Conflict Framing in the News Media and Political Discussion

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[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

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Article type   : Original Article

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Science Association Workshop 2017, and I would like to thank the participants for constructive comments and suggestions.

Though political discussion amongst citizens is central in democracy, little is known about what triggers informal political discussions and through which pathways. This article argues that citizens gain knowledge about politics when they are exposed to political conflict in the news media and that this may encourage them to participate more in political discussions conditioned by their orientation toward conflict due to potential interpersonal conflict. The indirect effect is argued to be larger on social media where behaviour is more uncivil than in face-to-face interactions. Based on a content analysis of news coverage and a three-wave panel survey (n = 2,049), exposure to conflict framing is found to have a positive effect on changes in discussion frequency across social settings. The effect is mediated by knowledge and subsequently moderated by conflict avoidance: conflict non-avoiders are more positively influenced than conflict avoiders. The indirect effect is larger in social media than in public and private settings. The wider societal implications of the results are discussed.

Discussing politics is a central part of democracy; some enjoy it, others try to avoid it, some do it online, others around the dinner table or in public. Political discussions have several positive implications for various political phenomena such as increased political knowledge (Eveland and Thomson, 2006; McClurg, 2006a), clarification and strengthening of political attitudes, and increasing engagement in politics (Kwak et al., 2005; McClurg, 2006b; Wyatt et al., 2000). Despite our knowledge about the positive effects of discussing politics, little is known about what triggers citizens to engage more frequently in political discussions and through which pathways.

An obvious starting point for investigating the drivers of political discussions is the news media, which for most citizens is the primary source of information about politics (Strömbäck 2008; Zaller 2003). Prior studies have shown that citizens often discuss information they have been exposed to by the media with their fellow citizens (Anderson et al., 1994). However, we know surprisingly little about which *specific* type of media content provides 'mobilizing information'

(Lemert, 1979) and *triggers* more informal discussions. This article presents a path model based upon Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk's (2020) moderated mediation model, which explains how exposure to conflict news framing influences political participation (e.g. participation in demonstrations) with knowledge as the mediator and conflict avoidance as the moderator.[1] In line with this model, the article argues that when citizens are exposed to political conflict reported by the news media, they may gain knowledge about politics. This article extends the model by arguing that this knowledge may increase the frequency of political discussion across various social settings conditioned by citizens' level of conflict avoidance. The model is further extended by the argument that the indirect effect is larger in social media than in public and private settings. The empirical analysis substantiates the expectations even when political participation is included as a control, suggesting that this article examines a pathway that is related to but distinct from the pathway in Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk (2020).

Political conflict is an important part of news reporting (Neuman et al. 1992; Bartholome et al. 2015). Journalists use a *conflict frame* when covering politics, portraying politics as disagreement among elite actors (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Political conflict signals that something is at stake (Schuck et al., 2016; Zaller, 2003) and organises the political sides of an issue (Price, 1989). According to Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk's (2020), citizens may gain knowledge when exposed to conflict. The article further argues that the knowledge they gain may translate into them discussing politics more frequently. When citizens are exposed to conflict, they may learn about politics, which makes it easier for them to find arguments to utilize in discussions compared to situations in which they are exposed to elite consensus.

Like other scholars, individual predispositions are considered important for citizens' discussion frequency (e.g. Gerber et al. 2012; Hibbing et al. 2011). Inspired by Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk (2020), it is argued that conflict avoidance is of importance for citizens' discussion frequency. Discussing politics typically involves the exchange of diverse opinions and, hence, the extent to which individuals prefer to avoid conflicts presents itself as another interesting moderator. Conflict avoiders try to avoid conflictual situations, while non-avoiders are attracted to such situations (Mutz and Reeves, 2005; Ulbig and Funk, 1999). This article therefore further expects that conflict non-avoiders are more willing than conflict avoiders to discuss politics based on knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing.

Furthermore, it is expected that the strength of the moderator depends on the social settings in which discussions take place (e.g., Hayes, 2005; Klofstad et al., 2013). Online platforms have changed and increased opportunities for interacting politically (Theocharis, 2015), but research has shown that online debates are more uncivil (Oz and Chen 2018; Su et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2004), which is argued to influence the strength of the moderator. This article expects that the indirect

effect is larger on social media than in public and private settings. The higher degree of incivility increases the gap between conflict non-avoiders, who are more attracted to, and conflict avoiders, who are more repulsed from engaging in discussions online.

In sum, this article *investigates whether the effect of exposure to conflict news framing on citizens' discussion frequency is mediated by citizens' level of knowledge and subsequently moderated by their level of conflict avoidance across social settings (private, social media, and public).* To test the arguments, the article relies on a three-wave panel survey measuring citizens' media usage and discussion frequency from 2014 to 2015 (n = 2,049) and content analysis of political conflict in the news media. The survey taps the frequency of political discussions in three social settings, and the content analysis captures the presence of conflict framing in the news media.

Antecedents of and Pathways to Political Discussions

The study of political discussion often refers to interpersonal and small-group interactions about politics that take place outside formal deliberation settings (Eveland et al. 2000; Wyatt et al. 2000). Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the (positive) *effects* of such political discussion on political engagement, e.g. increased political knowledge (Eveland and Thomson, 2006; Kwak et al., 2005; McClurg, 2006a, 2006b; Wyatt et al., 2000). Much less attention has been devoted to the question what *triggers* discussions in the first place and through which *pathways* (Eveland et al. 2011). One starting point in the literature has been to map what drives or motivates individual citizens to engage in political discussions (Eveland et al. 2011; de Zúñiga et al., 2016).

