

The social (de-) construction of the Corona-pandemic as being a serious threat to society

Insights from a discourse analysis of German tweets until contacts were banned in March 2020

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Discussion Paper

Management

2021/5

The social (de-) construction of the Corona- pandemic as being a serious threat to society – Insights from a discourse analysis of German tweets until contacts were banned in March 2020

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Abstract

This essay examines how different individual and collective actors interpreted the initial weeks of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak from the German perspective. During this early phase, knowledge about COVID-19 was quite limited and uncertain, which also influenced the ability to assess (potential) impacts. The analysis relies on twitter data and traces the main arguments in the public German discourse between January and March 2020. It shows that actors ascribed different meanings to the outbreak – either recognizing or negating the gravity of the COVID-19 threat. Shortly before the first German lockdown, the seriousness of the COVID-19 threat had begun to feature prominently within the public discourse.

Keywords

Pandemic; COVID-19; social construction; discourse analysis; Twitter

The unexpected outbreak of the new Corona virus confronted political, economic and individual actors with the challenge of having to make decisions based on highly fragmented knowledge and fundamental uncertainty [1]. One of the main concerns surrounding the virus was the total lack of information about its nature and that of the related disease COVID-19. As from the official reporting of the first infections in China by the WHO on January 4th 2020, many assumptions were made that often required subsequent revision. However, within a very short time considerable knowledge about the virus and COVID-19 was generated and spread around the globe.

According to many social theories, this quickly accumulated knowledge about COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2 represents the basis on which actors make sense, frame or interpret the situation and develop forecasts and plans for action. At the same time, this knowledge in itself is reproduced and transformed by such action [e.g., 2,3]. Therefore, the practices [2] of communicating knowledge and assumptions about the new coronavirus are key to understanding the social conditions and consequences of the current developments. Our essay therefore aims to examine how actors interpreted the outbreak of COVID-19 and ascribed different meanings to it in the course of its initial development.

Because events, interpretations and actions (in this first period of the outbreak) have a strong nation-state reference, which has become more than evident since travel restrictions and border closures have been put into effect, we limit our investigation to Germany as a country that – at least during the initial phase– seemed to cope reasonably well with the pandemic in terms of hospitalizations and fatalities. Our analysis relies on twitter data, including tweets from relevant individual and collective actors such as leading virologists, the German health ministry, and national newspapers addressing important stakeholder groups.

We consider these tweets to be expressions of practice, specifically aimed at information exchange and dissemination. Against this background, we ask *what (primarily) discursive practices regarding the new Corona virus did these actors pursue, and how did these practices change as the pandemic developed?*

In this initial qualitative analysis, we focus on practices of either recognising the new Corona virus as a serious threat or denying recognition as such, claiming that it is a relatively normal disease which does not call for special measures to be taken. Both interpretations were competing with each other to determine which line of action ought to be followed, at least at the beginning of the pandemic (January to March 2020).

In order to answer our research question, we use 1,394 tweets provided by ten accounts representing different stakeholder groups on Twitter (see Table 1), posted between January 4th and March 22nd. Twitter allows users to post and share publicly available short text messages (tweets) with a maximum of 280 characters, which forces them to boil their message down to the point. On several occasions, Twitter has demonstrated its power as a common and timely information channel during crises [4]. Using tweets from selected accounts for a discourse analysis of the COVID-19 outbreak in Germany allows us to gather the opinions and arguments of different important actors in a fine-grained and longitudinal manner.

We manually coded the nature of arguments and their use over time. In order to gain insights into the overall development of the pandemic, we compared the overlap with the development of the reported German Covid-19 cases and the important measures subsequently taken by the government (e.g., contact bans).

