1-1-2013

What Can Reader Comments to News Online Contribute to Engagement and Interactivity? A Quantitative Approach

Brett A. Borton
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

What Can Reader Comments to News Online
Contribute to Engagement and Interactivity?
A Quantitative Approach.

by

Brett A. Borton

Bachelor of Arts
Ohio University, 1981

Master of Mass Communication
University of South Carolina, 2009

_____

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Mass Communications

College of Mass Communications and Information Studies

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

Carol J. Pardun, Major Professor

Ran Wei, Committee Member

Jay Bender, Committee Member

John Besley, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

DEDICATION

To Sara, Jarrett, Ian, Evan and Haley (my laughing moonbeam). There are no words to express how you have blessed my life. I love you.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the relationship between journalism and computer-mediated communication by exploring the degree to which newly empowered audience members are using the reader comment forum on newspaper websites to participate in democratic discourse – a key component of civic engagement. Twenty-first century journalism has evolved from the traditional top-down, "one-to-many" model into a process involving producers, content and audiences. The interactive capabilities of Internet-based news products have enabled legacy media to connect with audiences in unprecedented fashion. Perhaps more than any other interactive platform, the reader comment forum on online news sites reflects the ideal of the "public sphere," defined by Jurgen Habermas as a democratic utopia in which all citizens have an opportunity to participate in discussing social and political matters important toward making decisions for the common good. Under a framework of deliberative democratic theory, this dissertation employs a quantitative content analysis of reader comments posted to the websites of six South Carolina daily newspapers to detect themes of democratic engagement. Additionally, the analysis adds to a growing body of research on the motivations behind online content production by examining reader comments for themes drawn from literature on the uses and gratifications of media use. To bring analytical depth to the research, interviews with journalists from each of the sampled newspapers were conducted to assess the effectiveness of reader comment forums as a new public sphere for democratic discourse and the role of journalists in facilitating public discourse. The findings from this

dissertation contribute to the literature on online journalism and interactivity by offering new insight into how and why users engage in online news forums, the role of anonymity in public deliberation, and the traditionally detached, and at times contentious, relationship between journalists and audience members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps in the end journalism simply means
carrying and amplifying the conversation of people themselves.
James Carey (1997)

An enduring professional value in journalism is the belief in the need for news.

Another is that good journalism, delivered across the globe or across town, makes a

difference somewhere every day. News is "a singularly important form of social glue"

(Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 3) that shapes the way in which individuals view

the world around them. At its best, journalism enriches the lives of citizens by providing

useful information for their daily lives and a sense of participation in the wider world.

Perhaps more than any other medium, newspapers have consistently delivered quality

journalism by serving as a watchdog over government and preserving a culture of

accountability that has become one of America's greatest assets (Downie & Kaiser,

2002). But the importance of newspapers extends well beyond the reporting of the day's

major events. For more than two hundred years, newspapers have served democratic

societies by providing a forum for constructive dialogue and spirited debate on topical

issues, a public service perhaps best reflected in communities where outlets for public

discourse may be limited (Tichenor, et al. 1980). Community newspapers help connect

people with those around them by providing a forum for ordinary citizens to make their

voices heard and contribute to a deliberate discourse on the future of their community (Rogers, 2009).

The emergence of digital communication technologies has altered the media landscape, significantly affecting the role of traditional media in serving the needs of the public. Twenty-first century journalism has evolved as a process involving producers, content and audiences. Newspapers have created online platforms to engage with the public, and audience members are turning to a popular form of user-generated content, reader comments on newspaper websites, to participate in democratic discourse.

The interactive nature of the reader comment forum presents opportunities to more effectively explore new dimensions of civic journalism. The concept of civic journalism is based on the ideals of philosopher John Dewey, who believed that the public, given the proper communication channels, has the capability to become civically engaged by deliberating and rendering sensible judgments about public policy. "The ground of democratic ideas and practices is faith in the potentialities of individuals, faith in the capacity for positive developments if proper conditions are provided, " wrote Dewey in 1938 (taken from Boydston & Sharpe, 2008, p. 113).

Such conditions are ideally provided by the news media as a fulfillment of its journalistic obligation to society, by which citizens are addressed as potential participants, rather than spectators, in public affairs (Glasser, 1999). Dewey believed that newspapers should help communities shape their shared ideals through debate, forming a "meaningful horizon in which civic actors can make decisions" (Friedland, 2000, p. 123).

Traditionally, newspapers have facilitated public commentary on civic affairs through the letters to the editor feature. This long-standing mechanism for audience feedback has been revolutionized by digital technology; today's newspapers have the capability to engage audience members through interactive forums of discourse between journalists and readers and among readers themselves. This cyclical connection between a newspaper and its readers (Stamm, 1985) can perpetuate a "community connectedness" that enhances civic engagement, improves public debate, and enhances public life (Rosen, 1993, p. 3).

Newspapers have experimented with a variety of online features designed to facilitate reader participation, including blogs, message boards, chat rooms and interactive polls. One of the newer interactive features, reader comments to news stories, has rapidly gained popularity on online news sites (Loke, 2011) as a space where citizens can freely engage in deliberation and debate on issues of importance to a community. Perhaps more than any other interactive platform, the reader comment forum offers the potential for a range of opinions that more closely match the ideals of a "public sphere," defined by Habermas (1989[1962]) as a democratic utopia in which all citizens have an opportunity to participate in discussing social and political matters important toward making decisions for the common good. The participatory nature of the platform acknowledges citizens as stakeholders in the democratic process, a key component of civic journalism (Merritt & Dvorkin, 2001).

There are few barriers for entry into reader comment forums; an individual needs only to register with a valid email address on the newspaper's website and agree to adhere to the established guidelines for commenting. Most newspapers allow users to

create a screen name or avatar to serve as their online identity when posting comments, and there are few, if any, restrictions on the types of articles on which users can comment or the number of comments that a user can post at any given time. The instant, inclusive nature of the platform has eliminated some obstacles to robust public discourse inherent to the letters to the editor section (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001).

While online discussions can provide a robust platform for readers to engage in relevant and constructive dialogue, they can also lead to uncivil discourse that widens the gaps between those on opposite sides of public issues (Price, 2006). Often posted under the veil of anonymity, reader comments can spiral into a "smorgasbord of audacious input" (Loke, 2011, p. 6) characterized by racist, sexist, profane and generally vitriolic exchanges between and among participants. As a result, reader comment forums can become "free for alls" that encourage uncivil discourse, facilitate diffusion of unverified information, and ultimately serve to polarize opinions rather than support finding common ground (Price, 2006).

News executives are faced with a unique and formidable challenge: Upholding the newspaper's traditional responsibility for fostering public participation against the threat of losing journalistic credibility and driving away readers. It is a delicate balance for an industry still struggling to adapt to the realities of convergence. Reader comment forums are equally capable of promoting "civil, thoughtful discussion of community issues" (Santana, 2011, p. 75) or driving online discourse to its lowest common denominator through the publication of insensitive, offensive, or obscene commentary (Gsell, 2009; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Nip, 2006; Reader, 2012; Rosenberry, 2011; Santana, 2010).

4

This dissertation addresses the relationship between journalism and computer-mediated communication by exploring the degree to which newly empowered audience members are using the reader comment forum on newspaper websites to participate in democratic discourse -- a key component of civic engagement.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The newspaper industry finds itself at a challenging crossroad with regard to reader engagement and interactive online platforms such as reader comments. Newspapers are commercial enterprises that survive by attracting an audience. In the wake of steadily declining circulation and advertising revenue from the print product, there is a strong economic motivation for newspapers to grow online communities. The continued threat of additional losses in readers and revenue compels newspapers to be more engaged with their readers and journalists to be more receptive to the type of content that the audience desires (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). Online news stories that allow for reader comments attract more readers (Goldberg, 2010); increased online traffic is a strong selling point for newspapers attempting to grow digital advertising revenue.

Digital technology has given newspapers an opportunity to re-connect with audiences in unprecedented fashion. As more consumers turn to the Internet for news and information, news organizations have slowly, but steadily adopted digital strategies for newsgathering and delivery in an attempt to grow online readership. Many of these strategies are built around interactive features that promote the active participation of readers as consumers and contributors in the news process. The reader comment

platform brings a deeper level of engagement to the news-consumption process by allowing readers to submit their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs in response to the top news stories of the day. As a shared space with content produced by professional journalists, the forum seems ideally suited as an instrument for practicing civic journalism (Perry, 2003). A newspaper can enhance its social capital by providing a forum for discussion of community issues, events and problems important to ordinary citizens (Price, 2006). Acknowledging the value of public opinion through the facilitation of community discourse would seem to make good business sense as well. There is a distinct commercial interest among news organizations in providing platforms for reader comments, based on the premise that news sites that don't offer the feature will lose readers to sites that do provide the forum (Nagar, 2009).

As online news has become a regular part of the daily routines of Americans, traditional newsrooms were initially reluctant to incorporate interactive features into its online news products. A 2006 report published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that the number of Americans getting news from the Internet on a daily basis had grown 61 percent over a four-year period (Horrigan, 2006). Also in 2006, the Bivings Group released a study of the top 100 U.S. daily newspapers and found that only 19 newspaper websites allowed readers to post comments to news articles and just 13 offered live online chats or chat rooms (p. 17). Researchers found myriad reasons as to why newsrooms were hesitant to employ multimedia or interactive technology including organizational structure (Boczkowski, 2004), technological limitations (Dibean & Garrison; 2001), a lack of qualified or trained reporters (Russial, 2009), asymmetrical relationships between print and online newsrooms (Boczkowski, 2004; Brannon, 2008),

and perceived lack of technical prowess among audience members (Boczkowski, 2004). The Bivings Group (2006) concluded that most daily newspapers shied away from full interactivity for fear of "losing control" of the material appearing on its website (p. 18).

Within the past five years, the barriers to adoption of more advanced digital features have largely dissipated. American newspapers have incorporated reader comments into their online news products more than any other multimedia or interactive feature (Bergland et al. 2012; Santana, 2010). By 2012, 96 percent of the newspapers sampled in the Bivings Group study offered reader comments on most or all online articles (Bergland et al., 2012). Consumers of online news have responded in equally dramatic fashion. A 2012 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicated that, of the 80 percent of Americans who actively use the Internet, 32 percent have posted a comment to an online news group or website (Edmonds et al., 2012). These figures represent a significant increase from 2008, when just seven percent of news consumers said that they regularly or sometimes posted comments on news stories (Pew Research Center, 2009).

Journalists have been less enthusiastic about sharing professional space with audience members, especially those cloaked in anonymity (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Research indicates that while most journalists read comments to news stories on a regular basis (Nielsen, 2010; Santana, 2010), some found reader posts to be of little value to the news gathering process (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Nielsen, 2010) while others cite reader comments as a source for new story ideas (Robinson, 2010; Santana, 2010; Wardle et al., 2009), bringing additional information or context to existing stories

(Robinson, 2010; Santana, 2010) or correcting inaccuracies (Robinson, 2010) in online reports.

As newspaper companies embrace digital business models in an effort to salvage some semblance of the industry's proud journalistic tradition, many questions remain unanswered on the effectiveness of online news comments as a forum for democratic engagement. Allowing easy access to public participation and require minimal technological expertise, the reader comment platform can serve as a digital marketplace of ideas, enabling spontaneous dialogue among readers on critical contemporary issues (Hecht, 2003). But the impersonal, "drive-by" nature of relationships on computer-mediated networks may hinder the development of social capital through meaningful discourse (Price, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Research is needed to determine if the open debate and deliberation on news websites reflects the collective democratic will that promotes civic engagement (Charney, 1998; McCluskey & Hmielokski, 2011) or fosters negative, inflammatory discourse that can further erode the credibility of newspapers. Questions remain as to whether news executives, by increasingly accepting online reader posts, are using the platform as an instrument for constructive community discourse or simply as a vehicle for driving traffic to their digital products. Inquiry is also needed to determine if journalists have accepted user-generated content as a valuable contribution to the news process or an inevitable consequence of the digital revolution.

Studies of online reader comments have been narrowly focused on content framed as sexist or racist "hate speech" or promoting negative ethnic stereotypes (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nagar, 2009; Nielsen, 2010; Santana, 2010; Wardle et al., 2009). What remains largely unexplored is the effectiveness of the reader comment platform as a

public sphere, facilitating the engagement of community members through their collective concerns for the whole. This dissertation will offer new insight into the discourse currently taking place in online reader comment forums, its potential impact on civic engagement, and how news organizations are managing this emerging and at times controversial public space.

1.2 Research Objectives

The transition of news production and delivery from traditional to multi-platform, digital models has provided journalism scholars with fertile ground for examining the evolving roles of the media and the public. Certain normative presumptions in journalism – the press' "fourth estate" role of government watchdog, defender of free speech and independent arbiter of common good (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009) – are ripe for both theoretical and empirical scrutiny as traditional media channels continue to adapt to the realities of digital delivery. The interactivity of online news products has created new dimensions for interpersonal interaction between and among journalists and audiences, a phenomenon to which researchers have only begun to explore. In an effort to develop a "nuanced understanding" of news consumers (Atton, 2009), scholarship is needed to explore the evolving relationship between news organizations and audiences, and the opportunities and challenges created by interactive media forums such as reader comments to news stories.

For hundreds of years, newspaper editors have felt obliged to not only provide a "public forum" but also to grant citizens access to the discussion through letters to the editor (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). Media scholars have generally embraced the democratic potential of the letters section while pointing out its limitations as a true public sphere;

most notably, the role of newsroom gatekeepers in vetting letters prior to publication. Of particular note is Wahl-Jorgensen's 2001 analysis of the letters to the editor section as a platform for open discussion and debate. Specifically, she cites the "peculiarities" of a forum for deliberative democracy that privileges certain forms of expression, including the kind that "is considered 'good' for the community and, hence, for increasing circulation and advertising revenue" (p. 309). Editors may characterize the section as a "wide open" forum for members of the community, but they share "preferences for particular kinds of public discourse" that are reflected not only in their choice of letters but in the placement of letters on the page and the timing of when certain letters will run (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 310). Thus, while the letters to the editor section has been one of the longest-lasting standard features in the history of American mass media, it is at best a "hazy reflection of public opinion" (Grey & Brown, 1970).

As newspaper executives shift their focus to online news presentation, the Web 2.0 environment presents intriguing opportunities for the dissemination of reader views (Rosenberry, 2011). With an emphasis on user control and participation, interactive news platforms present opportunities for individuals to express views, elevate awareness and engage in debate on important social issues (Leung, 2009) in a manner that is potentially more open and less restrictive than letters to the editor. As an environment more conducive to the ideals of the public sphere, mediated interactive forums like reader comments can be effectively used to promote civic engagement.

User-generated content has also been considered in the context of citizen journalism and the role played by audience members in the news gathering process. Research suggests that journalists have grown somewhat more accepting of information

provided by readers that contributes to or enhances a news story. As Leung (2009) argues, online comments that provide additional information or link readers to other sources addresses one of the primary components of citizen journalism and helps illustrate the concept of community. Yet this brings to light a void in the current literature that this dissertation seeks to address. The rise of online media and interactivity has brought prominence to the concept of participatory journalism, but there is a need for scholarship that addresses the various degrees to which active audience members are participating in the presentation of online news. In order to establish a relationship between audience empowerment and civic engagement, it is important to discern the differences between *public* or *civic* journalism and *citizen* journalism, and the significance of these differences on user-generated content like online reader comments. This will bring clarity and context to the research proposed by this dissertation, an investigation into the degree to which empowered individuals are using online comments to enhance civic engagement through democratic discourse.

The purpose of this dissertation is threefold. First, the research will contribute to the literature on online journalism and user-generated content by analyzing how reader comments to online news stories reflect themes of democratic engagement. Audience participation is a key component of democratic engagement, as community members directly or indirectly express their individual values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs (Delli Carpini, 2004). Previous research has compared online reader comments to letters to the editor as a public forum for direct expression of opinion. Yet unlike the traditional letter to the editor, which is vetted by newsroom staff and where the author is clearly identified, online commentary is largely anonymous (participants must register with the newspaper,

11

but are identified online only by a screen name) and often inconsistently moderated. As a result, comments that positively promote political and social involvement may be overshadowed by those that are profane, sexist, racist, or altogether inappropriate for such a public forum.

It is particularly important that the scope of analysis of online comments is expanded to local news coverage in general, rather than on specific types of stories. News reports focusing on potentially divisive political topics or issues related to specific ethnic groups have been found to generate more uncivil comments from both anonymous and no-anonymous contributors. An analysis of posted comments to a wide range of news articles can provide new insight into the online platform's effectiveness in serving as a new public sphere and a viable, constructive form of civic journalism.

Secondly, the content analysis is used to examine reader comments for the presence of themes drawn from the literature on uses and gratifications. Uses and gratifications is an appropriate framework for studying the degree of empowerment and control afforded to users of online media through interactivity (Leung, 2009) and individual motivations in obtaining information online as well as contributing information to other users (Zhou & Pinkleton, 2012). To date, only a few studies have examined the gratifications or motives associated with user-generated content online. None have sought to suggest the presence of such gratifications through an analysis of specific content; in this instance, the actual comments posted by online newspaper readers. However, if scholars are committed to addressing the revolutionary impact of digital convergence and the "seismic shifts" in journalism created by newly empowered audience members (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009), there should be little resistance

12

to exploring the traditional boundaries of media research. This analysis may offer valuable insight on the motivations of those who comment on news articles and the degree to which anonymity affects the tone and content of online comments. Simply stated, it is an "out of the box" approach intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of participatory journalism.

Finally, because the reader comment platform remains a contentious issue in newsrooms, the dissertation draws from the perspectives of journalists who manage and moderate reader comments. In a fairly robust field of literature, journalists have been portrayed as being mildly ambivalent to passionately resistant in response to interactivity and user-generated content (Chung, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Schultz, 2000). Recent studies, however, indicate that, despite initial resistance and ongoing concerns, editors and reporters have begun to accept reader comment forums as an important tool for audience engagement and, potentially, a productive addition to online news delivery (Nagar, 2009). News organizations can regulate content by imposing stricter guidelines for participation in the forum, from requiring more personal information in the registration process (including a real identity rather than a screen name or pseudonym) to imposing tighter restrictions on what kinds of stories are available for comment and, specifically, what users can and can't post. Improving the quality of the discourse should help to assuage journalists who remain skeptical of the platform's overall value to the news process. With newspapers increasingly accepting reader comments, and news organizations experimenting with policies and procedures to improve the quality of online discourse, research is needed to assess how the platform is being used by readers and embraced, or rejected, by journalists.

1.3 Research Questions

This dissertation is guided by two research questions that focus on the specific content of online reader comments to news stories, and how this content reflects the effectiveness of the platform as an online public sphere for civic discourse.