Scholars argue that political conversations often revolve around information picked up in the news media. More than half a century ago, Berelson (1949: 119) described the news media as having "conversational value", as media content—in the form of factual information as well as diversity of opinions—enables citizens to appear informed at social gatherings. Similarly, Gamson (1992: 117–22) described the news media as a "conversational resource", meaning that people refer to "informational elements from media discourse" in their informal discussions of politics and current affairs. This suggests that the news media provide a resource for political discussions, as they equip individuals with arguments as well as information about politics that they may utilize in informal political discussions. In short, "News is what people talk about, and news makes people talk" (Anderson et al., 1994: 37).

The question is, then, *when* does the news media trigger political discussion – or more precisely what *specific* media content provides 'mobilizing information' (Lemert 1984) that triggers political discussions – and through which *pathways*? Research within this field is generally limited. Based on an experiment, Koch (1994) found that daily readers (students) of *New York Times* talked more frequently with others about politics and current events. In a similar study, Landreville, Holbert, and LaMarre (2010) found a positive indirect effect of late-night TV comedy viewing on

political talk through debate viewing with age as a subsequent moderator, where the effect was stronger among the younger audience. These findings suggest that exposure to media indeed can trigger political discussions. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) went one step further and showed that news media use influences the frequency of political conversations in daily life both at general and issue-specific levels. Their study contributes to our understanding of the dependent variable, i.e. discussion frequency in general and about different issues, but little is known about what *specific* media content triggers political discussions and through which *pathways* (Eveland et al. 2011).

To shed light on this question, the article builds upon Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk's (2020) moderated mediation model stating that exposure to conflict news framing triggers political participation mediated by knowledge and moderated by conflict avoidance. A similar pathway is argued to lead to political discussions, which is illustrated in Figure 1. Political discussion and political participation are related although distinct concepts. The threshold for discussing politics is noticeably lower than for participating in politics. There is more room to negotiate opinions, and it is less binding than when you fight for a specific cause by signing petitions or attending demonstrations, for instance. Moreover, in principle, citizens can discuss politics whenever they encounter another person online or physically, while participation in politics is more time consuming and often requires physical appearances. Although the concepts are distinct, they are also related. When citizens discuss politics, it may inspire them to fight for a cause by, for instance, attending a demonstration (Kim et al., 1999), and when citizens participate in politics, it may inspire them to discuss politics. The empirical analysis will include a control for political participation to empirically substantiate that this pathway is distinct from the ones identified in Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2020) (see further in Supplementary Information S2).

Like Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2020), this article argues that when individuals are exposed to conflict news framing, they may gain knowledge about politics. This article further extends their model by arguing that this knowledge may translate into more political discussions, as conflict attracts their attention and provides them with reasons to discuss politics conditioned by individuals' orientation towards conflict. Conflict non-avoiders are more likely than conflict avoiders to engage in political discussions after gaining knowledge (from exposure to conflict news framing). The latter are reminded of the contentious nature of politics and will be less willing to engage in discussions. The article extends the model further by arguing that the indirect effect is stronger on social media as the tone is more uncivil than in face-to-face interactions. The arguments are presented in the next section.

*** Figure 1 about here ***

A Moderated Mediation Process to Link Conflict News Framing to Political Discussion
Beginning with the first arrow from *conflict news framing* to political knowledge in Figure 1.

Political *knowledge* is generally considered a key predictor of political engagement (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Verba *et al.* 1997). Like Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk (2020), the article focuses on knowledge as the first step in the process, as citizens must ideally form opinions based on sufficient knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), which they can express in political discussions.

The news media are an obvious source of policy-specific information (Barabas and Jerit 2009). One way of reporting news is by emphasizing a conflict (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Bartholome et al.2015). News stories that focus on conflict have a high news value (Price, 1989), and the construction of conflict frames is embedded in media routines and professional standards, such as balanced news reporting (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Bartholome et al., 2015). Conceptually, a conflict frame entails that journalists "emphasize conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest" (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 95). Empirically, conflict framing has been shown to be one of the most frequently used news frames across different media systems, countries, and news formats (de Vreese et al., 2001; Lengauer et al., 2012; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Thus, exposure to conflict is part of the news stream citizens encounter.

There are at least two reasons why exposure to conflict news framing can increase discussion frequency through the expected pathway (for inspiration see Bjarnøe et al., 2020). Zaller (2003) famously formulated the 'burglar alarm' as a news standard that alerts citizens about important societal events. Many different aspects can cause such an alarm to go off, and one is exposure to a news conflict as it signals that something is at stake according to Schuck, Vliegenthart, and de Vreese (2016). When actions are 'needed', citizens may pay more attention to and learn more about politics, which may trigger them to discuss problems as well as solutions. Moreover, when the depiction of an issue is organised around different sides (Price 1989), it makes it easier for citizens to find arguments to utilize in discussions compared to situations in which they are exposed to elite consensus.

Furthermore, research has shown that individual-level factors influence individuals' discussion frequency (Gerber et al., 2012; Hibbing et al., 2011). Inspired by Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2020), the article argues that individuals' orientation toward conflict also acts as an important moderator for whether citizens engage in political discussions, i.e. the level of *conflict avoidance* (the second arrow in Figure 1). Conceptually, conflict avoidance refers to how one reacts to conflicts (Mutz and Reeves, 2005).[2] Some individuals are conflict avoiders, they generally find conflicts uncomfortable and therefore avoid conflict situations. Other individuals are conflict non-avoiders, they are comfortable with and/or attracted to conflicts. Against this backdrop, the following is expected:

H1: Knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing will translate into less discussion frequency the more individuals tend to avoid conflict.