Table 1: Twitter accounts selected for analysis

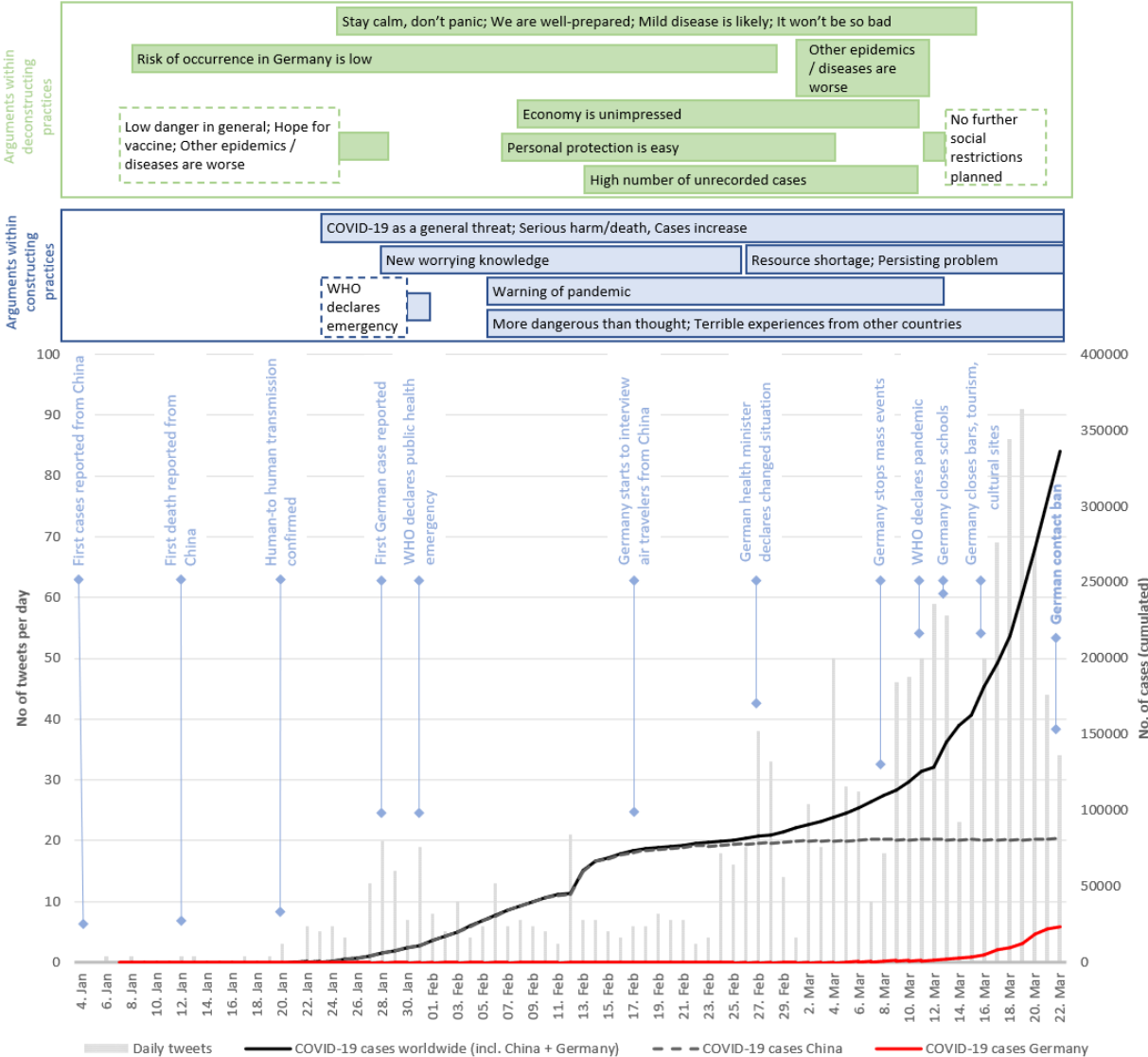
Name account	Person and description	Stakeholder group
@aerztezeitung	Deutsche Ärztezeitung; professional journal for German physicians	Medical professionals
@AlexanderKekule	Alexander Kekulé; German virologist at University of Halle	Virologists
@BMG_Bund	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit; German health ministry	Public authorities
@c_drosten	Christian Drosten, German virologist at Charité Berlin	Virologists
@DIEZEIT	Zeit; (weekly) German newspaper	National newspaper
@GKV_SV	GKV Spitzenverband, Association of Germany's statutory health insurers	Statutory sickness funds
@handelsblatt	Handelsblatt, (daily) German newspaper focusing on economy	Specialist newspaper
@Paritaet	Der Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband, German welfare organisation	Welfare organisations
@RKI_de	Robert-Koch-Institut, German federal government agency and research institute, responsible for disease control and prevention	Public authorities
@SpringerPflege	Springer Pflege, information platform for the nursing profession	Medical professionals

The analysis enabled us to reconstruct a chronology of the important events in Germany (see Appendix 1). After the first patient in Germany was reported on January 28th, attention shifted, and also the way the situation was interpreted. At the same time, the number of tweets gradually increased during the following weeks. The first announcement of general contact restrictions (i.e., the first German lockdown) was made on 22nd of March (see Figure 1), marking an important turning point and therefore the end of our preliminary analysis.

