-Scotton's (1997) Matrix Language Frame Model has offered a comprehensive framework for analyzing code-switching and bilingual communication, contributing to the methodological toolkit of social psycholinguists.

Giles et al. (2010) for example, focus on the study of communication between groups, from the perspectives of social psychology, using language and communication between groups as an expression of the elements of social identity. The methodologies they used are based on quantitative practices from social psychology.

The researcher often leads the method according to the world of content from which it comes. The socio psycholinguistic approach is multidisciplinary and combines qualitative research with quantitative research. The integration of diverse methodologies is crucial for capturing the intricacies of the reciprocal relationship between language and social cognition.

**4.3. Corpus and computational linguistics: Automatic identification of opinions**

Computational linguistics is essential for detecting opinionated content by analyzing language to ascertain the sentiment, subjectivity, and emotions conveyed in a particular text. Identifying opinionated text is crucial in many applications, including sentiment analysis, product reviews, social media monitoring, and others. Both supervised and unsupervised techniques are frequently utilized in this field.

* Supervised techniques (Francisco & Castro, 2023; Aprosio et al (2016) often employ classification algorithms, such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Naive Bayes, and neural networks. The models are trained using labeled datasets, where texts are marked with their corresponding opinions, which might be positive, negative, or neutral. For instance, the process involves training a sentiment analysis model using a collection of movie reviews that have been labeled with corresponding sentiments. Supervised machine learning models can utilize linguistic data, such as word frequencies, n-grams, and syntactic structures, as input features. This aids in capturing the linguistic patterns that are linked to opinions. For instance, one can extract sentiment-related features by analyzing the frequency of positive and negative words. Lexicon-based techniques are frequently regarded as supervised approaches. Lexicon-based methodologies employ sentiment lexicons, which are collections of words accompanied by sentiment scores, to allocate sentiment values to words in the text. These values are then combined to ascertain the overall sentiment. One approach is to assign sentiment ratings to individual words and then calculate the sum of these values to determine the overall sentiment polarity.
* Unsupervised techniques (Yu & Hatzivassiloglou, 2003) for identifying opinionated text are quite important. Instead of depending on datasets that have been labeled, these approaches utilize alternative strategies. One example of this strategy is using lexical resources such as WordNet to assess the sentiment of words based on their semantic relationships, including their synonyms and antonyms. Another commonly used unsupervised approach is the utilization of clustering techniques, such as k-means, to group similar opinions without relying on pre-existing labeled data; for instance, categorizing product reviews with comparable textual content without relying on pre-established sentiment labels. Topic modeling is another unsupervised strategy that effectively identifies and evaluates sentiments related to particular topics in a text. For instance, identifying positive and negative aspects within product reviews using topic modeling.

The reason why fully automatic methods to identify opinions as different from knowledge statements are not always successful and often do not bring positive outcomes is that such approaches are mostly one-sided, investigating e.g., opinion topic, opinion holder, or else sentiment lexis. Kim and Hove (2006) presented a methodology for analyzing judgment opinions, defined as opinions consisting of a valence, a holder, and a topic. The model was successful in recognizing the valence and holder of the opinion, and the authors aim to identify the topic of the opinion.

Hybrid approaches in computational linguistics are becoming increasingly popular for analyzing opinionated content. Semi-supervised learning is a notable approach that combines a small sample of labeled data with a larger set of unlabeled data to improve the performance of a model. Another efficient strategy entails utilizing transfer learning, harnessing pre-trained language models such as BERT and GPT. These models first acquire contextual information from extensive collections of texts and then undergo further training to specialize in tasks using opinionated text. The strength of transfer learning rests in its capacity to grasp detailed contextual subtleties, allowing the model to distinguish sentiments in a nuanced and domain-specific way. For instance, a pre-existing model can be further optimized for a specific domain, like product reviews, by utilizing its existing knowledge of context to enhance the accuracy of sentiment analysis. The use of hybrid approaches highlights how computational linguistics may effectively analyze opinionated textual data by being flexible and efficient.

**5. EFFECTS**

Influence and persuasion: the mechanisms and the impact of expressing and exposing to opinions

The spiral of silence theory suggested that individuals have a “quasistatistical sense” to continuously monitor cues in their environment in order to learn which viewpoints are approved by society (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). Also, the social projection hypothesis proposed that people primarily make estimates about others' opinions based on their own opinions, assuming that most others may hold the same stance as themselves (Fields & Schuman, 1976).

Applying these theoretical assumptions studies investigates whether and how people use their quasi-statistical sense in social media and to what extent “opinion cues” (e.g., user-generated comments) can amplify or attenuate people’s tendency to project their own opinion onto society.

For example, Neubaum and Krämer (2017) replicated previous research with respect to the influence of opinion cues on people’s perceptions of public opinion (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010), examined what drives people’s attention toward opinion cues on social networking platforms, and how perceptions of public opinion via social media affect subsequent opinions and actions.

The key assumption of spiral of silence theory is that opinion climate perceptions affect political opinion expression. Matthes and his colleagues (2018) metanalyse sixty-six studies, including more than 27,000 participants, observed a significant positive relationship between opinion climate and opinion expression. The researchers noted that the relationship was not weaker in online as compared with offline opinion expression environments, did not vary by the number of the targets of opinion expression, the opinion of the targets, the opinion climate characteristics, and the design, measurement, and sample characteristics. The biggest impact was when people expressed an opinion to people close to them on invasive issues. Overall, their findings suggest that the relationship between opinion climate perception and opinion expression is stronger and more robust than earlier research indicates.

**5.1. Opinion polarization**

Present-day societies are strongly characterized by extreme polarization of opinions (especially in social media), which is influenced by opinion amplification (Lim & Bentley, 2022).

Opinion polarization occurs when antagonistic groups develop into incompatible opinion-based groups (information bubbles or “echo chambers”), where the person’s opinion defines their group membership so much that they develop irreconcilable views (Koudenburg & Kashima, 2022 Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2022).

Social media leads to extreme fragmentation of the Internet into specific interest groups and makes the virtual world (in contrast to the real world) especially convenient for opinion polarization (Brainard, 2009; Putnam, 2000).

Extreme polarization of opinions fuels a diversity of damaging processes in society including radicalisation, violent extremism, issues on human rights, spread of misinformation, and hate speech (Grönlund et al., 2015).

**6. FINAL COMMENTS**

**Manipulative actors**

Ross et al. (2019) draw on the spiral of silence theory and complex adaptive systems, translated empirical evidence of individual behavior into an agent-based model, and show that the model results in the emergence of a consensus on the collective level. Their results indicate that in a highly polarized setting, depending on their network position and the overall network density, bot participation by as little as 2–4% of a communication network can be sufficient to tip over the opinion climate in two out of three cases.

**PART II. OPINION IN PUBLIC OPINION THEORY AND RESEARCH**

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1. **DEFINITIONS** **OF (PUBLIC) OPINION**

The study of public opinion is concerned with the formation, distribution, and implications of preferences among the members of society. Like other fields, it departs from an understanding of opinions as individuals’ evaluative attitudes or judgments toward an object (Childs, 1965). However, what is distinctive about the study of public opinion is its specific focus on evaluations of objects that are of shared relevance to members of a society, and thus capable of being exchanged, aggregated, and of resulting in behavioral consequences on a collective or mass level (Wilson, 1962). As such, public opinion research and theory is closely tied to the study of political affairs, economics, and other social sciences, which focus on phenomena that exist on a societal scale. In this chapter, we set out to identify the key implications that arise from conceptualizing opinion(s) at the level of societal groups, and lay out the main points of convergence and distinction in theoretical scholarship, broadly synthesizing pertinent work in the fields of political public opinion research, public relations, and marketing.

In public opinion theory, opinions are conceptualized as either evaluative beliefs held (Zaller, 1992), or evaluative statements pronounced (Kim & Hovy, 2004), by individuals that are members of a given public. Evaluative beliefs, in turn, are conceptualized either as reflective of underlying attitudes, which summarize an individuals’ relatively stable, cognitive, and affective beliefs about an object (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005); or as context-sensitive evaluative judgments that actualize relevant attitudes selectively, in view of a given communicative intention or purpose (Brewer & Gross, 2010). To the extent that opinions are conceptualized as evaluative statements, additionally, the possibility arises that expressed opinions may fail to accurately reflect individuals’ underlying psychological states. The inability to directly observe psychological opinions not only raises important methodological concerns in the measurement of public opinion, but also points to the possibility of deliberate misrepresentations and the presentation of inauthentic opinions; that is, opinion statements that do not actually reflect an individual’s evaluative beliefs (Ehrett et al., 2022).

Given the focus on the societal role of opinions held and expressed across large numbers of individuals, public opinion research is crucially interested in the ways in which individual opinions influence one another and can result in the emergence of widely shared opinions about public issues. In focusing on public issues, public opinion research presumes that there are certain objects that affect the lives of numerous individuals, which all hold evaluative beliefs toward that same object (Allport, 1937). Moreover, most (albeit not all) conceptualizations of public opinion presume that such shared relevance gives rise to public debates, wherein specific objects emerge as issues of salient public concern. Through such public debate, then, members of a public not only are enabled to exchange information about the issue, shaping some degree of a shared understanding of the object under evaluation; but also to express and receive one another’s evaluative attitudes and judgments toward the issue, resulting in complex dynamics of persuasion and opinion formation and the emergence of broad, widely shared, or at least acceptable, opinions. In addition, the expression of competing or aligned opinions in public discourse eventually enables a society or group to form an understanding of public opinion as a distribution of prevalent (or latitude of generally acceptable) evaluative stances, which is considered a key prerequisite for collective and political action, and feeds into numerous other processes in society (Ferree et al., 2002).

In consequence, public opinion can be conceptualized in several interdependent ways. As the public is incapable of collective consciousness, and thus cannot “have” an opinion in any meaningful sense, public opinion is necessarily an abstraction that emerges through some process of aggregation from the diverse opinions held by individuals. Focusing on the distribution of held or expressed opinions, public opinion can be understood as a statistical abstraction that captures what views are (or appear to be) endorsed/accepted by a majority or major social groups; factoring in people’s own, possibly distorted, perceptions of such distributions, public opinion can refer to the range of views that are believed (e.g., by members of the public) or said (e.g., in influential media) to be commonly held or acceptable; and, endowing the perception that certain views are or are not widely accepted with normative force, public opinion can refer to that range of views that can be publicly expressed without fear of sanctioning, or with the expectation of being regarded as legitimate.

While the former conceptualizations tend to conceive of public opinion as an observable state that is constantly shaped by external influences, the latter conceptualizations tend to view those dynamic processes of reshaping and constraining what views are seen as commonly accepted as an integral part of the phenomenon of public opinion (Lasswell, 1931). Accordingly, different theoretical elaborations have foregrounded different parts of the process of public opinion formation.

One approach, which is best exemplified by Zaller’s (1992) work, focuses primarily on the formation of *individuals’ opinions* within a given public. In this view, individuals formulate opinions by trying to identify any attitudes that they regard as meaningfully related to an issue, sampling stored evaluative tendencies and summarizing them into a reportable opinion. Accordingly, there are essentially two ways in which public opinion can be shaped. On the one hand, presently salient frames can guide individuals to identify systematically different selections of held attitudes as relevant to an issue. In consequence, they formulate different opinions on an issue, even though their underlying attitudes remain essentially unchanged. On the other hand, public communication may update the information and evaluative tendencies stored in individuals’ attitudes: As individuals are exposed to persuasive messages, they may change existing attitudes, potentially resulting in their forming different opinions. In either case, changes in public opinion arise primarily from individual-level processes, which are influenced by ongoing changes in the public debate (e.g., on mass media, digital platforms, or through the mediation of trusted peers and opinion leaders).

Perhaps the most well-known theorist of the role of *public opinion climates* is Noelle-Neumann (1974). Similarly departing from a notion of individual opinions rooted in psychological attitudes, she argues that individuals’ perception of the present distribution of opinions in a public can have profound implications for their willingness to report or even act upon these opinions. Accordingly, she proposes a somewhat narrower notion of public opinion that includes only those views which one can express publicly without the risk of sanctions and which one can act upon visibly in public, while at the same time expressing or acting upon the opposite opinion visibly in public carries the risk of isolating oneself. Changes in public opinion thus arise not only from actual changes in those opinions held by members of the public, but may also result from individuals’ changing perceptions of what opinions are publicly acceptable (Splichal, 1999). In consequence, public debates shape public opinion not only by offering persuasive messages and frames, but also by informing individuals about the distribution and acceptability of certain views – be that by means of opinion polls that identify majority and minority opinions, by means of “published opinion”, i.e., the distribution of opinions among opinion-leading media and influential voices, or through other effects in individuals’ personal communication ecologies.

Shifting emphasis toward those *opinions expressed in public*, Crespi (1997) offers a more explicitly process-oriented definition of public opinion: "Public opinion on particular issues emerges, expresses itself, and wanes as part of a three-dimensional (3-D) process in which individual opinions are formed and changed, these individual opinions are aroused and mobilized into a collective force expressive of collective judgments, and that force is integrated into the governance of a people" (p. 1). Decisive for public opinion, in this view, is what opinions are actually expressed and inform action, while silent opinions remain publicly unavailable and thus ineffective. In this perspective, much weight is attributed to mass media (and, more recently, digital platforms), whereupon only a subset of opinions held among members of the public is saliently represented. Beyond persuading and informing members of the public regarding the acceptability of opinions about an issue, mediated public communication acts as a direct reflection of public opinion, delimiting what opinions are capable of mobilizing public action. In consequence, this perspective differs from the others in that it fully integrates the process of public opinion formation, treating public debates, personal influence, and other sources of opinion change not as external drivers, but as an integral part of the phenomenon of public opinion itself. One important normative implication of this shift in perspective is a departure from the electoral metaphor, wherein each opinion held by any member of the public counts (or should count) the same toward an endorsement of the unequal weight attributed to those opinions expressed by powerful voices, such as political, economic, and cultural elites and their organizations, journalists and professional media, and various other groups of opinion leaders (Splichal, 1999). A similar view can be found also among early theorists such as Blumer (1948), who essentially equated public opinion with the range of opinions publicly represented by influential actors and in widely regarded media.

In contemporary democratic cultures, both holding and expressing opinions in public is inextricably linked to civic norms of democratic society. Going beyond the postulate of democratic theory that citizens should be informed and hold opinions capable of guiding them toward electoral choices reflective of their sincere preferences (Popkin, 1991), scholarship also attributes considerable value to citizens’ ability and willingness to actively present their opinions in public, actively practicing democratic discourse by participating in some form of political conversation (Gamson, 1992). Citizens’ awareness of, orientation toward, and capacity to position themselves in relation to ongoing political debates is regarded as a key civic virtue in democratic culture, as is individuals’ political expression and engagement in (especially cross-cutting) political talk (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Both in its interpretation as statistical distribution of opinions, and in its conceptualization as discursive process, therefore, public opinion thus carries profound normative implications not only within the scholarly debate, but also in popular culture.

Public opinion is intricately tied to its behavioral implications, as is emphasized in Allport’s (1937, p. 23) seminal definition:

“The term public opinion is given its meaning with reference to a multi-individual situation in which individuals are expressing themselves, or can be called upon to express themselves, as favoring or supporting (or else disfavoring or opposing) some definite condition, person, or proposal of widespread importance, in such a proportion of number, intensity, and constancy, as to give rise to the probability of affecting action, directly or indirectly, toward the object concerned."

Public opinion is generally thought of as *predictive* of both individual-level behavioral choices, and of collective, coordinated social *behavior*: Political scientists have studied public opinion’s implications upon phenomena such as voting behavior and political participation (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Popkin, 1991); economists study how public opinion influences various forms of economic behavior and market participation (e.g., Jackson, 2014; Watts & Dodds, 2007); sociologists have investigated the connections between public opinion and both personal and public life choices, including social activism and the formation of collective identities and cultural practices (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Perrin & McFarland, 2011). At the same time, each of the above theoretical conceptualizations foregrounds a slightly different connection between public opinion and behavior: Following the aggregative perspective exemplified by the work of Zaller (1992), public opinion primarily predicts individual action, as individuals are likely to act upon their respective opinions. Accordingly, this perspective has been highly influential for understanding individual-level behavioral choices, such as purchase decisions or voting behavior, especially when individuals’ choices are not normally observed directly, and therefore subject to limited pressure with regard to social desirability. For behaviors that respond to social desirability – notably, behaviors such as political participation and expression, but also personal life choices – the second perspective exemplified by the work of Noelle-Neumann (1977) offers the more pertinent account, wherein individual choices remain essentially driven by individual preferences, but are constrained by individuals’ perceptions of the public acceptability of certain behavioral choices. The third perspective, exemplified by the work of Crespi (1997), finally, focuses less on individual behavior choices, but is primarily interested in the mobilization of collective action and coordinated political behavior (e.g., protest).

A key contingency in the conceptualization and study of public opinion concerns the way in which *the public* is defined. Most classic theories of the public sphere tie the public to the presence of (typically mediated) communication spaces that enable members of the public to relate to common issues and recognize themselves as members of the same social collective (Price, 1988). In fact, political and normative theorists have constituted the public as a key functional component of political systems, and specifically, of democratic government (e.g., Habermas, 1988; Lippmann, 1997). Not only do public spheres permit constituents to negotiate issues of common concern and scrutinize the actions of political office holders, thus informing the formation of political preferences among the electorate; but they also enable the exchange and negotiation of opinions held among members of the public as well as their aggregation into some notion of public opinion capable of informing democratic politics. Different theoretical approaches foreground distinct notions of how the complex distribution of opinions among the public can be transformed into political will, and to what extent consensus or closure are normatively desirable (Ferree et al., 2002; Pfetsch, 2018).