This article further extends Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk's (2020) model by arguing that the social setting in which citizens discuss politics influences their willingness to discuss politics (e.g., Hayes, 2005; Klofstad et al., 2013). Extending H1, individuals' orientation toward conflicts is argued to have a stronger influence on social media than in private and public settings. In recent decades, the possibility of engaging in society has expanded and changed, particularly with the rise of online platforms that allow for digital interaction, including discussion of politics (Theocharis, 2015). Online platforms have a specific set of affordances: Interaction takes place behind a keyboard and a screen, can be anonymous, and often with strangers. One key concern that comes with these affordances is uncivil behaviour. Several studies have examined and identified uncivil behaviour on social media platforms like Facebook (Su et al., 2018), but also across social media platforms (e.g., Oz, 2016; Oz and Chen, 2018). Based on this research, it seems reasonable to argue that there is a higher chance of encountering uncivil behaviour on social media than in face-to-face interactions.

Research has shown that a disrespectful rhetoric (i.e. an uncivil tone) has negative consequences for, e.g., political trust (Skytte, 2020; Mutz and Reeves, 2005) and public deliberations (Hwang et al., 2014). Inspired by this research, it is further argued that incivility enhances the importance of the moderator, where the indirect effect is expected to be larger in social media compared public and private settings. The higher degree of incivility on social media increases the gap between conflict non-avoiders and conflict avoiders, as they are more attracted to and scared away from engaging in discussions online, respectively. Therefore, the following is expected:

H2a: The indirect effect of conflict avoidance is larger in social media than in private settings.

H2b: The indirect effect of conflict avoidance is larger in social media than in public settings.

Research Design

To examine how exposure to conflict news framing in the public debate influences changes in citizens' political discussion frequency, the article relies on a multi-methods research design including an automated news media content analysis and a three-wave panel survey conducted in Denmark during 2014 and 2015 (for other studies using the data see Bjarnøe et al. 2020, Andersen et al 2021). The automated content analysis makes it possible to identify the prominence of conflict framing in different news media outlets, while the survey allows us to assess the impact of exposure to conflict news framing on discussion frequency. Our case country, Denmark, is similar to other Western democracies with its multiparty system (Lijphart, 1999) and a democratic corporatist media system with a strong history of public broadcasting and a high level of news consumption

(Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Previous studies have shown that the level of conflict in the Danish news media is comparable to that of other western democracies (e.g. Esser et al., 2017:79).

Panel Design

The article relies on a three-wave panel survey based on a representative sample of the general Danish population, 18 years and older. The survey was imbedded in a larger seven-wave panel study conducted by the research agency Epinion. Three waves were utilized that included the variables of interest fielded from 21 November 2014 to 5 November 2015 (w1: 21 November 2014-26 January 2015, w2: 10-22 April 2015, w3: 26 October-5 November 2015). The sample was drawn from a database with a quota sample technique on gender, age, and geography. In total, 10,315 citizens were invited via e-mail to participate in the first wave, and 4,641 respondents completed the survey. Two waves were completed by 3,419 respondents, while 2,049 respondents completed all three waves.[3] Attrition led to a small increase in the average age and educational level. Since the focus is on a causal mechanism—rather than on predicting the exact levels of the larger population—these increases are of less concern. For a list of descriptive statistics (mean, std. dev., min., max., α) on all variables, see Table S1a in Supplementary Material S1.

The dependent variable, discussion frequency: Political discussions can generally be understood as interpersonal and small-group interactions about politics that take place outside formal deliberation settings (Eveland et al. 2000; Wyatt et al 2000). In order to measure discussion frequency in the three distinct settings, respondents were asked about discussion frequency with specific persons in private settings and about specific behaviour of political communicative interactions with others in social media and public settings.

Private politics discussion frequency: In line with previous research (e.g. Landreville et al, 2010), respondents were asked about political discussion frequency in private settings in relation to specific (groups of) interlocutors: 1) spouse/partner/boy- or girlfriend, 2) friends, 3) acquaintances, 4) colleagues/class mates/fellow students, 5) relatives, 6) neighbours (randomized order). Respondents were asked how often they talk about politics with the following persons? (listing each group) with the following answer categories: 'always', 'often', 'sometimes', 'rarely', 'never', or 'not relevant'. The index represents the mean discussion frequency across the (groups of) interlocutors, scaled from 0 to 100, ignoring 'not relevant' responses.[4]

Social media discussion frequency: On social media sites, individuals engage differently than in face-to-face conversations. They can engage in political discussions by expressing their opinion by sharing, liking, or in other written ways. Such behaviour was captured by asking how often, during the last 12 months in the first wave and 4 months in the second and the third waves (corresponding to the time periods between the waves),[5] they had: 1) "On social media or other places on the internet initiated a political discussion or supported a political issue, e.g. by creating a

group or donating money to a political project or event", 2) "On Facebook or similar social media liked posts about a political or societal issue", 3) "On Facebook or similar social media shared posts about a political or societal issue by others", 4) "On Facebook or similar social media expressed your opinion about a political or societal issue in a post". The answer categories were 'not at all', 'once', 'twice', 'three times', and 'four times'. The answers were summarized into an index for each wave ranging from 'not at all' to 'very often', scaled from 0 to 100.

Public discussion frequency: Discussing politics in public also involves oral and written elements, which was captured by asking how often, during the last 12 months in the first wave and 4 months in the second and the third waves (corresponding with the time periods in between the waves), they had: 1) "Written letters or articles to newspapers, magazines or the like to comment on a political matter", 2) "Called up a radio or television station to express your opinion on a political issue, even if you were not aired". The answer categories were 'not at all', 'once', 'twice', 'three times', 'four times', or 'not relevant' (coded as 'not at all'). In each wave, the answers were summarized into an index ranging from 'not at all' to 'very often', scaled from 0 to 100.