Figure 1 shows the development of COVID-19 cases over time worldwide and in Germany, together with important events which were reflected in the tweets. Moreover, it displays the discursive practices that were used in order to evaluate the threat that the virus was likely to pose to society in the course of time.

Our coding reveals that around 10% of the tweets of the different actors contribute to either regarding or disregarding the COVID-19 pandemic as being a severe societal threat. Especially tweets of @aerztezeitung and @DIEZEIT were inclined to be aware of its potential, whereas tweets of the German Ministry of Health were at that time clearly disregarding the dangers. The tweets of @handelsblatt and two German virologists that strongly influence the public discourse are more balanced, whereby a large proportion of the tweets of one of the virologists is more inclined to alert the public rather than to disregard the potential threat. In the course of time, the warnings uttered by those who were taking the virus seriously were to be heard more frequently, whereas those who had initially disregarded the threat posed by the virus gradually fell silent.

Figure 1: Developments in the course of time



From studying the practices used to *deny recognition* of COVID-19 as a serious societal threat, we see that articles published in the economic newspapers and the physicians' journals often recommended that people should "stay calm, and not panic", and frequently also claimed that the country was well-prepared. It was a less frequent occurrence that the *characteristics* of COVID 19 were denied recognition, for example by reference to the fact that people were likely to be subjected to a mild course of the disease. In addition, the fact that little was hitherto known about COVID-19 gave reason to deny recognition of the severity of the threat,

comparing it e.g. to that of potentially worse epidemics or play down the occurrence of severe cases by a high number of unrecorded cases. Especially in January, public health authorities assumed it to be unlikely that human-to-human transmission would occur (see e.g., a Tweet from WHO on January 12th: “At this stage, there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission in the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak in #Wuhan, #China. However, the Chinese authorities continue intensive surveillance and follow-up measures, including environmental investigations”). This led to the assessment that there was little risk that Germany was to fall victim to a pandemic.

Regarding practices used, by contrast, to *recognise* COVID-19 as a serious threat, we found that especially the nationwide and economically-oriented newspapers tweeted about COVID-19 as being a general threat, often in terms of the potential economic consequences involved. Accounts addressing the medical profession tended to warn its representatives of an upcoming pandemic, especially in February and the beginning of March until, on March 11th, the relatively late WHO declaration of a pandemic was made, which could legitimize further measures of the public authorities to be taken. Resource shortages (e.g., in terms of personal protection equipment and ventilators) played a main role in the physicians’ journals at a later stage, too, as they naturally had a direct effect on medical professionals. Reports about the dreadful experiences made in other countries were issued, mainly by virologists in the physicians’ journals, as an urgent warning. The threat of COVID-19 to the health of different sections of the population was reported mainly in these accounts.

As we know today, the pandemic turned into a worldwide, long-lasting threat. Our data on the very early phase of the pandemic show that agreement on specific knowledge became more firmly established over time (e.g. the fact that the new Corona virus has characteristics that differentiate it from other epidemics, or relating to the knowledge on how to avoid the spread of infection). In relation to these facts, both attitudes, either recognising or denying recognition to the potential of the threat, then *changed*: our data displays that, shortly before the German contact ban was issued little more was heard from those who had been denying recognition of the threat. At the same time, the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise exponentially. On February 27th, the German health minister Jens Spahn stated that the situation in Germany had changed. This put an end to the first round of arguments that trivialised the threat posed by COVID-19 in Germany, giving rise not only to a renewed awareness of the dangers involved (e.g. the resource shortage, the persisting nature of the problem) but also to newer arguments denying recognition of the threat (e.g. comparisons to worse diseases, role of the number of unrecorded cases). In addition, we know from our ongoing tracking of the public discourse that people again began to challenge how serious things were, especially as the economic and individual consequences of lockdowns became more and more visible.

This essay is based on ongoing work and has some limitations, including the small number of the analysed Twitter accounts and the limited time period it covers. We will continue this project. In the further course, we also aim to firstly develop explanations to the observations described here, and thus secondly to contribute to the discourse on possible solutions to address the challenges that the COVID-19 outbreak poses to our societies.