For instance, Herbst (1993), distinguishes between 1) liberal democratic theory’s reliance on majority opinion; 2) deliberative democratic theories’ desire to discursively identify or establish public consensus, which emphasizes the process of opinion formation through communicative interaction; 3) a representational approach reliant on an aggregation of heterogeneous preferences, which makes assumptions regarding public opinion similar to the liberal model; and 4) the rhetorical reification of public opinion into a singular collective will, which like the deliberative model relies on discourse as the primary location of public opinion, but foregrounds not the process of formation, but rather the deliberate postulation of public opinion by powerful speakers (see also the textbox on political public spheres). In other instances, publics are also constituted based on less enduring community boundaries, such as the usership of a given media channel or program, or participation in a given event or situation. Especially theorists in marketing and Public Relations have often defined their publics more discretionarily, either based on strategic target groups addressed by communication efforts, or based on distinctive functional roles taken in by its members in relation to a given stakeholder or interest (e.g., van Leuven & Slater, 1991). Yet other strategies have defined publics based on its members’ shared characteristics, well below the level of a self-aware political collective (Oskamp and Schultz, 2005).

Publics may be conceptualized either following an electoral metaphor (“one wo/man, one vote”), giving equal weight to any member, or in a more differentiated (typically, hierarchical) fashion, wherein more influential members (e.g., opinion leaders) are attributed stronger weight, while those who do not by themselves choose to express their opinion (and thereby forego any influence they might otherwise wield) are largely discounted. That said, formally tying membership in the public to specific “quality” criteria – as did Mackinnon (1849, reprinted in 2012), who defined public opinion as “that sentiment on any given subject which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, and most moral persons in the community” – has long been dismissed; its closest surviving relative is arguably the purposeful creation of small issue-focused publics (Dewey, 1927) in deliberative polling, which encourages informed debate and thus seeks to illuminate what public opinion might be if real-world opinion formation more closely resembled the deliberative ideal (Fishkin, 2003).

**POLITICAL PUBLIC SPHERES**

The significance and interpretation of public opinion is inseparable from the nature of the public sphere (the communication space wherein opinions are exchanged) and public (the population of relevant opinion holders) under consideration. Although what is public is conceptually constituted by the dichotomy of “public” vs. “private”, it is notoriously difficult to delineate the boundary between both. Following Arendt (1958), the term ‘public’ simultaneously refers to something being visible and accessible to the widest possible audience, and to it being of common relevance and interest to anyone within a given public, and thus distinct from individuals’ private affairs.

The political public sphere is typically tied to the state, as it is concerned with the affairs of the public (res publica, a dominant reading of the term “public” during the modern era). Over the course of the past century, the political public sphere has become theorized primarily as a space that mediates between the political preferences and activities of private individuals and associations (the sphere of civil society), and the formulation of public policy by the institutions of the state (Habermas, 1988). In modern democracies, which bestow the right to political participation to all citizens, and to some extent even beyond these, the public sphere is thus essential for enabling the participation of as many people as possible (Thompson, 1996). Recognizing the imperative of ubiquitous access and the mediating role of the public sphere, media – and specifically, technologies of mass- and mass-personal mediation – occupy a central place in theoretical discourses about the public sphere. Mass media not only enable members of the public to observe relevant events in and beyond society, offering a space for the social construction of meanings and the formation of opinions; they also serve as a key venue for negotiating subjective interpretations and evaluations, gauging public opinion climates, and aggregating individual opinions toward political will formation (Converse, 1987).

Public spheres have been conceptualized in view of several competing theoretical paradigms. In liberal political theory, the public sphere is understood as a marketplace of ideas, driven by the unrestricted representation of competing demands by private individuals, aimed at the formation of decisive majorities. This perspective thus naturally links to conceptualizations of public opinion as a distribution of individual opinions. More elitist variants foreground the public’s capacity to rally behind the salient standpoints expressed by highly visible public actors (e.g., politicians, parties, experts). In a Habermasian, rationalist paradigm, by contrast, the public sphere serves as a publicly controlled deliberative space for accumulating knowledge and argumentation, aimed at reasoned consensus; relatedly, constructionist ideas tend to foreground the role of the public sphere as a space where different narratives can be developed and fused to integrate the divergent perceptions and imaginations of heterogeneous groups within the public (for a useful review, see Ferree et al., 2002). In both conceptualizations, media primarily act as a sphere for the collaborative construction of meaning and opinions, preferring a conceptualization of public opinion as a discursive process. While each perspective makes somewhat different sense of key societal transformations, the changing role of the state and its institutions, and the constant development of media technologies, all converge in considering the public opinion that emerges through discursive exchanges in the public sphere as a key foundation of legitimate democratic governance (Habermas, 1988; Dahlgren, 1995). In democratic theory, the public sphere not only serves to identify issues of public concern, exchange views and demands pertinent to these, and thereby formulate public opinion; it also acts as a key driver of political competition and democratic decision making.

In this view, the arrival of networked digital media poses a multifaceted challenge to previous notions of public spheres, necessitating a re-conceptualization of key notions. Digital social media in particular have blurred the boundaries between the public and the private sphere to a point of non-recognizability (Papacharissi, 2010). Increasing parts of private communication exchanges are taking place in digital spaces, where they are publicly accessible and thus capable of influencing public opinion (even if that may not have been the participants’ intention). At the same time, with the expansion of publicly accessible, potentially political talk on digital media, technical accessibility is less and less tied to public visibility, especially where algorithms, self-directed selective exposure, and limited attention capacities govern which subsets of contributions a person is exposed to. This state has given rise to concerns about a fragmentation of the public sphere, and the emergence of countless, more or less networked public spheres with limited awareness of one another, and thus a diminished capacity at formulating (or even recognizing) political public opinion at the level of the entire collective (Bruns, 2023; Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Fuchs, 2015; Garnham, 2020; Gitlin, 1998).

1. **MODELS OF OPINION: KEY ELEMENTS**

Public opinion theory conceptualizes opinions as evaluative beliefs or statements about an object or issue, which are held or expressed by a member of the public at a given moment in time. In addition, many conceptualizations include a specific aspect or evaluative standard based on which the object is being evaluated (Liu & Zhang, 2012, p. 418). While the primary focus of modeling individual opinions in public opinion research is to enable their aggregation beyond the level of the individual, specific opinions held or expressed by individuals are frequently subjected to further qualification and evaluation: Opinions may be rated based on their being founded in experience, valid information, or other criteria intended to distinguish “informed” opinions (Gallup, 1947; Popkin, 1991), which constitute a key desiderate in democratic theory and are regarded as “higher-quality” and potentially more influential also in other fields of research (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Price, 1992). To the extent that public opinion is studied in relation to its capacity to predict and explain collective and mass behavior, opinions may be rated by their intensity and consistency; also normative and contextual evaluations, such as the social acceptability or extremity of opinions, as well as the civility and their deliberative quality, are frequently considered as valuable attributes of opinions (Rowe, 2015).

Owing to its interest in aggregating public opinion beyond the level of individual evaluative stances, most models of opinions in public opinion research and theory center upon the shared *object of evaluation*. Public opinion research considerably narrows the range of objects that individuals may have opinions toward in at least two ways. First, public opinion research is generally interested in opinions toward objects of shared public concern, discarding any objects that fail to meet some threshold of public significance (Allport, 1937). In political public opinion, this typically restricts relevant objects of evaluation to public issues; that is, collective choices toward which there exist competing stances, backed up by at least some degree of controversy in public debate. Most conceptual work focuses on issues whose public relevance is culturally pre-established. The public relevance of any object is established through discursive negotiations, wherein members of the public “make an issue” of something, such that issues may fade away in time, while new issues arise (e.g., Baumgartner, 2008). As such, potential issues include a wide range of objects, including symbolic or even non-existent ones, so long as the public can agree on regarding these as relevant. Other fields – notably, economics and marketing – are less restrictive with regard to the need for public contestation, permitting public opinion to evaluate also goods, services, and actors (e.g., companies) that may not be particularly controversial in a political sense, as long as they are sufficiently relevant and available for members of a public to evaluate and behave toward. However, any objects that are irrelevant or unfamiliar to significant parts of a public are excluded from the study of public opinion. Second, in order to permit some degree of aggregation, public opinion research needs to restrict the freedom and nuance with which objects of evaluation can be defined. It necessarily abstracts from the fact that different members of the public interpret the same issues in somewhat different terms, and thus often do not evaluate exactly the same object. Instead, public opinion research imposes deductive issue definitions that subsume any variation in subjective understandings, possibly further specified to identify those particular *aspects of an object* or issue being evaluated, or to constrain the evaluative standard toward which evaluations are considered (e.g., the urgency of a policy issue, the competence of a candidate for public office, or the prestige of a given brand; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). While some – notably, more discourse-focused – approaches are capable of handling at least some variation in how shared issues are defined or framed, the need to identify common objects evaluated by individuals all across the public necessarily reduces the amount of nuance that can be considered.

Likewise, public opinion’s emphasis on aggregate-level opinion distributions also limits the complexity with which *evaluative stances* toward an object can be considered. In its most basic form, it conceives of opinions as “simply a positive or negative sentiment, attitude, emotion, or appraisal about an entity or an aspect of the entity from an opinion holder” (Liu & Zhang, 2012, p. 418). Some notions of public opinion also include stances that are not evaluative in a narrow sense, such as affective stances (liking), epistemic stances (believing something to be true), or identification with a specific object or position (Hunston & Thompson, 1999). In each case, semantically rich and often ambivalent evaluative considerations are mapped upon a continuum that ranges from negative/oppositional to positive/supportive, and sometimes, additional continua or categories that capture opinion intensity, different evaluative standards, and other qualities (Gallup, 1947). Thus aggregating critical differences in the variety of opinions held or expressed among members of a public, this approach necessarily abstracts from much of the variation and nuance that exists at the level of individual evaluative beliefs or statements. This is also true for those approaches that focus more on the discursive negotiation of public opinion: While in this perspective, key dimensions and categories of evaluative differentiation may emerge inductively from the debate, rather than being imposed by the theorist, also the identification of qualitative differences in the evaluation of public issues requires strategic abstraction and a considerable loss of nuance.

While opinions are necessarily attributed to specific opinion holders, different paradigms limit in somewhat different ways who and what can appear as *the holder of an opinion.* Where public opinion is conceptualized as the distribution of opinions over the members of a public, opinion holders are necessarily natural persons that meet the criteria for being included in the public. Holding an opinion is understood to denote an individual’s psychological state, which may be expressed and thus recorded, but which primarily matters as a reflection of the individual’s true beliefs and behavioral dispositions (Zaller, 1992). Following a statistical approach, any member of the public is considered with equal weight, enabling an interpretation of public opinion as a probabilistic estimate of the specific opinion that a randomly selected member of the public holds. In political public opinion research, membership of the public is typically considered without regard to individuals’ specific functions, positions, or influence, and only segmented post-hoc (e.g., by political leaning, ethnicity, gender) for analytic purposes. This is different in economics and marketing research, where opinion holders are routinely differentiated based on their functional roles (e.g., customers, employers, stakeholders) in relation to an organization, or their public influence (e.g., distinguishing opinion leaders from other members of the public; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). By contrast, where public opinion is understood more as the outcome of a discursive process carried out within a public sphere, holding an opinion is primarily understood as a willingness to express and potentially promote a specific evaluative stance, which may accurately reflect an individual’s psychological state, but which may also be a product of strategic communicative intentions, negotiations among multiple individuals, or an individual’s negotiations of their true beliefs in light of social and other situational constraints (e.g., Streb et al., 2008; Wojcieszak & Price, 2009). In this approach, therefore, also collectives, organizations, and other non-natural persons can appear as holders of opinions, and may indeed be attributed superior weight to most individuals. Inversely, any members of the public are considered relevant opinion holders only to the extent that they express their opinions in public, thus rendering it accessible to other members. Likewise, opinion holders’ membership of the public is treated as a much looser criterion, often pragmatically replaced by the availability and salience of presented opinion statements within the public debate. In light of the aggregative perspective assumed by public opinion research, this approach raises numerous challenges with regard to the relative weight given to expressed opinions, which may respond not only to their salience and prestige, but also to repetition, the capacity of enclosing communication channels to reach large audiences, and even to actors’ attempts to strategically distort the salience of available opinions.

Beyond the restriction that opinions must be part of a given public discourse, or held by a member of a given public, public opinion cannot be separated from its underlying *temporal dimension*. At any given time, public opinion captures the distribution of opinions among the public at that moment in time, tracking its development and evolution often over extended periods of time. Changes in public opinion can be conceptualized as differences in the distribution of opinions between successive measurement points in time, and thus expressly not necessarily in relation to individual-level opinion change. In general, the study of longitudinal trends in public opinion also developed along the lines of the discursive vs. the aggregate understanding of the concept: Especially discourse-focused approaches to public opinion generally acknowledge that participation in public debates may shift over time, such that public opinion may evolve owing either to changes in the evaluative beliefs held by members of the public, to changes in their propensity to express their respective opinions, or even due to the entry of new actors into (or the exit of old ones from) the public debate (Baumgartner et al., 2008) or changes in the issues discussed publicly towards which opinions are formed and voiced (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). This tradition yielded a rich body of studies tracing the salience of issues and related opinions in media coverage over time. Most often, such studies focus on only single or few issues. In contrast, classic approaches of public opinion research in political science study long-term trends in aggregated individual opinion distributions, most prominently in American politics over decades (e.g., Enns & Koch, 2013; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Stimson, 1999). These works are based on large-scale public opinion surveys and generally identify only slow shifts in public opinion over the long run. However, recent studies point to increasing polarization tendencies for some issues and in some Western democracies, most notably the U.S. and Germany (Garzia el al., 2023; Perrett, 2023).

1. **TYPES AND TYPOLOGIES**

In the study of public opinion, opinions are mostly classified based on what they pertain to, their pragmatic functions, as well as their distinctive qualities in light of normative theories of democratic discourse.

With regard to the object of opinions, there is little use in trying to theorize a consistent typology, as there are literally myriads of possible ways of organizing these objects. One useful distinction is between political opinions (which imply some normative force or preference about how things should be in general), and personal opinions toward public objects that do not carry such implications (e.g., opinions toward specific brands or companies). Among political opinions, one can distinguish a number of broad policy fields (e.g., economic policy, environmental policy, ...); political actors and organizations, social and other groups; and aspects of the political system, its institutional setup, and political norms at a meta level, toward which people may hold opinions. Objects of opinion can refer to long-standing concerns or current events, and vary in scope, relevance, and many other ways.

With regard to the pragmatic functions of opinions, theorists have distinguished opinions expressed as simple reflections of psychological inner states (expressive function, usually in response to being elicited) from opinions expressed as part of various forms of goal-oriented human interactions (Springer et al., 2015). Notably, opinions may be expressed in order to signal specific identities, associating the holder with culturally meaningful symbols and stances, in a way that is primarily intended to be informative about the holder, rather than the object being evaluated; or opinions can be expressed to review, rate (Cao et al., 2011), and possibly recommend something (Chen et al., 2011), with the intention of informing others about the holder’s evaluation of an object. Opinions are often expressed as parts of argumentation, with the intent to persuade others of the validity or superiority of a certain stance; however, not all opinion expression intended to influence others’ opinions is usefully conceptualized as persuasion. Other uses foreground an effort to demarcate a corridor of permissible or sanctionable stances, resorting to discursive power, rather than argument, for effect. Accordingly, opinions can likewise be typified based on their (intended or observed) consequences. A specific variant of this practice, which has received considerable attention recently, concerns the practice of hate speech, which combines expressive and identity-related practices with the deliberate exclusion of specific outgroups from being legitimate opinion holders within a public sphere (Coe et al., 2014; Baczkowska, 2022; Boromisza-Habashi, 2013).

Opinions can furthermore be typified based on their foundation in stable psychological states, such as attitudes and personal belief- and value-systems. In this view, opinions will be stable and strong to the extent that they are founded in beliefs and evaluative attitudes that are well-formed (and thus relatively resilient to change), salient, and ordered (ensuring that consistent attitudes are sampled when forming an opinion; an important debate in the study of attitude change concerns the possibility of “on-line” attitudes, which are permanently salient, informing highly stable opinions). Inversely, opinions may be formed ad hoc, following contextual cues and frames to sample weakly salient attitudes, or responding intensely to presently available information in the absence of well-formed attitudes. At an individual level, accordingly, opinions can also be distinguished based on their persistence and resilience to change.

With regard to the normative quality of opinions, a first set of distinctions concerns the extent to which opinions are founded in sincere personal belief and adequate information. Opinions may authentically (even if selectively) reflect a holder’s underlying attitudes; they may be grounded in authentic beliefs but tactically misrepresent these, be that for the purpose of persuasive effect, to avoid sanctioning, or other objectives; or they may be essentially divorced from a holder’s true belief, who purports to hold opinions that she or he privately disagrees with. In addition, opinion expressions may be inauthentic if they purport to reflect the views of an opinion holder that does not exist (e.g., bots, sock puppets) or presents a false identity (e.g., Ehrett et al., 2022). In addition, opinions may be based on strong, well-formed and informed attitudes, or formed from weaker sources, including misinformed beliefs, ad hoc heuristics, or affect that is not directly tied to specific information (Zaller, 1992). Underlying attitudes may largely agree in valence, such that formed opinions are univalent, but they may also contain tensions and ambiguities, informing opinions that are ambivalent or only weakly lean in a specific direction. Correspondingly, opinions vary with regard to how stable and enduring they are (Reeskens et al., 2021), and with that, their capacity to reliably predict individuals’ future preferences and behavior. In the context of political public opinion research, the foundedness of opinions in sincere, informed belief is regarded as a normative desiderate, such that opinions are regarded as less valuable, to the point of detracting value, and to the extent that they fail to meet these quality criteria.