The independent variable, media exposure: To capture the respondents' media exposure, we measured their consumption of *specific* media sources to reduce the risk of underestimating possible media effects (Andersen et al., 2016). Respondents were asked how many days in the past week they read the following newspapers in the printed (on paper) and/or online version (electronically) or watched the following television programs on a scale from 0 to 7, reflecting the number of days in the last week a specific source was used. The measures for printed and online broadsheet and tabloid newspapers included the most read national newspapers: three national broadsheet (*Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken*) and two national tabloids (*B.T.* and *Ekstra Bladet*) (TNS Gallup, 2015). The measures for television news included the two most watched and regular evening newscasts along with their online news webpage (*TV-Avisen* at 6:30 pm on DR1 and *Nyhederne* at 7:00 pm on TV2) (TNS Gallup, 2014). For the subsequent analyses, media consumption was weighted by a conflict framing measure (see below).

The mediating variable, knowledge: Based on recent news coverage, four questions about current national and foreign politics were constructed (Barabas et al., 2014). Four answer categories were provided along with a 'don't know' option with 20 seconds to respond. 'Don't know' responses and missing values were coded as incorrect answers. The answers were summarised into an index ranging from 0 (no correct answers) to 4 (four correct answers).[6]

The moderating variable, conflict avoidance: Following previous research (Bresnahan et al., 2009; Mutz and Reeves, 2005), conflict avoidance was measured using five items on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: 1) "I hate arguments" (reversed), 2) "I find conflicts exciting", 3) "I enjoy challenging the opinions of others", 4) "Arguments don't bother me", and 5)

"I feel upset after an argument" (reversed). The answers were summarised into an index ranging from 1 to 5 from low to high levels of conflict avoidance. Both Cronbach's alpha and the item-item correlation analysis showed good results (see Tables S1a-b in Supplementary Material S1).

Control variables: The analysis includes controls for gender, age, and education (measured with a 7-point scale ranging from primary school to higher education) measured in the first wave. Moreover, political interest was also included as a control as it has often been considered a key predictor of engagement in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Prior, 2010) by asking: "Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?" on a scale from 0 (not interested at all) to 10 (very interested) (see also Elenbaas et al., 2013).

Pre-test: All variables except conflict avoidance were pre-tested on a sample of 200 respondents in October 2014. The variables were kept in their original form as good distributions were shown.

News Media Content Analysis

A news content analysis was conducted of the news media outlets on which the respondents reported their individual news consumption that made it possible to weight their news consumption by the percentage of conflict framing in the specific news media outlet (see also Schuck et al. 2016). This approach has generally been labelled state-of-the-art in observational media effects research (de Vreese et al., 2017; Schuck et al., 2016) despite a number of identified challenges (Fazekas and Larsen, 2016). The approach ensures that conflict framing is *present*, rather than assumed to be present, in the news media to obtain a more accurate and realistic understanding of our theoretical expectation of the media content effect (see also Graber, 2004: 516). Utilizing automated coding naturally limits the nuances possible to identify news media content (e.g. Conway, 2006), but as this article examines *general* political conflict, this approach is useful.

An automated content analysis was conducted based on keywords to allow for efficient collection of a large amount of data. A search string developed by Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2020: online appendix) to capture the presence of political conflicts in the Danish news media was applied. They identified news as conflict-framed in situations where 1) two or more conflicting viewpoints (sides, arguments, solutions) about a political matter are expressed, 2) explicit disagreement, conflict, or controversy over a political matter is expressed, or 3) an actor reproaches or blames another regarding a political matter (see also Schuck et al., 2016). Politics are here understood, in line with Easton's (1953) definition, as situations in which an actor (e.g., politician or interest organisation) tries to influence the allocation of scarce goods in society. Several random news articles were examined to identify words signalling conflicts (e.g. trouble and disagreement) and politics (e.g., party names and policy positions). Through series of iterations, they developed a search string to capture political conflict.[7,8] The news articles to be analysed were retrieved from the

Danish news archive *Infomedia*.

Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk (2020: online appendix) conducted an intercoder reliability test to examine the quality and the reproducibility of data provided by the search string. Two coders randomly coded 63 random news articles/newscasts from three random days between 23 November 2014 and 27 December 2015 for the presence and absence of a conflict frame. Three news articles/newscasts were randomly selected each day from three national broadsheet newspapers (*Politiken*, *Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*), two national tabloids (*Ekstra Bladet* and *B.T.*), and resumes from two national television newscasts (DR 6:30 pm, TV2 7:00 pm). The results between two human coders on the presence/absence of a conflict frame were highly satisfactory with a Krippendorff's alpha of .86 and acceptable though lower between one of the authors and the machine (/the search string) at .65 (Krippendorff, 2003). The search string was considered sufficiently reliable.

Next, a weight for conflict framing was computed based on an average of the daily amount of news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame with the total number of news articles/newscasts during a ten-day period.[9] Since the respondents reported their media usage during the past seven days, the weight was based on the seven days leading up to the first day the survey was running and the following three days (10 days in total), as most respondents reported their media use during those days. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of conflict frames in all news articles/newscast. Generally, the broadsheet newspapers had the largest percentage of conflict frames followed by television news and tabloid newspapers. Results thus suggest that it matters for our respondents' level of exposure to conflict framing which media outlets they use.

To calculate the weight, which was multiplied by respondents' reported media usage, the answers were combined into an index range from 0 to 100 across waves, where 100 indicates that a respondent was exposed to all news outlets during the last 7 days, and that they all included 100 percentage conflict coverage. The observed range is, obviously, lower in each wave.