References

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Appendix 2: Chronological order of important events and communications

Date	Account	Tweet (Links not included)
4. Jan	@WHO	#China has reported to WHO a cluster of #pneumonia cases —with no deaths— in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Investigations are underway to identify the cause of this illness.
5. Jan	@WHO	Chinese authorities informed WHO that they have ruled out a number of causes of the outbreak of #pneumonia in Wuhan City. The pathogen is not influenza, avian flu, adenovirus, SARS or MERS. Work continues to identify the cause.
12. Jan	@aerztezeitung	First death after infection with the new Corona virus Many have fallen ill with the new Corona virus in China. Seven are in a critical condition. One 61 year-old patient with severe underlying diseases died [our translation].
16. Jan	@WHO	The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare @MHLWitter, today informed WHO of a confirmed case of a novel #coronavirus (2019-nCoV) in a person who travelled to #Wuhan, #China.
20. Jan	@aerztezeitung	Human-to-human transmission of nCoV was confirmed More and more infections are reported in China. It is apparent now that the new SARS-type is spreading via human-to-human transmission [our translation].
28. Jan	@aerztezeitung	First case of Corona virus in Germany The new Corona virus 2019-nCov has reached Germany now. A man in the district of Starnberg is infected, according to a report of the Bavarian ministry of health [our translation].
30. Jan	@WHO	BREAKING "For all of these reasons, I am declaring a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of #2019nCoV." - @DrTedros
12. Feb	@aerztezeitung	The lung disease is now called Covid-19 There are now two patients in Germany who have contracted the new Corona virus. The WHO has meanwhile relabeled the virus and given a new name to the lung disease [our translation].
13. Feb	@aerztezeitung	This could become a Corona virus pandemic The Corona virus could become more widespread, the RKI warns. Meanwhile, the WHO reports of 4 possible vaccines. The number of infected people in China is rising considerably due also to a new way of counting them [our translation].
17. Feb	@aerztezeitung	Spahn intensifies controls of China-flights Two days after the special meeting of the EU-health ministers, Jens Spahn is putting first decisions into practice: travelers coming from China will now be questioned more extensively [our translation].
24. Feb	@bmg_bund	"#Corona has reached Europe as a pandemic Because of this we have to expect the virus to spread in Germany as well. We will remain alert, prepare and react accordingly and proportionally." @jensspahn addressed the current situation of #coronavirus [our translation].
	@aerztezeitung	Contagious even without symptoms Asymptomatically infected people spread the new Corona virus, too, as a cluster analysis of Covid-19 afflicted in China reveals. Efforts to contain the Sars-Cov-2-agent could therefore be ery... [our translation].
27. Feb	@bmg_bund	We have to tell the citizens that the situation has changed. The authorities are doing their best but it has become more difficult to trace, identify and isolate each contact" @JensSpahn at @tagesthemen [our translation].
08. Mar	@AlexanderKekule	After fatal procrastination, as the first German dies of #coronavirus, BM Spahn finally recommends to stop mass events. How many have to die until he will close kindergartens and schools? #Coronaferien
11. Mar	@c_drosten	„Tsunami that has overwhelmed us“ –the desperate report of an Italian doctor [Link to newspaper article] #COVID19 will follow the same course here if we carry on thinking that “Germany will do it better” and therefore do nothing. [our translation].
	@WHO	BREAKING "We have therefore made the assessment that #COVID19 can be characterized as a pandemic"- @DrTedros #coronavirus

11. Mar	Joint press conference by Angela Merkel (German chancellor), Jens Spahn (health minister) and Lothar Wieler (head of Robert-Koch-Institute)	
13. Mar	@WHO	Europe has now become the epicenter of the #COVID19 pandemic, with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined, apart from #China. More cases are now being reported every day than were reported in at the height of its epidemic"- @DrTedros #coronavirus
13. Mar	@handelsblatt	Each federal state is now going to decide whether its schools are to be closed. The federal states are not able to decide quickly and jointly even in an emergency [our translation].
15. Mar	@aerzteblatt	„Everything is good that makes people keep their distance“ The number of infections is growing, schools and clubs are closing down. If at all and the extent to which these measures will contain the SARS-CoV-2-epidemic will take some days to show, according to RKI [our translation].
16. Mar	Germany closes, among others, clubs, restaurants, cultural sites, sport facilities, worship services, and touristic activities	
18. Mar	Chancellor Angela Merkel makes the Corona outbreak a subject of discussion in a nation-wide address	
22. Mar	Federal government and federal states agree on an encompassing contact ban, aired in a press conference by German chancellor Angela Merkel	

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