

Siles, I. & Tristán-Jiménez, L. (2020). Facebook as “Third Space”: Triggers of Political Talk in News About Non-Public Affairs. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. doi: 10.1080/19331681.2020.1835780

**Facebook as “Third Space”:  
Triggers of Political Talk in News About Non-Public Affairs**

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This work was supported by Espacio de Estudios Avanzados de la Universidad de Costa Rica (UCREA)

We thank Carolina Carazo and Baptiste Kotras for their most helpful suggestions about previous versions of this manuscript, as well as Mariana Álvarez, Pedro Campos, Daniel Ramírez, and Brayan Rodríguez for their assistance in collecting and analyzing the data. We also thank the journal’s editors and the anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments on earlier drafts of this article.

**Abstract**

This paper builds on recent work on “third spaces” to analyze political talk in comments on news about non-public affairs. It draws on content and discourse analyses of comments on news published by a leading Costa Rican media organization on Facebook. The article develops five categories of issues that triggered political talk (institutionality, identity, political inclinations, factual aspects, and criticism of the media) and examines the discursive strategies through which these comments became political. This allowed to broaden understanding of the political relevance of discussions about non-public affairs on social media.

**Keywords**

Facebook - Latin America - online deliberation - political talk - political discourse analysis - popular culture - social media

## **Facebook as “Third Space”:**

### **Triggers of Political Talk in News About Non-Public Affairs**

The distinction between public and non-public affairs has been key in understanding the role of the media and the historical construction of journalistic authority (Graber, 2012).

According to Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), this distinction emerged in the 1920s and became the key feature of the “age of broadcast,” the media regime that characterized the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new century.

Most research to date has privileged people’s discussion of public affairs, that is, “the activity of government, elected officials, and political candidates; the economy and business developments; and events, happening in other countries, about the state or international organizations” (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2010, p. 425). Researchers have often recognized the importance of conversations about these issues for the formation of public spheres. More recently, a growing number of studies have paid attention to the political significance of conversations about non-public affairs such as sports, crime, entertainment, culture, medicine, science, technology, and the weather (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2010). Wright (2012) defined “third spaces” as “discussion spaces with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations” (p. 8). In this context, “political talk” refers to the opportunities afforded by the news “for understanding, deliberating, and acting on (1) the condition of one’s everyday life, (2) the life of fellow community members, and (3) the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 122).

In this paper, we broaden understanding of third spaces by examining comments about non-public affairs news published by Costa Rican news organizations on Facebook that turned into political talk. We provide answers to the following research questions: how do conversations

about non-public affairs news on Facebook become political? What thematic issues about this type of news do people discuss about? What discursive strategies do people employ in order to convey a political point of view?

Our contribution to this body of work is threefold. First, we examine specific *triggers* of political talk in non-political spaces, an issue that has received comparatively less attention than its quality and consequences. Eliasoph (1998) notes that “any object is potentially political” (p. 14). A trigger thus actualizes this potentiality by revealing “how citizens come to define some issues, and some contexts, as ‘political’” (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 15). Graham and Hajru (2011) argued that triggers occur when: “(1) a participant [makes] a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulate[s] reflection and a response by at least one other participant” (p. 22). Although we considered comments that met both criteria, in this study we focus on how political conversations start (hence the word “trigger”) rather than on conversations themselves. We examine comments that established links between events in non-public affair news and general issues in their particular sociohistorical contexts. These comments trigger political talk by engaging in a “public-spirited” conversation (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 15) with others about issues that affect the lives of people in a community and the norms and structures underlying these issues.

Second, we identify the specific topics and the discursive strategies through which political talk starts. The analysis of discursive strategies has been rare in studies of third spaces, which has privileged methods such as content analysis. We argue that a consideration of *how* people discuss public affairs is as important as *what* they talk about. For this reason, we employed both quantitative and qualitative analyses of comments in our account of online political talk.

Finally, we focus on the case of Facebook. Most studies have drawn on analyses of online forums to define the nature and main traits of third spaces. Whether social media platforms count as third spaces has remained largely a theoretical debate. Yet, as Wright (2020) notes, by excluding social media platforms from the analysis, researchers run the risk of overlooking one of the places where most political talk occurs nowadays in various parts of the world. This article draws on empirical evidence to assess the extent to which Facebook can be labeled as a third space.

It could be argued that discussing public affairs based on *any* kind of news is expected, given the media's public service role. However, media outlets usually offer a differentiated coverage of public and non-public affairs to accomplish distinct editorial goals. Van Dijk (1997) aptly noted that "context [is] decisive for the categorization of discourse as 'political' or not" (p. 14). In Costa Rica, the case we examine here, there has been a stark contrast in how news organizations present public and non-public affairs. Historically, both kinds of news have been published in different sections and have been characterized by distinct sets of discourses, framings, and roles. As in other Latin American countries, news about crime and entertainment in Costa Rica are the iconic expression of "yellow journalism" and "sensationalism," often considered as the opposite of public affairs and quality journalism (Martínez Gallego et al., 2019). For these reasons, we argue that considering comments of news about non-public affairs on Facebook as third spaces is warranted. These comments are not unlike forums about television shows that have been typically studied as third spaces (Graham, 2012). Before delving deeper on the empirical results, we elaborate on the importance of studying political talk in spaces devoted to non-public affairs, the singularities of the Costa Rican case, and the methods we employed in our study.