As a ubiquitous feature of online news sites, the reader comment platform has drawn increased interest from scholars throughout the world. While researchers have acknowledged that interactive, online media channels can invigorate democracy by creating opportunities for "wider, easier, and more diverse participation" from the public (Dunleavy & Weir, 1998, p. 72), few have approached the actual content of reader comments as civic deliberation. Manosevitch and Walker (2009) examined the editorial pages of two major American newspapers to assess how public discourse was facilitated through reader comments to online opinion journalism. The authors concluded that reader comments could enhance deliberative democracy, but the study was limited to response mechanisms to newspaper editorials rather than fully interactive forums that promoted open discourse (p. 22). Focusing on news rather than opinion journalism, McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) compared tone and content of letters to the editor and online reader comments in response to a controversial local story. While limited to the context of one particular news event, their findings indicated that the differences of opinion expressed through reader comments represent the "promise" of the public sphere ideal by bringing additional views into public discourse on important local issues (p. 314).

This dissertation advances this stream of research by examining online reader comments to local news stories, as a means of developing a deeper understanding of how the forum is being used for public deliberation. The first research question is guided by the theory of deliberative democracy, the ideal that true democracy is realized when citizens talk among themselves and form strong opinions that ultimately guide the decision making process of those in power (Friedland, 2000). Deliberative democratic theory will be discussed in greater detail in the Literature Review chapter. Applying the connection between deliberation and democracy to this dissertation, the first research question addresses specific themes that have been commonly associated with democratic engagement -- political efficacy, mobilization, and cynicism -- and the degree to which these themes are expressed by readers in online deliberation. The presence or absence of these themes can provide insight into the functional utility of the reader comment forum in facilitating the type of democratic discourse that promotes civic engagement.

RQ1: How do online comments to newspaper stories reflect themes that could encourage or discourage civic engagement among citizens?

The second research question takes a more theoretical approach to the online discourse taking place between and among users of the reader comment forum. Informed by themes from uses and gratifications literature, it seeks to shed light on the motives of those who comment online; an experiment into the malleability of uses and gratifications as a "highly serviceable theory" for communication research in the 21st century (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 29) and a "sound framework" for gaining insight into why individuals write online comments (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a, p. 5).

Long before the evolution of online media, scholars had noted the significance of the active user -- a core uses and gratifications concept -- and interactivity, or the "degree to which participants in the communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse" (Williams et al., 1988, p. 10). The interactive features of online media channels, especially those that facilitate user-to-user communication, and the empowerment afforded to audience members through interactivity would support a uses and gratifications approach to the study of online content generation (Yoo, 2011) and the possible motivations for writing online comments (Leung, 2009). User-generated content comes in many forms, representing different intents and purposes of those generating the content and different value propositions to those consuming it (Rosenberry, 2011; Shao, 2008). An analysis of reader responses to news stories of local importance may not be sufficient for offering a well-grounded theoretical overview of all the motives for online content creation (Rosenberry, 2011).

Similar exploratory approaches do exist, however. Web logs or "blogs" -- online sites created by individuals to provide information or facilitate discussion -- have been content analyzed to identify the social utility motivations of bloggers, including social interaction, information, and entertainment (Papacharissi, 2003; Trammell et al., 2004). More recently, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011a) conducted a mixed-method study of reader comments to news stories posted online by the *Sacramento Bee*. Combining content analysis with surveys of online users and journalists, the researchers used grounded theory to identify motivational factors for reading and writing online comments that supported a traditional uses and gratifications typology of media gratifications (Blumler, 1979; Miller, 2004). As a synthesis of stakeholder perspectives, their findings

16

supported the argument that a traditional uses and gratifications approach, including the

application of certain goal-oriented motives, could be an effective predictor of online

participation and user engagement in forums such as reader comments (Yoo, 2011). The

authors also called for further exploratory research that used content analysis to

determine if comments to a particular type of news story reflected a greater sense of

community or engagement among users.

Based on these findings, the second research question seeks to determine if

traditional typologies drawn from uses and gratifications research can be identified

through an analysis of online reader comments. The objective is not to establish a cause-

and-effect relationship between the motivations of comment writers and the viability of a

online public forum like reader comments as a new public sphere. Rather, it is to explore

the perimeter of a possible association by examining *what* an individual writes as a means

of understanding *why* it was written, if these observations can offer insight into the

discourse taking place in this online forum, and how it may affect civic engagement. The

results obtained from this analysis will contribute to the literature on uses and

gratifications and its continued relevance to studies of online media, user-generated

content, and interactivity.

RQ2**:** How are themes associated with the uses and gratifications of media use --
specifically, those related to motives of information, personal identity, social interaction,
and entertainment -- reflected in reader comments to online news stories?

1.4 Method And Analysis

The research questions will be addressed through a quantitative content analysis

conducted on a constructed three-week sample of reader comments to online news stories

published by six daily newspapers in South Carolina. The purpose of the analysis is to identify the presence of themes associated with democratic engagement (Delli Carpini, 2004) as well as themes that would suggest possible gratifications from individuals who are actively participating in the forum by writing comments. (Creswell, 2002). This study's content analysis will reveal the degree to which online reader comment forums are being used as platforms for civic engagement. In other words, what are people saying that could motivate or discourage citizens from becoming politically and socially active in their respective communities?

To provide a deeper understanding of the quantitative results, interviews with eight journalists from the representative papers were also conducted. These interviews bring additional perspective to the research problem by exploring how and why newspapers are using reader comment sections, how these interactive forums are being moderated, and if these forums are promoting the overall journalistic mission of the newspapers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dissertation is an examination of a specific type of computer-mediated communication -- reader comments to online news stories -- as a means of assessing the forum's effectiveness as a new public sphere for democratic engagement. It also explores how online newspapers are using the platform to facilitate public deliberation. The study is grounded in the ideal of democratic deliberation, or the theory that a rational public, exposed to widespread discussion, will make informed decisions on matters related to public policy (Meraz, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). But the rise in computer-mediated communication has also led scholars to consider the motivations behind online content creation and its implications for public deliberation and civic engagement (Leung, 2009). To that end, this study is informed by themes of uses and gratifications to gain additional insight into the discourse taking place in reader comment forums.

2.1 Democratic Deliberation And The Public Sphere

Delli Carpini et al. (2004) describe public deliberation as a process through which deliberative democracy occurs, a form of participation anchored by discussion in which citizens can "act" by talking and debating with other citizens (p. 318). These discussions are central to identifying shared concerns and preferences, clarifying and negotiating divisions, and developing an understanding over matters of public concern. Enlightened through the exchange of ideas and information, individuals develop a heightened sense of

place within a community and become more engaged by participating in activities such as voting, lobbying, volunteering or attending rallies (p. 319). This "communitarian spirit" of public discourse (Price, 2006) embodies the ideal of the public sphere as envisioned by Jurgen Habermas (1989/1962).

In Habermas's concept of the public sphere, private citizens come together to discuss matters of public concern as a means of reaching a consensus about the common good (Loke, 2011, p. 5). Participation is open and accessible to all, regardless of stature or standing and free from any state or political control. Because the public sphere is predicated not solely on the gathering of individuals but on the exchange of information among those gathered, it embodies the ideal of deliberative democracy, in which citizens make decisions based on unrestricted rational discussion and hold those in power accountable for their actions.

While logical in theory, the role of public deliberation in civic engagement remains largely untested. The practical reality of the public sphere -- ordinary citizens contributing to the governing process through public discourse -- has been subjected to robust debate, grounded primarily in two distinct schools of thought formed nearly a century ago.

Philosopher John Dewey was a proponent of democratic transformative action, driven by public deliberation and the ability of citizens to discuss policy in a rational, judicious manner. For Dewey, the concept of community and the idea of democracy were essentially equivalent terms; the most important concern in a democracy was the

participation of each member in deciding its goals and sharing in its rewards (Feinberg, 1992). In *The Public and its Problems* (1927), Dewey wrote of the democratic ideal:

> From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity informing and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the group, it demands liberation of the potentiality of members of the group in harmony with the interests and goals which are common (p. 147).

In Dewey's philosophy, true deliberative democracy is consistent with true democracy: All citizens must have the opportunity for political participation on any and all social issues and problems which concern them (Shook, 2004). As a critical pragmatist, Dewey believed that one's own lived experience is not just a "surface realm of ideology, " but the foundation for social intelligence required for meaningful democratic deliberation (Kadlec, 2007, p. 118). But Dewey also warned that democratic habits are not inherent to humans. Americans must be committed to the development of their own individuation, through formal education as well as the dedicated investment of time in interacting with others in collaborative inquiry. The "time process" includes information gathering and deliberation, in which each participant makes a contribution based on existing norms and values as well as new information acquired during the deliberative process (Dewey, 1925).

Dewey's passionate belief in social democratic ideology was in stark contrast to the skepticism of journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann. Citing the deterioration of democracy and community in America following World War I, Lippmann questioned the value of mass participation in policy making and cast doubt on the ability of ordinary citizens to comprehend and decide complicated public issues.

Democracy, writes Lippmann in *The Phantom Public* (1927), is "a false ideal, " not undesirable but unattainable. "(It is) bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer. An ideal should express the true possibilities of its subject. When it does not it perverts the true possibilities. " He continues:

> Today's theories assume that either the voters are inherently competent to direct the course of affairs or that they are making progress toward such an ideal. The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorance in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs... (p. 136).

Lippmann refers to the "disenchanted man," the "outsider" who had become disillusioned with democracy and reform and was incapable of taking an active role in political decision making. "The private citizen today has come to feel rather like the deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery...but cannot quite manage to stay awake, " Lippmann writes. "He knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations...taxes...and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstance" (pp. 3-4). In contrast to the outsider, the "insider" was the expert in policy-making, solely capable of making decisions "not because he is inherently a better man but because he is so placed that he can understand and act" (p. 140).

The Dewey-Lippmann debate has achieved wide currency as a staple of American political thought (Rogers, 2010) and inspired scholars to delve deeper into deliberative democracy and the public's role in decision making. Jurgen Habermas further shaped

22

and refined the ideal of democratic deliberation through his concept of the public sphere, in which he defined the legitimate conditions for respectful, rational public discourse (1984). According to Habermas, the public sphere is a product of democracy, a space within society in which public opinion can be formed. Accessible to all and blind to class positions, the public sphere promotes engagement through the mutual will of participants to deliberate on matters of shared interest. From these deliberations come the formation of public opinion, the control and criticism of political authority manifested by the public through elections.

Contemporary supporters of Dewey's democratic deliberative theory emphasize the potentially powerful benefits of citizen deliberation. One of the core concepts of deliberative theory, according to Chambers (2003) is that deliberation can "change minds and transform opinions" by creating opportunities to reconsider one's own beliefs while developing a greater understanding for alternative viewpoints. Under the right conditions, she argues, deliberation can "broaden perspectives, promote toleration and understanding between groups, and generally encourage a public spirited attitude" (p. 318). Gastil (2000) writes that while deliberation may not always lead to consensus, it can provide citizens with a greater sense of political self-efficacy–that their contribution has value and significance that can "make a difference"– which in turn strengthens other aspects of citizenship (pp. 23–25). Public deliberation, if "appropriately empathetic, egalitarian, open-minded, and reason-centered, " should enable citizens to be more civically engaged and have more confidence in democracy (Delli Carpini et al., 2004, p. 328; Mendelberg, 2002, p. 153).

Yet much of the research conducted on public discourse seems to support Lippmann's "liberal rationalist " view (Barber, 1984; Price, 2006), finding little practicality in the idyllic vision of the public sphere. The public is incapable of engaging in substantive debate on key issues, hindered by indifference, intolerance, or political ignorance (Neuman, 1986) or "highly unstable and untrustworthy opinions" (Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993, p. 48). Democratic consensus is successfully achieved, according to Schultz (2000), when diverse opinions are not only expressed but also openly debated. Inherent to debate is disagreement, yet Price (2006) contends that because people are often uncomfortable with disagreement, its role in deliberation has been misconstrued or "misplaced" (p. 5). He concurs with sociologist Michael Schudson (1997) and others that political disagreement, in particular, is often taken personally, especially by those who have doubts about their own views. As a result, disagreement can become polarizing, fueling animosity rather than mutual respect and trust. Citing empirical research on group decision making, Price argues that when an atmosphere of "political correctness" prevails over group discussions, those with extreme or unpopular opinions can succumb to social-normative pressures leading to "spirals of silence" (Noelle-Neuman, 1984) that inhibit the expression of one's true preferences (Price, 2006, p. 4). Disagreement can also induce ambivalence or apathy toward civic participation, as citizens refuse to actively participate in public deliberation simply to avoid confrontation (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

There are also questions as to whether a reciprocal, open-minded exchange can be reasonably expected in a society where certain segments of the population are marginalized. Critics of Habermas have cited the contradiction in the public sphere ideal

regarding the suspension of social class and equality of participation, and the irony of a democratic ideal that for centuries has been decidedly undemocratic in structure (Papacharissi, 2002). Critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1992) argues that the openness and accessibility prescribed by Habermas was never realized; the original public sphere ideal was dominated by bourgeois men, with women and ethnic minorities excluded from participation because of their race and gender (also Papacharissi, 2002). Even the most well-intentioned public forums practice their own forms of exclusion and marginalization, she adds, and some can actually be "explicitly antidemocratic and antiegalitarian" (p.124). Rather than empowering the disenfranchised and embracing alternative points of view, group deliberation can potentially do just the opposite, discouraging those who lack social or political status or rhetorical skills and further empowering high status, educated participants.

2.2 The Role Of Newspapers

Among traditional news outlets, newspapers have perhaps best served as an institution of public trust, reinforcing democratic ideals by serving the interests of all citizens. A community newspaper should function as the quintessential marketplace of ideas, a mediator of democratic deliberation rather than "a mere organ for the conveyance of information…" (Habermas, 1989, p. 234).

Newspapers have played an integral role in American history and in the formation of the republic. Starr (2010) noted that the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of the press survived one of its earliest and most formidable challenges because of the partisan Jeffersonian newspapers that helped defeat President John Adams' ill-advised

Sedition Act in 1798. Starr also cited the "muckraker" journalists of the late 18th century as the first investigative reporters, providing a form of public service journalism that ultimately laid the groundwork for a higher standard of news reporting. In *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978), sociologist Michael Schudson stated that the "penny papers" of the 1830s ushered in a "commercial revolution" in American media and established the paid circulation/advertising business model that newspapers have since followed. The invention of the telegraph in the 1840s led to the formation of the Associated Press and a new standard of factual, objective reporting that would define the "ideal of journalism" (p. 4). By the late nineteenth century, transcontinental railroads enabled nationwide distribution and established newspapers as the first mass medium (Downie & Kaiser, 2002).

Technological advancements continued to change the newspaper industry well into the twentieth century, although the impact of these changes has also been rigorously debated. Gillmor (2006) argued that the "corporatization" of journalism resulted in newspapers losing both readers and advertisers, first to radio and then to television (p. 4). But there was also a generational element to the marginalization of newspapers (Baughman, 2009), as individuals born after World War II ("Baby Boomers") began breaking with the traditional behavioral patterns of their parents and relied more frequently on television news than newspapers. Sociologist Richard Maisel argued that Americans in the 1950s and 1960s had begun developing more specialized interests and tastes, and he predicted that technological advances would dilute mass audiences and stimulate growth of more specialized media, including "new (media) systems that are growing rapidly" (1973, p. 169).

Newspapers were the primary source of news for most Americans in the 1950s, but by 1974, 65 percent of Americans were relying on television for news (The Roper Organization, 1977). The emergence of 24-hour news channels on cable systems further contributed to the "fundamental disruption of an industry" (Fallows, 2010, p. 46) and as television stations became regarded as profit centers, the editorial focus shifted from serious news to the cheaper and more popular alternatives of violence and entertainment (Gillmor, 2006). Yet others have argued that the competition from television actually made print journalism better, prompting newspapers to commit more resources to more in-depth, investigative reporting (Downie & Kaiser, 2002; Heflin, 2010). As a result, newspaper journalism reached new heights of quality and credibility during the 1970s with the publication of the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate investigation that ultimately exposed the corruption of the Nixon administration (Downie & Kaiser, 2002, pp 21-22).

With the emergence of the Internet in the 1980s, technology once again facilitated dramatic shifts in how news can be delivered to an audience. This time, the newspaper industry wasn't as resilient. Digital technology wrecked havoc on the traditional business model for newspapers and fueled the "long-simmering tension" between journalism and commerce that "gradually gnawed away at the democratic potential of the enterprise" (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. 11). The impact of the Internet was only part of the problem for newspapers. An economic recession led to steep declines in retail advertising revenues that further diminished the profit potential for newspapers. The late 1980s and early 1990s were particularly devastating . Precipitous drops in display and

classified advertising, coupled with escalating costs of newsprint, were driving down traditionally robust profit margins.

Still, traditional news organizations clung to the operational and organizational structure of their legacy business and failed to invest in transformation to a new digital-based business model (Abernathy & Foster, 2010). In an analysis for the Reuters Institute, Kimmo Lundén (2009) argued that publishers were relying on online advertising revenues that were miniscule compared to those of print advertising, even as millions of unique visitors flocked to news websites (p. 11). With digital ad revenues unable to offset the hard costs and operational expense of the traditional business model, newspapers responded through cost-cutting measures that eliminated newsroom jobs and impacted local coverage and the quality of the news, especially at the regional and local levels (p. 16). Critics also noted that news organizations were not effectively leveraging new technology to full potential in the collection and distribution of news (Dibean & Garrison, 2001). Newspapers continued to follow the traditional model of reporting the news every 24 hours rather than providing continuous updates and relied on "shovelware," or the process of taking the content from the print edition and reproducing it on a website (p. 81).

As the newspaper industry struggled, widespread declines were reported in citizens' political, civic and social engagement with institutions, and with other individuals, a trend that political scientists had tracked through the last half of the twentieth century. Political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) cited time and financial pressures, increased mobility, urban sprawl, and the accumulated effect of generational differences as contributing to this erosion of the social fabric of America. As a result, the

informal social networks that had traditionally shaped and developed connections among community members were disappearing. Americans were feeling excluded from public life, according to Sirianni and Friedland (2001), and were struggling to conceptualize their role as citizens.

Disconnects were occurring not only among citizens but also between citizens and the press. Surveys consistently found correlations between declines in newspaper readership, respect for and trust of the press, and civic participation. For example, in a 1994 Times Mirror poll, 71 percent of Americans agreed that the news media "stand in the way of society solving its problems" (Grimes, 1999, p. 5.). The press was not only failing to engage audiences in public affairs but was just as likely to push citizens away from the democratic process (Neuman, 1986). Longtime journalist and Knight Ridder executive Davis "Buzz" Merritt (1995) stated bluntly, "It is no coincidence that the decline in journalism and the decline in public life have happened at the same time. In modern society, they are codependent: Public life needs the information and perspective that journalism can provide, and journalism needs a viable public life because without one, there is no need for journalism" (p. 6).