*** Figure 2 about here ***

Results

To investigate whether knowledge gained following exposure to conflict news framing translates into increased discussion frequency moderated by conflict avoidance (H1), the article relies on a conditional process model to analyse the pathway (as suggested by Hayes (2013) and applied by Schuck and de Vreese (2012) and Bjarnøe et al. (2020)). A path analysis across waves was utilized using a structural equation (based on OLS-regressions) applying cluster robust standard errors to correct for heteroscedasticity and added bootstrapping with 5,000 replications.

Table 1 presents the results of the path analysis with cell entries containing OLS coefficients with cluster robust standard errors in parentheses in private (a), social media (b), and public settings

(c). The columns refer to the independent variable (conflict framing), the mediator (knowledge), and the dependent variable (discussion frequency in private (a), social media (b), and public settings (c)) with an inclusion of the moderator (conflict avoidance) as well as a lag on the dependent variable. In each step, female, age, education, and political interest are included as control variables. The pathway was also analysed by including political participation in the last step in each model. Results are substantially similar, suggesting that the pathway examined in this article is distinct from the one proposed by Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk (2020) (see further in Supplementary Information S2).

The results in Table 1 show that exposure to conflict news framing has a positive significant effect on knowledge (.076, p < .000). Whether the knowledge gained translates into an increase in citizens' discussion frequency is dependent on the interaction terms. The interaction between conflict avoidance and knowledge on political discussion is insignificant in *private* settings (-.156), significant in *social* media setting (-.992, p < .000), and insignificant in *public* settings (-.225). The different levels of significance suggest that the pathway is more pronounced in social media than in the other settings.

. *** Table 1 about here ***

Moving on to the conditional *indirect* effect of the moderated mediation process, Table 2 lists the marginal effect on changes in discussion frequency at a low, medium (average), and high level of conflict avoidance (+/- 1 SD from mean) in each setting. OLS coefficients with bootstrap cluster robust standard errors in parentheses are listed along with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. In *private settings*, conflict non-avoiders (low) have a significant positive effect of .045 [.005; .087] (p<.05), individuals with an average level of conflict avoidance (mean) have a significant and less positive effect of .036 [.008; .067] (p<.05), while conflict avoiders (high) have a significant and even less positive effect of .026 [-.013; .069]. The effect on discussion frequency through the expected pathway becomes more negative the more citizens tend to avoid conflict.

In *social media settings*, conflict non-avoiders (low) have a significant positive effect of .108 [.055; .175] (p<.000), individuals with an average level of conflict avoidance (mean) have a significant and less positive effect of .046 [.005; .091] (p<.01), while conflict avoiders (high) have an insignificant and slightly negative effect of -.015 [-.061; .034]. As above, moving from conflict non-avoiders to conflict avoiders has a negative effect on citizens' discussion frequency through the expected pathway. Finally, in *public settings*, conflict non-avoiders (low) have an insignificant and slightly negative effect of -.018 [-.060; .019], individuals with an average level of conflict avoidance (mean) have a significant and more negative effect of -.032 [-.063; -.005] (p<.05), while conflict avoiders (high) have a significant and even more negative effect of -.046 [-.081; -.015]

(p<.01). Again, the more conflict-avoidant citizens are, the greater the negative effect on their discussion frequency through the expected pathway.

Supporting the expectation in H1, the results show that knowledge gained from exposure to conflict news framing translates into less discussion frequency the more individuals tend to avoid conflict across social settings.

*** Table 2 about here ***

Next, it is examined whether the moderation effect is stronger in social media than in private and public settings (H2a, H2b). Returning to Table 2, results show that the indirect effects are larger in social media (.108, .046, -.015) than in private (.045, .036, .026) and especially public settings (-.018, -.032, -.046). Moreover, the path analysis (Table 1) only showed significant interactions between knowledge and conflict avoidance in social media settings (p < .000) and not in public or private settings, suggesting that the expected pathway is more pronounced on the online platform than in face-to-face interactions. All in all, the findings support the expectations that the indirect effects are larger in social media than in other settings (H2a, H2b).

Discussion

Considerable theoretical development and empirical testing have been devoted to the (positive) implications of citizens discussing politics (Eveland and Thomson, 2006; Kwak et al., 2005; McClurg, 2006a, 2006b; Wyatt et al., 2000), while little is known about what triggers discussion frequency and through which pathways (Eveland et al.,2011). This article builds upon Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk's (2020) moderated mediation model to explain how exposure to conflict news framing translates into political participation with knowledge as the mediator and conflict avoidance as the moderator. Following their model, it is argued, and empirically substantiated, that citizens who are exposed to political conflict news framing can gain knowledge about politics. This article further extents their model by arguing, and empirically substantiating, that the gained knowledge may translate into political discussion across social settings moderated by individuals' orientation toward conflict, and that conflict avoiders are more negatively influenced than non-conflict avoiders. The model is further extended by arguing, and empirically substantiating, that the indirect effects are larger in social media than in private and public settings. The empirical results are substantially similar when political participation is included as a control (Supplementary Information S2), indicating that the pathway examined in this article is distinct from the one proposed by Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2020).

At least three important lessons can be learned from this study: *First*, when journalists frame politics along conflict lines, it mobilizes citizens to both participate politically (Bjarnøe et al., 2020; de Vreese and Tobiasen, 2007; Schuck et al., 2016) and to discuss politics. However, the varying level of conflict framing across news outlets (Figure 2) may affect their potential to trigger

discussions. The less conflict-oriented news in tabloid compared to broadsheet newspapers (Table 2) could be explained by their higher focus on sensationalism (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000) and soft news (Reinemann et al. 2012). Thus, when tabloid newspapers portray politics as a conflict, it may boost citizens' willingness to discuss politics, as conflict-oriented news are more unusual in tabloid than in broadsheet newspapers. This seems like an obvious topic to investigate further.