### **The Relevance of Political Talk in “Non-Political” Spaces**

Recent studies have emphasized the political relevance of conversations about non-public affairs (Graber, 2012; Wright, 2012). Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) argued that these affairs matter because they express larger structural transformations in contemporary media regimes. Against this background, studies have arrived at three important conclusions regarding the political significance of discussions about non-public affairs: they can provide a valid source of knowledge; they are not unlike political talk about public matters; and they have important (but often unrecognized) consequences.

Scholars have noted that exposition to non-public affairs can be a valid way of understanding and discussing politics. Graber (2012) refuted the notion that the public is poorly informed about politics because it is interested in entertainment. She argued that individuals make sense of politics when they watch television dramas because they typically contextualize and obtain information, facts, and insights from these shows. She concluded: “citizens deserve to be called politically alert when they collectively, albeit necessarily individually, concern themselves with situations that are encompassed by [the] broad array of topics [shown on TV]” (Graber, 2012, p. 107). For Graber, television audiences establish parallels between the world of entertainment and their personal social and political conditions.

Work has also been devoted to understanding whether discussions about non-public issues meet the normative criteria of the public sphere (Graham, 2015). Graham (2012) examined conversations in a forum devoted to reality television. He concluded that “levels of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, the use of supporting evidence, and substantial equality were all moderately high to high, while levels of critical reflection, extended debate, reflexivity, and

communicative empathy were reasonable” (Graham, 2012, pp. 40–41). This body of work has consistently argued for broadening definitions of political talk by recognizing the centrality of emotion and expressiveness in how people talk about public affairs nowadays.

Finally, researchers have also paid attention to the political implications of conversations in non-political spaces. Wright, Graham & Jackson (2016) contended that “everyday political talk—particularly in third spaces—has the potential to overcome many of the identified issues with online deliberation” (p. 75). They argued that third spaces were characterized by cross-cutting political talk (thus overcoming polarization), reciprocated exchanges (thus suggesting democratic quality), and the discussion of sensitive issues (thus overcoming the avoidance of politics).

Discourse analysis has also proved useful in broadening understanding of political talk. Political discourse analysis has examined prevailing strategies in conversations about politics (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 1997). Most studies have focused on the persuasion and argumentation strategies that official political actors employ. Research shows that, when the media incorporate the voices of citizens into their discourse about political issues, they tend to portray them as disengaged from politics and to trivialize their opinions (Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). As Ekström and Tolson (2017) noted, “citizens tend to appear in the news without expertise and newsworthy knowledge” (p. 213). Through certain discursive strategies, the media thus control the “epistemic territories” about which citizens are “allowed” to talk (Heritage, 2012). The link between discursive strategies and epistemic issues is also key in our study, which we explain next.

### **Contextualizing the Study: The Case of Costa Rica**

Most research on the political relevance of discussions about non-public affairs has considered online forums in English-speaking contexts. As an alternative, this study focuses on the case of Costa Rica. The country is a liberal democracy with a stable political system and media regime, often considered the oldest democracy in Latin America. Sandoval-García (2008) aptly summarizes major social transformations in Costa Rica's recent history that explain some of the concerns expressed in the comments we analyzed:

The style of development in Costa Rica has experienced drastic changes: public investment has decreased and currently it has not recovered to the levels reported in 1980. An undermining of public services such as education and health has become an everyday experience for those citizens who do not have access to private facilities. (p. 103)

The media have played a crucial role in promoting some of these reforms in the country. The local media ecology has been traditionally dominated by few organizations. The newspaper of record, *La Nación*--which has typically supported conservative ideologies and neoliberal reforms--has faced important challenges in emerging news organizations. *CRHoy.com*, a so-called pure-player, has become the leading Costa Rican news outlet in the country on Facebook (in terms of the number of user reactions, comments, and shares it generates) (Siles, Campos & Segura, 2018; Tristán-Jiménez, Alvarez & Siles, 2020).

Costa Rica also stands out for having the highest rate of Facebook use in Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2018). By 2018, 70% of the country's population fully agreed with the statement: "Social networks allow me to know what is happening in the country" (CIEP, 2018, p. 22). Surveys thus reflect the centrality acquired by social media platforms in people's information diets in the country.



## **Research Design**

In this study, we specifically ask:

- How do conversations about non-public affairs news on Facebook become political?
- What thematic issues about this type of news do people discuss about?
- What discursive strategies do people employ in order to convey a political point of view?

### ***Sampling and Data Collection Strategies***

To answer these questions, we analyzed comments on twelve news articles published on Facebook by *CRHoy.com* in 2018 and 2019. These articles and comments were selected through an intentional sampling strategy that privileged three main criteria: user engagement, thematic diversity, and temporal context. We collected a sample of comments that was ideal for a mixed-method study: it was quantitatively comparable to previous studies on third spaces that have relied on content analysis to identify thematic issues, while still amenable to qualitative discourse analysis intended to assess the use of certain discursive strategies.