In this relation, different theories of democracy foreground somewhat different normative demands regarding public opinion. Liberal theories of democracy primarily postulate that opinions must reflect individuals’ sincere preferences without undue restriction (e.g., pressures exerted by public opinion climates or restrictions on free speech). The same paradigm demands that public debates should be competitive and pluralistic, enabling a free exchange of views. More elitist versions of representative democratic theory are less confident of individuals’ capacity to recognize and express their true preferences, as public discourse is seen as rife with affect, stereotypes, misconception, and heuristic reasoning. Instead, such conceptions foreground the role of political elites - notably, politicians, journalists, pressure groups - who can present the public with either transparent, persuasive, and meaningful choices to support, or distort, public opinion formation through misleading rhetoric or appeals to populist or other sentiments. In deliberative models of democracy, by contrast, the key desiderate governing the quality of opinions is their foundedness in information and reasoned argument, as well as their openness to persuasion and consensus formation. In this conceptualization, much weight is given to the quality of the institutional framework structuring the public sphere - notably, civil society as the collective of actors called-upon to participate in the formation of public opinion, as well as media, science, bureaucracy, the judiciary, and other procurers of verified knowledge - and the quality of information available and considered in the formation of political opinions (Lasswell, 1931; Berelson, 1952; Zaller, 1992; Lippmann, 1997; Habermas, 1988; Axtmann, 2005; Rosenberg, 2007; Szwed, 2011; Hess, 2013).

Generally, opinions can be qualified based on the amount and nature of knowledge that informs them. Following a rationalist paradigm, opinions should ideally be based on verified, factual information and an unbiased appraisal of the needs and interests of the opinion holder (in liberal theories) or the collective (in deliberative models). In this perspective, the availability of scientific or otherwise verified information constitutes a key prerequisite for informed opinion formation. Against this, a tradition in social psychological research emphasizes the rootedness of opinions in “social representations”; that is, culturally established belief systems (lay theories) shaped primarily by popular knowledge qualified more by conventional affirmation than by scientific evidentiary standards (Moscovici, 1984; 2001). Scientific knowledge can become part of social representations by being “anchored” in established beliefs and categories, or through a process of objectification, wherein new insights are rendered concrete and graspable in popular culture. Within their relevant cultural context, social representations are perceived as confident knowledge, even if they include consequential simplifications, abstractions, or even error, forming interpretive communities that facilitate the formation of shared public opinion.

Beyond their epistemic and normative qualities, finally, opinions may be distinguished based on their alignment within public discourse: Opinions can be widely regarded as legitimate, or they can be contested or sanctioned, to the point of being outlawed (e.g., some countries ban public criticism of governing authorities or religion, holocaust denial, or expressions of support for certain ideas or enemy groups). Opinions can be grouped into consensual, majority, minority, and fringe opinions, organized along political cleavages (e.g., left-right), or along a dimension of distance from the societal mainstream (e.g., extreme/radical opinions; Ferree et al., 2002). Opinions may express support for the present status quo, or be classified as progressive or reactionary, or even revolutionary. Both their common adoption and perceived legitimacy, moreover, inform opinion’s suitability for being publicly expressed without fear of sanction (while other opinions might remain unexpressed and thus latent). Focusing more on their mode of presentation, opinions can be evaluated as constructive based on their (attributed) capacity to advance the quality of public opinion negotiation, aggregation, and governance; similarly, opinions can be typified into those relevant to, and invested into, an ongoing debate, and those (off-topic) contributions that are unsuitable to advance said debate. Other typologies distinguish democratic from populist or even anti-democratic opinions, or aim to otherwise separate normatively desirable from less desirable contributions to public opinion.

**TEXTBOX INSERT: HATE SPEECH**

Hate speech refers to opinion expressions that disparage, delegitimize, or attack social groups or individuals based on their affiliation to certain social groups, most commonly understood in relation to their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender (Hietanen & Eddebo, 2023). Owing to various dynamics observed in digital communication spaces - notably, the toxic manifestations of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), the formation of radical online subcultures (Sunstein, 2001), and the instrumentalization of online communication as a weapon in social conflict (Zelenkauskaite, 2022) - hate speech has gained considerable prominence in the academic, professional, and public debate about online opinion expression, and sizable resources are invested to attempt its moderation or suppression in various online environments.

While a precise delineation of hate speech remains challenging both conceptually and operationally, most definitions consider both a speaker’s intention to hurt a targeted outgroup (or outgroup member), as well as referenced outgroups’ own perception of their dignity being harmed. However, neither criterion offers strong boundaries, as hate speech can also arise from other motives (e.g., performing power relations, asserting exclusionary beliefs, attention seeking/“trolling”, negligence; Kunić, 2024); and many opinions expressed with hateful intention (Sponholz, 2022), and/or subjectively experienced as hurtful, fail to qualify as hate speech. In terms of its linguistic form, hate speech may explicate extreme negative sentiment (e.g., using slurs or insults) or hostile intentions (e.g., threats) toward targeted outsiders, or imply such devaluation (e.g., through reference to pop-cultural stereotypes, texts, and ideas wherein specific attributes are enshrined). Politeness research, in particular, has parsed variegated means of expressing hostile opinions (e.g., slurs and insults, vulgarity; (im)personal addresses; Culpepper, 2011; Finkbeiner et al., 2016). At the same time, the detection of hate speech is complicated by the use of sub-cultural jargons, textual ambiguity, multimodal forms, and the fact that hate speech is often context-dependent, such that equivalentexpressions maycommunicate different meaning depending on the identity of the speaker, co-present alters, the communication situation, and other factors.

Hate speech is highly prevalent in online environments where contested political subjects are discussed (e.g., immigration, religion, sexuality; Paasch-Colberg et al., 2021; Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012). From a public opinion point of view, a key danger of hate speech concerns its capacity to exclude deviant opinions from being voiced, and manipulate public perceptions of acceptable and sanctionable opinions (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Hate speech has been associated with political polarization and extremism (e.g., Schäfer et el., 2022), and other forms of deterioration in the quality of democratic public debates. Accordingly, many digital platforms and media organizations have established (and many public regulators have mandated) specific community guidelines and moderation protocols designed to discourage or redact, commonly relying on a combination of AI-based algorithms (in older versions, dictionaries of lexical markers), human moderation, and community feedback (Zelenkauskaite et al. 2021; Chaudhry, 2015).

1. **HOW ARE OPINIONS FORMED?**

Unlike the formation of individual opinions, the formation of public opinion involves at least three interdependent processes. One process accounts for what objects and issues are regarded as of public shared relevance; one process shapes the formation of individual opinions among members of the public; and one process drives what opinions are regarded as acceptable, controversial, or out of bounds.

The process of establishing issues as publicly relevant has been theorized from several angles. One perspective, which is rooted mostly in social movement research and discourse theory, focuses on the making of issues from previous non-issues (Cobb et al., 1976). Specifically, new issues arise from subject matters that were not previously exposed to public debate and evaluation, because they were previously considered private (e.g., domestic violence), consensual (heteronormativity), unimportant (e.g., environmental protection), or because they simply did not exist (e.g., artificial intelligence). In each case, issues are typically introduced by interested stakeholder groups, often activists, who challenge the predominant understanding. Where these challengers gain sufficient resonance in public discourse, a public debate unfolds, inviting also the participation of other societal actors, including those interested in maintaining the status quo (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Zhou & Moy, 2007). Relatedly, agenda setting research has primarily focused on the relative importance attributed to available issues. Likewise pointing to public discourse, and mass media in particular, public concern with available issues tends to respond to the amount (and to some extent, the style) of media attention dedicated to an issue (McCombs, 2004). Inversely, in a recursive process, media attention also responds to the amount of public concern for an issue, on top of the strategic efforts of interested stakeholders in different camps at inserting specific issues into the debate (agenda building). In this way, agenda setting theory can explain how issues gain sufficient salience to become relevant objects of public opinion, as well as the reverse process by which issues may fail to hold on to public attention, eventually dropping off the radar. Framing theory has primarily been concerned with the specific way in which available issues are defined and contextualized, and thereby, what aspects of an issue are made salient to the public, and what aspects are rendered comparatively less available (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2003). In addition, frames also contribute to intensifying public controversy (e.g., by emphasizing strongly evocative aspects, presenting issues as tied to collective identities, or foregrounding conflict) or inversely, to the depoliticization and possible removal of issues from the public debate (e.g., by foregrounding technocratic aspects; van Gorp & Vyncke, 2021). While each theoretical perspective focuses on a different part of the process, all conceptualize the construction and negotiation of public issues as a highly competitive, discursive achievement that takes place in mediated public debate. Consequently, this process is considered integral to public opinion in theoretical perspectives that foreground the importance of public discourse (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2008), while those perspectives that emphasize the distribution of opinions held among members of the public tend to regard this process as external, and focus instead on issues whose public relevance can be assumed with high confidence at the time under consideration. In economics and marketing, which are less interested in contested issues and thus satisfied with assuming public familiarity with an evaluated object, relevant efforts at raising public awareness and knowledge of a given product, brand, or service, actor or activity, or more generally, the diffusion of innovation, may stand in place of the process of issue formation (Rogers, 2003).

Most theory and research in public opinion has focused on the formation of individual opinions among the public, addressing anything from heuristic to systematic judgment, considering affective, normative, social and rational processes, as well as a near-endless range of valuable information sources (notably: personal experience; identity; interpersonal word-of-mouth; mass-mediated and digital communication; logical reasoning; perceptions of social context; and the prevailing climate of opinion; Crespi, 1997; Gamson, 1996; Popkin, 1991). Without debating each possible route in detail, the main difference between available theoretical conceptualizations concerns whether they primarily address the formation of enduring, personal, evaluative beliefs (often referred-to as attitudes), the formation of situation-bound evaluative judgments (which Zaller [1992] refers to as opinions in a narrower sense), or the self-directed expression of evaluative statements. While theoretical conceptualizations of public opinion as the distribution of individual opinions are acutely interested in the first and second part of these, more discourse-based conceptualizations of public opinion tend to foreground the second and third part.

In one key contribution positioned firmly within the former paradigm, Zaller (1992) has conceptually separated the process of attitude formation from the process of deriving an evaluative response from available attitudes. In his understanding, attitude formation is primarily driven by the reception and selective acceptance of available information. While information can be gleaned from a wide variety of sources, only information disseminated in public discourse is available to all members of the public alike, and therefore occupies a privileged role in forming the attitudes underlying public opinion. At the same time, Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) have famously noted that mass-mediated information may be less likely to be accepted and integrated into people’s beliefs than information presented by personally familiar and trusted individuals. Their theoretical conceptualization of two-step information flows of personal influence, since extended in numerous ways to account for the complex multi-step flows known from contemporary digital media environments, has firmly established also the role of opinion leaders – influential individuals familiar and trusted among members of the public due to their attributed expertise, reputation, or other skills – as key agents in mass persuasion (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Watts & Dodds, 2007). In addition, the rising availability of on-demand information on digital media accessible via search engines, various portals, and social networks has elevated the impact of individuals’ active information searches, and with these, the power of digital platforms (Liu & Zhang, 2012; Nielsen & Ganter, 2021). To decide what information to accept, individuals rely both on their own prior attitudes, as well as additional cues available in received information (e.g., source credibility, framing). In each round, new information is weighed against sometimes considerable amounts of prior knowledge, resulting in a somewhat path-dependent, slow-moving process of attitude formation and change. When called upon to state an opinion, according to Zaller (1992), individuals then access any attitudes that they find relevant to a given issue, and summarize stored evaluative beliefs into an ad-hoc (“on-line”) reported opinion. However, since individuals are limited in the amount of information that they can consider at a time, the same individual may sample information from different subsets of held attitudes depending on current accessibility, situational cues, and available frames (either in mind or in a prompt or message), resulting in opinion reports that are notably less stable than the underlying attitudes. To elicit an individual’s “true” opinion toward an issue thus requires considerable cognitive effort, possibly multiple observations, and careful control of available cues that might bias individuals’ response behavior.

By comparison, theorists in the more discourse-focused perspective on public opinion are less concerned with what opinions are indeed held among the public, but rather with which opinions are publicly expressed and thus made politically salient. They, too, have emphasized the influence of the framing of public debates, which they conceptualize less in terms of guiding individuals’ cognitive information processing, but in terms of legitimizing or delegitimizing specific opinions (Crespi, 1997). In this view, individuals are normally capable of thinking of the same issue in multiple perspectives, potentially pointing towards different evaluative conclusions, but are most likely to consider, verbalize, and act upon those that are salient in their communicative environment (Chong & Druckman, 2007). While also these theorists acknowledge the importance of interpersonal communication, opinion leaders, and personal concerns capable of raising an individual’s attention to specific evaluative perspectives and opinions, they attribute relatively greater weight to public discourse, and especially the contents of major, opinion-leading media and highly-visible, prestigious forums. In this perspective, individuals tend to orient themselves toward those frames and opinions salient in public debate (Crespi, 1997; Nelson & Oxley, 1999), both in terms of rendering their opinions relevant to ongoing public negotiations, and in terms of responding to perceived opinion climates that govern which opinions can and cannot be expressed without fear of sanction. A rapidly growing body of scholarship has theorized those factors that lead individuals to express and defend their opinions, especially in the context of digital social media, documenting severe imbalances in public participation (e.g., Springer et al., 2015; Wu & Atkin, 2017). A key role also belongs to individuals’ personal information ecologies (e.g., media diets, discussion networks, algorithmically personalized social media feeds), which may embolden individuals to publicly uphold minority opinions, or to misperceive the overall distribution and climate of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Of course, contemporary theorists acknowledge a much wider range of influential opinion holders capable of making their views heard in public, especially compared to early theorists of public opinion as elite political and media discourse. However, the growing enfranchisement of opinion holders in the public debate has also introduced new forms of distortion, from the exaggerated visibility of activist and extremist voices (e.g., Yarchi et al., 2021), to the strategic dissemination of inauthentic voices (e.g., bots, propaganda; Benkler et al., 2018), to the algorithmic visibility manipulation and suppression of selected opinions (Nielsen & Ganter, 2021). As a result, public opinion as expressed in public discourse may deviate considerably from public opinion as the distribution of views among the public: Ongoing debates may address the concerns of only certain subsets of the public, who perceive their opinions to constitute valid contributions to the debate, while others choose to remain silent as their opinions fail to fit the present framing of the issue. Moreover, powerful voices may contribute to the widespread perception that certain opinions are dominant or even consensual (Schulz & Roessler, 2012), motivating dissidents to remain silent for fear of social sanctioning. Inversely, selected voices may come to participate disproportionally in public discourse, owing to their superior motivation, ability, social capital, and other resources enabling them to gain an exaggerated presence in the public debate. Consequently, this theoretical perspective sometimes includes an important contribution by critical scholarship that examines those both discursive and extra-discursive power structures, cultures, and contexts that shape the way in which communicative norms are negotiated in public discourse, what voices will be heard, and which are excluded from legitimate participation (e.g., Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Sponholz, 2022). In addition, some attention has been given to the embedded recursive process, whereby publicly expressed opinions not only reflect what is presently seen as relevant and legitimate, but also shape what opinions are likely to be considered and verbalized in the future. In the discourse-focused interpretation of public opinion, the ever-evolving process of opinion formation is thus inseparable from public opinion itself, resulting in the theoretical development of numerous dynamic process theories – notably, Noelle-Neumann’s (1977) spiral of silence, as well as various accounts of dynamic polarization and radicalization.

**TEXTBOX INSERT: OPINION LEADERS**

Opinion leaders play a key role in the formation of public opinion. Originally introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), opinion leaders “are likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment” (p.3), owing to personal (and potentially, para-social) ties that position them as trusted sources of information (Watts & Dodds, 2007). According to Katz (1957), three factors differentiate leaders from nonleaders: (1) Identity (who one is): the embodiment of certain values in the persona of the opinion leader; (2) Expertise (what one knows): the competence or knowledge associated with leaders; and (3) Social Network (whom one knows): the strategic positioning within the social network. Conceptually, opinion leaders are distinguished by their (often sectoral) superior expertise and active efforts at mediating ideas and opinions between public discourse at large and members of their respective networks (or communities; Rogers, 2003; Valente & Davis, 1999). According to the two-step flow of communication theory developed by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), information first flows from the media to opinion leaders and then from these opinion leaders to less active segments of the population. However, subsequent research expanded this hypothesis to include multistep flows, wherein ideas are passed on through different stages, with varying levels of influence between communicators (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 2003). Opinion leaders can be conceptualized both in terms of the strategic, “top-down” diffusion of knowledge and innovation (Cho et al., 2012), shaping the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of others (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), and in terms of their capacity to aggregate community takes on current issue and rendering these accessible to wider public debates. Moreover, opinion leaders may act as such out of their own volition (e.g., early adopters or motivated stakeholders who offer their personal opinions on current issues or objects), or appear as part of centralized communication strategies (e.g., influencers that sell their capacity at reaching out to certain audiences to interested buyers; Venkatraman, 1989). Especially in the context of marketing, companies can leverage mediation offered by opinion leaders to disseminate product information, offer recommendations, share personal comments, and augment professional knowledge, so as to promote their products and services in an effective and targeted manner (Li & Du, 2011). In addition, direct personal conversation as well as para-social interactions (e.g., following influencers via social media) endow communicated contents with a sense of trustworthiness and intimacy that facilitate the adoption of proposed opinions and may be conducive also to foster further re-sharing and word-of-mouth (WoM, and in digital communication environments, eWoM; Cheung & Lee, 2012) among targeted audiences (Chen et al. 2011; Cabosky, 2016). While there is less explicit theorizing about opinion leadership as part of strategic communication campaigns in political public opinion as compared to marketing research, the important contribution of trusted mediators and the capacity to motivate political conversations among networked audiences is well-recognized also in the context of political communication. One critical contribution of opinion leadership in the context of political public spheres concerns opinion leaders’ capacity to structure the formation and aggregation of individuals’ opinions, strengthening communally shared perceptions and thus enabling collective awareness and potential mobilization. In view of the intensely networked communication dynamics characteristic of digital media environments, opinion leaders thus act as brokers of public opinion capable not only of speaking to, but also for their respective communities to facilitate a mediation of opinions between civil society and political institutions (Castells, 2009).