The growing disenchantment between the public and the press brought new perspective to the role of the media as a public sphere and reignited a debate that began more than 50 years earlier. If there was a point of agreement between deliberative theorists such as Dewey and liberal-rationalists like Lippmann, it was that the media's traditional top-down communication model was ill-suited for facilitating the type of public discourse required in the public sphere. The top-down, vertical communication model was based on messages sent from those in authority "down" to the public; the

29

media was charged with mobilizing the development of audience members, who were

assigned a passive role (Narula, 2006, p. 127). Habermas is among the scholars who

have been critical of the one-way discussion that results from messages being produced

independently from news audiences (Schultz, 1999) and the failure of news organizations

to provide opportunities for robust political discussion and feedback from citizens

(Barber, 1984). Others concur that the mass media have failed to provide an adequate

forum for such deliberation, accusing the press of transforming politics into a "spectator

sport, " in which audiences consume political views disseminated by those in power

rather than functioning as autonomous, deliberating bodies (Price, 2006, p. 3). The letters

to the editor section has served as one of the most historically durable features of a

newspaper, embraced by scholars for its democratic potential (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001).

But the gatekeeping routines that determine which letters will run, and the content that

will survive an editor's discretionary pen, has made the section an incomplete,

unrepresentative reflection of public opinion (Grey & Brown, 1970). As journalism

scholar Jay Rosen (1991) stated, "The problem is not that citizens know too little or

participate too rarely to qualify as a public. It is that no one can be a member of a public,

when not addressed as such by journalists…" (p. 269). If citizens opt out of participation

in civic affairs, they would have no need to be informed, thus making the public service

mission of journalism irrelevant (Rosen, 1993).

2.3 The Civic Journalism Movement

 Just as the press contributed to citizens' disenchantment with civic life, Merritt

and Rosen were among those who believed that the press could be instrumental in its

renewal. A revival of civic engagement would require an investment of social capital, a

re-establishment of the connections among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from social networks (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Communities that successfully build social capital, argued Merritt (1996), need a "repository" for it, where…"the encouragement that success breeds and the accumulated experience of a community learning to make itself better…can be drawn upon" (p. 26). An appropriate repository, he proposed, was the local newspaper. In the spirit of the public sphere ideal, where a functioning press reinforces a functioning democracy and newspapers exist to serve citizens rather than just readers (Smith, 2001), the civic journalism movement took form.

As one of its pioneers, Rosen (1994) noted that civic journalism was not a formal doctrine or uniform strict code of conduct but an evolving philosophy about journalism's role in civic life. Citizens expressed a growing sense of alienation from the political processes at which – at least according to democratic theory – they were supposed to be at the center. They had been all but abandoned by the media, which had failed to fulfill its traditional public service role as citizen's proxy and government watchdog and did little to encourage citizens to see themselves as active agents in their own self-governance (Rosen, 1993). Proponents of civic journalism "sought new ways of understanding and framing public opinion, rooted in the American tradition of reasoned and pragmatic deliberation" (Sirianni & Friedland, 2001, p. 188) by creating forums for an active and open exchange of diverse points of view. Exemplifying what Dewey called "genuine public journalism, " these forums were to be moderated by journalists but driven by the deliberation of community members (Parisi, 1997, pp. 680-81). A more ambitious objective of civic journalism, according to some supporters, was to create an

idealized citizen, a rational and deliberative individual who, through the development of normative attitudes that promote civic participation, is actively engaged in community issues (Chaffee et al., 1997).

By the early 1990s a handful of newspapers had begun experimenting with civic journalism, incorporating new strategies for covering news on elections and local issues. In 1993, the Philadelphia-based Pew Charitable Trusts established the Pew Center for Civic Journalism (Shepard, 1996), and over the next few years civic journalism principles had been absorbed into the news gathering and reporting routines at several newspapers owned by Knight Ridder. But after nearly a decade of projects and experiments generated mixed results on the effectiveness of civic journalism, questions were raised by journalism scholars and practitioners. In particular, the revolutionary zeal that helped fuel the civic journalism movement perhaps overshadowed the fact that it had no clearly defined mission. In an overview of civic journalism published by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (Grimes, 1999), political scientist Timothy Cook suggested that the popularity of the civic journalism ideal may have resulted from "how ambiguous, sometimes all-inclusive a term it is" (p. 2). The author of the report, former journalist and media scholar Charlotte Grimes, called the movement "intentionally amorphous, " out of fear that its scope would be limited (p. 3).

The notion that civic journalism represented a new role for media in connecting the public and democracy (Denton & Thorson, 1995) drew sharp criticism as a threat to news organizations' independence and impartiality. Grimes (1999) noted that journalists were suspicious and resentful of civic journalism's emphasis on public involvement and participation in the news gathering process. Additionally, the kind of "grass roots"

reporting espoused by the civic journalism movement was neither new nor innovative but merely quality journalism (Fouhy, 1994; Massey & Haas, 2002). Challenging the methods and motives of civic journalism, *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. stated, "Too much of what's been called public journalism appears to be what our promotion department does, only with a different kind of name and a fancy evangelistic fervor" (from Case, 1994, p. 14). The public journalism "crusade," added Richard Aregood of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, is only what good newspapers are already doing. "What in God's name are we thinking about?" he asked (p. 14).

Staunch supporters of civic journalism acknowledged that the concept of becoming more deeply immersed in community was hardly revolutionary. In "*Mixed News*," a 1997 book of essays on the evolution of civic journalism, co-author Billy Winn recalled that "we did a lot more (diverse, public-spirited reporting) when I first came into journalism in the '60s " (in Grimes, 1999, p. 9). Richard Harwood, who actively assisted civic journalists in developing local reporting techniques that he called "tapping civic life, " admitted, "Tapping civic life is another name for practicing good journalism" (2000, pp. 40-41.). In a 2001 Pew Center for Civic Journalism poll of 360 daily newspaper editors, two-thirds said they supported its tenets but "did not identify with the label" (Greenwald, 2002, p. 12).

Merritt's belief in framing community issues through public deliberation – that citizens, not journalists, should set a newspaper's news agenda – was seen as yet another threat to journalistic credibility. Under mounting pressure to maintain or increase profits, civic journalists can unknowingly drift into market-driven or consumer-driven practices that allows readers to essentially dictate what appears in the news. It is a fear, argues

33

Grimes, that evolved from the readership declines experienced by newspapers, "at a time of profound dismay among many journalists who see their profession...adrift from its core values and battered by ever-changing demands of a volatile industry" (1999, p. 4). Cook noted that the "in an era where profit margins are increasingly important to news divisions, those needs may become further diminished in the chase for stories that meet news values of immediacy, timeliness, color, drama, good visuals and the like—none of which have very much to do with the demands of good public policy" (Grimes, 1999, p. 1).

Civic journalists should be attentive to stakeholders' underlying values and familiarize themselves with places where citizens and community leaders gather to talk about important local issues (Burroughs, 2006). Such deliberative forums, argued Merritt (1996), revealed "the narrative of a community, stories it tells about itself" (p. 26). But the common practice of creating community task forces and holding backyard barbecues for residents and journalists was seen by many as a dangerous flirtation with advocacy journalism, or encouraging political mobilization by focusing on the needs and/or interests of particular individuals or groups (Waisbord, from Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). A 1997 survey of media executives revealed a nearly equal division— 34.8 percent strongly agreeing, 33.9 percent strongly disagreeing—on the idea that civic journalists "cross the line between reporting and advocacy—putting journalism's ebbing credibility in further peril" (Grimes, 1999). Supporters like Billy Winn eventually questioned the actual value of journalist-mediated public gatherings, dismissing the practice as "a crutch for (reporters) who don't know their community. It's an excuse to

do structured projects that are heavy on planning and teamwork, but short on knowledge, talent and genuine concern for the community" (Grimes, 1999, p. 9).

Perhaps the most telling criticism of the civic journalism movement is that it was simply too ambitious, especially with its reliance on public support and participation (Dzur, 2002). As Putnam (2000) writes, the voluntary participation of individual citizens is critical to the community connectedness that leads to a more deliberative society. "In public journalism, " said Rosen, "we believe people have to participate effectively so they'll want to become informed" (1995, p. 7). Merritt (1996) also emphasized the importance of citizen participation: "Journalism is only half of the equation, and the journalism in a community can be no better than the civic story the community is itself producing" (p. 26). But the goal of achieving the democratic ideal by using the power of the press to create a more thoughtful, active citizenry may in reality have found far more of the former than the latter. Recalling Lippmann's argument that questions the public's ability to comprehend information required for deliberative discourse, Neuman (1986) described the "inverse law, in which the higher the level of abstract, issue-oriented content, the smaller the audience it is likely to attract" (p. 137). Burroughs' 2006 study on the effectiveness of community newspapers in promoting civic engagement found respondents to be unsure of the newspaper's role in "bringing people together in the community." While 60 percent of respondents felt the newspaper's role was important, nearly one-third did not see the newspaper as a vehicle for community cohesiveness or were unsure as to how it might be achieved (p. 63). If a newspaper's success in facilitating a more engaged community is dependent on the community itself, concluded Burroughs, the findings raise interesting questions about the effectiveness of civic

journalism's core ideals. "While a newspaper can encourage engagement and provide citizens with the necessary tools, the outcome will be only as effective as members of the community permit, " she said (p. 86).

A more clearly defined and focused civic journalism model could have also helped newspapers achieve higher levels of what journalism scholar Philip Meyer (1994) calls "social influence," potentially contributing to a more sustainable business model. Social influence is a degree of community trust and engagement that contributes to commercial influence, or persuading consumers to make purchases in support of the newspaper's advertisers. The intangible value in social influence and the tangible value in commercial influence combine to enhance a newspaper's credibility and provide "economic justification for excellence in journalism" (p. 7) that can ultimately help newspapers achieve long-term financial viability.

Yet despite the best intentions of its proponents, civic journalism has been ineffective in facilitating community involvement and citizen interaction in solving local problems. Levels of social trust in the U.S. have continued to decline in the past 30 years and have contributed to consistent declines in newspaper readership, as individuals look to the Internet for alternative sources of information. Over the past decade, as online news has continued to evolve as a regular part of the daily routines of average Americans, the audience for print news has decreased dramatically. Paid circulation for daily and Sunday editions of newspapers has fallen 30 percent since 1990, and newspaper readership among American adults dropped from 53 percent in 2005 to 37 percent in 2010 (Edmonds et al., 2012).

Evidence suggests, however. that newspaper readers retain a high level of interest in community news, turning to print and online editions more often for local news and opinion (Hollander, 2010). A Pew Research study from January 2011 found that newspapers and newspaper websites are the leading source of news for consumers on a wide range of topics, but particularly for news of local importance on issues such as crime, local government activities, schools, local politics and taxes (Rosenstiel et al., 2011). Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of American adults describe themselves as "local news enthusiasts" (Miller et al., 2012) who regard newspaper websites to be the most trustworthy and credible sources for local news and information (NAA, 2010). It is perhaps not surprising that while print readership continues to fall, newspaper website audiences are steadily growing (Edmonds et al., 2012), fueled by the public's interest in digital coverage of highly localized, event-centered news (Barnhurst, 2010).

This "need for news" has enabled traditional newspapers to re-connect with audiences through interactive technology. As part of its effort to "catch up" to news delivery in the Internet age, traditional organizations must regard its digital operations as the "future" and not the "step-child," and re-create communities of loyalty by fashioning a compelling interactive experience online (Abernathy & Foster, 2010). The metaphor of a "conversation," which once figured prominently in the future of civic journalism, has re-emerged online in unprecedented form. The issue at hand is whether audience members will engage in a form of "cyber-democracy" (Rosenberry, 2005, p.) in this new public sphere.

2.4 Interactivity And Deliberative Discourse

The evolution of the Internet has provided fertile ground for the exploration of interactivity, its impact on communication, and its role in shaping a "new" public sphere. Fully interactive communication has altered the traditional one-to-many-flow paradigm of mass communication by enabling a greater symmetry of communicative power (Schultz, 2000, p. 209), as individuals not only become consumers of news, but also active participants in its production.

The participatory nature of interactivity has been exhibited by what has been deemed citizen or community journalism, a concept perhaps best described as an interactive application of the "grassroots" civic journalism ideal. It is believed that, by playing an active role in collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information, citizens facilitate a deeper level of engagement between communities and newsrooms (Bowman & Willis, 2003). While Goode (2009) includes commenting on news stories or materials posted by other users as a form of citizen journalism, others view it as advocacy journalism, "an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting" that is "driven by different objectives and ideals" than those of mainstream journalism (Karlekar & Radsch, 2012).

The roots of citizen journalism can be traced, argues Gillmor (2006), to the desktop publishing capabilities of the Macintosh personal computer in the mid-1980s. Certain forms of independent media emerged as ordinary citizens, equipped with the appropriate software and a laser printer, began assimilating a diversity of viewpoints. Further advances in technology led to an "open source," more conversational form of

journalism where "we all enlighten each other. We can correct our mistakes. We can add new facts and context" (p. 18). By adding perspective and facilitating dialogue, Gillmor writes, these forums foster the type of robust, open debate and deliberation that the drafters of the First Amendment envisioned. In this context, the value of audience interaction should be measured not by the role of ordinary citizens in gathering and reporting the news but through citizen deliberation that responds to the news, a form of interpersonal interactivity that more accurately represents the public sphere.

Interactivity has been conceptualized in a number of ways, but most scholars have agreed on two distinct definitional models (Chung, 2008). Medium interactivity is based on the technological features of the media system and what it allows users to do (i.e., submitting stories or photos, e-mailing reporters or editors, or submitting letters to the editor), while human interactivity is communication between two or more users that takes place through a communication channel on features such as message boards or chat functions (p. 660). As a process in which online users engage with one another through the medium, human interactivity can serve as a foundation for public deliberation (McMillan, 2002; Yoo, 2011). In addressing human interactivity and the public sphere ideal, communication scholars have cited the importance of "ritual communication, "or the representation of shared beliefs (Carey, 2009, p. 15). Ritualistic expression in online forums exemplifies "the power of citizen-to-citizen communications" (Gaynor, 1996, p. 4) as individuals empower themselves and their community by taking interest in each other's opinions while also looking out for the good of the community as a whole (Schultz, 2000).

By encouraging democratic participation, online communities can serve as alternatives to or reinforcements of actual physical communities in their functions as public spheres. "Virtual" communities, according to Dyson (1998), allow people who share common interests to communicate with one another regardless of geographic boundaries. By enabling individuals from different backgrounds the opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions, the Internet can be a "powerful enabling technology fostering the development of communities because it supports the very thing that creates a community — human interaction" (p. 44). In *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold (1993) described interactive forums as a "living database" created and used by citizens to build community, which in turn forms a "web of human relationships...where the potential for cultural and political change can be found" (p. 249)

The rapid growth of online technology prompted further optimism about a revitalized public sphere, where citizens exercise collective democratic will through free and open debate, deliberation and engagement (Charney, 1998; McCluskey & Hmielokski, 2011). Yet while researchers acknowledge the theoretical value of discursive forums, questions have once again been raised regarding the ability of citizens to engage in constructive deliberation. Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) argues that the public sphere requires "respectful and reflexive deliberation" in order for "self-seeking individuals" to become "publicly oriented citizens" capable of making decisions for the greater good of the community (p. 620). True democratic deliberation should include an exchange and critique of fact-based ideals, a critical evaluation of one's own values and beliefs, and an understanding and appreciation of other perspectives (p. 623). Dahlberg's examination of an online pro-democracy initiative in Minnesota concludes that only one

of these "requirements, " the exchange of factual information, was consistently present in interactive deliberation.

While Schudson's "conversational ideal" (1978) may be an appropriate framework for examining human interactivity (Chung, 2008), it is the nature of the conversation itself that raises concerns. Schultz (2000) warns that unfettered participation in online forums is not necessarily synonymous with the quality and value of the discussion. Text-based online discussions are likely to be superficial and ill-suited to establishing relationships and levels of trust necessary for group discourse and decision-making (Fishkin, 1995). The impersonal nature of computer-mediated forums are incapable of generating social capital due to what Putnam (2000) describes as "easy-in, easy out" and "drive-by" relationships (p. 177). Schudson (1998) himself seems unconvinced that issues of communal importance can be effectively addressed through spontaneous discussion. Democratic deliberation, he argues, is oriented to problem solving and governed by rules and civility typically absent from casual conversation.

Years before Internet access had reached critical mass, social psychologists were theorizing on the depersonalizing nature of electronic communication. Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) observe that users may "sometimes . . . lose sight of the fact that they are really addressing other people, not the computer" (p. 1125) and craft messages that are more uninhibited and assertive. In the absence of a dominant leader or moderator, a disregard for accepted social norms and standards can lead to uninhibited behavior. "For years, observers of computer networks have noticed uninhibited behavior" including the practice of flaming, or "expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings." (p. 1130). Rather than

encouraging reasonable dialogue over shared issues, online interactive forums may instead promote communication among enclaves of like-minded citizens, resulting in the circulation of unfounded or false information and polarizing opinions that can widen the gaps between those on opposite sides of public issues (Sunstein, 2001).

Despite the technological advances that have opened new channels of online communication, few studies have examined the evolution of interactive forums and how online discourse has contributed to civic engagement and responsible citizenship. There is looming skepticism, however, as to whether technological innovation alone will revive the public sphere. As Dahlberg (2001) argues, individuals must be drawn into reasonable, rational discourse before technology can be successfully employed. Otherwise, participants in deliberative forums will be consumed "by their own narrow self interests" and unconcerned with the greater public good (Sirianni & Friedland , 2001, p. 23). Barber (1998) predicted that societies dominated by commercial and individualist values and "thin" models of democratic participation will likely be unaffected by the application of new technologies, resulting in the same incivility and cynicism that prevailed in the older technologies. "If the technology is to make a political difference, " he added, " it is the politics that will first have to change" (p. 261-263).

2.5 Newspapers And Audience Feedback

It has been suggested that the quality of online discourse may improve as more trusted, centralized sources become accessible to individual users. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) note that as citizens are exposed to an ever-increasing flow of data, the need becomes greater for identifiable sources that can be counted on to verify

information and highlight for consumers what is important and filter out what is not (p. 48). Websites that offer valid, up-to-date news as well as forums for reasoned discussion and debate enable individuals to build shared beliefs and make judgments about issues of local importance (Schultz, 2000. p. 207).

The role of promoting responsible citizenship through public discourse is one that has traditionally been assigned to traditional media outlets, and newspapers in particular. Habermas (1998) believed that newspapers were critical to the public sphere, facilitating public discussion that transpired through the daily face-to-face interactions between citizens. Online newspapers can offer platforms for civic discourse that strengthen ties between readers and editors and among readers themselves (Choi, 2004, p. 13). But long before the arrival of the Internet, newspapers provided one of the most enduring spaces for public discussion, incorporating citizens' voices into the conversation through the letters to the editor section.