By engagement, we refer to the total number of shares, likes, and comments generated by a news story on Facebook. Siles and colleagues (2018, 2020a) showed the existence of a “power law” in how people consume news stories on Facebook in Costa Rica: whereas few news posts generate most of the media’s total engagement, they majority of stories published by media outlets produce relatively few interactions from users. The same situation occurs with comments: few of them typically generate most user engagement. For this reason, we selected news articles

with the highest level of engagement on Facebook published by the leading media organization in the country: *CRHoy.com*.

To obtain diversity in the content of the news, we also selected the four themes of non-public affairs that typically generate most user interactions on Facebook: *sucesos* (news mostly about crime), sports, entertainment, and curiosities (Siles, Campos & Segura, 2018). These articles were published in sections of *CRHoy.com* that signaled their condition as non-public affairs. As noted above, both crime and entertainment are considered among the most iconic expressions of sensationalism in the country. In a similar matter, sports and curiosities are a defining part of non-public affairs (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2010). The selected news stories gathered between 5,006 (no. 3) and 15,849 interactions (no. 7), with an average of 10,961 interactions. Together, these stories amounted to a total of 131,529 interactions from Facebook users. (See Table 1).

Regarding the temporal context of the news, we selected articles from three specific moments: the presidential election campaign (first semester of 2018), six months after that campaign (second semester of 2018), and one year after the electoral campaign (first semester of 2019). Most news articles about sports with the highest levels of user engagement on Facebook during the 2018 campaign were related to politics. (They included, for example, when and where professional Costa Rican soccer players voted around the world.) For that reason, no articles on this topic were included in the sample from this period. Instead, we included two articles about sports in the second period of analysis.

We used the Netvizz application to extract the data from Facebook. Comments were originally written in Spanish. (All translations are our own.) We cite anonymized and translated examples of these comments based on the premise that news profiles on Facebook constitute

sites for public discussion where individuals post with their own names. For this reason, it seems “reasonable to argue that there is likely no perception and/or expectation of privacy” (British Psychological Society, 2017, p. 8). Table 1 describes the characteristics of selected news articles.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

### *Content Analysis of News Comments*

Research on political talk in non-political spaces has been carried out mainly through studies of how comments comply (or not) with certain standards of deliberative theories of the public sphere (Graham, 2012). As an alternative, we conducted a content analysis of 3,507 news comments on Facebook. Given the existence of a “power law” in user engagement metrics, we focused on the 10% of the comments with the highest user participation. This allowed us to analyze the sample of comments that typically generates most user engagement in the profile of *CRHoy.com* on Facebook (Siles, Campos & Segura, 2018; Tristán-Jiménez, Alvarez & Siles, 2020).

We began by identifying comments that contained a political trigger, as defined by Graham and Hajru (2011). We then combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches to flesh out the types of triggers available in the data. Qualitatively, we followed the main tenets of grounded theory to build inductively larger categories of triggers. That is, once we had identified comments that met the criteria, we coded for the kinds of themes repeatedly discussed by commentators and the types of discursive strategies they used. We then grouped these themes into larger categories that shared common traits. In this way, we developed a five-category typology of triggers (explained in more detail in the next section).

We also followed a quantitative approach to further calculate the prevalence of each kind of trigger. To this end, two members of the research team independently carried out a content

analysis of comments. Intercoder reliability scores were calculated using Gwet's AC1 statistic. The mean value of intercoder reliability coefficient in coding comments based on the types of triggers was 0.95. We opted for Gwet's AC1 statistic to account for observer agreement paradoxes identified by Shankar and Bangdiwala (2014), who note that the AC1 statistic "provide[s] closer results [than alternatives] when the marginal distributions are symmetrically imbalanced and the observed agreement is greater than 50%" (p. 1). (Table 2 reports individual scores for each type of trigger).

[TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

### ***Discourse Analysis of Comments***

We employed discourse analysis to identify linguistic resources through which the content, apparently prosaic, became political. First, we identified the discursive strategies that readers used to generate a conversation with political nuances based on articles that were not devoted to that purpose. A discursive strategy is defined as a set of practices used to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). We found that commentators used four types of strategies: referential strategies, by which people and objects are represented in the news items; transitivity strategies, which states who performs and receives the actions in the news story; argumentative strategies, by which the readers establish their point of views; and semantic strategies that enable the readers to create meaning.

Second, we examined the discursive modalities employed in the comments. Commentators employed three main types of modalities: axiological (through which they expressed notions of goodness and badness), deontic (by which they asserted how things should be), and epistemic (used to represent concepts of knowledge and belief) (Dolezel, 1975). Third, discourse analysis also allowed us to identify *topos*. These can be defined as a "reservoir of

generalised key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be generated”

(Richardson, 2004, p. 230). In this way, we identified arguments that commentators tended to perceive as irrefutable truth.

### **Political Triggers in News About Non-Public Affairs**

A third of the comments analyzed (33.4%) contained both criteria that allowed to define them as triggers. This finding is remarkably similar to the results of previous studies in the case of online forums (Graham, 2012). Triggers focused on five specific issues: institutionality, identity, political inclinations, factual aspects, and criticism of the media. The first two types of triggers (institutional and identitarian) were the most frequent in the sample. Comments with political triggers were abundant in 10 of the 12 selected news articles. In news no. 2 and no. 11, about the concert of Puerto Rican singer Chayanne in Costa Rica and about a local soccer team, only one comment was identified as a trigger. (The number of comments with a political trigger rises to more than 42% if these two articles are left out of the sample.) Table 3 summarizes major tendencies in the types of triggers in the sample.