1. **EXPRESSIONS OF OPINIONS**

Perhaps the deepest disagreement among different approaches to theorizing public opinion concerns their expression. Where public opinion is conceptualized primarily as a distribution of views, which are held by individuals but not necessarily expressed in public, the expression of opinions is primarily regarded as a methodological concern: For an opinion to be recorded, individuals need to be capable of accurately expressing their views (McNemar, 1946) – typically, upon being prompted by an interviewer or in an online survey. Accordingly, much attention has been dedicated to people’s tendencies to misrepresent their true psychological states. Scholarship has identified a wide range of factors capable of influencing individuals’ opinion expression even in the private situation of a survey interview, which include context effects within the course of the survey interview (e.g., halo effects; trying to appear consistent; e.g., Strack & Martin, 1987), different variants of social desirability, and signaling behavior (relative to perceived public opinion climates, but also in the context of the survey interview; Streb et al., 2008), as well as a wide range of heuristic response behaviors (e.g., guessing, default categories, preferring/avoiding to report no opinion). Recognizing a wide variety of possible distortions in individuals’ tendency to voluntarily express their opinions in public, scholars associated with this paradigm remain deeply skeptical of public opinion measures that rely on the (inevitably non-representative, selective) representation of opinion statements in any form of media (Murphy et al., 2014). Conceptualizing opinions as essentially individual and private, opinion expression is mostly regarded as potential influence upon, or outcome of, public opinion, but not as part of public opinion itself.

By contrast, for all theoretical approaches that view public opinion as a discursive, collaborative achievement, how and when opinions are expressed relationally and in public is key to the phenomenon of public opinion (McGregor, 2019). As this conceptualization focuses on the public negotiation of commonly recognized, accepted opinions, opinions can become part of public opinion only to the extent that they are indeed expressed in ways that permit them to influence others’ perceptions, and exposes them to being challenged, supported, or otherwise negotiated by other members of the public. In this view, eliciting and thus making visible opinions that their holders would not have expressed otherwise constitutes a deliberate intervention into the public opinion process, which can in itself be studied as part of the dynamic, discursive process of public opinion formation.

Despite these conceptual divides, both paradigms have informed ample scholarship about the public expression of opinion. One concern shared by both strands focuses on understanding when and why individuals do or do not express their opinion in public, when they do so with greater or lesser frequency, in different situations and channels, and in different manners (Lee et al., 2015; Springer et al., 2015). One central aspect relates to the impact of the perceived context in which an opinion might (have to) be expressed: Individuals may consider their opinion’s social desirability in relation to those social norms (seen as) governing a given public space, gauge the perceived public opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and prospective audiences’ tendency to agree or challenge stated opinions, or factor in possible repressive responses on part of other individuals and social groups, platforms, or the state. Individuals may choose to express or withhold their opinions following very different motivations: While persuasion intention should normally raise individuals’ tendency to express an opinion, opinion expression as the signaling of identity should be strongly context sensitive, and it has even been argued that individuals may express opinions in order to elicit responses and thus learn about others’ prevalent views (Soffer & Gordoni, 2018). Moreover, individuals’ substantive investment in a debate, topic, or community may motivate sustained contribution even when faced with adverse responses, while less invested speakers are often known to engage in “drive-by commenting”, inserting their opinions without sticking around for others’ responses (Fredheim et al., 2015). Also, individual-level predispositions account for important differences in the tendency to express opinions, such as individuals’ fear of isolation (Willnat et al., 2002) or the intensity or salience of an existing opinion (Kim et al., 2021). Moreover, individuals’ willingness to express their opinion varies systematically between different subgroups of society, reflecting, amongst others, differences in power and social status (notably, members of discriminated-against minorities are much less likely to publicly voice their opinions).

With the rise of digital, and especially social media, opportunities for individuals to express their opinion in public (or semi-public) spaces have expanded by several orders of magnitude, while at the same time, profoundly eroding or cloaking the distinct publicness of mediated spaces. In consequence, much controversy has focused on how online spaces alter individuals’ tendency to express their opinions. On the one hand, theorists have underlined digital media environments’ potential for inclusiveness, enabling a broader audience to express their opinions and participate in public deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004). In this view, the primary embedding of online interactions in social settings dominated by like-minded others facilitates expression, while the networkedness of online public spheres still permits the mediation of expressed opinions toward other and larger publics (e.g. Schäfer et al., 2022; Springer et al., 2015; Ziegele et al., 2014). Research has furthermore highlighted specific interventions suitable to increase the civility and inclusiveness of online interactions (e.g., by limiting anonymity or engaging in content moderation; Fredheim et al., 2015; Friess et al., 2021). On the other hand, other scholars have illuminated online discourse’s threat to inclusiveness by means of hostile and incivil interactions, the mobilization of discourse power, and the possible tendency of algorithmically prestructured online public spheres to fragment and polarize public opinion. Notably, scholarship has foregrounded the toxic atmosphere created by hate speech and other forms of hostile interactions facilitated by perceived anonymity (“online disinhibition effect”, Suler, 2004); distorted perceptions of in- and outgroup opinion distributions owing to the effects of echo chambers and selective exposure facilitated by algorithmic and motivated content selection; and the capacity of activist groups to gain disproportionate visibility, either advancing highly particular, often extreme views (recognizing radical groups’ heightened capacity for mobilization), or shouting down and silencing opposing views (Colleoni et al., 2014; Rossini, 2022).

In addition to individuals’ differential tendency to express their opinions in online spaces, a related field of research has addressed the presence of consequential distortions in the visibility of expressed opinions, owing to both general attention dynamics and specific media logics. Prior to the advent of digital media, considerable attention had been dedicated to the role of professional gatekeepers – journalists, editors, and other elite communicators such as political, economic, and cultural elites – affecting the public visibility of available opinions, which relied primarily on audiovisual and print mass media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Following the rise of digital platforms and digital social media, much of this focus has shifted toward the role of online publics themselves, whose behavioral choices are amplified, but also incentivized and exploited by proprietary algorithms. In particular, research has documented digital platforms’ tendency to selectively amplify controversial and extreme opinions, which elicit further controversy and keep users on the platform, and to reward active mobilization and high-activity users (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). One persistent concern in the study of opinion expression and the differential visibility and influence of available opinions concerns the role of opinion leaders (in digital parlance, often called influencers; Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Often lacking professional or institutional roles, certain individuals nevertheless emerge (or strategically position themselves) as widely visible, trusted voices capable of making their opinions heard within specific publics. Opinion leaders may either represent their own views, or offer their influence to interested actors in exchange for a fee or other benefits.

As a consequence, what opinions are expressed in public, gain salience, and are capable of influencing others’ opinions and perceptions of present opinion climates is the outcome of a complex, dynamic, socio-technical process capable of numerous quirky behaviors that remain less than fully understood (e.g., virality, hypes/fads; see for example Waldherr et al., 2021 for a discussion of such dynamics). Accordingly, public opinion conceptualized as the process of public opinion expression and negotiation usually differs considerably from public opinion conceptualized as the distribution of opinions held among individuals. Despite this, the ubiquity of social media and the ease of accessing and mining it for opinion expressions has inspired the growth of an entire industry of social media-based opinion mining, which is often treated as a substitute or proxy for public opinion that can feed into organizational decision-making processes (e.g., political campaign strategies, investment choices, marketing decisions; Bai, 2011; Eirinaki et al. 2012; Cao et al., 2011; Liu & Zhang, 2012). However, while opinion mining may validly capture certain changes in the public availability of opinion expressions, it is subject to numerous additional distortions (for instance, frequentist measures of opinion expression frequencies do not translate well into public visibility; most mining strategies foreground textual expression, while much opinionated discourse on digital media is multimodal; also, digital media are not bounded in alignment with political communities or markets), including deliberate manipulations and attempts at simulating opinion climates that cannot be reasonably expected to predict public behavior.

Beyond the wide range of factors driving the expression of opinions, scholarship has developed a rich conceptual gridwork of distinctive ways in which opinions can be expressed. One key distinction concerns the modality and media channel of expression, which not only shapes the opportunities for how an opinion can be expressed, but also how others are enabled to respond to it: While oral forms (e.g., word of mouth, public addresses) often (albeit not necessarily, if an event is recorded) limit the availability of opinion expressions in time and space, and most pre-digital media afford high visibility at one time (e.g., via journalistic coverage, insertion into popular programming) at the expense of continued easy access, most digital forms of expression remain accessible over extended periods of time and can be accessed from more or less anywhere (Cheung & Lee, 2012). With regard to modality, contemporary digital media environments have given much space for textual-visual, and increasingly, audio-visual forms (notably, memes; Shifman, 2013), pushing back on the previous dominance on verbal and textual forms of expression. Relatedly, opinion expressions may be univalent or ambivalent, well-explicated, or imbued with lesser or greater amounts of ambiguity (Boxman-Shabtai, 2020). In this regard, textual forms tend to afford greater opportunity for controlling the content of expressed opinions and offering explicit justification, while multimodal forms permit the presentation of richer evaluative sentiment and affect, often at the cost of reduced control and heightened ambiguity (Geise & Baden, 2013). Opinion expressions can furthermore be distinguished based on all those qualities discussed above as types: They may offer or withhold evidence of reasons and authentic belief, express higher or lesser intensity, mark or cloak pragmatic intentions, and so on. Opinions can be expressed in a civil, respectful, and constructive manner, or in incivil ways, to the point of foregrounding hostility and disrespect (see also text box on hate speech).

One specific form of opinion expression that has gained much attention in the context of digital social media is the use of Like-functions, up- and down-votes, and related reductive ways to express approval or disapproval. While most such forms reduce opinions to the pure sentiment expressed toward a contribution (Kim & Hovy, 2004; Liu & Zhang, 2012; Oskamp & Schultz, 2005), some variants offer marginally more, pre-categorized, semantic depth (e.g., Facebook’s emotes distinguish between anger, sadness, care/love, hilarity, and astonishment). Characteristically, such forms of opinion expression are dependent on someone else defining the object of evaluation, often already including an opinion statement, which is then the object toward support, or whether disapproval is indicated.

**TEXTBOX INSERT: DISINFORMATION SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION**

The widespread dissemination of disinformation and misinformation is a powerful factor that profoundly affects how public sentiment is formed and interpreted. The intentional dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information is known as disinformation, and it has become a powerful instrument for influencing public opinion (Gërguri, 2023). The significance of disinformation in the realm of public opinion lies in its ability to distort reality, manipulate narratives, and sway the collective mindset.

Disinformation involves “deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate” (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 7). Disinformation is conceptualized as the deployment of propaganda that involves affective, deflective, and misleading, rather than false information; and propaganda is conceptualized as the intentional use of communication means to influence attitudes and behaviors in target populations (Benkler et al., 2018). Recent examples of such behaviors include Russian trolling (Zelenkauskaite, 2022). Similarly, disinformation can contain elements of misinformation. Misinformation, however, entails that information that is factually inaccurate, yet without manipulative or malicious intent” (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 7). Every aspect of public opinion, which depends on precise and well-informed knowledge, is susceptible to manipulation in such a situation.

When interpreting public opinion in the context of disinformation or misinformation, scholars must navigate through a landscape where truth and falsehood coexist, and individuals are exposed to a barrage of contradictory information. In the current media landscape, disinformation or misinformation circulation can take place through various channels. Disinformation often exploits cognitive biases, emotions, and identity, making individuals susceptible to manipulation. Also, the continuous development of new forms of disinformation, such as the deepfakes and other content produced by artificial intelligence, also presents new difficulties for both users and regulators of media contents, as well as academic scholarship (Gërguri, 2023).

If historically, disinformation was mostly spread intentionally as part of propaganda controlled by the state, using centralized mass media channels, much of the circulation of disinformation in contemporary digital media environments relies on the participation of lay actors: Besides strategically created disinformation disseminated by ideologically motivated, unwitting (and sometimes, paid) individuals (Asmolov, 2019), also the digital amplification of rumors and misperceptions contributes to the ubiquity of unverified and misleading factual claims. In addition, the emergence of social media and online platforms has raised concerns over possible filter bubbles and echo chambers, wherein people are preferentially exposed to contents that confirm their preexisting opinions, and furnish supportive factual claims (Bruns, 2019; Sunstein 2001). As a consequence, opinion disagreements in public discourse are potentially aggravated, diminishing opportunities for resolution by rational argument, and blurring the boundaries between factual and evaluative beliefs. In the context of public opinion scholarship, this situation not only distorts the process of public opinion formation, but through its construction of alternative realities toward which opinions can be formulated, also interferes with attempts to validly gauge public opinion.

1. **METHODS USED TO INVESTIGATE AND MEASURE OPINIONS**

Depending on one’s preferred conceptualization of public opinion, very different strategies lend themselves to its empirical investigation. If the conceptualization of public opinion as distribution of individual opinions within a public demands a reliance on survey-based research, viewing public opinion as a discursive process naturally leads an investigator toward discourse- and content analytic measures, and more recently, computational methods. In fact, the evolution of theoretical paradigms in public opinion research is closely tied to the emergence of new methods: Prior to the rise of representative, quantitative survey methods, studying the contents of opinion-leading mass media constituted the primary point of access to public opinion, foregrounding conceptualizations that relied on elites’ published opinions represented and exchanged in national news discourse and selected political forums. While qualitative inquiry-based approaches existed and continue to exist, elites’ and opinion leaders’ limited availability to participate in such research mostly restricted their use to the study of audiences’ sense-making practices in the reception of public opinion (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Gingras & Carrier, 1996; Graber, 1988; McGregor, 2020). With the rise of representative, quantitative surveys in the 1940s and 1950s, inquiry-based research gained the capacity to measure privately held opinions at scale, shifting the emphasis from elite opinion toward enfranchising initially any household, and later any adult member of the public in the study of public opinion (e.g., Hodder-Williams, 2022). In conjunction with this methodological innovation, theoretical conceptualizations that foregrounded the distribution of opinions among members of a public rapidly gained traction, to the point that discourse-based approaches focused on public negotiations of published opinions became a side track both paradigmatically and methodologically. The process-focused paradigm experienced some degree of rehabilitation in the wake of growing content analytic and experimental research in public agenda setting (McCombs, 2004) and (a bit later) framing (Entman, 2003), which established structural linkages between the contents of opinion-leading mass media and the distribution of opinions among the public (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2017; Kümpel & Springer, 2016; Zerback & Karadas, 2022). However, while much theoretical and empirical work on agenda setting and framing, which does involve the study of media contents, was motivated by the wish to better understand public opinion, most of its conceptual setup focused on explaining over-time stochastic changes in the distribution of opinions among individuals, with little attention to dynamic processes within public discourse itself. Only with the rise of digital media – and with it, the facility of studying the contents of public discourse at scale and over time – did content-analytic research on framing resurrect its focus on public discourse dynamics, and with it, the discourse-focused conceptualization of public opinion (Colleoni et al., 2014; Shah et al., 2015). The ensuing rise of digital methods further accelerated this development, motivating a rapid growth of empirical work addressing over-time changes in opinions expressed in public debates, including those verbalization, amplification, contestation, and other processes involved. In the same progression, the rapid penetration of digital social media into all realms of life enabled content-analytic public opinion research to finally match survey researchers’ capacity to include non-elite opinions in a systematic fashion, massively expanding the study of public opinion as expressed in publicly available, digital media. That said, researchers rooted in distribution-focused conceptualizations of public media have likewise made efforts to make use of the sudden availability of large-scale digital records of opinion expressions, hoping to replace expensive survey-based research with individuals’ self-directed verbalization of opinions on social media (e.g., Murphy et al., 2014). At the same time, any such efforts have rapidly run into issues regarding the representativeness of verbalized opinions, which is a key requirement of valid measurement in the distribution-focused understanding of public opinion. By contrast, discourse process focused conceptualizations resonate well overall with the innate asymmetries reflected in individuals’ self-directed expression of opinion.

In survey-based public opinion research, the validity of measurement depends primarily on the means by which a survey is administered, and how representativeness is ascertained (Price & Neijens, 1997). Strategies for ensuring representative samples used to rely on census-based population data (e.g., selecting respondents at random from a register; Berinsky, 2017), or full randomization strategies (e.g., random walks for in-person surveys, random digit dialing for telephone surveys; Berinsky, 2017; Wilson, 1947); however, both have become impractical and also unreliable (e.g., some people have multiple phone numbers). At present, many surveys rely on large panels of subscribed participants managed by large survey companies, who remunerate their members for participation and thus try to manage representative sample composition. Given growing awareness of persistent asymmetries in response behavior, including participation in such panels, however, much contemporary survey research has shifted from seeking truly random, representative samples toward compensating for known biases in the sample by attributing differential weights to different participants. This strategy is specifically pertinent given that most contemporary public opinion surveys (at least in developed countries) are administered online, which is considerably cheaper than alternatives but suffers from steep biases in participation (Van Selm & Janowski, 2006). That said, also telephone-administered surveys (for much of the 20th century, the standard practice) and even door-to-door surveys are subject to such biases. A special case is the exit poll, a form of public opinion survey conducted in-person at the exit of polling stations, which thereby assures a greater degree of representativeness, but can be used only in the context of actual elections. Once a suitable sample has been constructed, the remaining challenge is to ensure that reported opinions accurately reflect individuals’ underlying attitudes and preferences. To this end, survey-based opinion research depends on respondents’ pre-established familiarity with, and opinion formation toward, any relevant issues, limiting the use of such methods to issues salient in public discourse (Asher, 2016). To enable valid measurement, researchers have developed a wide variety of scales, tasks, and implicit measures, devised variegated strategies for counteracting known response biases (notably, social desirability and context-based priming effects; Mouncey, 2018; Streb et al., 2008; Zaller, 1992), and employed consistency checks intended to detect un-founded, ad-hoc, and inauthentic opinion statements (Ethrett et al., 2022; Zelenkauskaite, 2022). While most validity checks in survey-based research have focused on the consistency of individual measurements, opinion surveys’ capacity to accurately predict the outcomes of democratic elections, one of the key contexts where public opinion surveys are commonly used, is often regarded as a critical benchmark in this line of research.