Since colonial times, the letters to the editor forum has granted access to citizens to participate in public discourse. During the Penny Press era of the 1830s, newspapers abandoned the practice of partisanship by separating opinions from fact-based stories; as a result, the voices of "regular citizens" were allowed into the newspaper as "true and authentic" representations of public opinion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 38). Because letters to the editor has traditionally been one of the most widely read sections in a print newspaper (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991), it has generated significant interest from researchers.

As a fixture on the Op-Ed pages of most newspapers, letters to the editor represents a symbiotic relationship between journalists and audience members. As Rosenberry (2011) explains, journalists frame stories through the choice of sources and views, providing the context for opinion expression. The audience can respond by echoing those views, offering alternative opinions or introducing new ideas. As one of the few outlets for public commentary, the letters section is regarded by editors as a reflection of the community's pulse and a forum for perpetual debate (Kapoor & Botan, 1992; Kapoor, 1995). Editors believe that expressions of opinion in letters can not only impact readers (Hynds & Martin, 1979) but influence news content as well. Pritchard and Berkowitz found that content in letters influenced editors to write about certain issues and to emphasize particular topics in the news. Considering that most newspapers are commercial enterprises that survive by attracting and maintaining an audience, journalists must provide the types of content that the audience desires. The letters to the editor forum is one the few means by which journalists can learn what readers are thinking about (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991).

Less clear, though, is whether letters are a good representation of public opinion. Since people who write letters are often older, better educated and more conservative than the general population (Grey & Brown, 1970; Reader et al., 2004), published letters may not be an accurate gauge of the audience. On controversial topics, however, letters to the editor may reflect public opinion (Hill, 1981). Sigelman and Walkosz (1992) found that the reasons voiced in letters to major newspapers in Arizona closely matched public sentiment when voters rejected a state referendum on making Martin Luther King Day a paid holiday in Arizona. Letter writers, they argued, were more closely aligned to

the average citizens, and that "highly salient issues that engage large numbers of citizens" were more likely to show similar proportions of letters that match public opinion polls (p. 945).

But traditional barriers remain in place that raise questions about the effectiveness of this public sphere. In the top-down, centralized approach of traditional media newsrooms, journalists continue to serve as gatekeepers (Chung, 2008), a role that is particularly restrictive on "outside" sources of material. Particular bias has been detected toward letters to the editor. Wahl-Jorgensen (2001) found that space limitations force newspapers to publish only five to 50 percent of letters received, and those that are published reflect what journalists regard as "reasonable ideas." Media gatekeepers also favor letters that are succinct, well-written and focus on timely, important issues (Kapoor, 1995), yet past research presents solid evidence that letter writers tend to "derive exhibitionistic pleasure from venting publicly" (Loke, 2011, p. 47) and expressing extreme, sometimes crude and often negative views (Gans, 1977; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). Those deemed too vulgar for publication are rejected, as are form letters, open letters to other people, and letters focused on non-relevant issues or containing false information (Reader, 2005). Journalists have more recently been found to use their gatekeeping authority to favor letters to the editor that dissent from the newspaper's stated editorial views (Butler & Schofield, 2010).

To ensure accuracy in the content of reader letters, most newspapers require letter writers to disclose their name and contact information (address and/or telephone number) for verification purposes (Reader, 2005; Renfro, 1979). Reader (2005) found that banning anonymity reduces the number of people who write letters to the editor and

potentially limits the range of views, especially from women, racial minorities, and other

marginalized groups (also McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Reader et al., 2004), a

significant violation of the public sphere ideal. These barriers have prevented

newspapers from "reviving the publicness" of its journalistic obligations to society

(Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 122). By consistently attracting readers, the letters to the

editor section has made valuable contributions to the economic goals of newspapers

(Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002), but a few handpicked letters

relegated to the newspapers' opinion pages can hardly be regarded as a vehicle for

fostering public discourse (Nord, 2001). Regarding letters to the editor as a "marketplace

of idea" that fulfills Habermas's vision of a public sphere, concludes McCluskey and

Hmielowski (2011), is more a normative ideal than reality (p. 304).

As the Internet evolved, online content was enhanced by user-interface features

that created mediated social interaction through online chat rooms and discussion forums.

Audiences were empowered in the Web 2.0 environment to interact with content

providers in a manner that could resurrect the public sphere and journalism's role in

fostering democratic discourse. Inspired by the ideal of a cyber-democracy (Grossman,

1995), journalists could help newspapers "reclaim the mantle of the Fourth Estate" by

making use of interactive devices to provide spaces for citizen interaction on public

affairs and putting institutional authority behind those discussions (Rosenberry, 2005, p.

66).

But traditional media did little to engage readers online. Major newspapers had

maintained websites since the late 1990s, but most were simply static online versions of

their print product with "just an illusion of interactivity" (Schultz, 2000, p. 209). The

2006 Bivings Group report found that while newspapers were launching "aggressive online programs that include many sophisticated elements," it was "uncommon for newspapers to employ more advanced Web tools" (p. 2), including interactive user forums.

Studies of online newspapers confirmed the industry's failure to embrace interactive features that facilitated communication and the expression of ideas. Schultz (1999) investigated interactive features in 100 U.S. newspapers online and found that only one-third ran discussion forums, one-fourth provided online polls or surveys, and chat rooms were nearly non-existent. A follow-up study (Schultz, 2000) of the *New York Times* found newsroom personnel to be "hardly involved" in online discussions with readers (p. 215). The results from Massey and Levy's 1999 study of interactive features on Asian newspaper websites were "disappointing;" options for interpersonal interactivity were virtually nonexistent, and although most newspapers provided a link to the newsroom for reader feedback, most of the emails went unanswered (p. 147). Rosenberry (2005) argues that newspapers, as the traditional source for in-depth political news, are prime candidates for a best practices model of cyber-democracy and citizen deliberation, with journalists filling the role of facilitator. But his content analysis of 47 U.S. newspaper websites found few devices being used to enhance local public affairs reporting (p. 70) . Recalling a frequently used metaphor, Rosenberry describes newspapers as a bridge between newsmakers and readers, a role that can become a two-way thoroughfare with interactive applications. He concluded, however, "this bridge is still under construction" (pp. 62, 70), a similar conclusion reached in studies of European news sites. An analysis of mainstream media websites in Belgium, Spain, Finland, and

Germany by Paulussen et al. (2007) found few examples of interactive platforms that promote participatory journalism. Of particular note was the skepticism from professional journalists in all four countries about interactivity with users and their adherence to the traditional top-down model of trustee journalism (p. 146).

Finding motivation, perhaps, in the potential economic value of increased visitor traffic, news organizations have become more aggressive in implementing interactive tools into their online products (Chung, 2004; Greer & Mensing, 2006; Salwen, 2005). Of the human interactive features that encourage dialogic communication, none have been adopted more, and become as popular, on mainstream news sites than the reader comment forum (Kim, 2009). In less than a decade, reader comments have became the "most frequent form of sustained written discourse" in new media (Levinson, 2009, p. 22). Bergland et al. (2012) randomly sampled websites of 361 U.S. daily newspapers in 2007, finding that 55 percent had comments sections after articles.

Presented at the end of an online news story, the reader comment platform typically takes the form of a multi-directional discussion between and among users. Communication through the reader comment forum can be synchronous – in which users are engaged instantly and at the same point in time – or asynchronous, whereby users connect with each other at each individual's own convenience and own schedule (Ashley, 2003). Minimal technological expertise is required (Johnson, 2008; Santana, 2010); users are required only to register their name, address and contact information (telephone number or email address) and create a screen name that will serve as their identity when posting a comment. Comments are published as they are posted and typically arranged in reverse chronological order (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). While many news sites

remove postings that are defamatory or in bad taste, most posts remain on the site and are archived for varying periods of time.

There appears to be no "best practice" standard for the reader comment forum in terms of user identity, types of content, or length of content. Many newspapers allow reader comments but reserve the right to disable the forum on stories that contain potentially controversial themes or that were likely to attract inappropriate or offensive comments targeted at certain individuals or groups. Thornton (2009) found that the Minnesota *Star Tribune* disabled comments to stories on crime and fatalities/suicides as well as those focused on racially sensitive issues, Muslims, and homosexuals. The *Boston Globe* bans comments to any story that involves personal tragedy, while the *Quad-City Times* in Davenport, Iowa, refuses to allow commentary on stories dealing with sexual assault, for fear that the victim will be identified (Thornton, 2009). In other newsrooms, including the *News and Observer* in Greensboro, N.C., editors have become increasingly vigilant in monitoring comments on stories dealing with race and gender issues and immigration (Thornton, 2009).

By providing easy access for users to comment on the top stories of the day, newspapers have created a "new sphere" that enables spontaneous dialogue among readers and encourages users to offer solutions to critical contemporary issues (Hecht, 2003; Schultz, 2000). The forum is ideally suited for public deliberation because reader comments are immediate, face little censorship, and reside in unlimited space (Rosenberry, 2005). Studies of online news comments have focused on mainstream news sites because they continue to be the most popular online news sources on the Internet and as representative of offline news organizations, are regarded as authoritative sources

(Fidler, 2012; Pew Internet, 2013). The reader comment forum has been found to be far more convenient, instant and inclusive than letters to the editor as a portal of audience interaction. Demographic differences between letter writers and online participants have also been well documented. Adults aged 18 to 49 are the heaviest users of the Internet (Pew Internet, 2013); like Internet users, newspaper letter writers are better educated than the general population but are also considered to be more conservative than the general population (Grey & Brown, 1970; Reader et al., 2004).

Views are decidedly more mixed on the degree of civility in online discourse and the effect of anonymity on the tone and content of reader comments. Santana (2012) describes the reader comment forum as sites for spirited debate, "facilitating the very thing newspapers were designed to do in a democratic society" (p 1). As a new and largely untested technology, however, the platform proved to be an enigma for news executives. Hermida and Thurman (2007) examined the struggles of newspapers in the United Kingdom to publish user-generated content like reader comments in a traditional newsroom culture "fram[ing] the approach" toward such content (p. 24.). Imposing minimal restrictions on comment posters--a decidedly different philosophy from the routine vetting of letters to the editor--contributed to the spontaneous give-and-take nature of the discussions, but also resulted in pervasive patterns of incivility that became of the forum's most defining characteristics. As a result, the value of what were initially considered to be "relatively civilized outlets for ventings" (Schultz, 2000, p. 215) was being undermined by vitriol that often spiraled into name-calling and overt sexism and racism (Santana, 2012).

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions, bringing renewed relevance to the role of civility in democratic discourse (Barber, 1997). As deliberative theorists have argued, civility in public deliberation, online or offline, can often be measured predicated on whether participants can respectfully disagree with one another. If those who participate in online forums lack the ability to respectfully listen to others or show unwillingness to accept different perspectives, notes Dahlberg (2001), there is little potential for advancing democratic deliberation through online discourse. Hwang and Cameron (2008) define discursive civility as vigorously defending one's own view while admitting and respecting the validity of others' views, whereas discursive incivility is an expression of disagreement that denies and disrespects the views of others. Certain levels of impoliteness may even be tolerated, argued Papacharissi (2004) in an analysis of political discussion online newsgroups. Being impolite "implies emotion, and emotion implies compassion, which in turn implies humanity" she stated. "It is incivility without a trace of politeness, 'impeccable incivility,' that should frighten us" (p. 279). When this kind of incivility takes control of a discussion, through attacks that move beyond fact and into contempt and derision (Brooks & Geer, 2007), participants shelter themselves with their own beliefs and further debate becomes unproductive (Hwang & Cameron, 2008).

Conversely, when people are treated with respect and view the decision-making process as just and fair, they are more likely to be open-minded about the debate and accepting of other points of view (Santana, 2010). There is literature that supports Herbst's (2010) observation that "people can be passionate and civil at the same time" (p. 128). Hecht (2003) views the talkbacks phenomenon in Israel as a cultural catalyst accelerating the movement of ideas between marginalized social groups and the center,

allowing growing parts of the population to express their views in the public arena. He

sees talkbacks as providing the potential for an ideal discourse by allowing equality,

reciprocity and symmetry (2003). Comparing online comments with letters to the editor

at Louisiana publications covering the Jena Six controversy, McCluskey and Hmielowski

(2011) concluded that reader comments presented a more balanced range and tone when

free from the scrutiny of newsroom gatekeepers. Similarly reflective of the public sphere

ideal were reader comments on Iowa news websites, deemed by Manosevitch and Walker

(2009) to be "legitimate representatives" of public deliberation by offering

"substantial...factual information, and (demonstrating) a public process of weighing

alternatives via the expression of issue positions and supporting rationales" (p. 21). An

analysis of more than 15,000 user-generated comments from international newspapers

found that online forums in *The Guardian* (United Kingdom) and *The New York Times*

were characterized by "respect and diversity of ideas among participants" that conform to

Habermas's model (Ruiz et al., 2011). Editors at the *Times* referred to the reader

comment forum as "a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed

commentary that enhances the quality of our news and information" (p. 32).

The news organization's credibility within its community centers more on the

quality of the commentary taking place in the forum. Quality, in this context, is defined

by Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011a) as a degree of excellence in conveying knowledge

or intelligence through accepted journalistic standards of accuracy, reliability, validity,

currency, relevancy, comprehensiveness and clarity. It is achieved, they contend, through

a consistent application of best practices that include the posting and enforcement of user

guidelines and expectations and having dedicated moderators check and approve

comments before they are posted. But newspapers have struggled to maintain

consistency in commenting policies and moderation, an ongoing challenge that

researchers and practitioners attribute to one the forum's most distinguishing

characteristics: the ability of users to shield their identity by posting comments under

screen names or pseudonyms.

2.6 Anonymity

Anonymity remains the primary point of contention in the debate over online

reader comments and the public sphere. The literature suggests an ideological split

between those who see the theoretical value of "free rein" deliberating under the cloak of

anonymity and others who have documented who have the consequences of uninhibited,

unrestrained commentary.

While newspaper executives were still struggling with the concept of digital

delivery, researchers had already begun making associations between anonymity and

incivility in computer-mediated communication. The reduced social cues model--which

states that a change in one's behavior and communication is caused by the removal of

their identity--was initially cited as a factor behind anonymous participation in early

online discussion forums such as bulletin boards and chat rooms. Sproull and Kiesler

(1986) argue that anonymity in computer-mediated communication, in contrast to face-

to-face communication, allowed participants to be less inhibited in their expressions and

unconcerned with the consequences. "People interacting on a computer are isolated from

social cues and feel safe from surveillance and criticism, " they write. "This feeling of

privacy makes them feel less inhibited with others. It also makes it easy for them to

disagree with, confront, or take exception to others' opinions" (1991, p. 48-49).

Challenging the "spiral of silence" effect of incivility in group discussions, Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna (1991) found that anonymity had an equalizing effect on computer-mediated communication between employees and managers, making group members less aware and less concerned with social or professional status than when they met face-to-face. In a similar study, Baltes et al. (2002) found that anonymity decreases conformance pressure in a group setting, and that ideas expressed anonymously are more likely to be evaluated based on merit, rather than on the status of the person presenting the information.

In recommending further inquiry into the Internet as a communication medium, Boczkowski (1999) raises the question of whether the "transformative and adaptive" online strategies of newspapers would succeed or fail (p. 116). He questions the extent to which online newspapers can foster participation in local politics. "What influence may communities of interest anchored in forums and chat rooms have upon the political role of online newspapers?" he writes. "Whose voices will be massively amplified by the fourth estate, and whose will be neglected?" (p. 109). There was also an intriguing observation on the "frequent occurrence of utterly aggressive content" in online discussion groups and the potential consequences for online newspapers (pp. 105). Paraphrasing Myers (1987), Boczkowski asks, "Is anonymity 'part of the magic,' or the curse of the Internet as a communication platform? " (p. 106). The ensuing research has enriched both sides of the argument.

The discourse taking place in reader comment forums exhibits many of the "notable and novel characteristics" of audience behavior found in earlier computer-

mediated communication (Dicken-Garcia, 1998, p. 22). The elimination of social cues

and the shield of anonymity have enabled individuals to take on new identities, often

typified by less inhibitive behavior. Some believe that this can actually enhance online

deliberation. Singer (1996), for example, describes anonymity as an "escape hatch" for

individuals exercising their freedom of expression in online discussions. "They are

known, " she wrote, "…but not really. They are accountable for what they say…but only

so long as they choose to remain 'visible' to the online community" (p. 98.) McCluskey

and Hmielowski (2011) argue that anonymity contributes to the public sphere ideal by

giving reluctant individuals an avenue to express views, thereby expanding the number of

participants in the discourse and, potentially, the range of views aired (p. 307).

Reader comments to opinion journalism on Iowa news websites were, according

to Manosevitch and Walker (2009), legitimate representations of public deliberation with

no significant differences detected in the content of anonymous postings. Forums with

both anonymous and non-anonymous posts "offered substantial amount of factual

information, and demonstrated a public process of weighing alternatives via the

expression of issue positions and supporting rationales" (p. 21).

Yet others have found anonymous postings to do more harm than good to the

credibility of the reader comment forum as a space for democratic discourse. While

anonymity can reduce inhibition, it can also make users less accountable and promote

behavior that tends to be emotional and impulsive (McDevitt et al., 2003, p. 458). Such

uninhibited spontaneity is often expressed in online forums as "flaming" or the hostile

communication toward others online (Rosenberry, 2011, p. 8) that can have a chilling

effect on discourse. The result, argues Loke (2011), has been a "smorgasbord of

audacious input," much of it in direct opposition to the utopian ideal of democratic discourse that the reader comment forum was intended to serve (p. 6). Loke attributes the "widespread vitriol" in reader comment forums to anonymity. "Because anyone who can read, type and has access to the Internet can participate in this new space, the press is now hosting a more diverse range of thoughts – including those that are racist and sexist," she writes (p.19). Loke and Santana (2010, 2012) are among those finding associations between anonymity and "hate speech," expressions based on race, gender or nationality that are explicitly offensive or derogatory. Because certain marginalized groups are targeted by anonymous comments in online newspapers, writes Santana (2012), the forum has proven to be as ineffective as Habermas's public sphere in accommodating such groups (also see Fraser, 1992).

The effect of anonymity in online forums exemplifies the dilemma faced by news organizations as they continue to leverage interactive features to engage with readers. It also brings new relevance to the role of journalists in an online public space, and researchers have seized the opportunity to examine the relationship between news professionals and newly empowered news consumers.