[TABLE 3 NEAR HERE]

In what follows, we discuss the typology of triggers that we identified through both content and discourse analyses. For each trigger, we discuss thematic issues and discursive strategies in turn.

#### ***Institutionality***

##### *Thematic Issues*

This trigger was oriented towards the discussion of the regulatory, normative, and cultural frameworks that serve as pillars of the country's institutions (Scott, 2014). Comments became political when users envisioned the news as an opportunity to start conversations about the country's laws, norms, traditions, organizations, forms of government, and rules of social living. We consider these comments as political in that they focused on the norms and structures of power that shape the relationships between individuals and institutions in a community. This was the most frequent kind of trigger in the sample of comments (59%). This is not entirely surprising given the centrality of certain institutions in shaping the country's identity as the oldest democracy in Latin America. It was constantly repeated in comments of all the news articles of the sample. This trigger appeared more frequently in comments about news no. 6 (about a rape in the country) (61%).

Conversations turned political when commentators saw developments in crime, sports, and entertainment as evidence of the deterioration of democratic institutions. Thus, triggers of this kind typically criticized the country's laws and governmental priorities (or lack thereof). They also discussed institutionalized social norms. For example, a commentary about news no. 2 criticized the culture of debt in Costa Rica to argue against the visit of a singer to the country.

Since they identified problems at an institutional level, commentators often turned news stories into demands for a structural transformation through citizen intervention and collective action. Some commentators thus motivated others to participate in a march in order to demand more stringent immigration laws: "TICOS [Costa Ricans], let's wake up, a [...] protest is coming to demand stronger migratory laws and fight the filthy corruption of this country. [W]e will recover COSTA RICA" (caps in original). The use of the phrase "we will recover Costa Rica" is reminiscent of political slogans used in the United States to try to implement immigration

reforms. This protest actually took place on said day with hundreds of participants. During the event, nationalist slogans were shouted against Nicaraguans. Moreover, participants demanded more jobs for Costa Ricans and protested against a fiscal reform (under discussion in the Legislative Assembly at the time and approved a few months later).

### *Discursive Strategies*

Comments with an institutional trigger were usually addressed to those in charge of democratic institutions. Accordingly, they sought to directly interpellate the President, the Government, or public institutions in charge of regulatory frameworks. Commentators employed a metonymy where the person stood for institutions (such as political parties). The tone of the comments was usually critical. In the case of news article no. 6, commentators were critical of the Government's agenda for the lack of immigration reform and citizen security issues as part of its priorities. (The news article asserted that the person who committed the rape was Nicaraguan.) This criticism was framed in opposition to other issues that were the subject of public attention during the 2018 electoral campaign (Siles, Carazo & Tristán-Jiménez, 2020). The following comment, addressed to the President of the country, reflects this pattern:

Carlos Alvarado Quesada[:] Don't you think it's been enough? Don't you think our security and that of tourists deserve being a priority[?] You keep promoting the adoption of gay marriage and keep ignoring all these crimes that are happening in [Costa Rica]. There is no control about the massive immigration of Nicaraguans and they continue to harm our country.

Discursively, this comment also showed the presence of a *topos* of threat in relation to Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. Comments employed a deontic modality regarding how the issue of security in the country should be dealt with. In a similar manner, comments argued for the need

to replace the Government with politicians who had a clearer position on the securitization of immigration. The following comment reflects this pattern: “No more Pac [Partido Acción Ciudadana, governing party]. NEVER AGAIN. We need people [...] who know[...] the problem very well and can act immediately. Costa Rica was totally neglected by this government and violence and femicides must be contained” (caps in original). Comments with an institutional trigger often assumed apologetic positions regarding the construction of a border wall that built again on comparisons with the United States.

## ***Identity***

### *Thematic Issues*

The second most frequent type of trigger in the sample focused on identity issues (58.3%). These comments triggered political talk when they made visible the underlying social relations that, according to commentators, explained news about non-public affairs. To make visible how social relations were at the heart of developments in the news, commentators emphasized the need to separate between “us” and “them.” The target of this separation varied. It included references to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer community (LGBTIQ), to specific notions of masculinity and femininity, to groups such as “older adults” or “young people,” to people’s occupation (“taxi drivers”), country of origin (“foreigners,” “Nicaraguans”), or socioeconomic status. As a political trigger, it emphasized the conditions of people’s everyday life and their relationship with other members of their communities.

Comments triggered political talk when they disparaged certain social groups. Most comments showed little respect towards groups based on their ethnic origin or class. This trigger was obvious in the news about a rape that occurred in the country (no. 6). 67.3% of comments in



this article centered on identity issues. Many comments contained xenophobic ideas against Nicaraguans. They tended to attribute negative essentialist traits to them, such as evil, crime, lies, and abuse of the Costa Rican social security system, among others. The following comment exemplifies this pattern:

Yet another *nica* [Nicaraguan]! These [insult] are doing this on purpose to destroy the image of our country, since theirs is already a sanitary landfill they want to do the same here ... [...] Juan Santamaría [considered to be a national hero who fought against a filibuster located in Nicaragua in 1856] must regret that he died for all the [insult] descendants who remained here.