Second, in line with previous research (Gerber et al., 2012; Hibbing et al., 2011), the study shows the importance of accounting for individual-level factors such as individuals' orientation toward conflict. Building on previous research, it is shown that individuals' orientation toward conflict matters not only for their participation in politics (Bjarnøe et al., 2020), but also their willingness to discuss politics. The positive story is that conflict non-avoiders are mobilized through the expected pathway in social media and private settings; the flip-side is that conflict avoiders are less mobilized and even demobilized in all three social settings. *Third*, it is argued, and empirically substantiated, that the social setting in which political discussions take place matters. The results show a larger indirect effect in social media than in public and private settings. The higher degree of incivility on social media was argued to increase the gap between conflict non-avoiders and conflict avoiders, who are, respectively, more attracted to and repulsed from engaging in discussions online.

The findings point to some interesting opportunities as well as challenges in the current high-choice media landscape (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2017). It is hardly controversial to argue that the news media may trigger political discussion. The question is by publishing which type of content (Lemert, 1979). The study shows that journalists putting emphasis on political conflict triggers especially conflict non-avoiders to discuss politics but not conflict avoiders. Conflict is at the heart of much politics (Schattschneider, 1960) and, hence, to some extent inevitable. The question is how journalists can trigger these individuals to engage in political discussions too by emphasising certain characteristics of a conflict. Bartholome, Lecheler and de Vreese (2017: 1692) distinguish between substantial conflict focusing mainly on "political ideas, policy issues, ideological issues and values" and unsubstantial conflict closely related to the process/strategic/game frame focusing on "the policy process, politics as a game or personal attacks" (see also Capella and Jamieson, 1997). It seems reasonable that conflicts involving more substantial elements trigger discussions easier than game-oriented conflicts that do not equip citizens with arguments they can use in political discussions.

The study has at least four limitations that need to be addressed. Most importantly, the operationalization of discussion frequency is comparable albeit not similar across settings. In private settings, the general convention is followed by asking about the level of discussion frequency with specific persons, while this article asks about specific actions for public (e.g.,

sending letters to the editors) and social media settings (e.g., liking or sharing an opinion). Though there is no reason to expect that the operationalisations are not valid measures, this article encourages future research to replicate this study to standardise the measures further to examine, for example, whether the size of the findings may vary.

Another point is the generalizability of the findings. The level of conflict news framing in Denmark is comparable to that of other Western democracies (Esser et al.,2017; de Vreese et al., 2001;Lengauer et al.,2012). With respect to discussion frequency (Nir, 2012) or engaging in activities emphasising persuasion attempts (Karp and Banducci, 2007), Denmark tends to score slightly above the mean across Western democracies. Overall, there are no reasons to expect that the conclusions are not generalizable to other Western democracies, but the size of the findings may vary. A third point is that the arguments are examined relying on panel data to identify the pathway from exposure to political conflict in the public debate to discussion frequency. Future research is encouraged to examine more rigorously the underlying causal mechanism by the use of an experimental design. Finally, the study examines the triggering potential of *general* conflict news framing independent of the issue at stake. Issues vary on a range of dimensions (Grossmann, 2013), and one of the relevant dimensions for at least policy making and public behaviour is issue salience (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones,1993). It would be interesting to examine whether issue salience in the news – and hence citizens' general familiarity with an issue – may affect the mobilizing effect of conflicts.

Summing up, this article shows how conflict news framing mobilizes citizens to discuss politics across social settings through a moderated mediation model with knowledge as the mediator and conflict avoidance as the moderator. The indirect effect was shown to be larger in social media than in private and public settings. Based on the findings, future research is encouraged to employ a more nuanced view on antecedents of and pathways leading to political discussions by accounting for media content, individual-level factors, and the social settings in which discussions take place.

Notes

[1] The author thanks the anonymous reviewers for the excellent suggestion to build the article upon Bjarnøe, de Vreese, and Albæk's (2020) moderated mediation model.

[2] Some scholars distinguish between conflict approach and conflict avoidance, i.e.. conflict-seeking or conflict-refuting citizens (Bresnahan et al., 2009; Elliot and Thrash, 2002). Conflict-seeking behaviour is often measured as closely linked to discussion frequency by questions like "I am sometimes reluctant to talk about politics" (Testa et al., 2014, 775) or desire to engage in

interpersonal conflict (Ulbig and Funk, 1999). To avoid theoretical and operational overlap, the article focuses on conflict avoidance.

[3] Between waves 3 and 2, two election campaign waves were fielded (27 May to 15 June 2015, 19-29 June 2015) in which respondents dropped to 2,940 and 2,680, respectively. These waves were excluded from our sample as relevant variables were missing.

[4] Substantively similar results were found if we coded 'not relevant' answers as 'never' answers. Respondents who answered 'not relevant' to all (groups of) interlocutors were excluded from the sample.

[5] If respondent answered 'none' to using any of the following social media platforms: Facebook, Google+, Pinterest, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, or Other, they only answered the *first* question. Answers to the subsequent questions were coded as 'not at all'.