2.7 The Journalist's Perspective

By creating new channels of communication between journalists and audience members, interactive technology has given the public a share of control over news presentation. Journalists have generally been resistant to the idea. As Singer (2006) notes, "Journalists have been slow to let go of the 'we write, you read'" mentality (p. 266). Having long maintained a professional distance from both readers and sources,

56

they have struggled to accept the elimination of barriers that have prevented public intrusion into their professional space (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Rebillard & Touboul, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Singer et al., 2011). In the early stages of interactive adoption by newspapers, journalists expressed reservations over the inevitable increase in audience involvement online. Schultz's *New York Times* survey found that while journalists considered email to be under-utilized as an interactive portal, they were lukewarm, at best, about actually having to use it to communicate with readers (p. 211).

The professional response to reader comments has been more absolute than ambivalent. Journalists distrust opinionated user-generated content like reader comments because it represents neither public opinion nor the views of regular newspaper readers (Thornton, 2009; Perez-Pena, 2010) but is instead "the domain of people who hold extreme and often unpalatable political views" (Wahl- Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle, 2010, p. 186). This causes disruptions to the tightly structured, deadline-driven routines in traditional newsrooms (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer, 2006) and creates distractions for journalists who may be already balancing multiple responsibilities (Schultz, 2000). The free flow of thought and expression reflected in anonymous comments is particularly uncomfortable for journalists when the content violates the basic tenets of professional integrity and, adding insult to injury, is delivered in a space that was once their exclusive domain. Anonymity has been blamed for the distortion of facts and the propagation of misinformation (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a, 2011b), and personal attacks on sources or reporters that drive away users out of fear that their own posts will be subjected to similar abuse and contempt (Nagar, 2009). Anonymity fuels "unconstrained expressions of opinion" on culturally sensitive topics such as race

and gender that have "found a convenient and comfortable amplifier in the very public space of readers' comments" (Loke, 2011, p. 4), further discouraging the "civil, thoughtful discussion of community issues" (Santana, 2011, p. 75).

This intolerant and at times contemptuous regard for anonymous commentary may explain the ineffectiveness of the reader comment forum in serving as a conduit for conversation between journalists and the public (Manosevitch & Walker, 2010). Perhaps contributing to their disdain is the commercial value of the forum to the news operation. Studies have framed online interactive forums like reader comments as a necessary evil for driving traffic to news websites (Nagar, 2009), with commercial interests outweighing the hesitation or concerns from journalists over content quality (Chung, 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Scholars agree that acceptance of the reader comment forum and its potential for contributing to positive public discourse requires a top-down commitment from news organizations. Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011b) recommend that editorial managers explore new strategies for improving the discourse among users and the relationship between users and journalists and users. They concur with Schultz's (2000) suggestion that journalists should accept the inevitability of such interactive forums by taking a more active role in reader response and communication by participating in forum discussions. The goal, according to Schultz, is to preserve the media's traditional role as "institutions of integration and public discourse" while adapting to the new culture of interaction (p. 217).

In fact, initiatives are underway to improve the quality of online dialogue, from outsourcing moderation duties to applying stricter controls. Newspapers such as the *Boston Globe* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* have contracted with companies that

specialize in moderating online content in an effort to free up newsroom resources while improving the quality of the discourse (Ellis, 2011). Using the social media site Facebook as a registration and moderation platform for online commenters has increased the quality of the conversation at the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* by eliminating anonymity and requiring commenters to post under their real names (Sonderman, 2011). In August 2012, McClatchy Newspapers began implementing a series of recommendations to "connect more deeply with our audience, and (make) the best use of interactive elements in newsgathering and publishing" (McClatchy Newspapers, 2012, p. 1). Included were revisions to the company's commenting policies; most notably, requiring users to register through Facebook to more accurately verify the user's identity (p. 6). News staffs were also encouraged to respond to comments as "a clear message to readers that 'We're listening'" (p. 8).

2.8 A Vehicle For Democratic Engagement

Nearly three quarters of adults in America are considered to be "local news enthusiasts, " reliant on both print and online newspapers for news about government and civic affairs and more likely to believe that they can make a positive contribution to civic improvement (Miller et al., 2012). With a greater impact on social trust than other forms of media (Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001), newspapers can facilitate the various forms of audience participation, including public deliberation, that brings communities together. This is the essence of democratic engagement, and the foundation for the exploratory nature of this dissertation.

The "process" of public deliberation is a key concept in understanding the difference between civic engagement and democratic engagement. Saltmarsh et al. (2009) write that civic engagement is action-based, centered on time and place, with knowledge gained through direct involvement and participation. When individuals interact with one another in a deliberative process--one that reflects inclusiveness, participation, and an "equality of respect" for the knowledge and experience of others-- and work toward shared objectives, civic engagement becomes democratic. "Democratic engagement seeks the public good with the public… as a means to facilitating a more active and engaged democracy, " the authors conclude. "(It is) collaborative (and) problem-oriented, (addressing) community change through a multi-directional flow of information" (5th para). This is consistent with Delli Carpini's (2004) description of democratic engagement as a reflection of one's values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs, expressed by direct participation (i.e., voting, attending political rallies or community meetings, volunteering for charitable work) or through public deliberation and debate on issues of shared importance (p. 398).

Citizens that are democratically engaged, writes Delli Carpini, have higher levels of social trust or feelings of "connectedness" to fellow citizens and are more likely to encourage others to participate in community affairs (p. 403). Participation in deliberative forums gives citizens a greater sense of political self-efficacy–that their contribution has value and significance that can "make a difference"–which in turn strengthens other aspects of citizenship such as political interest and collective action through civic and political participation (Gastil, 2000).

Yet the role played by the media in motivating citizens to be democratically engaged, through deliberation or direct participation in civic affairs, remains largely inconclusive.

Miller et al. (2012) found that local news enthusiasts aged 40 and older are more connected to their communities and more likely to follow local news topics on politics, crime, taxes, and local government, whereas younger news consumers are more interested in stories on restaurants and job opportunities. Younger news enthusiasts (56 percent) are more likely than older news consumers (33 percent) to actively participate in the digital local news environment; this includes commenting on local news stories (22 percent v. 13 percent) and contributing to an online discussion (14 percent v. 5 percent) (Miller et al., 2012). In all, younger residents of urban or suburban areas were least connected to their communities, in terms of how long they lived there or how many people they knew, but were the heaviest users of interactive features on local newspaper websites. Residents of rural areas and small towns continue to rely more on the traditional print newspaper (53 percent) rather than the online version (18 percent) for community news and information and, subsequently, are far less likely to actively participate in interactive online news forums (Miller et al., 2012).

This data seems to support the premise that, while certain online platforms can potentially contribute to the rejuvenation of Habermas's public sphere (Dahlberg 2004; Oblak, 2003), democratic engagement is predicated not by the time spent with media, but in how people use media (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001). Significant relationships have not been found between various dimensions of civic engagement and user-generated content (Leung, 2009). In other words, those who

are actively participating in civic matters are not necessarily those who are active in generating content online (p. 1339).

In an examination of online interactive features and civic involvement, Chung (2008) finds only men and those who were involved in local politics to be actively engaged in the human interactive features that foster two-way communication and the expression of ideas. Although these features make online news truly different from news delivered through traditional media channels, she argues, they are infrequently used (p. 674). Ognyanova et al.'s (2012) study of online participation in discourse on local issues confirms that online participation enhances intergroup dialogue and civic engagement, but their other findings suggest the presence of exclusionary factors that have traditionally hampered democratic discourse. Social groups that are already disconnected from local civic practices and communication resources -- including the elderly or those with lower education levels or socio-economic status -- may remain excluded from online engagement and less likely to seek out digital platforms for participation.

With the content and form of newspapers evolving almost daily through multi-media platforms, questions remain on the role of journalism and democratic engagement. The Internet has provided unparalleled accessibility to news audiences but has hardly led to a renaissance in public participation and civic engagement. Information is easier to obtain than ever before, but accessibility has not necessarily created a more informed citizenry nor fueled individuals' desire to participate in civic affairs. What can be said with relative conviction is that there have never been more platforms for public discourse, accessible and convenient to more citizens, than those offered by online news sources. Newspapers have the opportunity to advance constructive discussion in a new public

sphere of their own making, but further inquiry is needed to assess the progress that is being made. This dissertation seeks to fill the void in this particular area of research. The objective is to gain valuable insight into the relationship between newspapers and their readers, and if interactive forums like reader comments are enhancing public trust by facilitating democratic engagement.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation relies on a quantitative content analysis as its methodological approach. Conducted during the summer and fall of 2012, a content analysis was applied to reader comments from stories published on websites of six South Carolina newspapers.

Based on the theories of deliberative democracy and democratic citizen participation from John Dewey and Jurgen Habermas, the study addressed Research Question #1 ("How do online comments to newspaper stories reflect themes that could encourage or discourage civic engagement among citizens?") by analyzing reader comments for the presence or absence themes associated with deliberative engagement: political efficacy, mobilization, and cynicism. Weare and Lin (2000) emphasized that content analysis should continue to be the "methodological underpinning" of research on the Internet's growing influence on fundamental democratic processes, including public discourse (p. 273). Yet in the absence of a true theoretical framework, content analysis has been "stuck on a plateau" and unable to systematically explain "either the forces that (create)...content or...its effects" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1990, p. 649).

The phenomena of computer-mediated communication, including online reader comments, has prompted scholars to investigate the content of these messages (*what* is being said) as well as the possible motivations behind the messages (*why* is it being said).

64

To enhance this line of research, and to address Research Question 2 ("How are themes associated with the uses and gratifications of media use reflected in reader comments to online news stories?"), reader comments were also analyzed in this dissertation for the presence or absence of themes reflecting information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment. The objective of this methodological approach is to offer evidence of the potential for content analysis to contribute to a more nuanced conceptual understanding of computer-mediated communication (Bucy, 2004).

To bring further analytical depth to the quantitative methodology used in this dissertation, interviews were conducted with journalists from the sampled newspapers whose responsibilities include the daily moderation of reader comments. A textual analysis of these interviews provides insight into the perceived value of the reader comment forum and the evolving role of the journalist in facilitating public deliberation and debate. Providing a clear, accurate, and inclusive opinion based on personal experience (Burgess, 1982), interviews have increasingly been used to gain insight from news executives and journalists, especially those on the digital "front line" who monitor or moderate interactive forums. The insight from these interviews, which were conducted concurrently with the quantitative phase of the dissertation, enhances the content analysis by offering insight into "how" and "why" newspapers have implemented reader comment platforms, the effectiveness of those platforms in enhancing reader engagement, and advancing the overall objectives of the news organization (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012).

3.1 Research Design

This dissertation is part of an ongoing research initiative being conducted in conjunction with the South Carolina Press Association on the transition of the state's daily newspapers from traditional to digital business models. Sampling among South Carolina dailies is limited by its relatively small size; only 16 daily newspapers are published in the state. But within this universe lies a mix of daily papers in terms of circulation, market size and demographics, and ownership. Weekday circulation of the state's daily newspapers ranges from 4,955 for the Union *Daily Times* to 88,939 for the Charleston *Post and Courier* and averages just under 30,000 (South Carolina Press Association, 2012). Ten of the 16 daily newspapers are owned by publicly traded media companies, while six are family-owned or privately held by partnership groups (SCPA, 2012).

Past studies of newspaper content have used different criteria for selecting samples. Northwestern University's 2004 Readership Study sampled newspapers within markets with the widest possible demographic distribution and, in markets where there were multiple dailies, selected the newspaper with the greatest geographical difference and the most diversity by ownership compared to the other newspapers in the sample (Readership Institute, 2004). Studies with smaller samples have used similar strategies to achieve a diverse representation of newspapers. Fico and Drager (2001) randomly selected 15 newspapers based on circulation (between 50,000 and 100,000) and geographic distribution. Beam (2003) used a market-orientation index to stratify 12 newspapers (six with high scores on the index, six with low scores) and then further stratified by circulation (among each set of six, two small, two medium, two large).

More recently, a pilot study of reader comments in online newspapers conducted by Manosevitch and Walker (2009) selected two community newspapers that differed in size, location, and audience demographics.

Because an increasing number of newspapers have monetized online content through paywalls or similar fee-based systems, it was important to select newspapers for this study that still offered free, unfettered access to online content. A census of all 16 newspaper websites and follow-up telephone inquiries conducted in spring 2012 found that five were charging for online news content or were planning to implement a subscription-only policy during the sampling frame. The remaining 11 newspapers were then stratified by circulation, frequency, market and ownership. The six papers selected for the final sample each publish the same number of days in markets that reflected geographic and demographic diversity. Equal weight was given to circulation (three of the newspapers have a weekday circulation of less than 30,000 and three are circulated to more than 30,000), and the ratio of public/private ownership of all of the state's dailies was maintained (four of the sampled papers are publicly owned and two are privately held). This purposive sample achieves internal validity by providing an "apples to apples" comparison of news sites with free, accessible content and provides data that is illustrative but not strictly representative of the media universe (Pew Research, 2009).

Prior to data collection, a survey of the websites of all six newspapers used in the sample was conducted to determine user registration procedures required by each newspaper. The registration process is a key determinant of whether online users are permitted to post comments under a screen name or pseudonym. For example, the "plug-in" software offered to newspapers by the social media program Facebook requires online

commenters to be identified by the name used to create their Facebook profile. As previously noted in the Literature Review, newspapers that required users to register for the online comment forum through Facebook experienced a higher level of civility in the discourse because users were almost always identified by the real names (Sonderman, 2011). Although anonymity is not completely eliminated from Facebook registration -- users can join Facebook under a pseudonym and use that identity for online commenting in newspaper forums -- the difference in registration policies could prove important to this study.

The website survey confirmed that four of the six sampled newspapers used a registration platform hosted by the Disqus software program. Labeled as a "conversation network," Disqus (pronounced as "discuss") requires only a name (one's real name, or a screen name or pseudonym), a valid email address (where confirmation is sent, and reply is required), and a password for registration. The registration form links to an extensive listing of Terms and Policies, although users do not have to confirm agreement with these policies when registering. When posting an online comment through Disqus, users are required to sign in using their screen name and password, and they are identified in the comment thread by the screen name and an optional photograph, avatar or other graphic image. Disqus also offers news organizations a variety of "plug-in" software to help moderate comment forums and track user activity ("Publishers," disqus.com, n.d.)

Two of the sampled newspapers (one small daily, with a weekday circulation less than 30,000, and one large daily with more than 30,000 weekday circulation) utilize "plug-in" software from Facebook for registering users. The Registration feature eliminates the need for users to complete an additional form on the newspaper site, but it

also gives newspapers access to information from the user's social network page (Facebook Developers, 2012b). The "Comments Box" feature on Facebook is an add-on program that hosts and manages the reader comment forum with built-in tools for moderation and distribution (Facebook Developers, 2012a). Newspapers may designate the specific information required for online commenting from the user's Facebook profile, but the standard requirement is a full name (the user's Facebook identity, which may or may not be their real name), a valid email address, and a log-in password that is different from their Facebook password. When an online reader writes a comment to a news story, the post identifies them by the name and profile photo or avatar used on their Facebook page.

To account for this information in the data analysis, and to further ensure the anonymity of those journalists who participated in the interviews, the researcher revised the labels of the sampled newspapers prior to statistical testing. Rather than identifying each newspaper by name, the papers with less than 30K circulation were identified as "Small Daily 1," "Small Daily 2," etc., while those with more than 30K circulation were labeled as "Large Daily 1, "Large Daily 2," etc. Additionally, they were labeled "(D)" or "(FB)" according to whether Disqus or Facebook was used as a registration/moderation program. Thus, the newspapers will appear in the data analysis as "Small Daily 1 (D)," "Large Daily 3 (FB)," etc.

3.2 Sampling Frame

The content analysis conducted for this dissertation was based on a constructed three-week sample, a technique considered to be superior to a other forms of random

69

sampling when the goal is to obtain a representative distribution of overall content (Stempel, 1952; Jones & Carter, 1959). Simple random sampling of daily newspapers fails to address variation in newspaper content; days with traditionally large newsholes (e.g., Sundays) could by chance be over- or under-represented in a sample. Constructed week sampling assumes cyclic variation of content for different days of the week and requires that all the different days of the week be represented (Stempel, 1989). A constructed week sample was used by Lacy et al. (2001) to ensure equal representation among the daily editions and control for sources of "systematic variation" (p. 837) first discussed by Stempel (1952). For Northwestern University's 2004 newspaper study (Readership Institute, 2004), eight publishing days were randomly selected within a one-month frame to form a constructed week of seven non-consecutive days plus one additional Sunday -- one of the sampled papers published just six days a week.

In comparing different sampling methods, Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993) found that one constructed week was adequate for representing a six-month "population" of editions for a daily newspaper, but that two constructed weeks provided more reliable estimates for local stories (p. 139). These results supported earlier research of local news stories by Stempel (1952) and Jones and Carter (1959).

Constructed week sampling is equally efficient for analyzing online news content. Comparing sampling methods and sample sizes, Hester and Dougall (2007) found that a single constructed week allows reliable estimates of online content in a six-month population of newspaper editions, but between two and five constructed weeks are needed to accurately represent online news content gathered during the same period. Based on those findings, this dissertation employs a randomly selected sample of three

70

constructed weeks drawn from a five-month population of editions from July through

November 2012. Relying on the procedure used by Lacy and colleagues (2001), the

constructed weeks were created by identifying all Mondays and randomly selecting one

Monday, then identifying all Tuesdays, and randomly selecting one Tuesday, continuing

until three seven-day periods were obtained.

A total of 2,337 comments were collected from the sampled newspapers for the

three-week constructed sample comprised of the following days during the summer and

fall of 2012: July 11, 15, 24, and 30; August 17, 20, 21, 25, and 27; September 2, 13, 16,

19, and 21; October 13, 16, 18, and 20; and November 9, 14, and 15.

3.3 Unit Of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this dissertation is a reader comment, or each post made

by an audience member that accompanies a specific news story on an online news

website (Loke, 2011). Each comment represents the response by one particular writer on

a single day. Comments can evolve from individual insight on the designated article to a

dialogue among readers or between a reader and a journalist.

To gain insight into the role that reader comments play in democratic deliberation,

the analysis is limited to reader comments to local, bylined news stories (Fico and

Drager, 2001; Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993) that appear in the printed newspaper and on the

newspaper's website (Massey & Levy, 1999; Randle & Mordock, 2003) during the

constructed three-week period. Local news stories are most reflective of public

journalism practices by the newspaper on a daily basis (Choi, 2004). In order to more

accurately assess degrees of democratic engagement, the researcher chose to focus on

articles related to issues and/or events considered by news executives to be relevant to local citizens and produced by journalists affiliated with the respective newspapers as staff writers, reporters or editors. Focusing on stories that appear on the front page of the printed paper and the home page or "local" news page of a newspaper web site helps ensure that these stories are the most important on that particular day in that particular community, while also reflecting a parsimonious but valid reflection of the data. A complete listing of the types of stories from which comments were collected can be found in Appendix A of this dissertation.