This comment started political talk by invoking national heroes and historical events in the relationship between Costa Rica and Nicaragua to interpret the meaning of the news (a rape against a woman) and to provide “advice” to other citizens. The historical relationship between these two countries was positioned in the dichotomy between “us” (all Costa Ricans) and “them” (all Nicaraguans). Posts that expressed concern about the consequences of the actions of “foreigners” in Costa Rica were recurrent triggers in our sample of comments. Comments on identity turned the news into an instance of larger social and political issues in the country, such as the rise of social insecurity. They also worked as a vehicle to criticize the Government and show its alleged detrimental effects on the subjective, collective, and imagined identity of Costa Rica.

This logic also permeated the interpretation made of women and LGBTIQ groups in the news. Sexual diversity was thus framed as an offense to heteronormativity. On some occasions, commentators even argued that such diversity was only a product of how the ruling party was privileging the political desires of the LGBTIQ community. Identity thus functioned as a means

to denounce what commentators envisioned as a governmental incapacity to negotiate with various social movements. In the comments of news article no. 5, about a concert of a reggaeton singer in Costa Rica, men who plan to attend the concert were qualified as “*chatas*” (a term used to refer to low income individuals associated with the reggaeton and trap subculture and, more broadly, to criminal activities) and women as “*tierrosas*” (a derogatory term that includes the Spanish word *tierra* --“dirt”--to suggest that a woman is poor). For these commentators, markers of identity expressed larger social problems in the country, notably the rise of crime, poverty, and lack of education. They used the news as an opportunity to criticize this situation. Yet, these critiques were often targeted at specific individuals and social groups who, according to commentators, embodied these problems.

### *Discursive Strategies*

In triggers that focused on identity issues, commentators often used the *topos* of threat as an argumentative strategy that served to show the alleged danger that a given social group (“them”) posed to the security and stability of another group (“us”). In other words, showing a potential threat operated as a successful mechanism to ignite political talk.

A common discursive modality in this type of trigger was of implicature. A telling example was the use of feminist ideas to relate the subject matter of the news to everyday events experienced by women in Costa Rica (such as street harassment). This type of strategy characterized comments that triggered political talk about entertainment news such as concerts by singers whose lyrics are misogynistic. Commentators noted that, since harassment is an issue that affects all women in the country, determining whether a certain singer could perform should involve public institutions in charge of ensuring the protection of women.

In addition to implicature, this trigger typically employed a discursive modality of irony to denigrate and attack different social groups. Comments referred specifically to those individuals who stereotypically represented them. As with the institutional turn, commentators employed a deontic modality that dictated how intergroup dynamics should take place in the country. This discursive modality was prevalent in discussions about national identity. Comments focused on stereotypical assessments of Costa Rica: they exalted its supposed pacifism and sanctioned everything that denied or opposed it (for example, violence and irresponsibility). A comment of news article no. 3 (about a dispute between two men with machetes) is typical in that sense: “How terrible with my beloved country, people are getting worse every day. And stop blaming the governments. Everyone is responsible for their actions, they are grownups already to hold others responsible for their own decisions.” This comment triggered political talk by reinterpreting the events presented in the news as a direct attack on the country. Accordingly, it posited that all individuals should assume their share of responsibility in the political and social condition of Costa Rica.

### ***Political Inclination***

#### *Thematic Issues*

Conversations about non-public affairs also turned political when commentators argued for the need to uncover political positions that, in their opinion, explained assertions in the media or underlay ideas implied in the news. This operated as a trigger when comments invoked political positions, movements, or notions (such as capitalism, nationalism, conservatism, particular ideologies, or characters that served as icons of an ideology) that supported the facts presented in the news or in other comments. These comments did not question specific facts but

rather disputed the political framework used to interpret evidence or assertions. In this way, commentators sought to make visible the structures of power that give sense to people's thoughts and actions in a political community.

A discussion of political inclinations was present in 14.6% of the comments that contained a trigger. Some comments contained several triggers simultaneously. In the case of political inclination, they were usually accompanied by institutional and identity triggers. Regarding news no. 12, about a college student who scratched sculptures in the country's capital, a commentator stated:

Remember the *progres* [liberal/progressive] GLTBI [sic] daughters of former minister Obregón[?], they are possibly abroad with scholarships for such great feat of scratching walls and painting another sculpture of this Man. With the *progres* of the PAC [ruling party] there are no lawsuits.

This comment started political talk by suggesting that the event described in the news required a broader framework to understand its significance. It argued that the event reflected the problems brought by a liberal ideology in the country. Accordingly, it criticized the “progressive” character that defined the Government and the ruling party (PAC). The comment also linked this event to others that seemed to be symptoms of the same underlying political inclination. Being “*progre*” was made responsible for various “evils” described recently in the news: corruption (that is, an alleged preferential treatment received by the daughters of a Minister in a previous government) and the rise of the LGBTIQ movement in the country.