For investigations into public opinion that rely on text as data, a distinction must be made between qualitative, quantitative manual, and computational methods. Early studies, as well as ongoing work interested primarily in the discursive construction of acceptable or sanctioned opinions, have relied primarily on discourse analytic approaches (including critical discourse analysis), targeting limited-scale samples of opinion-leading mass media or elite discourse (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Most work in the discourse-focused paradigm has relied on content analytic methods, drawing representative or stratified samples of mass media coverage (or written records of other kinds of salient public discourse) to classify expressed opinions, including various close siblings of opinions (notably, sentiments and frames; or political claims, e.g., Koopmans & Statham, 2010). Such works typically focus less on processes and mechanisms of public opinion negotiation, but rather at capturing what opinions audiences are exposed to, often in an effort to explain opinion distributions captured using survey-based methods. While some content analytic work exists that has aimed to reconstruct discursive negotiation processes – notably, analyses of frame building processes within elite media (e.g., Entman, 2003), or in strategic communication materials aimed to influence these; studies of news user commentary on digital media (e.g., Barnes, 2018; Graham, 2007; Springer et al., 2015) – this endeavor has only really taken off again with the advent of computational methods.

In this line of research, scholars often compose huge corpora of digital media coverage and other privileged sites of discourse, but also of social media discussions, news user commentary, or other digital traces deemed relevant (e.g., Cerina & Duch, 2019). In this material, digital methods are then deployed to extract different components or proxies of opinions: For instance, sentiment analysis, also referred to as opinion mining, is a natural language processing (NLP) technique that aims to determine the affective sentiment expressed in a piece of text (Shaik et al., 2023), which may be informative especially when the object evaluated in a text is already known (e.g., reviews about products and services; Ligthart et al., 2021). If it is not, topic modeling is an unsupervised machine learning technique used to find hidden semantics in document collections and cluster themes as a topic (Ma et al., 2016; Finch et al., 2018). Numerous strategies target specific aspects of opinions (e.g., the moral foundations of evaluations). That said, all of the approaches mentioned have recently come under criticism, as they do not directly measure opinions, but rather contend themselves with proxies or related constructs that are easier to measure automatically than the complex, multipartite construct of opinions (Overbeck et al., 2023; van Atteveldt et al., 2021). To date, there exist several attempts to advance the computational measurement of opinions in textual data, but no widely accepted, valid standard has yet emerged. There are also considerable efforts at the computational modeling of (public) opinion dynamics originating in the STEM disciplines, particularly sociophysics (see Flache et al., 2017; Schweitzer, 2018), which have still been scarcely received in public opinion research. While the methodological field is evolving rapidly, specifically through the impact of advanced language models and AI, there is still an urgent need to relate such work to available theory and research on public opinion, to enable a targeted and valid measurement of expressed opinions.

A key unresolved issue in text-based, public opinion research concerns how to separate meaningful expressions of public opinion from a wide range of irrelevant ones: For instance, some expressions are widely received, while others reach only miniscule audiences, if any; overly generous samples thus dilute the measurement with inconsequential instances, while narrow samples may miss important contributions to the process. Also, the likely inclusion of inauthentic or artificially inflated opinion expressions raises numerous challenges, and it remains unclear how to adequately delimit, weight, and aggregate expressed opinions. Instead, scientific discourse has so far focused on mitigating specific, known sources of bias, such as the strategic distortion of the frequency with which specific opinions are verbalized (e.g., via bots and algorithmic amplification, or the disproportional activity of certain vociferous minorities and sometimes paid contributors).

Other methods are used in public opinion research as well, but mostly in an auxiliary capacity, or to study the formation or implications of public opinion: Experimental research has long dominated efforts to study how the contents of public discourse influences individuals’ privately held opinions (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2010; Mutz & Soss, 1997). More recently, linkage studies – a strategy for measuring individuals’ personal opinions and media consumption, using surveys, and tying it to a content-analytic measure of the discourse content thus consumed (De Vreese et al., 2017) – have entered this realm, with promising results. Qualitative, inquiry-based methods, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, have been used to understand what is seen as acceptable or contested opinion, and how communally shared opinions emerge (e.g., Pasitselska, 2022). A rare variant, deliberative polling exposes selected groups of people to rich information, induces them to deliberate and form a reasoned opinion, so as to study what public opinion might emerge if the public sphere conformed more closely to the normative ideal (Fishkin, 2003). A handful of exceptional ethnographic studies have contributed to mapping out the rich and complex process of public opinion formation, both on the level of beliefs and of discourse, and there is a growing body of digital ethnographies that help contextualize the role of networked communication patterns for the interactive negotiation of public opinion (e.g., Cramer, 2016).

**PART III. Political Communication and Cultural Studies**

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1. **DEFINITIONS OF OPINION**
	1. **Dictionary definitions**

The dictionary definitions by Cambridge, Merriam-Webster, and Macmillan cover a wide range of the understandings of the concept of opinion. Firstly, regarding the ontological status of the phenomenon, they all present the opinion as the view, thought, belief, estimate, or ideas. An important part of all the definitions is the evaluative component which makes the opinion synonymous to judgement, appraisal, attitude, or advice. Secondly, regarding the epistemic basis of opinions, the definitions emphasize that the opinion might range from feelings and beliefs of the individuals formed in their minds, to expert judgements expressed formally by a judge, court, or referee. The definitions notice the difference in their epistemic status. On the one hand, the definitions cover uncertain beliefs, feelings which are stronger than impression and less strong than positive knowledge as being based on sources insufficient to produce complete certainty. On the other, expressions are grounded on the legal reasons and law principles upon which a legal decision is based. Thirdly, the definitions include a plurality of actors holding and expressing opinions, ranging from the lay individuals to groups of people, including experts. In other words, opinions might be individual feelings, but also socially shared thought constructions. Fourthly, the object of opinion according to the definitions might be related to the entire universe of objects, including social and physical qualities of something or someone (Opinion, Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Opinion, Merriam -Webster Dictionary, n.d.; Opinion, MacMillan Dictionary, n.d.).

* 1. **Academic definitions**

The academic definitions share all the characteristics of opinion present in the dictionary definitions. Accordingly, opinion is a view, judgment, or appraisal formed in the mind about a particular matter (Pozzi et al., 2017) or a thought or belief about something or someone (Katewoodford, 2015). Scholars keep the distinction between opinion as a subjective statement that reflects people’s sentiments or perceptions about the entities and events (Liu, 2007) and the fact. However, it is worth noting the constructed, social nature of the distinction. “The meaning of opinion changes if the meaning of fact changes” (Myers, 2004, p. 4).

In political communication research the category of public opinion refers not only to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and evaluations that individuals hold. Of particular importance is the object of opinions, namely political issues, policies, candidates, and institutions (Campbell et al., 2019; Verba et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2018). Consequently, the concept encompasses the opinions and preferences of the public regarding matters of political significance (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2019)

Scholars also attempt to introduce precise distinctions between opinion and attitude. Firstly, opinions can be considered as observable, specific responses (verbal or otherwise) to an issue or question, while attitudes are covert, psychological predispositions or tendencies. Secondly, while attitude refers to affect, opinion is characterized more by cognition and a conscious decision to support or oppose the specific target. Attitudes relate more to emotional orientations, and opinions more to thoughtful and conscious deliberation. Thirdly, attitudes are more general, durable orientations towards a class of targets; opinions are more situational, pertaining to a specific issue in a specific context. „In this way, attitudes are thought of as being continually held and opinions denote the focused and specific application of those underlying attitudes to a delimited target” (Anderson & Turgeon, 2023, 22-23).

Another distinction of crucial importance for the public discourse runs between opinionated and non-opinionated language. Non-opinionated statements convey information relating solely to the source's attitude toward a particular idea or belief (e.g., "I believe that Red China should be admitted to the United Nations"). By contrast, opinionated statements convey two kinds of information; they indicate the source's attitude toward an idea or belief and his/her attitude toward those who agree or disagree with the source [e.g., "Only a stupid fool would oppose admission of Red China to the United Nations" (opinionated rejection statement), or "Any intelligent person knows that we should admit Red China to the United Nations" (opinionated acceptance statement)]. Messages containing opinionated statements explicitly indicate the source's disapproval or approval of the recipient is contingent upon the latter's conformity to message recommendations (Miller & Baseheart, 1969).

Currently, the changes of the media field have increased the significance of the opinionated journalism. Accordingly, the traditional distinction between two types of news articles: 1) opinion articles written to present the opinion of the editor or board and aimed to persuade the readers with respect to a particular point of view (opinion = subjectivity), and 2) news stories, which aim to report factual news or events, are blurred at best (Alhindi, T. et al., 2020). The opinionated pieces in news media are falling somewhere in between advocacy and tabloid journalism in that they share the former’s commitment to advancing a particular political agenda and the latter’s commitment to commercial imperatives (Entman, 2004).

1. **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY OF OPINION**

This section provides a basic overview of theoretical approaches to the study of opinion from the perspectives of political economy and cultural studies.

For more than a century, the debate on opinion has been tightly connected with the study of political communication, as well as with other concepts such as rationality, reason, and quality, as expressed in Druckman’s (2014) conceptualization of informed opinion. Information is thought to be important in opinion formation, Druckman argues, “because it aids citizens in the process of connecting their interests and values with available political alternatives” and because people equipped with different levels of information express distinct preferences (p. 469). Druckman lists four main problems with the informed opinion criterion: (1) most citizens lack knowledge and thus many fail to meet this criterion outright; (2) even if the mass public did possess knowledge about politics, it is not clear why this would matter; (3) high levels of information are not even necessary for the formation of quality preferences in the first place, as citizens may find alternative ways to arrive at opinions they would hold if they had more information by using a variety of shortcuts/cues/advice; (4) despite years of research devoted to “measuring” knowledge, there is no consensus on how it should be measured. Moreover, Druckman summarizes, “informed opinion is neither realistic nor independent of strategic elite communication, raising serious questions about its suitability as a requirement of democratic functioning and responsiveness” (Druckman, 2014, p. 471).

The rational choice theory approaches the relationships between reason and opinion in a different manner. It posits that individuals make political decisions based on a rational assessment of costs and benefits. It assumes that individuals weigh the potential outcomes and choose the option that maximizes their self-interest. In the context of public opinion, this theory suggests that individuals form their opinions by evaluating political issues and policies based on their perceived benefits and consequences (Taber & Lodge, 2006). The deliberative paradigm, on the other hand, stresses the importance of a supra-individual democratic process, which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes (mainly in view of the impact of arguments on rational changes in preference). The deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions (Habermas, 2006).

Currently scholars share the view that public opinion is a social construct (Bourdieu, 1979; Burstein, 2003; Herbst, 1993; Lewis, 2001, McGregor, 2019, 2020). According to Strong (2017), many traditional studies conceptualize ‘public opinion’ as the opinion of the public, and assume it exists ‘out there’, awaiting observation. The constructionist approach towards public opinion and opinion formation, as represented by W. Gamson, is based on a number of theoretical and methodological shifts. Firstly, a shift in focus from attitudes and voting behavior (determined by social background) to political cognition. The interpretive processes are central as well as concepts derived from cognitive psychology – schemata, constructs, cognitive maps, frames, script, and modes of political thinking. Secondly, constructivism resigns from reliance mainly on the sample surveys with pre-coded response categories to open-ended questions. Other methodological traditions for studying public opinion are increasingly being employed, particularly long intensive interviews and focus groups. Thirdly, media are no longer conceived as an environmental stimulus, but a cultural system worthy of a dynamic analysis in its own right. Public opinion analysis, in this approach, requires an examination of political culture and the language and symbols of public discourse. The relationship between the media and public opinion formation are based on the interplay between two interactive systems. On the one hand, there is a system of media discourse that frames events and presents information in some contextual meaning. On the other hand, there are interacting individuals who actively use media and construct their own personal meanings about public events and issues (Gamson, 1988; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). According to W. Gamson, public discourse draws on a catalogue of discursive resources (metaphors, catch-phrases, argumentation strategies, etc.) which are organized in packages. The study of opinion formation should include the mechanisms of articulation of these elements constituting packages. In general, perceiving public opinion as a social fact allows to study the conditions of its emergence, the feedback loops linking media and publics, but also policy-makers and their usage of social opinions to legitimize their views (Soo et al., 2023; Strong, 2017; Szwed, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2022).

Opinion is typically theorized within political communication theories with regard to political behaviour it stimulates. Kim et al. (1999) point out Bryce’s model suggesting that the variables of deliberative democracy result in some forms of participatory activity. Katz also maintains that opinions lead to actions: “Opinions [are] really formed through the day-to-day exchange of comments and observations which goes on among people. . . . By the very process of talking to one another, the vague dispositions which people have are crystallized, step by step, into specific attitudes, acts, or votes” (1992, p. 80). According to Gerber et al. (2020), public opinion can drive mobilization and activism. When people feel strongly about an issue, they may engage in protests, rallies, or other forms of collective action to express their opinions and push for change (Gerber et al., 2020). These activities can have a significant impact on political communication by drawing attention to specific issues and applying pressure on policymakers (McCright & Dunlap, 2019; Tarrow, 2018; Verba et al., 2019). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals strive for consistency between their beliefs and behaviors. When confronted with conflicting information or opinions, individuals experience psychological discomfort or dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Cooper 2007). To reduce this dissonance, they may adjust their opinions or seek out information that aligns with their existing beliefs.

Public opinion is further theorized in the context of persuasion or manipulation – mainly for its crucial role in shaping political processes and decision-making (Bartels, 2019; Erikson et al., 2019). These theories refer to the impact that the opinions of the public have on political actors, policymakers, and the formulation of public policies (Druckman & Lupia, 2020; Page & Shapiro, 2019). Political communication often aims to shape and mobilize public opinion to influence political outcomes (Soroka & Wlezien, 2019). The elaboration likelihood model explains the process by which individuals process persuasive messages. It suggests that people engage in either a central or peripheral route of processing, depending on their motivation and ability to think deeply about an issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Cacioppo et al., 1996; Albarracín et al., 2005). This model helps understand how individuals form and change their opinions in response to persuasive communication.

A broad number of authors thematize the importance of communication and the media in the process of opinion construction and shaping (Zaller, 1992, 1996; Zaller & Feldman, 1992; Price, 1992; Page & Shapiro, 2019; Mutz et al., 1996). As Lasker (1949) points out, “Our opinions can remain unformed and mutually contradictory for a long time unless a discussion or some other stimulus forces us to reconsider them” (Lasker in Kim et al., 1999). We would argue, therefore, that those who talk politics frequently are likely to have more consistent, clearer, and more considered opinions. Because patterns of political diffusion depend on channels of social communication, Huckfeldt et al. (1995) argue, public opinion that is more than a straightforward aggregation of its component units is formed, regardless of whether the units are individual citizens or small cohesive social cells. Katz (1992) summarizes Tarde’s argument that “conversation at all times, and the press, which at present is the principal source of conversation, are the major factors in opinion” (Tarde, 1899/1989, p. 75) – as he explains, the media fuel conversation, conversation shapes opinion, and opinion triggers action. Metag (2016) summarizes that communication processes are crucial for opinion formation since mass media and interpersonal communication provide essential information for opinion formation (de Vreese, 2007). Local mass media remain influential in forming citizens’ political opinions. Other relevant individual characteristics for opinion formation include political predispositions, political involvement, and personal relevance (Zaller, 1992).

In relation to the role of the media in opinion formation, media framing and its impact on opinions is broadly studied. The common idea is that frames that often circulate via mediated environments have the potential to influence individuals’ preferences (i.e., they have effects on the individual level) (Druckman & Lupia, 2020). Message frames and framing effects are highly investigated in numerous political settings, including policy statements and opinions (favor/oppose a policy), candidate evaluations, and attributions of credit/blame for policy outcomes (Busby et al., 2018). Emphasis framing is a specific area of research that is relevant when studying frames and opinions. Emphases are made when a political actor highlights a subset of relevant considerations about a candidate, issue, or event; public opinion often depends on which frames political elites choose to use (Druckman, 2001). A consideration contains a specific evaluation (positive or negative) of an issue, thus giving birth to the idea that news media have the potential to circulate issue frames – i.e., frames that suggest how people can make sense of an issue/the course of action people might take. However, in real political settings, it is hard to show exactly how and when frames influence people’s preferences.

D’Angelo (2012) differentiate between two types of frames: frames in communication (the message is technologically mediated and has a strategic purpose) versus frames in thought (refer to how individuals perceive a situation). Framing effects occur when an emphasis causes individuals to place greater weight on highlighted consideration when forming their preferences. Chong and Druckman (2007) add another typology of frames – strong and weak: availability, accessibility, and applicability of frames are the main characteristics that influence their strength.

Given the important role the media have in opinion formation, media partisanship and politicization represent a crucial research focus related to opinion research. Politicization may be said to occur whenever political values, motives, and orientations affect editorial and/or journalistic practice. Although the idea of completely non-political media has probably always been more a normative theoretical construct than an empirical reality, the impact of political rationality and a political logic of action on the media is still a highly contested issue that touches the core of the current media-politics relationship in several ways (Esmark, 2014).

In a situation where one’s views, political parties, ideologies, value systems, religions, nations, professions are favored, and presented in a good light, while others are criticized, discriminated against, or presented in a negative way, we talk about bias (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011, p. 70). Such bias may concern not only politics, but also religion, attitudes, nationalities, or advertised products (Guo & Lai, 2014). Ewa Nowak-Teter emphasizes the differences between slant, which means the inclination, distortion, and one-sidedness of the relationship in which some elements are emphasized, and ignores others, from bias, defined as consistent and long-lasting one-sidedness of the message (Nowak-Teter, 2017, p. 105). Dennis McQuail proposes a more complex typology of political bias, making the criteria of its division intentionality and openness. On this basis, he distinguishes propaganda, ideological, unmistakable and involuntary bias (McQuail, 1992, p. 191), as well as explicit and implicit bias (Anderson et al., 2016).