[6] The questions were in wave 1: 1) Which position has Margrethe Vestager been appointed to in the European Commission? (Commissioner for Competition); 2) In what country is there currently war against IS (Islamic State)? (Iraq); 3) Who is the Conservative's political spokesperson? (Mai Mercado); 4) Who is Minister of Employment in Denmark? (Henrik Dam Kristensen). In wave 2: 1) Which party was Klaus Riskær Pedersen recently excluded from? (The Alternative); 2) Which country is currently experiencing fierce fighting after a rebel group overthrew the president? (Yemen); 3) What did a majority in Parliament recently decide to hold a referendum about? (Denmark's EU opt-out on Justice and Home Affairs); 4) Who is the Minister of the Environment in Denmark? (Kirsten Brosbøl). In wave 3: 1) Who is the chairman of the Danish Parliament? (Pia Kjærsgaard), 2) Which country recently started air-strikes in Syria? (Russia), 3) Which of the following parties recommend a 'no'-vote in the referendum on Denmark's EU opt-out on Justice and Home Affairs? (Danish People's Party [Dansk Folkeparti] and the Red-Green Alliance [Enhedslisten], four parties were listed and two of them had to be chosen for a correct answer), and 4) Who is the Danish Minister of Defence? (Carl Holst).

[7] An identified conflict frame during the inductive coding process was: "The Social Liberals are furious about CD's [The Center Democrats'] proposal. On collision course, The Social Liberals react angrily, as CD's [The Center Democrats] Mimi Jakobsen yesterday mentioned the opportunity to raise the age of early retirement. Mimi Jakobsen herself acknowledges that the relationship with the Social Liberals is strained" (Berlingske Tidende 1997) (Bjarnøe et al., 2020: online appendix).

[8] Bjarnøe et al. (2020, online appendix) explain "The words used to identify political content were: party names (and their abbreviations), general political words (e.g. politics, politicians, political), selected political institutions and positions (e.g. council, major, minister, left-wing, right-wing, red bloc, blue bloc, government, opposition, party leader), super national political bodies (EU, NATO, UN), elections (e.g. referendum, election campaign), and interest organisations. Besides using the

words interest organisations and trade unions, the names of the 15 most prominent interest organisations in the news media were included in the search string (identified using interarena.dk ('orglist'), see also Binderkrantz and Christiansen 2014). The words used to identify a conflict were: trouble / controversy, disagree, disagree, conflict, crisis, critical, criticize, criticism, clash / battle, split / divide, discord, accuse, row / quarrel, opposition / resistance, against, dissatisfied / disgruntled, not happy / not satisfied, discussion / argument / debate, discuss / argue / debate, deny / refuse, fear, threaten, not accept / reject, unacceptable, fight, crack / rift, rising / breaking up, dispute / conflict / battle, rage, reject, defy, and lashes out at.

[9] The following mathematical equation was used: The proportion of political conflict $= (\frac{x_1}{n_1} + \frac{x_2}{n_2} + \frac{x_3}{n_3} + \frac{x_4}{n_4} + \frac{x_5}{5} + \frac{x_6}{n_6} + \frac{x_7}{n_7} + \frac{x_8}{n_8} + \frac{x_9}{n_9} + \frac{x_{10}}{n_{10}}) / 10$. The numbers refer to day 1, day 2 and so on, n refers to total number of news items, and x refers to number of news items containing political conflict. Similar patterns were found if the weight was calculated by using the average of all news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame of the total number of news articles/newscasts about politics.

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Figure 1. The process from exposure to conflict framing to political discussion