#### *Discursive Strategies*

Employing discursive strategies of intensification, which bordered on paroxysm, was common to ignite political talk. This was nowhere clearer in our data than in references to the

“progressive” positions of the governing party. Commentators argued that, in the current political context of the country, freedom of expression seemed valid only when it came to progressive positions, since the most conservatives were usually censored. A comment on the article about a fight with machetes stated: “How terrible it is for us. [With] PAC people are like crazy and desperate. This government is ending with [Costa Rica] how sad.” In a similar manner, commentators often used metaphors to disqualify the Government’s position about gay marriage. For example, they used phrases such as “regime of colors” to label the Alvarado-Quesada Administration by referring to the gay pride flag (Siles, Carazo & Tristán-Jiménez, 2020).

Commentators also used strategies of implicature to suggest that the main cause of national problems was the permissive ideology of the governing party. In article no. 4, about the remarks made by TV personalities regarding a trans woman who won a beauty pageant in Spain, one of the commentators noted: “Democracy is over, welcome to the dictatorship of sensitive minorities.” In this case, the causes defended by the LGBTIQ movement were interpreted as the end of democracy itself, both in Costa Rica and abroad.

Discursively, comments that contained this type of trigger usually expressed an axiological modality insofar as they alluded to the scale of values of the readers, as well as to their aesthetic and moral evaluation of the events outlined in the news. To this end, commentators used linguistic devices, such as adjectives like “violent,” “shameful,” and “sad,” among others of negative connotation, to describe the current state of Costa Rican society. They employed these devices to convey the notion that a more conservative government was necessary to restore the values that once characterized the country.

Likewise, commentators drew on discursive strategies of delegitimation of the presidency and its followers, with the purpose of holding their political ideology responsible for the

country's alleged violence spree (as evidenced by news about non-public affairs). A comment in news item no. 3 illustrated this trend: "this government established collective neurosis and confrontation as a way to 'solve' the problems ... [it's a] pity that all that violence is not directed [...] against those who have political power!" In this example, the actions attributed to the Government were perceived as antagonistic of the axiological standard held by most of the commentators and, therefore, against an inherently good Costa Rican "way of life."

### *Factual Aspects*

#### *Thematic Issues*

Another trigger of political talk was to mention aspects related to the evidence or the data that were presented to support claims in the news or in other comments. These comments became a trigger of political talk when commentators presented what they considered to be important facts that, in their view, explained or problematized the issues portrayed in non-public affair news. To this end, they often included statistics, data, or suggestions that expanded the knowledge basis on which the media or other people made claims. This trigger also took place when users raised a new framing, issue, or angle to resignify the subject matter of the news or other comments. This trigger is political in the sense that it presupposes compliance to a set of norms that underlie the operation of power structures in thought and action in daily life.

12.6% of the comments with triggers were of this kind. In article no. 7, about a dispute on WhatsApp between two former professional soccer players, one person commented: "THE [cost of the] MARKET BASKET INCREASES AND EVERYBODY IS HAPPY WATCHING THE SOAP OPERA OF THESE [insult]" (caps in original). This comment proposed an alternative theme about public affairs (such as the cost of the market basket) to downplay the growing

discussion about non-public affairs. In the news article no. 6, about a rape, another commentator asks: “Isn’t this a strategy of Nicaragua to affect [Costa Rican] tourism[?]” Thus, a conspiracy theory was presented to situate the news within the realm of international relations.

Commentators often focused on the data provided by other commentators and not on the news itself. This practice is important in that it broadened the sources from which political talk emerged: for many commentators, the news included not only what was published by media outlets but also everything that other readers had written. Put differently, commentators attributed the same symbolic weight (or more) to other people’s statements in the comments than the one assigned to the news.

A typical expression of how factual aspects triggered political talk was to provide a new frame or agenda to interpret a news article. For example, in news no. 1, a person maintained: “Send this to the IACHR [Inter-American Court of Human Rights.] They say yes to everything!” This comment was referring to the advisory opinion of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights regarding a consultation made in 2016 by the Costa Rican government on the rights of LGBTIQ people in the country. The commentator thus used the opportunity provided by the case of a woman who filed a lawsuit against a local television network to criticize IACHR’s opinion, which played an important role in the Costa Rican presidential election of 2018 (Siles, Carazo & Tristán-Jiménez, 2020). In a similar manner, in article no. 12, about the student who scratched various sculptures, a commentator invoked another event to situate the news within a wider perspective: “This news is reminiscent of the case of other *chancletudas* [a person who uses flip-flops, an item stereotypically associated with left-wing politics] who made a graffiti on a church, if I am not mistaken; they were also daughters of a recognized person in the country.”

*Discursive Strategies*

Given that comments containing this type of trigger focused on data, information, or evidence to explain, contradict, or refute claims, the discursive modality that prevailed was epistemic. Comments became triggers of political talk when they offered “new” knowledge about the actions of certain political actors. Commentators used referential strategies in order to support their knowledge of the phenomena described in the news. For instance, in item no. 6, commentators used the referential strategy “Nicaraguan ” to attribute, without any doubt, the responsibility of the crime to a person of that nationality: “The headline should say ‘NICARAGUAN PERSON’ Meanwhile, the government [is] thinking about how to help them” (caps in original).