When bias appears as part of the media representations, scholars identify it as media bias. It can be unintentional and intentional (intended) and can be measured: (a) by estimating ideological scores for several major media outlets. To compute this, we count the times that a particular media outlet cites various think tanks and policy groups, and then compare this with the times that members of Congress cite the same groups (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005); (b) three categories: measures based on comparing media outlets with other actors, measures based on the intensity of media coverage, and measures based on tone. When approached from a long-term perspective, media discourses are crucial for understanding influences in the sphere of opinionated communication. Media discourse refers to interactions that take place through a broadcast platform, whether spoken or written, in which the discourse is oriented to a non-present reader, listener, or viewer. Though the discourse is oriented towards these recipients, they very often cannot make instantaneous responses to the producer(s) of the discourse, though increasingly this is changing with the advent of new media technology. Crucially, the written or spoken discourse itself is oriented to the readership or listening/viewing audience, respectively. In other words, media discourse is a public, manufactured, on-record, form of interaction. It is not ad hoc or spontaneous (in the same way as casual speaking or writing is); it is neither private nor off the record. Obvious as these basic characteristics may sound, they are crucial to the investigation, description, and understanding of media discourse. Because media discourse is manufactured, we need to consider how this has been done – both in a literal sense of what goes into its making and at an ideological level (O’Keeffe, 2011, p. 441).

Political arena is another environment in which framing effects are studied in relation to opinions. Election settings are a well-researched domain for studying framing effects – it allows researchers to study how political preferences are formed and what their role is in evaluating political candidates and elections outcomes. Ideological leanings and polarization then become key aspects of opinion research. Ideological opinions categorize individuals’ political beliefs based on a set of coherent and consistent principles (Jost et al., 2009). Common ideological categories include liberalism, conservatism, socialism, libertarianism, and nationalism. These classifications are often based on attitudes towards the role of government, economic policies, social issues, and other ideological dimensions (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). Public opinion polarization is conceived as a process of alignment along multiple lines of potential disagreement and measured as a growing constraint in individuals’ preferences. The findings suggest that opinion changes correspond more to a resorting of party labels among voters than to greater constraint on issue attitudes: since parties are more polarized, they are now better at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Levels of constraint vary across population subgroups: strong partisans and wealthier and politically sophisticated voters have grown more coherent in their beliefs (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008).

Public opinion also affects the trust in and legitimacy of political institutions. When public opinion is favorable, it enhances the perceived legitimacy of governments and their policies. Conversely, widespread negative opinions can erode trust and skepticism towards authorities (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

1. **MODELS OF OPINION: KEY ELEMENTS**

This section summarizes the elements of the opinion from the viewpoint of political communication and cultural studies. The literature of opinion mining is particularly useful for understanding and investigating the components of opinions (for summary see Liu, 2007; Penubaka et al., 2018; Tong, 2001).

Bing Liu (2007) argues that an opinion comprises four elements: the entity expressing the opinion, the subject of the opinion, the actual content and its characteristics of the opinion, and the timing of its expression.

In the realm of opinions, individuals or organizations, termed opinion holders, play a vital role. In various contexts, such as product reviews, forum posts, or blogs, these holders express their viewpoints (Ku et al., 2009). They are particularly significant in news articles, explicitly stating opinions and attributing them to specific persons or organizations, as exemplified in the sentence "The President has expressed his concern about tensions in the Middle East". In public opinion studies, an opinion from a single opinion holder is usually not sufficient for action. While in political communication, an opinion from a very important person (in politics they are the political leaders, pundits, public intellectuals, experts) matters the most (Krüger et al., 2012). Moreover an opinion of a key political actor is probably more important than an opinion from the average citizen. An opinion from an organization is typically more important than an opinion from a private individual. For instance, the opinion implied by an important global rating agency which downgrades the credit rating of a country is very important for the financial market and even for national and international politics. Oftentimes the opinion holder (Bethard et al., 2004; Choi et al., 2005; Kim & Hovy, 2004) is also called the opinion source (Wiebe et al., 2005). For political blogs, opinion holders are usually the authors of the posts and are easy to extract. By comparison, opinion holders are more difficult to extract from news articles, which sometimes explicitly state the person or organization that holds an opinion, but media outlets often blur the lines between journalistic interpretation and the sources’ messages.

Opinions, which can encompass anything from products to services, topics, individuals, organizations, or events, are expressed about entities referred to as subject. A subject, defined as an entity associated with a hierarchy (or taxonomy) of components and attributes, can be hierarchically decomposed based on part-of relationships. Each component within this hierarchy has its sub-components and attributes, forming a tree structure with the subject itself as the root.

The actual content characteristics of the opinion are often conveyed through opinion passages, evaluating features of an object in a positive or negative light. These passages may consist of a sequence of sentences or a single sentence expressing opinions on multiple features, exemplified by statements like "The picture quality of this camera is good, but the battery life is short." In addition, semantic orientation should also be taken into account. It refers to the semantic toolkit of expression of opinions: a finite set of words or phrases, providing a structured way to convey the content. In opinion mining analysis, the semantic orientation is relevant for the subjective meaning: the evaluative character of a word is called its semantic orientation. Positive semantic orientation indicates praise (e.g., “honest”, “kind”) and negative semantic orientation indicates criticism (e.g., “disturbing”, “alarming”). Semantic orientation varies in both direction (positive or negative) and degree (mild to strong). An automated system for measuring semantic orientation would have application in text classification, text filtering, tracking opinions in online discussions, and analysis of survey responses (Turney & Littman, 2003).

The time and date of the opinion is useful because political scientists often want to know how opinions change over time or how opinions cluster around a certain period of time.

As for the context of the opinions, it is important to note that in politics most opinions are mediated. Mass media functions as a multifaceted platform in the opinion ecosystem. It serves as sources of opinions, acting as opinion holders and senders, a channel for opinion dissemination, a receiver of comments from the audience, and a gatekeeper, controlling the visibility of certain opinions through blocking or banning. The social environment, highlighted by Metag (2016), reveals that political opinions are influenced not only by the mediated nature of the opinionated communication, but oftentimes by the interpersonal communication. Studies on elections and direct democratic votes demonstrate the impact of discussions on people's political opinions and decisions (Anderson & Mendes, 2006). In Europe, especially, the international, cross-border, and pan-European politics context influences the opinions. Political communication scholars explore the presence of bias in media coverage, investigating whether certain outlets demonstrate a particular slant in their reporting on the EU and enlargement (de Vreese et al., 2008; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008). This could include ideological biases or biases related to national interests. Given the presence of Eurosceptic sentiments in some countries, scholars examine how various political situations (e.g. enlargement, crisis, EP elections) contribute to the development and amplification of Eurosceptic or Europhilic opinion (de Vreese & Kandyla, 2009; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2010; Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). Overall, the field of political communication offers a rich landscape for understanding the dynamics between media, politics, and public opinion in the context of the European Union and its history.

Lastly, manifesting political opinions cannot be separated from the institutional, systemic, and cultural features of the space where opinions are manifested. Based on liberal thought, the function of mass communication is to be a mirror of public opinion (Gerhards, 1997): the main aim of the political system is to safeguard the equal freedom of all citizens (including freedom of expression and freedom of accessing information/opinion). From the liberal perspective, the public space is rather seen as the infrastructure for citizens to control the government than as a realm of developing and debating conflicting political projects. In other words, it is a free and open arena for political opinion. Studies, however, demonstrated that the space is neither neutral nor inclusive, but rather heavily influenced by power relations, social contacts, systemic frameworks (institutional, legal, and cultural), and communication standards (Dahlgren, 2018). The space of opinion always in some way involves contestation or struggle: some political voices are welcome, some are tolerated, others are systematically excluded. Due to their social ties, the elite have more access to the space of opinion than those who are not the members of the privileged groups. The news media system is often seen as the main institution of the space of opinion. Based on Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) system classification, we posit there are four dimensions that influence the media systems such as the structure of media markets (e.g. circulation rates, importance of newspapers and television as sources of news, ratio of local, regional, and national media outlets), political parallelism (e.g. partisan bias, relationship between journalists and politicians), professionalization of journalism (e.g. degree of professional autonomy, journalistic culture), and the role of the state with regards to media systems (e.g. censorship, ownership regulation). As for the communication standards, the manifestations of opinions depend on its environmental conditions. In the case of online discussions, for example, these conditions are principally the place in which the conversations take place. Also, the topic and the interaction among the participants of the online talks are important circumstances that affect the opinion manifestation. It has also been revealed that the tonality of the opinion is influenced by three main factors: platform, topic, and surrounding interactions (Szabó et al., 2021). Instead of postulating neutrality, we draw attention to the interactionalist-constructivist approach which defines the space for expressing political opinion as an intersubjectively shared, communicatively constructed system of mutual observance without a concrete social order or membership, and therefore applicable to contingent situations (Trenz, 2002).

1. **QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS**

Political opinions play a pivotal role in understanding societal dynamics, influencing decision-making processes, and shaping the discourse in various fields, particularly in communication and political science. In this comprehensive summary, this section delves into an array of research methodologies that collectively offer a nuanced understanding of opinion and its manifestations from the perspective of political communication and cultural studies.

* 1. **Surveys, Content Analysis, and beyond: Foundational Approach**

Surveys and content analysis are the widely and traditionally embraced methods that lay the foundation for measuring opinions systematically. Survey is the highly professional scientific effort to estimate public opinion and sentiments related to certain political issues, while content analysis is a non-intrusive research technique to decipher manifestation of opinions from various sources. Content analysis serves as a research instrument employed to identify the occurrence of specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data, particularly textual content. Through content analysis, investigators measure and scrutinize the prevalence, significance, and interconnections of these particular words, themes, or concepts. For instance, researchers assess the language employed in a news article to uncover potential bias, favoritism, or subjectivity. Subsequently, conclusions can be drawn regarding the messages conveyed in the texts, the authorship, the target audience, and even the cultural and temporal context surrounding the text (Sussman & Tyson, 2000). Political opinions are verymuch influenced by the explicit and implicit journalistic voices (e.g. interpretations and interventions) in news content. When it comes to measuring journalistic voices, Claudia Mellado and colleagues (2020) offer indicators which focus on the explicit expression of a journalist's point of view; these are: journalistic point of view, journalistic interpretation, call for action, use of qualifying adjectives, use of first person.

Surveys and content analysis can be easily complemented with network analysis. By annotating statements made by various actors in textual sources, structured data can be utilized to construct networks. These communication or discursive networks may take the form of congruence or conflict networks, operating at both actor and concept levels, affiliation networks that depict relationships between actors and their conceptual stances, as well as longitudinal variations of these networks. The network data provide insights into crucial aspects of a debate, such as the configuration of advocacy coalitions or discourse coalitions, the emergence of polarization or consensus, and intrinsic endogenous processes like popularity, reciprocity, or social balance (Leifeld, 2017).

* 1. **Opinion Mining/Sentiment Analysis and Emotion Analysis: NLP approach**

Opinion mining, also referred to as sentiment analysis, is a natural language processing technique (NLP) employed to discern the emotional tone embedded in a text (Bansal et al., 2022). Methods based on machine learning typically transform text analysis into a text classification problem. Classic machine learning algorithms like support vector machines (SVM) and naive Bayes are then employed to train models through supervised training, and these trained models subsequently perform text emotion analysis (Žižka et al., 2019). This method has found extensive application in extracting user opinions on products and services from their reviews, generating actionable insights for an entity (Ligthart et al., 2021). The utilization of sentiment analysis allows businesses to enhance their strategies and gain a deeper understanding of customers' feedback regarding their offerings. Opinion mining, being a multidisciplinary field, integrates machine learning, linguistics, sociology, and psychology to uncover the underlying sentiments of customers or users. Major social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook serve as substantial repositories of user opinions (Drus & Khalid, 2019). Opinion mining tools gain momentum in political communication studies as the growing digital-savvy population increasingly seek political information and express political opinions in social networking sites.

The first step involves assigning tags, such as positive, negative, or neutral, to text, indicating the opinion holders’ attitude towards the subject of the opinion. The complexity of opinion mining/sentiment analysis levels varies based on specific application requirements (Zhang et al., 2021). Manual annotation or labeling of sentiment orientation is a time-consuming process (Liu et al., 2019) that demands substantial resources, field expertise, knowledge on political context, and linguistic expertise. To address all these challenges, various annotation approaches have been developed using lexicons and corpora, serving as unsupervised techniques for obtaining an initial understanding of opinion. The integration of AI in opinion mining/sentiment analysis is imperative as it facilitates the processing and analysis of a large corpora or big data (Zhu et al., 2021). AI methodologies, including machine learning, deep learning, and transformers (Acheampong et al., 2021), possess the capability to learn from opinions using attention mechanisms, thereby classifying or predicting expressions or the tonality for unlabeled segments of communication (Kuleto et al., 2021). Both unsupervised sentiment annotation techniques and AI methodologies contribute significantly to decrease the time of manual labeling to a certain extent. In political communication and cultural studies, opinion mining and sentiment analysis usually explores four levels of opinions: document level, sentence level, entity level, and aspect level.

Various AI methods are used to detect (overt and covert) aggression and hate speech on Facebook and social media comments in politics-related topics and to measure the intensity of the sentiment (Kocoń et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2018).

As social media platforms like forums, blogs, and Twitter have evolved, a vast amount of emotional data has become available, making emotion analysis technology increasingly crucial in modern society. Various existing techniques for emotion analysis can be categorized into emotion dictionary-based methods, machine learning-based methods, and deep learning-based methods. Emotion dictionary-based methods analyze text through word and syntax, calculating emotion values as a basis for determining the text's emotional tendency. These methods effectively capture emotional information within the text using predefined emotion dictionaries, offering a relatively straightforward implementation. When individuals express themselves, they incorporate essential emotional vocabulary, emotional praise and derogation words, adverbs of degree, negative words, etc., significantly influencing the strength or attenuation of emotional semantics (Rosenmann, 2015). The works conducted by Westjohn and colleagues (2017), Abdaoui and associates (2017) and Xu et al. (2020) expanded emotion dictionaries by constructing related ones, such as negative words, adverbs, and emotional expressions, substantially improving the ability to assess emotional polarity in texts. Settanni and Marengo (2016) established a domain-specific emotion dictionary for social media contents, which increased the performance of emotion classification in sentence-level texts.

Political communication studies, in general, have been using computational methods to study areas such as international conflicts, social media analysis, virality in networking sites, policy narratives, and comparative policy agendas, while in cultural studies AI-based methods are yet to be influential.

* 1. **Diverse Approaches to Understanding Political Opinion**

Beside the foundational methods and AI-supported tools, “researchers design experiments to address causal questions” in relation to political opinion (Druckman, 2011, p. 16). Gerber and colleagues (2009; 2010) argue that field experimentation, for example, has some advantages in studying political opinion, namely use of a naturalistic setting and an assurance of orthogonality of treatment to observable and unobservable characteristics. To qualitatively explore political opinion, the most used methods are the focus group or narrative interviews. Both are excellent ways to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances in opinion expressions. By participant observations, including Netnographic research, scholars may shed some light on the dynamic and interactional mechanisms of the political opinion formations.

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

This literature review maps out the concept of “opinion” from the viewpoint of political communication and cultural studies. The review explores various definitions of opinion, both from dictionary sources and academic perspectives. It begins by summarizing how dictionaries define opinion, highlighting that it encompasses views, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes, with a distinction between personal feelings and expert judgments. Moreover, opinions can be individual or socially shared. In academic contexts, opinion is defined similarly, focusing on subjective viewpoints formed in the mind about particular matters. Scholars distinguish opinions from facts, noting their constructed and social nature. In political communication research, public opinion refers to collective attitudes toward political issues, candidates, and institutions.

The review also discusses the distinction between opinion and attitude. Opinions are seen as specific responses to issues, while attitudes are broader, enduring orientations. Opinions are characterized by cognition and conscious decision-making, while attitudes are more emotional.

Furthermore, the review touches on opinionated language, which conveys both the source's attitude toward an idea and toward those who agree or disagree with it. This distinction is crucial in public discourse. The changing landscape of media is also notes, with opinionated journalism becoming increasingly significant. It suggests that traditional distinctions between opinion articles and news stories are becoming blurred, with opinionated pieces falling between advocacy and tabloid journalism.

The review delves into the theoretical implications of studying opinion, primarily focusing on political communication, rational choice theory, deliberative democracy, and media constructionism. The debate surrounding opinion is often tied to political communication and concepts like rationality. Druckman's concept of informed opinion argues that information aids citizens in aligning their interests and values with political alternatives. Rational choice theory suggests individuals make decisions based on a rational assessment of costs and benefits, forming opinions based on perceived outcomes. Deliberative democracy emphasizes a democratic process generating legitimacy through transparent and inclusive opinion formation. Scholars view public opinion as a social construct shaped by media discourse, political cognition, and cultural systems; while the constructionist approach shifts focus from attitudes to political cognition and from surveys to open-ended inquiries.

The literature on political communication and cultural studies suggest that media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion through framing effects, emphasizing specific considerations that influence individual preferences. Scholars differentiate between frames in communication and frames in thought, studying how media representations influence opinions and behaviors. Elections provide a fertile ground for studying opinions and their manifestations. Ideological opinions categorize individuals' beliefs based on coherent principles, with polarization indicating alignment along multiple lines of disagreement. Overall, understanding the theoretical underpinnings of opinion formation and its implications for political behavior, media dynamics, and institutional trust is crucial in contemporary political discourse and decision-making processes.