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┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐
│  Exposure to │ ───▶ │  Knowledge   │ ──────▶  │ Political discussion │
│conflict framing│    └──────────────┘   ▲      └──────────────────┘
└──────────────┘                         │
                               ┌─────────────────┐
                               │ Conflict avoidance │
                               └─────────────────┘
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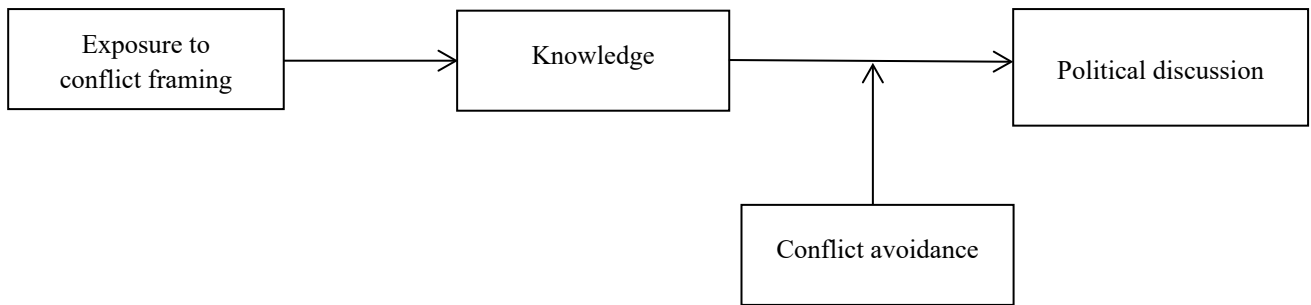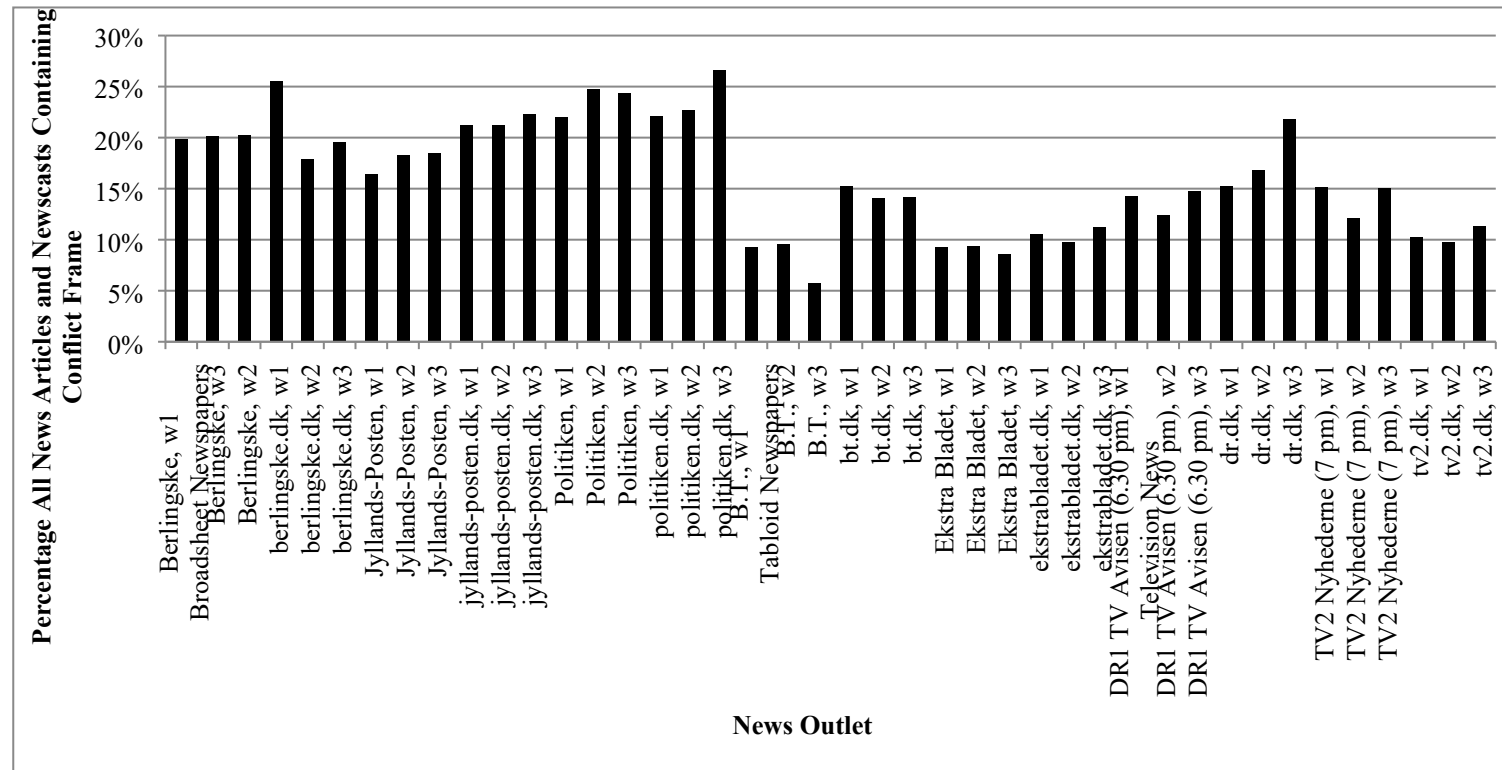
Figure 2. Prominence of conflict framing across news outlets

Note: An average for the prominence of conflict framing in each news outlet was calculated by an average of the daily amount of news articles/newscasts containing a conflict frame with the total number of news articles/ newscasts during a ten-day period (w1: November 14-23 2014, w2: April 3-12 2015, and w3: October 19-28 2015).

Table 1. Explaining changes in political discussion frequency across social settings

	Conflict framing	Knowledge	Changes in *private* discussions frequency	Changes in *social media* discussions frequency	Changes in *public* discussions frequency
Discussion frequency (1. lag)			.540*** (.019)	.743*** (.013)	.443*** (.033)
Conflict framing	.076*** (.007)		.242** (.081)	.344** (.116)	.342** (.108)
Knowledge			.844 (.583)	2.982*** (.693)	.121 (.502)
Conflict avoidance			-.485 (.696)	2.207** (.724)	.641 (.464)
Knowledge*Conflict avoidance			-.156 (.232)	-.992*** (.247)	-.225 (.179)
Female	-.409 *** (.096)	-.378*** (.035)	1.568*** (.357)	2.607*** (.509)	-.669* (.316)
Age	.013*** (.003)	.012*** (.001)	.010 (.012)	-.028 (.017)	.057*** (.011)
Education	.166*** (.025)	.053*** (.009)	-.014 (.096)	-.201 (.122)	.034 (.089)
Political Interest	.278*** (.019)	.141*** (.008)	1.431*** (.119)	.822*** (.123)	.398*** (.077)
(Constant)	-.083 (.219)	.972*** (.089)	10.516*** (2.037)	-8.279*** (2.286)	-5.422*** (.1.505)

Note: Structural equation modelling, OLS coefficients with cluster robust standard errors in parentheses

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, n=2,049 (4,098)

Table 2: Conditional indirect effect on changes in political discussion frequency across social settings

			95 % bias-corrected confidence interval	
Setting	Conflict avoidance	Conditional indirect effect	LL	UL
Private	Low	.045* (.021)	.005	.087
	Mean	.036* (.015)	.008	.067
	High	.026 (.021)	-.013	.069

Social Media	**Low**	.108*** (.031)	.055	.175
	Mean	.046* (.022)	.005	.091
	High	-.015 (.024)	-.061	.034
Public	**Low**	-.018 (.020)	-.060	.019
	Mean	-.032* (.014)	-.063	-.005
	High	-.046** (.017)	-.081	-.015

Note. Conditional moderated mediation test with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5.000 resamples).

OLS coefficients with bootstrap cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. Levels of moderator are +/- 1 SD from the mean.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, n=2,049 (4,098)