Comments to local news stories are especially appropriate for examining public discourse among readers who have a personal stake in the local community, as opposed to comments on weblogs or "blogs." Blogs tend to adopt a specific viewpoint and draw like-minded individuals (Xenos, 2008). Blog readers represent an online community because of this shared interest. Newspaper readers come together online with no such connection other than the fact that they read the same newspaper and most likely live in the same community. The content of reader comments to local news stories is a more accurate reflection of the public sphere ideal, with diverse groups of participants coming together to share views on a variety of different topics which, collectively, have relevance to the whole of the community. The rationale is equally valid for excluding opinion pieces and editorials from the analysis. Because news stories are more reflective of an organization's commitment to the traditional values of objectivity and balance, news coverage potentially attracts a broader range of public views than an issue-specific position taken in a newspaper's editorial (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011).

The ephemeral nature of certain pages on news websites, particularly those that are constantly updated, has posed challenges to researchers. The synchronous nature of online commenting requires that the time of data collection for each day of the sampling period be vigilantly controlled (Weare & Lin, 2000). To capture a consistent "snapshot" of content (Koehler, 1999), data samples were drawn from four of the six websites at various times of the day (Choi, 2004). From this testing, it was determined that articles containing reader comments be collected between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. on each day of the constructed three-week period.

On each collection day, both the printed and online editions of sampled newspapers were analyzed. Print editions that were not readily available to the researcher were accessed by referencing the newspaper's "e-edition," a digital replica of the print edition. E-editions are available by subscription from each of the sampled newspaper's websites. Local, bylined articles on the front page of the e-edition were documented and then cross-referenced on the newspaper's website. Each article was downloaded and printed in a format that included the complete article as well as the reader comments that appeared at the end of the article. Depending on the length of the article and the number of comments, these print-outs ranged from two to seven pages. Print-outs for each article were sorted by newspaper and collection date and randomly distributed to coders on a weekly basis.

In some cases, a local news story found on the printed edition's front page was not found in its entirety on the home page of the paper's website. Instead, those stories were often featured as the lead story on the site's "local news" page. This was not seen as being detrimental to the effectiveness of the study; these local news portals were

never more than two clicks from the home page, and page-view analytics from the researcher's local paper revealed the "local" or "metro" news pages to be among the most visited on a newspaper's site on any given day. It is also common for a story to be published on a newspaper's website in the late afternoon or evening of a particular day and then appear the following day in the newspaper's print edition. It was determined by the researcher that the date of data collection should reflect when an article appeared on the front page of the print newspaper, in that this would give print and online readers ample opportunity to post a comment to the digital version. Reviews of a small subset of articles from each of the sampled newspapers found that no local news stories were posted online on the day following publication in the print edition.

Online reader posts are typically arranged in reverse chronological order, rather than using journalistic criteria like relevance, and items are published as they are posted (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). For this study, the default settings for each newspaper was changed so that posted comments were sorted beginning with the "oldest" comments. The rationale was that chronological sorting is a better, more fluid representation of the "conversation" taking place in the forum. It is also a standard consistent with earlier studies, which confirmed that comment threads typically begin with comments specific to the actual story before evolving into back and forth exchanges between two or more participants.

This strategy was particularly important when controlling for the overall number of comments to be analyzed. Online reader comments have been analyzed for overall trends in topicality or frequency (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b), specific attributes of negative or abusive comments (Bhutani, Misra & Toshniwal, 2012) or to identify

sentimentality expressed in comments to online news stories ranked "most popular" by online users (Sood & Churchill, 2010). Scholars have also investigated how certain controversial news topics affect the quality and tone of online discourse (Loke, 2011; Santana, 2012). No studies of online comments were found that considered the overall volume of comments to particular news story as a source of potential bias; Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011b) found a correlation between comment frequency and negativity but acknowledged that questions remained on the "natural tendency" of users to post a positive or negative comment based on the overall tone of the particular conversation (p. 1410). Thus, in addition to controlling the order in which posted comments were collected, the researcher felt compelled to control for potential threats to validity and reliability by limiting the number of comments drawn from each story to a maximum of twenty. The maximum number was selected based on the Diakopoulos and Naaman study (2011b), which found that online comments begin to shift in tone from positive to negative between the tenth and twentieth comment in a thread, an indication that the comments become more directed at others rather than the subject of the article (p. 1409). While many of the sampled articles in this study drew less than 20 comments at the time the sample was taken, there were just as many that generated as many as 200 or more. There were also instances, particularly among the smaller newspapers, where a local front-page news story had not generated a single comment. Those gaps were reflected in the recording and coding of the data.

3.4 Operational Definitions Of Variables

The content analysis consisted of both manifest ("on the surface") variables and latent content that required more subjective interpretations from coders (Neuendorf, 2002). Coding categories were identified and variables operationalized as follows:

Issue or posting date. The actual date in which the article appeared on the front page of the printed edition of the newspaper and on the homepage of the online version of the newspaper. This was recorded in a six-digit numerical format (e.g., July 1, 2012 is coded as "070112") and was used by the researcher strictly to ensure that data collection and coding accurately reflected the constructed three-week sample.

Newspaper. The name of the newspaper in which the article appears in both print and online form. Coded using a nominal scale (Krippendorfff, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002) with each newspaper represented numerically ("1 = Anderson Independent Mail, 2 = The State, etc. ").

Day of publication. The actual day of the week in which the article appears in the print edition of the newspaper. As previously noted, certain local stories first appeared on a newspaper's website a day earlier than its publication in the print newspaper. Basing the day of publication on the story's appearance in the print edition ensured that ample time had been allotted for online users to post comments to the digital version of the story. Nominal scales were assigned for recording the day of publication as "1 = Monday, 2 = Tuesday, " etc. (Krippendorfff, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002).

Type of story/article. A nominal scale was also developed to identify story content, or the main subject/topic addressed in each local news article being drawn for

the sample. Based on studies of traditional newspapers (Bailey & Hackett, 1997) and online news stories (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2011; Santana, 2010), a total of 19 typologies were identified as main subjects/topics for this analysis. A complete list of the typologies and descriptions of each can be found in Appendix A. Stories were coded as "1 = Police/crime/legal, 2 = Politics/government, 3 = Business/economy, etc. "

Number of comments per story. The number of comments actually posted to a particular article at the time of the data collection. Posts that were hidden or collapsed under previous comments were collected as long as the content could be opened and viewed, but comments that were marked as "deleted" or in violation of the newspaper's comment policy were excluded (Abdul-Mageed, 2008). A nomimal scale was assigned to assess the number of posted comments per story as "0 = 1 to 10 comments, 1 = 11 to 20 comments, and 2 = 21 or more comments. "

Identification of commenter. This is to determine if contributors are using their real names when posting, or using screen names or pseudonyms. The standard applied to this study is that the use of a full name -- first and last name -- represents the "true" identity of the user as long as the full name is not easily discernible as a pseudonym (i.e., names of cartoon characters, fictional characters, etc.). Based on a coding scheme for reader comments developed by Abdul-Mageed (2008), a nominal scale assigns a value of "0" to comments posted by individuals using a screen name or pseudonym and a value of "1" to comments under a user's real first and last name.

The dissertation's research questions were addressed by coding reader comments for the absence or presence of latent themes -- "0 = Absent, 1 = Present" -- commonly

associated with democratic engagement (political efficacy, cynicism and mobilization) and the uses and gratifications of media use (information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment). Themes were operationalized as follows:

    Political efficacy. As an attitudinal measure of democratic engagement (Delli Carpini, 2004), political efficacy is reflected by internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy is the sense that one's participation in their own governance can actually make a difference, a degree of empowerment reflected in comments such as "*You can make a difference*," "*Every vote counts*," or "*Voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the way government runs things.*" External efficacy is the belief that the political system would be responsive to the participation of citizens through statements such as *"They (government) need to know how you feel."* Faith in the democratic process can be enhanced as people who deliberate become empowered and feel that their government truly is "of the people" (Fishkin 1995). Kenski and Stroud (2006) write that the Internet may help improve external efficacy by enabling citizens to interact with other citizens in a "more or less anonymous, computer-mediated environment" (p. 50).   Efficacy in reader comments can also be expressed through statements that empower or encourage citizens to become actively involved in finding solutions to community problems that may be outside of a political realm (Hays, 2007). For example, a survey of news stories not included in this study's sample found a report on the formation of a community alliance to help curb underage drinking after an alcohol-related car crash in which several teenagers were killed or injured. Comments of support and encouragement to those involved in the alliance *("Good to learn that something good may come from this tragedy,"* "*I wish these folks luck in climbing that very tall*

mountain," "Keep up the great work, Julie and Phyllis") can also be expressions of efficacy.

Cynicism. Another attitudinal dimension of engagement, cynicism runs counter to efficacy by reflecting a feeling of negativity toward government that suggests distrust, alienation, or powerlessness (Delli Carpini, 2004). Gamson et al. (1992) argued that the media can facilitate levels of cynicism in the public that dissuades active participation and participation (in Kensicki, 2004, p. 54). Cynicism can be expressed online in degrees ranging from doubt *("Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on,"* or *"I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think"*) to resignation (*"People like me don't have any say about what the government does,"* "*I/we feel helpless,*" or *"There is nothing you/we can do to stop it"*) to anger and animosity *("He/she/they are crooks," "He/she/they don't care about the rest of us,"* or "*They don't want my/your/our help"*). Cynicism can also be targeted toward others in the community and reflect a lack of public trust or community "connectedness" (Rosen, 1993) among citizens. In this context, cynicism expressed in statements that are insensitive, vulgar, or threatening to others in an online forum can diminish the value of the discourse and discourage participation (Santana, 2010, 2012; Loke, 2012)

Mobilization. Whereas efficacy is more empowering in context, active participation can be facilitated through mobilizing information (Lemert et al., 1977). Although it does not inherently motivate people (Hoffman, 2006), mobilizing information enables individuals to act on existing motivations by providing specific details on meeting dates, times or locations as well as relevant phone numbers or other contact

information (Lemert, 1981; 1992; Merritt, 1998; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001).

Mobilization can be effectively promoted through interactive media channels when users share "call-to-action" information or identify specific opportunities to act (Hoffman, 2006). It can also be information that identifies a specific entity as an appropriate contact, or tactical information such as "how-to's" or tips that would enhance the effectiveness of mobilization (Delli Carpini, 2004).

Information. This is a construct traditionally defined as "surveillance" in uses & gratifications studies. As a motivational factor for using or consuming media, it refers to a means of information gathering; a cognitive approach whereby news consumers seek information about the world around them (Blumler, 1979). For the purpose of this dissertation, it can be indicated as an attempt to obtain information by asking questions, or to educate or inform others by answering questions; adding facts, insight, background, or observations to the online conversation or providing links to relevant resources; clarifying points made during a discussion or noting missing information; or pointing out inaccuracies, false statements, factual errors, or misinformation (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). Simply stated, it is a comment that contributes something substantive to the discussion in a very straightforward manner; one that is based in fact and not reflective of the contributor's personal feelings, beliefs, etc. An example from another story not used in this sample: A report on the state's efforts to reduce homeowner's insurance premiums for coastal residents drew this response: *"Premiums are on average $1,000 higher in this county than in coastal areas of New Jersey. Why are they so high in SC?"* This was followed further in the comment thread by a post from another user: *"As a point of*

comparison, this provides a blueprint for how Florida does it" (with link to an Orlando

newspaper article).

Personal Identity. Consumers motivated by personal identity use media content

to give added salience to something in their own lives or personal situations (Blumler,

1979). Personal identity motives are used to resolve a personal dilemma or either

reinforce or justify a change in one's attitudes, ideologies, or beliefs (Blumler, 1979),

although McGuire (1974) suggested that individuals who inject their identities into media

are most likely seeking reinforcement of their own values and beliefs. In online

discussions, motivations of personal identity are manifested by expressions that indicate a

particularly intense interest in a story or an emotional response that would initiate the

desire to comment (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). Comments expressing personal

identity motives are characterized by the use of personal pronouns ("I, " "me, " "we, "

etc.) or the use of multiple exclamation points ("!!!!!") or question marks ("????") to add

emphasis to their point. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) note that personal identity

can also be reflected in reader comments when ALL CAPS are used to represent an

online version of shouting (p. 315).

Social Interaction. These motives are social in that they are expressions explicitly

directed at other people in the online community. The most obvious indicator of a social

interaction is a post that is marked as a "reply" or "response" to a previous post; as such,

these comments can be simple acknowledgements of agreement with other users. But

themes of social interaction can also be more emotionally driven and reflected in

words/phrases that express sympathy or condolences to others (Diakopoulos & Naaman,

2011b) or that applaud good work by reporters as in "*The facts are presented well here.*

Nice job of reporting. I look forward to reading more." Conversely, it can also be expressed in comments that question, challenge, or refute the comments made by others, or through words or phrases that attempt to persuade others, such as trying to get the newspaper to take some action or cover a particular story.

Entertainment. Blumler (1979) defined entertainment as a diversionary tactic used to relieve boredom or stress or simply take consumers away from their daily routines. As a motivational factor for writing online comments, values of entertainment or diversion would be expressed by words and/or phrases that attempt to "lighten the mood" of the discourse or debate by making a joke or a humorous observation (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). Unlike cynicism or sarcasm, it is not designed to give perspective to a comment thread but is simply an injection of humor in an attempt to be funny. A non-sampled news article on South Carolina's revised laws allowing golf carts on many secondary roads drew several posts that raised questions about the legal age for driving carts and the requirement of seat belts, followed by this: "*Oh great, more old people driving 15 m.p.h. on the roads.*" Another non-sampled story on efforts to rescue boaters trapped on a coastal sand bar prompted this comment: "*I bet they were from Ohio!*"

3.5 Coding Training And Intercoder Reliability

To eliminate the potential for researcher bias in the content analysis portion of this dissertation, two graduate students in journalism and mass communication were recruited to serve as independent coders. Once the coding instrument had been drafted by the researcher in June 2012, a series of training sessions and pre-tests were conducted

over the course of several weeks, modeled after Lacy & Riffe's (1996) recommendations for establishing acceptable levels of intercoder reliability. According to Krippendorfff (1980), intercoder reliability establishes the degree to which a study can be recreated under different circumstances with different coders. In content analysis, intercoder reliability provides validation of a coding scheme by measuring the level of agreement achieved by two or more coders using the same process on the same data set (Neuendorf, 2002).

The initial training session was held with both coders, who were given an overview of the dissertation objectives and a thorough review of coding procedures and operational definitions for all variables. This two-hour training session was followed by an informal assessment designed to further develop a common frame of reference and "calibrate" the coders against one another (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 142). The coders were asked to independently code a randomly selected set of approximately 25-30 comments which were not a part of the primary sample. The coders reconvened with the researcher four days later to review the results, which revealed certain discrepancies in the operational definitions of the Cynicism, Information, Personal Identity, and Entertainment. Specifically, the coders required additional clarification on the differences between expressions of cynicism and humor, and if expressions of personal experience were to be regarded more as Information or Personal Identity. These problematic areas were addressed through revisions to the coding instrument and clarification of the operational definitions of the specific variables, followed by a thorough review and discussion of the codebook revisions with the coders.

After determining that these areas had been effectively addressed, the researcher conducted a pre-test on a random sub-sample of reader comments from articles in the sampled newspapers but on days that were not a part of the study's constructed sample. This sub-sample (n = 235) represented approximately 10 percent of the total sample, an acceptable size for a reliability assessment in social science research (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Comments were given to each coder with instructions to code the data independently. The results from the pilot test indicated two categories of variables, Political Efficacy and Mobilization, that failed to achieve a level of reliability of .80 (Krippendorfff, 1980; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). These categories were collapsed, reconfigured and redefined as "Engagement" by the researcher. The results of the pre-test also indicated the presence of only six of the 19 content typologies operationalized under "Type of Story/Article: " Police/Crime/Legal, Politics/Government, Business/Economy, Education/Schools, Accidents/Tragic Occurrences, and Ordinary People (a construct for feature-type stories on local citizens achieving individual success or overcoming obstacles or personal hardship). The category was revised to include only these labeled variables in the coding scheme, with any remaining story types defined as "Other" (coded as "Missing data"). The complete codebook with coding instructions can be found in Appendix B of this dissertation.

After another meeting with coders to review and discuss these revisions to the codebook, a final reliability test was conducted on a subsample of comments (n = 280, or 12 percent of the total sample) randomly selected by the researcher after data collection was underway. Once again, each coder was instructed to work independently and have no contact or interaction with one another. Using data that has been collected for the

dissertation's quantitative analysis provides a fair representation of the coders'

performance for the duration of the study (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 146). This test resulted in

acceptable reliability levels when applying two commonly used reliability indices,

percent agreement and Cohen's kappa. Table 1 reflects the levels of intercoder reliability

for this study, calculated by using IBM SPSS Statistical software (version 21).

Table 3.1

Intercoder Reliability Coefficients

Variables	Percent agreement	Cohen's kappa
Newspaper	100.0	1.00
Day of Publication	100.0	1.00
Type of Story/Article	92.8	.83
Total Comments/Article	100.0	1.00
User Identification	99.3	.87
Engagement	99.1	.81
Cynicism	95.4	.94
Information	98.7	.84
Personal Identity	95.7	.86
Social Interaction	100.0	.94
Entertainment	98.8	.86

Also known as simple agreement, percent agreement is the simple percentage of

all coding decisions made by pairs of coders on which the coders agree (Lombard et al.,

2002). But because this method does not account for agreement that would occur simply

by chance, it is often used in conjunction with an index that does account for chance

agreement. Cohen's kappa is a widely used reliability coefficient that is effective for measuring agreement among multiple coders (Lacy & Riffe, 1993; Perreault & Leigh, 1989; Zwick, 1988). Although there are no established standards for an acceptable level of reliability, Neuendorf (2002) refers to the standard "rules of thumb" in which a coefficient of .90 or greater is acceptable by all and a coefficient of .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations (p. 145).

In adherence to the recommended guidelines for measuring and reporting intercoder reliability, coefficients should be reported for each categorical variable rather than averaging reliability coefficients across variables (Lacy & Riffe, 1993).

3.6 Journalist Interviews

The quantitative content analysis conducted for this dissertation was complemented by interviews conducted with journalists from each of the sampled newspapers, as a means of bringing analytical depth to the research (Herbert & Thurman, 2007). The interviews conducted for this study, while representing a very small sample, provide a greater understanding of the role played by reader comment forums in facilitating democratic discourse. The responses from journalists offer insight into the relationship between newsroom personnel and online audiences and how reader comment forums are being managed to serve the needs of the organization and the community.