Likewise, commentators used attribution strategies to display their knowledge of a given situation and to explain, to their imagined audience, how the events described in the news should be interpreted. A comment on news article no. 9 illustrates this:

Those of us who have received the basic police training know that a legitimate defense is when my life or that of the people around me are in serious danger, what this security officer did is, before the law, a defensible fact, the store, the staff, the clients and his own life were in serious danger, well done, he acted under the instinct of survival. A hero who deserves to live.

Here, the commentator used his/her personal experience to assess the conditions that should regulate the interpretation of laws in the country.

### ***Criticism of the Media***

#### *Thematic Issues*



Finally, other comments triggered political talk when they focused on the role of the media as creators of public opinion and on their public service mission. Commentators turned non-public affairs into opportunities to reflect about what they felt was unsaid by the media either by omission or negligence. This trigger inverted the tendency identified by political discourse analysts (reviewed above): commentators suggested that, when citizens took over political conversations, it was the media that were found both wanting and ignorant. Comments criticized the media for their lack of compliance with the rules of the democratic systems in which the media and citizens participate. This trigger is political in that comments sought to demonstrate the shortcomings of the media in fulfilling their role in the formation of public spheres. This reveals an underlying belief in the media as a fundamental part of power structures through which democracies are sustained. It was the least frequent trigger in our sample of comments (2.5%) and was usually accompanied by comments on factual aspects.

In most cases, political talk emerged when commentators openly disputed the agenda of media organizations, that is, the issues that received attention and those that were ignored. Regarding article no. 7, about a WhatsApp confrontation between two professional soccer players that became public, a commentator wrote: “How is it possible that The Press emphasizes such irrelevant things?” The premise behind this comment is a recognition of the importance of the media in the establishment of public discussion agendas. Commentators criticized the inclusion of certain issues over others in the media’s agenda. Users also suggested that the media’s decision to write about certain issues masked political or economic interests. For example, it was relatively common to find comments that expressed the belief that *CRHoy.com* was behind the approval of gay marriage in the country.

Conversations also turned political when commentators criticized the media for not complying with certain ethical standards. These comments appeared most noticeably in news no. 4 and no. 7, which mentioned media organizations. For example, a person wrote: “Personal things should not be news, that’s simple.” This comment sought to remind others of how the distinction between public and private should be interpreted in the country.

Commentators also made more direct accusations against the media. In the case of news no. 10, about the concert of a Mexican singer in the country, a person condemned the media’s “double standard.” In this person’s words:

And what about all the things that are said and done on national television?? And what about the things you hear on the radio ... the office of censorship is invisible... a [TV] channel like [T]eletica is garbage[,] they campaign against harassment but then have a joke of a character that keeps saying... [“]TELL ME ALL THE NAUGHTY THINGS YOU WANT[”]... I mean... DOUBLE STANDARD... convenience. (Caps in original)

By mentioning the word “convenience,” the person suggested that the media were willing to break basic rules of their public service mission to improve their income.

### *Discursive Strategies*

Comments against the media usually employed a deontic modality to reflect on how the media should ethically proceed in ways that were consistent with their social function. This was achieved through the recurrent use of implication strategies aimed at revealing the standards of news organizations. This was the case of a comment on news article n. 10: “You can read this type of news only in Costa Rica.” It was thus implied that low informative standards were the trademark of the Costa Rican news ecosystem. This triggered political talk when others discussed the consequences of such state of affairs. Comments also used argumentative strategies

to reinforce the deontic point of view of the commentators, specifically, their views on the lack of ethics that characterizes Costa Rican media.

### **Facebook as “Third Space”?**

This study analyzed comments of twelve articles about non-public affairs published by Costa Rica’s leading news organization on Facebook. Although these articles did not center explicitly on public affairs, one third of these comments turned political. We used this analysis to begin answering three specific questions.

*How do conversations about non-public affairs news become political?*

To respond to this question, we turned to the notion of “triggers” of political talk. Building on Graham and Hajru (2011)’s criteria, we defined triggers as the starting point of political talk that centers on specific thematic issues and is discursively enacted in certain ways.

Our analysis revealed that a number of comments turned political when Facebook users provided an alternative framework or starting point from which to discuss and (re)interpret non-public affair news. These comments sought to uncover different kinds of latent aspects in the news (such as power and institutional structures, identity dynamics, political underpinnings, factual components, and the role of the media in the polity). Political triggers thus worked as a mechanism for commentators to actually express what they thought the media were not really saying. Triggers operated at a “meta” level that allowed commentators to reveal what they thought was left unsaid by the media (or to take over a conversation that has historically remained elusive for them). Considered in this way, non-public affair news stories were opportunities for others to join a political conversation that went beyond what was explicitly given to readers in the news.

These triggers were situated in specific historical and contextual conditions. That is, comments triggered political talk in certain circumstances. The non-public affairs news that we studied were published in sections about *sucesos*, sports, entertainment, and curiosities. This suggests that commentators in Costa Rica perceived that even the most mundane spaces of the country's life were being affected in ways that demanded commentary about the *real* significance of the news. Moreover, some of the concerns expressed in these comments were at the core of the disputes that defined the Costa Rican presidential election in 2018 (Pignataro & Treminio, 2019; Siles, Carazo & Tristán-Jiménez, 2020). For example, a survey conducted during the election revealed “a conservative reaction in people of different social groups who express their opposition to [political positions that] contradict[...] traditional Costa Rican values linked to the Catholic religion” (CIEP, 2018, p. 8). In this sense, the 2018 presidential election and the implementation of neoliberal reforms in the country over the past decades provided an important context for turning comments about non-public affairs news into political talk.