The review outlines the key elements of opinion from the perspectives of political communication and cultural studies, drawing from the literature on opinion mining. Opinion holders, whether individuals or organizations, are central in expressing viewpoints. Their opinions vary in significance based on factors like their role in society and the context in which the opinion is expressed. Opinions are expressed about entities referred to as subjects, which can encompass products, services, individuals, organizations, or events. Subjects are hierarchical, allowing for decomposition based on relationships and attributes. Opinions are conveyed through passages evaluating features in a positive or negative light. Semantic orientation, the evaluative character of words, is crucial in understanding the tone and sentiment of opinions. Knowing when an opinion is expressed is useful, especially in political contexts, for understanding opinion shifts over time or clustering around specific periods. Opinions are often mediated through mass media, serving as opinion sources, channels for dissemination, and receivers of audience feedback. Political opinions are influenced not only by mediated communication but also by interpersonal discussions and social contexts. The expression of political opinions is influenced by institutional, systemic, and cultural factors. While the liberal perspective views public space as an arena for free expression, studies show it is influenced by power relations, systemic frameworks, and communication standards. The media system plays a significant role in shaping the space of opinion, influenced by factors like media market structure, political parallelism, journalism professionalism, and state regulation. Overall, understanding the components and contexts of opinions is crucial for analyzing public discourse, political communication, and media dynamics.

Lastly, the variety of research methodologies that provide insight into political opinion from the perspectives of political communication and cultural studies is discussed. Beside the traditional methods, like surveys, content analysis, focus groups, narrative and network analysis, AI-based tools and techniques such as opinion mining, sentiment analysis, and emotion detections are presented. These methodologies collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of political opinions, shaping discourse in communication and political science fields.

**PART IV. Opinions in Communication and Media Studies**

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There are a number of theories, concepts, and methods used in communication and media studies applicable to studying opinions, among them: Critical Discourse Analysis, evaluative language, impoliteness/incivility studies, the Appraisal Theory, Sentiment Analysis, multimodality, framing of opinions vs Agenda-setting theory, or sociotechnical properties of online platforms, and related with them, theoretical approaches. Some fundamental concepts related to opinions expressed in the media are related to the theories of mediatization, platformization, algorithmization, and semiotics. Each of these theoretical frameworks has its own methods and tools to identify and examine instances of opinionated texts, which will be elaborated in the next sections. Understanding these fundamental concepts is necessary for better comprehension of the role of media in creating opinions and exercising influence on media recipients. Before these rudimentary aspects of opinion expression are explored, the very term opinions will be defined from the point of view of communication in the media.

1. **DEFINITIONS OF OPINION**

The language of the media is often analysed by resorting to concepts related to evaluative judgments. Therefore, one of the possible ways of defining opinions in the media related discourse is to see them as expressions of the writer’s/author’s (i.e., producer’s) subjective evaluations of an entity at hand, which is enacted by means of language. In literature on evaluative language, the term evaluation is defined as the expression of one’s attitude, stance, viewpoint, or feelings about the propositions at hand (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 5). Put differently, evaluation rests on subjectivity (the writer’s), assessment (attitude or stance), and affect (feelings). Evaluative language expresses the speaker’s personal, evaluative opinions (viewpoint or feelings) on an entity, e.g., some objects, events, behaviour, people, etc. in terms of being good or bad, by ascribing some value to the entity described. Evaluations are essentially comparative (an object is assessed relative to some yardstick), subjective, and value-laden (Thomson & Hunston, 2000). The first two factors tend to be encoded by grammar, whereas the last one by lexical choices (Thomson & Hunston, 2000). One of the main functions of evaluative language is expressing an opinion and, by the same token, disclosing the value system of the writer/speaker and their community alike. Related to this feature, there is also another function of constructing relations between the sender and the addressee (Thompson & Hunston, 2000. p. 6). Relations can be enacted in three ways: manipulation, hedging, and politeness (Thompson & Hunston, 2000). Additionally, three ingredients have been distinguished as necessary conditions of evaluation: the existence of an object of description identified in a sentence, emotivity (evaluation is value-laden), and subjectivity (presence of markers of subjective judgments) (Thompson & Huntson, 2000, pp. 21-22).

1. **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**
	1. **Mediatization, tabloidization, and the construction of reality**

Opinions expressed in the media space are affected by the process of mediatization. It is one of the key concepts in communication and media studies, which is concerned with the transformation of media technologies and communication practices; particularly, how this transformation affects the society and culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). In other words, mediatization explains a gradual exertion of media on various walks of life, user experiences, and, by the same token, opinions on politics, social life, cultural life, entertainment, education, etc. The transformation occurs at three levels: affecting an individual (micro level), institutions (meso level), and social, political or cultural systems (macro level). Mediatization when related to social, political or cultural systems, it takes place in specific space and time (extension); oftentimes, it substitutes other forms of social life and communication channels, or is combined with other forms of activity (amalgamation); extension, substitution, and amalgamation require some accommodation to media logic (Schulz, 2004). Essentially, media have the goal of reflecting actuality by distributing relevant content about social, political, and economic events; yet at the same time, they play an active role in constructing the social, political, and economic reality by influencing the audience with deliberately selected and carefully crafted news.

This process of mediatization has been drastically advanced by recent (media) digitalization, which triggered media differentiation that has led to polymedia. Resulting from this, no single type of media is seen as the predominant one in influencing public opinion. Rather, multiple types of digital media, as well as their deep technological interrelatedness, are viewed as significant (Hepp, 2020, pp. 4-5), with content moving across various types of media that manifest in multi-purpose media devices combined into one terminal, such as smartphones (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Their connectivity and interrelatedness are seen as a requirement in the new digital media environment. What is valid for this deep mediatization approach is user behaviours across diverse forms of media.

The way reality is perceived by people is dependent upon what and how is provided to the audience. Thereby, the media moulds the perception of the world by presenting a biased picture; i.e., media constructs the reality. The construction of reality by the media consists not only in news selection but also in decision-making regarding how the news is to be covered. The former is based on culling specific bits of information from the abundance of news available on daily reality according to predefined criteria and limiting them to a manageable portion for the audience to process. The decision-maker, the gatekeeper, is responsible for the ultimate selection process. The latter is about imposing a pattern of news presentation, which has a significant impact on news interpretation by the audience and is a form of influencing the audience through the imposition of what is presented first and how it is framed. Thus, two popular news coverage patterns are promoted by Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory, and both contribute to the understanding of media effects.

A well-known method of influencing media users’ opinions is described by Agenda Setting Theory. It is addressed by what McCombs and Shaw determined in 1972 and later researchers updated in a networked form (Guo, 2012; Guo et al., 2015), that it is the media that sets the agenda of electoral campaigns, shaping the political reality, influencing their readers not only on a specific issue presented by the media but also on the level of importance because of the amount of information in a network relationships among objects and/or attributes in news media story and its position. This theory places the news media in the main role of selecting information, and it is precisely the news media that prioritize those networked contents that people should follow. Thus, the opinion that the media wants to instil in the audience is manipulated by deciding how much information is provided on a given topic, what is its networked structure and whether this information is mentioned first (highlighted) or last (marginalised).

A more recent theory that explicates how a recipient’s opinion can be affected is the Framing Theory. Frames are cognitive structures that provide guidance in organization and perception of reality (Entman, 1993). This theoretical framework efficiently reduces the cognitive effort to process all incoming news and helps organize information by simplifying its complexity through inclusion/exclusion processes based on relevance and by emphasising select aspects of the news. This allows the audience to make sense of an otherwise overwhelming amount of data and imposes salience on select information. By highlighting specific bits of news, attention is drawn to some aspects while others are de-emphasised or left unnoticed. As a result, the perception and evaluation of information is implied to the audience and the significance of select news is imposed. Problem definitions are promoted, causes are suggested, moral evaluation is hinted, and solutions are recommended (Entman, 1993).

In the era of digitalized media and increasing competition on the media market, however, significant political, civic, and economic events occurring in public life are often marginalized for the benefit of entertaining stories, or are presented with the use of techniques typical of tabloids; i.e., full of sensational news, celebrities’ life, and lewd remarks. Sex, scandals, and infotainment are put to the fore at the cost of thus downgraded hard news (Kalb, 1997), which lowers journalistic standards. Such tabloidization, started by commercial media and fuelled by advertisers, has encroached onto mainstream media to warrant attention, get larger audiences, gain higher rankings in viewership, and/or increase saleability. The news presented in this manner (in what was invented as tabloid papers) is supposed to be more concentrated, digestible, and manageable (both content- and size-wise; the latter refers mostly to the new size of printed newspapers), similar to a small, swallowable tablet with concentrated medicine, from which the name was originally derived (Esser, 1999). In sum, tabloidization occurs when objective facts thus tend to be phased out by subjective opinions infused with high emotions.

* 1. **Social media and its audiences**

In this section, we explore digital media as a space where subjective opinions can be expressed. The term digital media refers to electronic devices and communication technologies that allow one to consume, create, and share information and various types of content. Digital media are characterized by digital transfer of information by technology. Digital information fundamentally differs from analogue information due to its discontinuous nature, which is based on two distinct states and is represented through binary code consisting of only two symbols, 0 and 1 (Feldman, 1997). We have a variety of examples of digital media such as social media (including social network sites and instant messaging apps), websites, blogs, podcasts, and video content. The impact of digital media on social behaviour, political engagement, media consumption, and cultural practices has been extensively researched in the field of social science, aiming to comprehend the intricate relationship between technology, society, and culture, as well as the consequences of digital media for individuals and society as a whole.

Social media can be defined as the use of web-based and mobile technologies to transform communication into interactive dialogue. They can be defined as a group of Internet applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the so-called Web 2.0, which has created a place for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. In pragmatics, Hoffmann (2017, p. 6) proposes a very broad typology of social media that comprises, inter alia: online message board, discussion fora, blog, microblogs (such as “X”), SNS, that is social network sites (such as Facebook), media-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube or Instagram), and even instant messaging services (e.g., SMS, MMS, WhatApp and Skype). Social media is a broader term than social networks, as the latter focus more on people and the former on content. Social media have replaced one-way communication, selection, and presentation of news with networks of users who personalize and share media content, add comments, and make media content visible to a larger number of users.

The emergence of Networked audiences is closely linked to the advances made in social networking technologies, resulting in changes in online environments that have blurred the boundaries between relationships and changed conditions for communication. The rapid evolution of digital affordances has fundamentally transformed the context and characteristics of audiences, allowing for a diverse range of activities to be combined both online and offline. With the introduction of social networking sites, audiences have become more scattered and less transparent regarding who will be exposed to content. Online platforms have revolutionized the way in which individuals produce and distribute content, breaking down the traditional one-way communication model between content creators and recipients. This has resulted in a diverse range of opinions being shared among users in a network. According to Jürgen Habermas (2022), this new phenomenon has significant implications for online discourse, including a lack of professional filters that would normally regulate the spread of information in the online public sphere. In terms of Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management, in the context of these new blurred network audiences (e.g., including family, friends, and colleagues from work), it can become complicated to control the roles we play as these roles may become unclear.

* 1. **Sociotechnical approaches to opinion generation**

Platformativity or platformization refers to the process through which digital platforms, particularly online platforms like social media, influence various aspects of social, economic, and cultural activities. This encompasses communication, and information sharing, reflecting the role of platforms in social interactions. "Platform studies" is an interdisciplinary academic field that deals with the study of these digital platforms. Scholars from disciplines such as computer science, game studies, communication studies, sociology, economics, media studies, and cultural studies investigate digital platforms' role, impact, and characteristics. It provides a framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of platforms, considering their technical foundations and broader societal implications. This field evolves with technological and societal changes and examines various digital platforms, including social media. Central to platform studies is investigating user behaviour and interactions, acknowledging the relationship between users and platforms. The approach incorporates critical perspectives to examine issues such as inequality, bias, and the concentration of power within digital platforms. Platform studies contribute valuable insights to policy and regulation discussions, addressing challenges related to distrust, privacy, and misinformation. However, the field also faces criticism for the tendency for technological determinism, limited attention to users and user agency, challenges in adapting to rapid changes in the digital environment, and limited attention to variations across different contexts (Apperley & Parikka, 2018; Bogost & Montfort, 2009).

Tightly connected with this aspect is algorithmization. In social media, algorithmization consists in controlling content streaming to end users of social media by means of sophisticated algorithmic calculations performed by complex computer programs. A huge collection of data are aggregated, filtered, ranked, selected, and matched to specific audiences. The aim of algorithmization is to provide an individual tailor-made, engaging content, which is computed by means of analysing historical data, such as a user’s past behaviour, interests, and preferences; in other words, as a result of tracking the user’s online activities. Engaging content is one that is seen as valuable, i.e., one that connects like-minded users, who express similar opinions on similar entities (people, objects, events, institutions, etc.), and creates recommendations regarding data that are similar to previous searches. A single user can to some extent control the feed by customizing his/her preferences, yet, to a great extent, online content distribution is controlled by algorithms. In other words, algorithmization personalizes interaction with online content and enhances user experience. By so doing, algorithmization also leverages user visibility online by targeting users potentially interested in one’s online account content and thus promoting and distributing it to wider circles, rapidly increasing potential audience. Consequently, another effect emerges from algorithmization, namely that marketers and advertisers can target users more effectively (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

Despite the beneficial results algorithmization can bring to an individual, tracking the user’s online activities may lead to undesirable effects from the point of view of online users, such as what Sivetc (2021) dubbed infrastructure-based censorship. Owing to tracking tools, a user can be easily located geographically, and his/her activities can be collected and passed to third parties, which may infringe on personal, sensitive data or, in extreme cases, may be tantamount to citizen surveillance. In such an environment, a freely expressed opinion can have potentially serious legal repercussions. Accordingly, it can substantially confine the limits of liberty in subjective opinion content-crafting. It can affect the way opinions are formed, veiled, distributed, or they can simply be avoided. Self-masking identity practices, such as expressing opinions without logging or using VPN to change user IP, are often used in such cases to prevent identity authentification.

In the era of post-truth, where appealing to emotions and personal beliefs becomes more powerful than relying on objective facts, opinion formation is hindered by the so-called fake news, which is automated and amplified by the algorithms and replicated by reposting. In other words, it proliferates and goes viral. While before social media era, media communication, particularly journalism, was committed to publicising social, political, and economic problems, and safeguarding factual information based on truth, once social media started to dominate public opinion presentation and exchange, untruthful information started to flood the internet. Online users use disinformation to introduce information chaos and confusion, and to implant doubt through delegitimization rhetoric, for example by ridiculing and delegitimising the target and thus obfuscating information in pursuit of dominance or power. Combating fake news relies on fact-checking or pre-bunking, i.e., by proceeding along the lines of what is proposed by the inoculation theory. It assumes that misinformation can be suppressed by inoculating potential recipients against it (Cook et al., 2017). This can be achieved by exposure to logical fallacies a priori, i.e. by preparing the audience to flawed arguments so that they can easily recognize and dismiss them in their opinion-formation process. Such a pre-exposure to misinformation, known as the pre-bunking approach, can successfully offset misinformation effects by neutralising misinformation before it becomes entrenched inasmuch as pre-existing attitudes affect responses to new (fake) information (Cook et al., 2017, p. 4).

There is yet another consequence of algorithmization, namely that it creates networks of communication, i.e., groups of users who display a preference to communicate with each other to the exclusion of others, known as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). Preferential networks of connections that are decided by the users themselves create a kind of network known as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2007). Thus, groups of users subjected to filters of preferential algorithmization (filter bubbles) are separated from the rest of the network and opinions opposite to theirs, which is enhanced by echo chambers (membership selection made by the very members themselves). Groups created in this way constitute a fairly homogeneous community of individuals who think alike and are intellectually isolated from other digital media users. They are exposed to and consume content consistent with their previous beliefs, values, and convictions identified by analysing the content they consumed in the past, thus remaining excluded from any contrary opinions. While filter bubbles and echo chambers increase engagement and interconnectivity, they also lead to users and information seclusion. Filter bubbles and echo chambers clearly demonstrate how digital technology can affect online society and opinions by controlling group membership and information consumption. The importance of both selection procedures notwithstanding, there are also voices which weaken the validity of filter bubbles as crucial tools in opinion forming (e.g., Figà Talamanca & Arfini, 2022).

* 1. **Semiotic aspects of opinion expression**

Since the use of social media, websites, platforms, and mobile phone applications have been ubiquitous for the expression of opinion, various research methods were recently developed to understand how people express opinions on such media, informed by principles of Actor-Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies. Interfaces are essentially multimodal as they comprise semiotic, discursive, and technological elements. A sociotechnical approach to the expression of opinion on such media is based on the premise that their design is not neutral but contains certain norms that “produce” certain user identities and uses and hence affect the expression of opinion. Two methods that can be used to study interfaces critically are Discursive Interface Analysis (Stanfill, 2015) and the Walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), which combine semiotic tradition, discourse analysis, and affordance analysis. Discursive Interface Analysis looks at functional affordances (functionalities i.e. what one can do), cognitive affordances (meaning-making of technological features), and sensory affordances (aesthetic aspects of features) (Stanfill, 2015). The Walkthrough method focuses on apps and sheds light on apps’ “intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses” (Light et al. 2018, p. 881). It is based on the analysis of the environment of expected use (vision, operating model, governance) and the technical walkthrough, which includes user interface arrangements, functions and features, textual content and tone, and symbolic representation. These and other similar methods offer valuable conceptual and methodological tools to understand how people express and form opinions in social media platforms and apps from a critical, interdisciplinary perspective.

The multimodal aspect of opinion expression is particularly important in communication via social media. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), multimodality is the use of multiple modes of communication, including but not limited to language, image, gesture, sound, and spatial arrangement to construct meaning and convey messages. From their perspective, communication is not solely reliant on linguistic elements but encompasses a diverse range of semiotic resources that interact and combine to shape how meaning is produced and interpreted. Each mode provides its own affordances and constraints, influencing the ways information is represented and understood. The combination of different modes within a communicative act allows for a richer, more nuanced form of expression. Multimodality extends beyond the mere co-occurrence of different modes; it encompasses the interplay and integration of these modes to create coherent and meaningful communication. Kress and van Leeuwen emphasize the importance of understanding how modes interact within multimodal texts, analyzing their relationships, hierarchies, and contributions to overall meaning-making processes. Kress and van Leeuwen also highlight the role of social and cultural factors in shaping multimodal practices. They argue that meanings are not inherent in modes themselves but are socially constructed and negotiated within specific cultural contexts. Therefore, multimodal analysis involves not only the identification of formal properties of different modes but also examining the ideological, institutional, and contextual factors that inform their use and interpretation.