The objective was to gather input from those on the proverbial "front lines" of the newspapers' reader comment section. Contact information for the appropriate editorial personnel (Executive Editor, Editor-in-Chief, Online Editor or Online Managing Editor) from each newspaper was obtained from the South Carolina Press Association, and each

86

was contacted by email in mid-June 2012. The email introduced the researcher, explained the nature of the dissertation, and requested an interview with the journalists most directly responsible for the oversight of the reader comment forum. The email also included an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity to all participants in the interviews. Three responses were received within two days, all confirming their participation in the study. A follow-up email and telephone call approximately one week after the initial inquiry resulted in confirmation from journalists with two additional newspapers. A representative from the final newspaper agreed to participate after a second follow-up phone call and email approximately 20 days after the initial email request. In all, there was 100 percent participation from the sampled newspapers. Two of the participating newspapers -- one large market (more than 30,000 daily circulation) and one small market (less than 30,000 daily circulation) -- were represented by two journalists in the interview; the other four newspapers (two large market and two small market) were represented by one journalist in the interview. Thus, a total of eight journalists, all of whom served in an editorial management capacity with direct supervision over the reader comment forum, participated in the interviews. A detailed list of the participants and newspapers (with fictitious identification to ensure anonymity) job titles, and years of experience can be found in Appendix C of this dissertation.

As interviews were being confirmed and scheduled, a script was drafted by the researcher with open-ended questions addressing the newspaper's specific policies for its reader comment forum (i.e., registration requirements, restrictions on content and frequency of comments, if moderation is conducted in-house or outsourced, and if and how these policies had changed since implementing the feature), discernible trends in the

content of reader comments (i.e., the emergence of different themes according to story type) and the real and perceived value of the reader comment forum in serving the newspaper's overall objectives (how long has the reader comment forum been offered, its effectiveness in engaging readers, and its overall impact on the newspaper's relationship with its readers). The original script was revised after an informal discussion between the researcher and a former journalism colleague and a pre-test interview with an executive from a non-sampled South Carolina daily newspaper. These revisions included the elimination of a question about the newspaper's plans for monetizing online content (through a "paywall" or other subscription-based model) and a follow-up probe on how those plans might affect reader comments in terms of content volume, quality and tone. The researcher determined that the question was not directly relevant to the research at hand; content would be more directly impacted by changes in the newspaper's registration or moderation policies, which is addressed elsewhere in the script.

The finalized script was emailed to the primary contact at each newspaper in advance of the interviews, which were conducted during July and August 2012. One of the interviews was conducted in person, due to the newspaper's close proximity to the researcher, and five were conducted by telephone. Each interview began with a summary of the project and an informed consent protocol. Once again, participants were promised confidentiality in accordance with this university's human subject requirements. All of the interviews were recorded and ranged from approximately 25 to 50 minutes in duration. The script used for these interviews can be found in Appendix D of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This dissertation's quantitative content analysis resulted in the collection of 2,337

comments were collected from the sampled newspapers during the summer and fall of

2012. Statistical testing of the data consisted of descriptive analysis using frequency

testing as well as chi-square tests for independence. All statistical tests were done on the

SPSS Statistics 21 software program.

4.1 Manifest Variables

A frequency analysis revealed that the daily newspapers with weekday circulation

of more than 30,000 collectively generated 54.2 percent of the sampled comments (n =

1,266) compared to 45.9 percent (n = 1,073) for the dailies with weekday circulations

under 30,000. As shown in Table 4.1, newspapers using the Disqus platform for

comment registration and moderation drew a higher overall volume of comments than

those newspapers using Facebook. "Large Daily 3," a newspaper that utilizes Facebook

for registration and moderation, generated just 2.6 percent of the total sample (n = 61),

less than "Small Daily 3" (3.7 percent, n = 86) that also moderates through Facebook.

Table 4.1: *Comment Frequency by Newspaper*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Small Daily 1 (D)	536	22.9	22.9	22.9
	Large Daily 1 (D)	799	34.2	34.2	57.1
	Large Daily 2 (D)	406	17.4	17.4	74.4
	Large Daily 3 (FB)	61	2.6	2.6	77.0
	Small Daily 2 (D)	451	19.3	19.3	96.3
	Small Daily 3 (FB)	86	3.7	3.7	100.0
	Total	2339	100.0	100.0	

Overall, the sampled newspaper with the highest daily circulation ("Large Daily 1") also generated the most comments (34.2 percent of the total sample, n = 799), but a smaller daily in a coastal-area market with a large transient population drew more comments (19.3 percent, n = 451) than two of the larger dailies. These results could possibly be linked to readership and demographic profiles of audiences in these particular markets that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. But the overall results are consistent with reports that tighter registration policies similar to those used by Facebook -- which virtually eliminate anonymous commenting -- typically lead to significant decreases in participation in reader comment forums (Sonderman, 2011).

Of the 231 news articles collected for the sample, 57.6 percent (n = 133) generated 10 comments or less, while 16.5 percent (n = 38) drew from 11 to 20 comments and 30 percent (n = 60) generated more than 21 comments. As shown in Table 4.2, 35.1 percent (n = 822) of all reader comments were in response to stories on political

affairs and government issues, followed by articles on crime, law enforcement or legal matters (28.9 percent, n = 676) and local business or economic news (14.8 percent, n = 346, 14.8 percent).

Table 4.2: *Comment Frequency by Story Type*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Politics/government	822	35.1	35.1	35.1
	Police/crime/legal	676	28.9	28.9	64.0
	Business/economy	346	14.8	14.8	78.8
	Education/schools	130	5.6	5.6	84.4
	Accidents/tragedies	89	3.8	3.8	88.2
	Ordinary people	81	3.5	3.5	91.7
	Other	195	8.3	8.3	100.0
	Total	2339	100.0	100.0	

Statistically, a significant relationship was found between newspapers and comments on specific story types ($x^2(30) = 780.7$, $p = .000$). On average, readers of smaller-circulated dailies posted more than 40 percent of comments on crime-related stories, while the large-circulation newspapers using the Disqus program were more than twice as likely to comment on stories related to politics or government. The one notable difference was found in the large-circulation daily using Facebook, which had fewer overall comments than any other newspaper (see Table 4.1). In "Large Daily 3 (FB)," 54 percent (n = 35) of all comments were made to crime/police/legal stories, compared to only 3.3 percent (n = 2) on political/government stories.

91

With the majority of sampled newspapers allowing users to comment under screen names or pseudonyms, nearly 86 percent (n = 1,993) of all comments were posted anonymously compared to 14.2 percent (n = 332) posted under the user's full (first and last) name. The crosstabulation in Table 4.3 reveals strong significance in the relationship between anonymous/non-anonymous comments and newspapers using Disqus for registration and those using Facebook ($x^2(5) = 843.8$, $p = .000$). Both small and large circulation dailies using Disqus featured substantially more anonymous comments, while nearly all of the commenters on the two newspapers using Facebook were identified by their real name.

A significant relationship was also found between user identification and comments to certain types of stories ($x^2(6) = 29.4$, $p = .000$). Table 4.4 indicates that anonymous users were more likely to comment on stories related to politics or government, while non-anonymous users posted more frequently stories related to crime or law enforcement Among all anonymous commenters (n = 1993), 36.5 percent (n = 728) responded to stories on politics/government compared to 28.3 percent (n = 564) posting anonymously on crime, police or legal stories. Among those posting under their real names, 33 percent (n = 109) commented on crime/police/legal stories compared to 27.3 percent (n = 90) commenting on stories related to politics/government.

4.2 Research Question 1

In addressing RQ1 ("How do online comments to newspaper stories reflect themes that could encourage or discourage civic engagement among citizens?"), themes of "Engagement" were identified in just over a third of the sampled comments (34.1

percent, n = 798), while "Cynicism" was present in well over one-half of all comments (54 percent, n = 1,264).

Table 4.3: *Newspaper and User ID Crosstabulation*

			User ID		
			Anonymous ID	Real Name ID	Total
Newspaper	Small Daily 1 (D)	Count	521	12	533
		% within Newspaper	97.7%	2.3%	100.0%
	Large Daily 1 (D)	Count	702	90	792
		% within Newspaper	88.6%	11.4%	100.0%
	Large Daily 2 (D)	Count	364	39	403
		% within Newspaper	90.3%	9.7%	100.0%
	Large Daily 3 (FB)	Count	3	58	61
		% within Newspaper	4.9%	95.1%	100.0%
	Small Daily 2 (D)	Count	398	52	450
		% within Newspaper	88.4%	11.6%	100.0%
	Small Daily 3 (FB)	Count	5	79	84
		% within Newspaper	6.0%	94.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	1993	330	2323
		% within Newspaper	85.8%	14.2%	100.0%

$x^2 = 843.8$, *df* = 5, *p* = < .001

Table 4.4: *Story Type and User ID Crosstabulation*

| | | | User ID | | |
			Anonymous ID	Real Name ID	Total
Story Type	Politics/government	Count	728	90	818
		% within User ID	36.5%	27.3%	35.2%
	Police/crime/legal	Count	564	109	673
		% within User ID	28.3%	33.0%	29.0%
	Business/economy	Count	300	44	344
		% within User ID	15.1%	13.3%	14.8%
	Education/schools	Count	116	11	127
		% within User ID	5.8%	3.3%	5.5%
	Accidents/tragedies	Count	65	23	88
		% within User ID	3.3%	7.0%	3.8%
	Ordinary people	Count	64	17	81
		% within User ID	3.2%	5.2%	3.5%
	Other	Count	156	36	192
		% within User ID	7.8%	10.9%	8.3%
Total		Count	1993	330	2323
		% within User ID	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 29.4$, $df = 6$, $p = < .001$

Engagement. Engagement themes were found in 37.5 percent of all comments made to stories in larger dailies and 34.2 percent of all comments in smaller dailies. In the newspapers registering users through Facebook ("Large Daily 3" and "Small Daily 3"), engagement themes were expressed in nearly 41 percent of all reader comments

compared to just over 33 percent of comments from newspapers using Disqus. Table 4.5

indicates that, across story types, engagement themes were present in nearly 61 percent of

all stories on accidents/tragedies, followed by police/crime (38.2 percent),

business/economy (34.5 percent) and politics/government (27.4 percent).

Engagement was reflected primarily through statements expressing mobilization

themes, or "calls to action." For example, a comment to a story on holiday crackdowns

on drunk driving stated, *"To report a drunk driver, you can call (number) and not tie up*

911." PRAYERS FOR MISSING TEENS, ENCOURAGE LOCAL PROSECUTORS

TO NAIL CRIMINALS, ETC. The presence of engagement in politics/government

stories (28.2 percent, n = 225) was often reflected through expressions of political

efficacy, or one's personal feeling of empowerment in making a difference in

government. Efficacy was frequently conveyed in response to complaints against local

elected officials or civic leaders ("*If you don't like how things are being done, run for*

office" or "*If you don't care for any of them, VOTE OUT ALL INCUMBANTS!!!!).* A

comment to a story on proposed term limits for county council members encouraged

residents to *"Speak up about any of your concerns!"* A story previewing upcoming

elections involving local government seats generated several comments along the lines of

"If you don't vote, don't complain." While news reports on accidents or tragic events

represented 6.8 percent (n = 54) of all comments with engagement themes, there was a

higher percentage (60.7) of engagement-themed comments in accident/tragedy stories (n

= 89) than any other story type. These comments typically served to mobilize readers by

providing specific information or links to websites on becoming blood or organ donors or

where memorial funds were being established for accident victims.

Table 4.5: *Engagement and Story Type Crosstabulation*

			Engagement		
			Absent	Present	Total
Story Type	Politics/government	Count	596	225	821
		% within Story Type	72.6%	27.4%	100.0%
	Police/crime/legal	Count	417	258	675
		% within Story Type	61.8%	38.2%	100.0%
	Business/economy	Count	223	123	346
		% within Story Type	65.5%	34.5%	100.0%
	Education/schools	Count	90	40	130
		% within Story Type	69.2%	30.8%	100.0%
	Accidents/tragedies	Count	35	54	89
		% within Story Type	39.3%	60.7%	100.0%
	Ordinary people	Count	63	18	81
		% within Story Type	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%
	Other	Count	115	80	195
		% within Story Type	59.0%	41.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	1539	798	2337
		% within Engagement	65.9%	34.1%	100.0%

Significance was found in the relationship between engagement and user identity, as 83 percent (n = 660) of all comments containing themes of engagement (n = 794) were posted by anonymous users, compared to 16.9 percent (n = 134) posted by users identified by their real name (Table 4.6). Of all the anonymous comments coded in the sample (n = 1,993), only 33.1 percent contained themes of engagement. Engagement-themed comments made up 40.7 percent of all comments in the sample posted by users identified by name.

In summary, engagement themes were absent from approximately two-thirds of all sampled comments. While stories dealing with accidents or personal tragedy were likely to draw engagement-themed comments, those who posted comments expressing engagement did so more frequently in response to crime/police stories than any other category.

Cynicism. Results were inconsistent when comparing comments reflecting cynicism - a sense of powerlessness or distrust of the government -- against the sampled newspapers. Among the newspapers using Facebook for registration/moderation, comments were less likely to express cynicism in the larger-circulated daily (31 percent of total comments) than in the smaller-circulated newspaper (61.6 percent). Two of the larger papers and one of the smaller dailies using the Disqus drew more cynical comments (averaging 57.3 percent of all comments), but the other smaller-circulated paper using Disqus had fewer comments (45.9 percent) with cynical themes.

A more significant relationship between cynicism and story type is revealed in Table 4.7. Comments to stories on politics/government reflected themes of cynicism by

an almost two-to-one margin (present in 534, absent in 286) while stories on accidents or tragic occurrences drew significantly fewer comments reflecting cynicism (absent in 69, present in 20).

Table 4.6: *Engagement and User ID Crosstabulation*

			Engagement		
			Absent	Present	Total
User ID	Anonymous ID	Count	1333	660	1993
		% within User ID	66.9%	33.1%	100.0%
		% within Engagement	87.2%	83.1%	85.8%
	Real Name ID	Count	195	134	329
		% within User ID	59.3%	40.7%	100.0%
		% within Engagement	12.8%	16.9%	14.2%
Total		Count	1528	794	2322
		% within User ID	65.8%	34.2%	100.0%
		% within Engagement	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 7.2$, *df* $= 1$, *p* $< .000$).

With political stories dominating the news pages in an election year, there was no shortage of strong opinions expressed through reader comment forums. A story explaining how South Carolina would be among a handful of pivotal states in deciding the presidential election, a commenter posted, *"The real truth is that elections are crapshoots but instead of money you win a politician, who may or may not be of any true*

98

value." Another commenter followed with, *"You can thank our so-called 'divinely inspired'...flawless founding fathers for this (electoral college) system"* to which a third user replied, *"I can only hope you leftist, racist, jealous-of-the-successful morons do not saddle us with this moron for 4 more years!!!* When a news story reported on the installation of new voting machines in time for the November elections, a user responded, *"Who cares about the machines? We know what the results will be."*

Politics and government were not the only target of cynical posts. A story on a local Chamber of Commerce attempting to increase tourism funding for its community drew this response: *"The Chamber really does not care if the number of tourists are up or down."* A report on a rash of local jewelry theft led to this somber post: *"You just do not know who to trust these days."* When another newspaper reported on a crime spree in its coverage area, a commenter lamented, *"If they lock them up, the judge just lets them out"* and, later in the thread, another posted, *"If you want anything done you might as well do it yourself. They (the police) could care less about other people's things as long as it's not their own."*

Interestingly, Table 4.8 indicates no significance in the relationship between user identification and themes of cynicism in online comments ($p = .043$). While anonymity was a factor in nearly 87 percent of all cynically themed comments, cynicism was present in just over half (55 percent) of all anonymous comments. Those who posted under their real names were only slightly less likely (48.5 percent) to make a cynical comment.

Table 4.7: *Cynicism and Story Type Crosstabulation*

			Cynicism		Total
			Absent	Present	
Story Type	Politics/government	Count	286	534	820
		% within Story Type	34.9%	65.1%	100.0%
	Police/crime/legal	Count	343	330	673
		% within Story Type	51.0%	49.0%	100.0%
	Business/economy	Count	152	191	343
		% within Story Type	44.3%	55.7%	100.0%
	Education/schools	Count	58	70	128
		% within Story Type	45.3%	54.7%	100.0%
	Accidents/tragedies	Count	69	20	89
		% within Story Type	77.5%	22.5%	100.0%
	Ordinary people	Count	43	38	81
		% within Story Type	53.1%	46.9%	100.0%
	Other	Count	114	81	195
		% within Story Type	58.5%	41.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	1065	1264	2329
		% within Story Type	45.7%	54.3%	100.0%

$x^2 = 97.4$, *df* = 6, *p* < .001

Table 4.8: *Cynicism and User ID Crosstabulation*

| | | | Cynicism | | |
			Absent	Present	Total
User ID	Anonymous ID	Count	893	1096	1989
		% within User ID	44.9%	55.1%	100.0%
		% within Cynicism	84.3%	87.3%	85.9%
	Real Name ID	Count	166	160	326
		% within User ID	50.9%	49.1%	100.0%
		% within Cynicism	15.7%	12.7%	14.1%
Total		Count	1059	1256	2315
		% within User ID	45.7%	54.3%	100.0%
		% within Cynicism	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

($x^2 = 4.1$, *df* = 1, *p* > .001).

While cynicism was present in well over one-half of all comments, there were no significant relationships found between cynical comments and newspaper size, or between those using Facebook or Disqus for user registration. Similarly, no association could be made between cynicism and anonymity. The most significant relationship was detected between themes of cynicism and story type; while politics/government was not the only story type to have more themes of cynicism present in reader comments, cynicism was far more likely to be expressed in response to politically-oriented stories.

4.3 Research Question 2

In response to Research Question 2 ("How are themes associated with the uses and gratifications of media use reflected in reader comments to online news stories?"), themes of Personal Identity (70.5 percent, n = 1,646) and Information (67.1 percent, n = 1,570) were most frequently found in the sampled comments, with slightly more than half (51 percent, n = 1,194) of all comments indicating Social Interaction among participants. Comments reflecting an Entertainment motive were rare (6.1 percent, n = 143).

Personal identity. Despite the nature of the theme -- that someone is using the platform to express their own opinions, beliefs or attitudes or share their own experiences -- 84.5 percent of all comments containing Personal Identity gratifications were posted anonymously. Anecdotally this could be explained simply by the overall predominance of anonymous comments in this sample. Yet no significant relationship was show to exist between anonymity and themes of Personal Identity (p = .073). As shown in Table 4.9, among all anonymous comments in the sample (n = 1,993), nearly 70 percent (n = 1,391) contained themes of Personal Identity. Users who posted anonymously were nearly as likely to express Personal Identity as those who posted under their real names (74.7 percent, n = 245).

Statistical significance was found between Personal Identity and story type, with the theme reflected in comments fairly evenly across story categories. It appeared most frequently (72.2 percent) in comments to stories on accidents/tragedies and police/crime and least (66.7 percent) in comments to stories on politics and government (Table 4.10).