*What thematic issues do people discuss about non-public affairs?*

A key part of transforming comments on Facebook into a political issue was talking about specific themes. We developed five categories of comments that characterized political conversations about non-public affairs. The two most prevalent were discussions of institutionality and identity. Less frequent were comments about the political inclination expressed in news articles or in other people's comments, factual aspects from which political talk emerges, and comments on the political role of media organizations.

Why these particular issues became fertile ground for political talk in Costa Rica is also a contextual matter. It could be argued that these triggers reveal the concerns of a specific sector of Costa Rican society at the turn of the decade. Commentators seemed concerned about

transformations experienced by central institutions in the social life of the country (family, marriage, laws, public policies) and changes in the roles traditionally assigned to certain actors to safeguard the order of things (the state, the media). Given that many of these transformations were perceived as threats that came from “outside,” concerns about identity issues (“others,” “foreigner,” “national,” “progressive,” “gender ideology”) became crucial.

*What discursive strategies do people employ in order to convey a political point of view?*

How people talk about these specific issues is as important as *what* they talk about. We argued that triggers of political talk on Facebook were also characterized by certain discursive strategies. These strategies are crucial components of triggers because they enact specific kinds of invitations for others to participate in political talk. In other words, through discursive strategies commentators interpellated others by showing how the news should be interpreted, under what grounds, and for what purposes.

Discursive strategies also revealed how commentators expected conversations about non-public affairs to take place. Thus, one of the most common discursive modalities in the sample of articles was deontic. When people turned non-public affairs into political issues, they proposed norms and standards to do it. This modality was applied to issues such as the institutionality of the country (what its immigration policy should look like), identity issues (how diplomatic and social relations with “foreigners” should be conducted), and media organizations (what journalistic standards should be met). In a similar manner, commentators invoked an axiological discursive mode to ask for more transparency about the scale of values from which “meta” political conversations could emerge.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Comments about non-public affairs news on Facebook may be understood as third spaces in several ways. First, conversations were constant. Second, they were connected to the most mundane aspects of daily life, considered the conditions and ramifications of power in it, and were largely oriented to public and collective action (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). This might have helped commentators to perceive comment sections as relatively accessible spaces that are also endowed with a certain sense of neutrality. (We also discuss below some limitations of the notion of third spaces in the case of Facebook).

The exploratory nature of this research is useful to begin articulating possible explanations about the political significance of third spaces on platforms such as Facebook, but it also makes it necessary to clarify some limitations. Because of our criterion sampling, it was not possible to make inferences that apply to the rest of the comments in news about non-public matters. For that reason, it was also impossible to establish a statistically significant relationship between the thematic issues of news and the presence of specific triggers, or to specify the difference in the behavior of commentators between electoral and non-electoral periods.

Our sample also privileged comments with high levels of user engagement on Facebook. It is possible that political triggers were concentrated precisely on this type of comments. Moreover, some technological peculiarities of Facebook might limit the possibilities for deliberation and the formation of communities and relationships between those who participate, which are fundamental criteria in the constitution of third spaces. Facebook might be shaping political talk about non-public affair news in various ways. First, although in other settings people choose which spaces they are a part of, algorithms make it impossible for people to know what stories they will get on their newsfeeds (Vergara, Siles, Castro & Chaves, forthcoming). Although they can decide whether they participate or not in certain conversations, algorithmic

filters partially decide how many and what news users will receive in the first place. Second, the platform is heavily oriented toward certain engagement metrics. Users typically tend to see the comments that have received more engagement from others, thus reinforcing power law dynamics. This is important because, just like with news stories, users do not get to decide what comments will appear first on their feeds or what these comments are about.

Despite the precautions, we argue that the results of this study offer valuable contributions to better understand the political importance of comments on news about non-public affairs on Facebook. For example, our findings point to the significance of toxic forms of conversation in online spaces that have grown parallel to the rise of populist rhetoric in different parts of the world (Waisbord, forthcoming). Our study pointed to specific issues and strategies that ignite conversations that, “instead of [being] positive, or at least neutral, contributions to the news-making processes, [were] characterized by negative, selfish or even deeply sinister contributions” (Quandt, 2018, p. 40). In this way, we contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and consequences of third spaces.

Some future research could help expand this knowledge. Studies could further clarify *why* certain thematic issues tend to work better than others. We argued that responding to this question is a historical and contextual matter. New empirical research could shed light on why specific issues become successful triggers of political talk. Do Facebook users in other parts of the world turn non-public affair news into “meta” conversations about national political issues? Does this occur in places with different media regimes? Considering third spaces as a temporal and cultural construct makes it necessary to carry out comparative research to determine how and why triggers vary (or not) in certain times and places.

Studies could also help to better understand why specific discursive strategies tend to ignite political talk on Facebook (and other platforms). In what contexts do certain discursive strategies trigger political talk? Additional mixed-method studies as well as other theoretical models, such as the appraisal framework (White, 2002), could help account for sociodemographic variables in patterns identified in this article. By studying the case of Costa Rica, we hope to have helped initiate this research process.



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