**2.5 Linguistic heritage**

The theoretical and methodological frameworks utilised in communication studies and media studies often draw from linguistic concepts that explore discourses, and these comprise the Critical Discourse Analysis, the concept of evaluative language, the Appraisal Theory, and the notion of incivility, the last one somewhat overlapping and partially inspired by the theories of impoliteness.

An already well-established framework deployed to analyze opinions is Critical Discourse Analysis. It is a discourse-analytic approach which combines scholarship engrained in various schools of linguistics with social studies, media studies, and political discourse. CDA is an already well-established, transdisciplinary, heterogenous, discourse-analytical approach to discourse which views language in terms of social practice. It combines research conducted in linguistics, social sciences, and political and media sciences. The goal of CDA is to seek, raise awareness, and de/legitimise social issues of discrimination, patterns of dominance, power imbalance, or ideology with the view to improve social injustice by analysing language used in opinionated, persuasive, and manipulative texts, primarily in the media. Media discourse, on the one hand, reflects the social structures, political situations, and institutions and, on the other, invokes changes in this sphere. The language thus reflects social reality, but at the same time, it moulds it and can impose patterns of power and dominance. While uncovering social issues, CDA is not confined to language, as it also explores semiotic symbols and multimodal resources (visual and auditory elements). There are several CDA schools, which rely on distinct theoretical frameworks and resort to various methodologies. Within the main approaches, there are also: the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), socio-cognitive (van Dijk, 2008), cognitive science (Chilton, 2004), or the dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough, 1989), van Leeuwen (1996). Van Leeuwen (1996) proposed a schema of various social actors, which situate subjects in the social-political-economic reality and label them according to the role they play in society, e.g., genericisation, functionalisation, nomination, predication (the last two are also elaborated by Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), etc.

Another approach to analysing opinions is exploring the evaluative parameters of texts conveyed by words, phrases, and/or syntactic structures. It is usually referred to as evaluative language, and it draws on contributions from linguistics (primarily the theories elaborated by Thompson & Hunston, 2000) as well as Bednarek’s (2006) adapted parameters for the analysis of newspaper discourse. Two approaches to evaluative language can be distinguished: attitudinal (encoded by adjectives, morphological affixes, words and phrases) and modality-oriented (grammaticalised, encoding likelihood). According to Bednarek (2006), evaluative language comprises, inter alia, such categories of description as: comprehensibility (clear, complicated), expectedness (surprisingly, obviously), emotivity (anger, praise), importance (crucial, insignificant), im/possibility (could), necessity (must), reliability (fake, genuine), and evidentiality (proof that, he said it was). Evaluative language is also elaborated by the Appraisal Theory, which was one of the sources from which Bednarek’s evaluative language evolved. The term evaluative language is sometimes used interchangeably with the term stance, which is, however, more often applied to corpus-informed studies revolving around lexico-grammatical structures that encode evaluation. Two most common structures have been identified to signal stance: adverbials and complement clause constructions.

At the foundation of Bednarek’s parameters lie concepts propounded by the Appraisal Theory. The Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2003) deals with the assessment of a text in terms of emotional, ethical, and aesthetic responses that are described by means of appraisal resources, i.e., linguistic devices dealing with how the above elements are encoded by language. The Appraisal Theory is an extension of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985), and it distinguishes three main subcategories of evaluative language: Graduation, Attitude, and Engagement. For media studies and communication research, Attitude plays a vital role. It is further divided into affect (emotions), judgment (behaviour; ethics), and appreciation (aesthetics).

Online incivility specifically refers to online comments or exchanges that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, or stereotype certain groups. Definitions of incivility from a normative aspect include qualifications such as hate speech, vulgar language, cursing, and offensive speech, while politeness is usually understood as the absence of this type of speech. Contextual definitions emphasize that online discussions are socially conditioned. Incivility can be defined as intentionally designed to attack someone or something and cause anger or resentment through name-calling, negative assessments of character, insulting statements, profanity, or offensive remarks. Politeness can be defined as the absence of personal attacks and harsh speech against others or about the topic under discussion. Some believe that incivility must be observed in the social and cultural context, ethnicity, and education of the participants. When talking about incivility as feature of opinion, it can be defined as a communication that conveys an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward discussion, participants, or topics. Incivility is intense speech marred by foul language, while intolerant language morally disrespects individuals or groups.

The notion of incivility utilized mainly in social science and media studies is anchored in a linguistic concept of impoliteness. The roots of impoliteness theories can be traced back to the theories of politeness. Politeness theorists assumed that impoliteness is a result of a failure to be polite (rather than a consequence of intentional measures) and that politeness is universal (that is unified across cultures and languages). Politeness assumed an ideal interlocutor; thus, culture- and community-specific norms were ignored. As a reaction to this approach to politeness, a group of scholars dealing with impolite verbal behaviour launched a new approach, a discursive analysis of impoliteness. It assumes (1) that impoliteness may be intentional or non-intentional, (2) that it is community-specific and guided by social norms, (3) it is based on internal perspectives of the interlocutors (rather than filtered through the researcher’s/observer’s perspective), i.e., the interlocutors decide themselves, through a “discursive struggle”, what is and what is not impolite in a situated discourse they participate in, and thus (3) impoliteness is negotiable. The internal perspective (dubbed impoliteness1) is equally important as the external, researcher’s perspective (impoliteness2). A series of impoliteness strategies were proposed by Culpeper (1996), and criticised by Bousfield (2008), which are spanned by two main groups: positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness. Impoliteness is sometimes contrasted with rudeness (Terkourafi, 2008, p. 70) on the grounds that, unlike the former, rudeness assumes that the hearer/target recognises the speaker’s face-threatening intention. Anti-social behaviour found on social media practices that resorts to abusive, offensive language, such as online flaming, is a typical example of an extreme form of impoliteness, i.e., offensiveness.

1. **MODELS**

Ideologization focuses on the way language is used to endorse or support ideological systems by the dominant power group as well as by those contesting the system (Althusser, 1971, Baker & Ellece, 2011, Fairclough, 1992). It can also affect individual and group identities by emphasizing linguistic customs. Language Policies and Practices may be launched by officials to push certain languages rather than others. Discourse analysis can show how ideologies can be encoded and diffused via language. Critical Discourse Studies also focus on the way language impacts social inequalities and how ideologization functions in discourse so dominance can be combated.

Ideological square by Van Dijk (1998) deals with ideological communication which relies on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. This model of analysis goes along the following lines: emphasize positive information about US and negative about THEM and suppress positive information about THEM and negative about US. Opinions rely here on creating overcompleteness or incompleteness, that is, creating salience or avoidance at the proposition or text level. They relate to a collective addressee/target rather than to an individual.

Opinion formations and distribution on social media stem from a peculiar participation mode that explains how actual and potential participants of information exchange can be involved and what roles they can have. Due to the nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the model of participation framework of opinion producers and the potential audience varies from one typical of face-to-face interaction; the latter is rich in all forms of multimodal resources the participants have easy and immediate access to. The participants of online interaction are mostly anonymous, and the audience is collective. Since the audience is undefined, it is sometimes dubbed the imagined audience (Litt, 2012), i.e., a conceptualisation of potential interactants. Ede and Lunsford (1984, p. 156) also distinguish between the invoked audience, which is one imagined by the writer of a message, and the addressed audience, which comprises the actual readers of the message. Another feature typical of online communication is that the writer of a message is not always its author. If the authors do not want to type and post a message themselves, they can relegate it to a writer. Similarly, on the reception end, the addressee is not necessarily the target of a message. The former is the person one talks/writes to, while the latter is the person the message is actually targeted at; this configuration, however, can also occur in face-to-face communication. The posted message reaches not only the addressee to whom the message is sent (i.e., ratified participants; Goffman, 1981) but anyone out there who happens to see the post and decides to read it (i.e., originally unratified participants, but due to the nature of social media which host open access to posted messages, they automatically become ratified participants) or those recipients the producer ratifies him/herself (friends on Facebook, subscribers on YouTube, etc.). Thus, the addressee and the target may, but need not, coincide. The possible interaction is multi-directional: on the one hand, the message producer initiates interaction with the addressee/target; but, on the other hand, unlike in face-to-face communication, various members of the audience (ratified, unratified, invoked, addressed) may also interact with each other with or without the inclusion of the original producer and/or addressee/target. The notion of ratified versus unratified addresses, originally proposed by Goffman (1981), in the context of social media, is substantially modified, since addressees change their status from unratified overhearers to ratified participants who are not addressees/targets. Both ratified and unratified participants on social media can freely express their opinions by posting their messages or by adding their opinions to existing posts, regardless of whether or not they are the addressees/targets of the message. Thereby, opinions are formed and distributed in a dynamic way, which resembles a snowball procedure, with fluid and often multiple authorship and frequently changing the target audience.

Collectivization refers to the process where languages and/or dialects fuse into a standardized form (Baker & Ellece, 2011, Holme, 2009, Van Leeuwen, 1996). This phenomenon usually occurs for socio-political reasons, such as part of nation-building efforts or language planning initiatives. The procedure may involve standardization via promotion of a certain linguistic/dialect variety through language policy that can result in language shift and a loss of linguistic diversity. The term collectivization also has a different applied meaning frequently used by many as the process of organizing individuals or resources into a collective or cooperative system. Russian collectivization of its agricultural system under Stalin is often used as an example.

Objectivisation is the way one may characterize subjective understandings to make them seem objective (Craig, 1999, Unger, 1974). Subjective concepts can be framed via language in a manner that makes them look genuine. Language is by nature subjective, given that it reflects the views of the user, although they may try to give it a veneer of objectivity by using strategies such as passive voice, technical language, or impersonal constructions. Discourse analysts especially focus on the use of these.

1. **METHODS OF EXPRESSING OPINIONS**

As already mentioned, the theoretical frameworks elaborated above are enabled by means of specific methods, tactics, parameters, or schemas. A selection of them will be discussed here to signal how the theoretic assumptions conceived of in the field of communication and media studies can be operationalised at the practical level for the purpose of the analysis of opinionated texts. We will briefly describe the social actors schema, evaluative language parameters, denialism, flaming and trolling emoticons and emoji as well as visualizations in a form of infographics.

A few categories of the so-called social actors schema proposed by Van Leeuwen (1996) will be described for illustration. Firstly, the category of “exclusion” involves social behaviour that serves to delegitimize some actors. Social actors represented by means of “exclusion” may be ignored in the text and left for the readers’ conjecture by, for example, the use of passive voice with agent deletion, middle voice or non-finite clauses, as well as gerunds, which stress actions and processes at the cost of their agentive source. Secondly, negativization of immigrants tends to be expressed by, for example, skin colour (“somaticization”, Negros; van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 120) rather than their nationality (Ukrainians, Syrians, etc.), as this exposes their otherness and triggers a sense of imminent threat to the local culture, religion, and lifestyle, drawing on self-victimizing tactic. Moreover, they may be presented in the media as criminals (“criminalisation”), social parasites living on benefits (“animization”) or, to the contrary, as solid workers paying taxes (“functionalization”, e.g., tax-payers or tax-evaders), as well as victims of the negative attitude towards them (“victimisation”). By focusing on representations of classes, “genericization” is realized or “assimilation”, whereas individuals-oriented references lead to “specification”. Pronouns and demonstratives epitomise “indetermination”, in particular, such words as somebody, many (claim that), they (don’t work), and the like. The impersonal they is an example of anonymization. When concrete numbers are provided, or the scale or degree of the problem described, “aggregation” is operationalized (e.g., 80% of immigrants…, the number of…, the level of immigration…).

Evaluativity has been explored by Bednarek (2006) to examine axiological biases in newspaper discourse. This taxonomy of evaluative language (comprising core and peripheral parameters) can be effectively applied to social media discourse investigating forms of and the semantics of opinion expression. According to Bednarek (2006), evaluative language comprises, inter alia, such parameters as: comprehensibility (clear, complicated), expectedness (surprisingly, obviously), emotivity (anger, praise), importance (crucial, insignificant), im/possibility (could), necessity (must), reliability (fake, genuine), and evidentiality (proof that, he said it was). Evaluative language is also elaborated by the Appraisal Theory, which was one of the sources from which Bednarek’s evaluative language evolved.

Whilst the tools employed in opinion-crafting mentioned above capitalize on word- or phrase-level verbalisations, there are tactics which combine verbal expression with negative behaviour practices online. One of them used in argumentation is denialism (Hoofnagle & Hoofnagle, 2007). It consists in blocking relevant information, usually of scientific value, by presenting subjective opinions, the so-called alternative facts. The aim of such tactics is to divert the addressee’s attention from the real problem and a truthful argument. Rather than express their opinion about some scientifically proved facts, denialists aim at presenting their own understanding of the world by promoting their subjective view of truth that, according to them, is new and better than the existing, well-engrained ones (Godulla et al., 2024). The denial tactics, exercised by individual citizens, groups (including political organizations), as well as government and institutions, aim at blocking genuine information and deceiving adversaries, which leads to unnecessary escalation or conflict as well as sows disinformation and confusion.

In recent studies into CMC, social media native notions of trolling and flaming, which instil hatred and amplify conflict, have gained traction (Hardaker, 2017). Flaming means to act aggressively by posting insults and other linguistic forms of abusive and offensive language on social media. Trolling in turn aims at initiating quarrels and stirring social discord. Flaming posts are characterized by vitriolic and extensive attacks, whereas trolling entails disrupting the harmony of discussions by sending incendiary and conflict-provocative comments that are to work as bait for future hostility-laced antagonism. Both are triggered by indignation or confrontational attitude and are encouraged by the anonymity that is offered by the Internet ecosystem. Trolling functions as an audience-manipulation technique which is to question, fight, and subvert agreed-upon norms, facts, and opinions.

Finally, whilst the approaches mentioned above concentrate on various forms of expressing opinions verbally, i.e., by resorting to select lexical, phrasal, and sentential solutions, communication as such, including social media (written discourse), often entails the use of pictorial resources, which either replace the verbal information or complement it. In the written discourse of social media, this is typically enacted by emoticons and emojis.

Multimodality involves the use of non-verbal, pictorial communication, such as emoticons and emoji, which is particularly popular in expressing one’s opinion in social media discourse and mobile communication. Their role is essential in the written mode of communication, which, due to the impoverishment of other non-verbal cues, such as bodily movements, posture, gestures, and facial expression, convey an incomplete message prone to misinterpretation and miscommunication. Emoticons are ASCI-based symbols, linear, character-based representations of non-verbal communication, whereas emoji, by some classified as a subtype of emoticons (Dainas & Herring, 2021), are graphically rendered pictograms or ideograms (symbolic representations of a meaning). They both play a role in adding social and interpersonal meaning to opinions by reinforcing, disambiguating, or replacing the verbal code. They may represent faces, similarly to emoticons, but unlike emoticons, emoji often stand for other parts of the body as well, or even objects, actions, and symbols (Wiese & Labrenz, 2021). They are particularly often used to convey opinions that are rooted in affective meaning and emotions (Park et al., 2014). While both emoticons and emoji are popular forms of expressing opinion, emoticons are on the decline while emoji are gaining in popularity. The original set of 176 emoji has quickly evolved to reach now more than two thousand, with ca. 60 new emoji added per year (Seargeant, 2019, p. 16). It is believed that over 70% of emoji have the function of signalling emotions (Seargeant, 2019). Along with the emotive function (Danesi, 2017), emoji can also play a phatic function, which serves to support interaction, yet it is the emotive meaning that is primarily used to convey subjective opinions. However, it is also possible for emoji to combine the emotive and interactive functions, especially when they are deployed for rapport building (Kelly & Watts, 2015), whereby the positive opinion is implicitly communicated, which may emphasize support, in-group membership, and group identity. On the other hand, they can also mitigate critical opinions (Danesi, 2017). In fact, ca. 70% of emoji are claimed to be used in order to signal positive emotions and only 15% to encode negativity (Danesi, 2017). Interestingly, Wiese and Labrenz (2021) assigned emoji the function of discourse markers. Their role may be one contributing to subjective (focusing on the speaker’s self), or intersubjective (focusing on the addressee) meaning (Traugott, 2010). The former is mostly exploited in left-periphery to index the speaker’s emotions and/or point of view, such as, e.g., friendliness, and the latter is typically used in right-periphery to encourage engagement, disclose positive intent, downgrade criticism or complaint, and adjust the tone, e.g., a sarcastic one, in order to guide the reader how to interpret the message or to trigger the addressee’s reaction (Wiese & Labrenz, 2020). Even though many emojis are claimed to be semantically ambiguous (Dainas & Herring, 2021) and subject to multiple interpretations flowing from contextual and cultural factors (Pohl et al., 2017), they can help resolve disambiguation of the written texts, which, devoid of non-verbal contextual clues, are often misleading (Cui et al., 2023).

The visual forms of presenting various types of data (usually complex information expressing facts or opinions) in a systematic form is known as infographics. Visualisations of textual or numerical information enhance data interpretation as they present a bird’s eye view of the data at hand, and make them more transparent, meaningful, and readable. Infographics are operationalized, inter alia, through maps, lists, line graphs, bubble plots, scatter plots, bar charts, pie charts, and time intelligence. They are often interactive, offering an overview of the data together with tools to drill them down, which empower users to explore the data on their own and enhance data comprehensibility. Infographics are based on big data (huge volumes of data counted in tera- and petabytes), are increasingly popular in data journalism, and have a big impact on the media industry (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). Infographics are often used in media organisations to visualise user-generated content, which expresses opinion polls or facts, published on social media (Tong, 2022). Popular software tools used to convert complex data into graphic form comprise Tableau, MS Power BI.

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

The review presented in this chapter has provided some glimpses of select theoretical frameworks, models and methods of analysis readily applicable to the study of opinionated texts. Sources of the approaches derived from several disciplines have been accounted for as communication and media studies to a great extent draw on scholarship balancing on the verge of social studies, political science and linguistics from which new ideas emerged embedded in and giving prominence to various aspects of communication expressed via the media.

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