Table 4.9: *Personal Identity and User ID Crosstabulation*

| | | | User ID | | |
			Anonymous ID	Real Name ID	Total
Personal Identity	Absent	Count	601	83	684
		% within Personal Identity	87.9%	12.1%	100.0%
		% within User ID	30.2%	25.3%	29.5%
	Present	Count	1391	245	1636
		% within Personal Identity	85.0%	15.0%	100.0%
		% within User ID	69.8%	74.7%	70.5%
Total		Count	1992	328	2320
		% within Personal Identity	85.9%	14.1%	100.0%
		% within User ID	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

($x^2 = 3.2$, $df = 1$, $p > .001$).

Comments ranged from general expression of one's personal opinion *("What a poorly written article*") to those taking on a more personal context. For example, a large daily published a story on the discovery of a journal belonging to a soldier killed during the second Gulf War and efforts to return it to his family. *"Steve was a high school*

Table 4.10: *Personal Identity and Story Type Crosstabulation*

			Personal Identity		
			Absent	Present	Total
Story Type	Politics/government	Count	273	548	821
		% within Story Type	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
	Police/crime/legal	Count	161	514	675
		% within Story Type	23.9%	76.1%	100.0%
	Business/economy	Count	98	247	345
		% within Story Type	28.4%	71.6%	100.0%
	Education/schools	Count	54	75	129
		% within Story Type	41.9%	58.1%	100.0%
	Accidents/tragedies	Count	21	68	89
		% within Story Type	23.6%	76.4%	100.0%
	Ordinary people	Count	23	58	81
		% within Story Type	28.4%	71.6%	100.0%
	Other	Count	59	136	195
		% within Story Type	30.3%	69.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	689	1646	2335
		% within Story Type	29.5%	70.5%	100.0%

$x^2 = 27.1, df = 6, p < .001$

classmate of mine…a fine athlete and a nice guy," one user posted. *"I pray these letters bring his family some comfort."* Later in the thread came this post: *"I knew Steve and played ball against him in high school. A great athlete. And I remember when he died."*

Others used the platform to personally chastise those who were posting inappropriate or offensive material. A large-daily story on plans to privatize a local homeless shelter drew several comments that chided homeless individuals to "get a job" and blamed the area's homeless population for a number of crimes and "making it unsafe...for anyone to go out after dark." These comments were followed by this observation: *"I find it truly chilling that so many people who comment on this site have so little feeling for their fellow man. It's sickening."* Personal identity was also exhibited through expressions of emotion conveyed through the use of all capital letters and multiple exclamation points to emphasize a message, as in one poster's response to a story on upcoming political primaries, encouraging fellow citizens to *"WAKE UP!!!"* When a smaller daily reported possible budget cuts to arts programs in state-supported public schools, a commenter relied on capital letters to vent frustration: *"ARTS ARE NEVER A WASTE. ARTS ARE THE BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS OF INTELLIGENCE IN AN INDIVIDUAL AND CUMULATIVELY, OF CIVILIZATION."*

There were also instances where the emotion of a story drew comments that were more subdued in delivery but equally powerful in opinion. A large-daily story on the arrest of a suspect in the kidnapping and murder of a local teenager generated this post: *"After he is found guilty, he should be set against a wall and shot. There is no need to keep this filth alive any longer."* Shortly thereafter came this comment: *"I am sick over*

this. Life is not fair, there is no God. She's beautiful. It's a good thing I don't live there, cause I would kill him myself."

Information. Informational gratifications were expressed primarily in reader comments to stories on politics & government (35.1 percent, n = 822) and crime/police (28.9 percent, n = 676). Information was expressed primarily by adding facts to a report or a link to a website for additional insight or relevant resources. As defined for this dissertation, Information could be represented by a simple statement of fact that adds to or enhances a reader's understanding of a particular story. This could explain why the Information gratification was more frequently detected than the other motivational themes. As Table 4.11 indicates, there is an association between Information and anonymity (*p* = .001). Of all the sampled comments reflecting an Information motive (n = 1,570), 83.6 percent (n = 1,313) were posted anonymously. Among all anonymous comments in the sample (n = 1,993), 66 percent contained themes of Information gratification.

In most cases, however, information was complemented by other gratification themes. As shown in Tables 4.12, a strong statistical relationship exists between comments that reflect both Information and Personal Identity (*p* = .000). Among all sampled comments containing Informational themes (n = 1,570), 65.3 percent also contained themes of Personal Identity (n = 1,025). Of all the reader comments sampled (n = 2,339), nearly seven in ten contained themes of Information and/or Personal Identity.

Table 4.11: *Information and User ID Crosstabulation*

| | | | User ID | | |
			Anonymous ID	Real Name ID	Total
Information	Absent	Count	677	82	759
		% within Information	89.2%	10.8%	100.0%
		% within User ID	34.0%	25.0%	32.7%
	Present	Count	1313	246	1559
		% within Information	84.2%	15.8%	100.0%
		% within User ID	66.0%	75.0%	67.3%
Total		Count	1990	328	2318
		% within Information	85.8%	14.2%	100.0%
		% within User ID	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 10.4$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$

One of the more compelling examples of a comment reflecting both Information and Personal Identity came from the family member of a teenage girl who was reported to be in serious condition following an auto accident. One of the first to comment on the story was a family member who updated the published story by stating that the girl had died from her injuries: *"God did take a beautiful angel (my stepdaughter) home this morning at 10:20 a.m."* This was followed by a personal appeal: "*Unless you know the*

107

truth about the accident or anything else about (her) I would ask out of respect for the

family that you keep certain thoughts and opinions to yourself. TY so much for

understanding."

Table 4.12: *Information and Personal Identity Crosstabulation*

			Information		
			Absent	Present	Total
Personal Identity	Absent	Count	143	545	688
		% within Personal Identity	20.8%	79.2%	100.0%
		% within Information	18.7%	34.7%	29.5%
	Present	Count	620	1025	1645
		% within Personal Identity	37.7%	62.3%	100.0%
		% within Information	81.3%	65.3%	70.5%
Total		Count	763	1570	2333
		% within Personal Identity	32.7%	67.3%	100.0%
		% within Information	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 62.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Social interaction. Strong significance ($p = .000$) was also found in the

relationship between comments with Information and Social Interaction (Table 4.13).

Among all comments, nearly 55 percent contained both Information and Social

Interaction themes. Information was present in 62.2 percent of all sampled comments

with Social Interaction themes (n = 1,194), while 47.4 percent of all comments with

Information themes (n = 1,569) also contained themes of Social Interaction.

Table 4.13: *Information and Social Interaction Crosstabulation*

			Information		
			Absent	Present	Total
Social Interaction	Absent	Count	312	826	1138
		% within Social Interaction	27.4%	72.6%	100.0%
		% within Information	40.9%	52.6%	48.8%
	Present	Count	451	743	1194
		% within Social Interaction	37.8%	62.2%	100.0%
		% within Information	59.1%	47.4%	51.2%
Total		Count	763	1569	2332
		% within Social Interaction	32.7%	67.3%	100.0%
		% within Information	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 28.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Themes of Information and Social Interaction were reflected in reader posts that

both acknowledged a previous comment and enhanced the comment by providing

additional information or insight or forwarding it to someone outside the conversation.

For example, the story on the deceased soldier's journal being returned to his family drew this response -- *Watched your video and forwarded it to a friend that was in the 173rd Thanks* -- a post that was interactive in responding to a previous comment (which, incidentally, added to the report by linking to a video of the soldier's combat unit) and informational in forwarding the video to another user. In another example, an advance story on primary races published by a small daily newspaper prompted a discussion on how corporations and unions could affect the outcome of certain key races in South Carolina. A commenter noted that *"Nearly all those large companies have unions in SC...the new unions here are cooperative and work with management.."* A follow-up "reply" to this post offered additional information in the form of historical background: *"IN 1954 SC became a "right to work" state. SC Code of Law SECTION 41-7-10 reads,'....'"*

The sampled comments that flirted with violating the newspapers' standards of civility for online commenting were those containing themes of Social Interaction, in which users were addressing the journalist that wrote the story or responding to others in the comment thread. As prior research has indicated, reader comment threads often begin with posts from users that specifically address the news article but eventually evolve into conversations among users. These interactions among readers can often become spirited. A story in a smaller-circulated daily of a man's arrest for stabbing his stepfather immediately drew a comment critical of the way the article was written, which perpetuated the following exchange:

(Second post in thread)   *"I think the article is fine...sometimes if you have nothing nice to say it is better to keep your mouth shut."*

(Third post in thread)   *"You must be the idiot who wrote the article. I'll say what I want when I want."*

Further down the thread, the conversation continued to focus on the quality of the article with messages targeted toward others in the thread:

(Eighth post in thread)   *"(S)ince you think the article was so poorly written, maybe they can use you on the staff of the newspaper. Your grammar and punctuation are impeccable!!!"*

(Ninth post in thread)   *"If you think you can do a better job, get out from in front of the computer and DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. Contrary to what you believe, you haven't been perfect in life."*

(Eleventh post in thread)   *"(N)o, im not a writer…and I wouldn't wanna take a pay cut working for the paper!"*

In the story on South Carolina's impact on the upcoming presidential election, a targeted rant began in the third comment in the thread: *"I can only hope you leftist, racist, jealous-of-the successful-morons do not saddle us with this moron for 4 more years!!!"* This prompted an exchange that threatened to become vitriolic but ended on a more civil note:

(Fifth post in thread*)   *"Get your medication refilled."*

(Sixth post in thread)   *"You made a nasty comment about Bush…to make unwarranted comments about sexuality is uncalled for."*

(Ninth post in thread)   *"You have an opinion on the issue, I have another. Both appear to have backers."*

(Tenth post in thread)   *"No, it shows how many people don't understand civics."*

        With the story on the privatization of the homeless shelter, a contentious exchange began deep into the thread, facilitated by a reference to the work of a local charitable organization, and continued for several subsequent posts:

(Fourteenth post in thread)   *"Excuse me…(organization) is doing fantastic work in our city. How is that part of the problem?"*

(Fifteenth post in thread)   *"Do you have proof of their fantastic job, or are you simply trolling per usual?"*

(Sixteenth post in thread)   *"I have seen first-hand where lives have been changed thanks to (organization). I speak from experience, and I resent the use of your word 'troll.'"*

(Seventeenth post in thread)   *"Well, maybe you should look up the definition of the word and then you would realize that it is simply an adjective for what you do on this site."*

(Eighteenth post in thread)   *"I still resent your use of that word, but if you must, then I would say it takes one to know one."*

        In this exchange, the commenter's injection of Personal Identity ("I speak from experience") did little to change the tone of the discourse and failed to elicit a statement of regret or apology from the writer of the "troll" post. Other Social Interactive exchanges were more conciliatory. Following a story in a large-circulation daily about crimes committed by the homeless, a commenter referred to homeless individuals as *"threatening"* and *"dangerous to public safety."* After being challenged by another commenter who reportedly spent years living on the streets, the initial poster offered this apology: *"Sorry, (screen name), I didn't mean no disrespect."* Social Interaction was also used by commenters to challenge information provided by other contributors and ranged in tone from appreciative *("Thank you, that sounds about right.")* to cynical

112

("That is not true," "Get your facts straight," "Learn to spell," I think you're making

that up") to malicious *("You don't have a clue," We don't need an idiot like you, too!").*

Yet as indicated in Table 4.14, no statistical relationship could be detected

between anonymity and Social Interaction ($p = .110$). Of all sampled comments

containing Social Interaction themes (n = 1,194), 86.7 percent (n = 1,035) were posted

anonymously, but only 52 percent of all anonymous comments in the sample (n = 1,993)

contained themes of Social Interaction. Based on the sampled data, individuals posting to

a reader comment forum under a screen name or pseudonym are more motivated by

Personal Identity (70 percent) and Information (66 percent) gratifications than by Social

Interaction.

4.4 Journalist Interviews

The interviews with journalists conducted for this study consisted of open-ended

questions with appropriate probes. The questions were structured to address two primary

objectives: To collect factual information on the registration and moderation policies of

each newspaper, and to gauge the effectiveness of the reader comment platform as a form

of civic engagement through the opinions and personal experiences of those being

interviewed. This combination of concrete data and deeper interpretive feedback from

journalists enhances the exploratory nature of the dissertation. Each interview subject

was also asked to provide information on their professional experience, including number

of years in their current position and at their current newspaper, and their overall years in

journalism. The researcher chose to include this information to determine if contrasting

schools of thought exist on audience interactivity and the potential for democratic

deliberation in the reader comment forum (Loke, 2011). A sample of the interview script

can be found in Appendix B of this dissertation, as well as a transcript from one of the

interviews (Appendix C).

Table 4.14: *Social Interaction and User ID Crosstabulation*

| | | | User ID | | |
			Anonymous ID	Real Name ID	Total
Social Interaction	Absent	Count	955	173	1128
		% within Social Interaction	84.7%	15.3%	100.0%
		% within User ID	48.0%	52.7%	48.7%
	Present	Count	1035	155	1190
		% within Social Interaction	87.0%	13.0%	100.0%
		% within User ID	52.0%	47.3%	51.3%
Total		Count	1990	328	2318
		% within Social Interaction	85.8%	14.2%	100.0%
		% within User ID	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$x^2 = 2.5$, *df* = 1, *p* > .001.

Following the transcription of the recordings from all six interviews, the data was

"reduced" or prioritized according to emerging schemes of interpretation. Lindhof and

Taylor (2002) promote data reduction in qualitative analysis as a effective tool for

categorizing and coding material that is relevant to one's research objectives (p. 211).

The interview data was initially categorized by creating a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel, in which columns were created that consisted of a heading (each interview question) and content (each of the answers given for that particular question). This stems from the advice of Tesch (1990), who recommended the initial use of "low inference" categories that are concrete, easily recognizable, and pay more attention to topic than the content of the text (p. 142). A "careful reading and re-reading" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) of the responses from each question identified specific themes and relationships that addressed the research objectives while providing a parsimonious but valid reflection of the data. This coding scheme involved the creation of a separate Excel spreadsheet in which common themes were served as headings for the specific journalist responses that reflected those specific themes. This particular coding scheme was regarded as a fundamental yet effective approach for discovering discernible patterns in how the sampled newspapers managed the reader comment forum and the effectiveness of the forum in engaging readers in positive discourse. Lindhof and Taylor (2002) offer words of caution to qualitative researchers who allow a complicated coding structure to affect the validity of a study. "The map is not the territory," they write; in other words, the code is not the interpretation (p. 222).

The journalists interviewed for the qualitative phase of the dissertation have spent an average of 28 years in journalism (ranging from 7.5 years to 45 years). They have been employed with their current newspaper for an average of 14 years, 3.5 months and have served in their current position for an average of 4 years, 4 months. Their professional titles ranged from those of traditional newsrooms (Editor-in-Chief,

115

Executive Editor, Editor, News Editor) to those reflective of the digital media environment (Director of Multimedia Development, Online Editor, Online Managing Editor, Online General Manager).

All six of the sampled newspapers have allowed readers to comment on news stories since going "live" online with their respective websites. As indicated by the journalists' responses to Q1 of the interview ("*How long has your newspaper offered reader comment sections on its website?"),* the newspapers have published online for an average of nine years, nine months (minimum of five years; maximum of 12 years).

Several common themes emerged from the interviews related to the moderation policies of each newspaper as well as in the overall opinions of the journalists on the quality of the online discourse taking place on the reader comment forum and its contribution to the overall objectives of the newspaper.

Comment Moderation: Questions 2, 3 and 4 of the interview were related to the newspapers' policies and procedures for online commenting, and the journalists' responses indicated a common approach to comment moderation regardless of whether the newspaper used Disqus or Facebook. In response to Q2 *("Are users required to register before being able to comment on new stories?"*), individuals wishing to post comments to the four newspapers using Disqus were required to set up an account by providing a user name (or "member" name), password and a valid email address. Once the account is established, users log in to the site with the screen name and password whenever they wish to post a comment. For the two newspapers using Facebook as a registration platform, users must have an account with the social media site. Creating a

Facebook account requires users to provide more detailed information (full name and address, including zip code, as well as a valid email address and password), with the name on the account serving as the identifier for those posting online comments. The log-in process with the newspaper requires the account name and password. Although Facebook registration significantly reduces the number of anonymous commenters, journalists from both newspapers using Facebook acknowledged that pseudonyms can be used to create a Facebook account and, subsequently, serve as the identifier for commenting online ("It is done, and that's to be expected").

There was strong agreement in response to Q3 *("Are reader comments permitted on some stories and not others?")* with journalists from all six newspapers noting that commenting is permitted on all news stories published online. They all added, though, that the feature can be turned off on a story that is "potentially problematic," and a commenting thread can be suspended if "things are getting out of hand." When probed to elaborate on these statements by providing examples, journalists cited stories on immigration, suicide, or issues related to sexual orientation (i.e., coverage of a gay pride parade), or comment threads that begin to reflect information that is unsubstantiated or contextually unrelated to the story. A journalist from a small daily newspaper described a story that ran as part of a series on "miracle moms," or women in single-parent households who held down full-time jobs while raising families. The subject of the story was heavily criticized in a series of comments posted by a user who identified himself as the woman's ex-husband and from other commenters claiming to be his friends. "We didn't shut down the thread completely but deleted those that had nothing to do with what was in the story and made claims that we had no way of knowing if they were true or

117

false," the journalist said. "But we did allow comments that criticized us for taking (the comments) down. It's one thing for an ex-husband to come on and dispute something that was in the story. I don't think we could delete that. But when it is totally unrelated to the story, I think that's different."

Specifics on what can and can't be posted by online commenters was one of the issues addressed through Q4 *("How are reader comments moderated or monitored by your newspaper"?)*. All six newspapers have a set of rules ("User Agreement," "User Guidelines") for online commenting posted online and linked to its registration or log-in page, but journalists from every paper noted that users "ignore" or "don't adhere to" the guidelines. "People never read them," said two of the interview subjects while another added, "They check the box (indicating acceptance of the posted guidelines) and then just do what they want."

Although the moderation routine is somewhat different for those newspapers using the Disqus platform, all six newspapers rely on users to "self-police" the comment forum by "flagging" comments deemed objectionable or offensive. Relying on the online community to regulate itself, as one small-daily journalist noted, makes users feels more engaged in the deliberative process. Newsroom staff can also devote more time to other responsibilities because "we are simply not equipped" to read every comment that is posted to the site. A journalist with a large daily added, "When we first started (the comment forum), we had more hands on deck. We thought there would always be someone sitting there moderating. But it doesn't always work the way you planned."

At the newspapers using Disqus, flagged comments are assigned to an internal portal (a "moderation" or "abuse" queue) which is checked by newspaper staff on an average of two to three times daily. Each flagged comment is reviewed and can be deleted or posted back to the thread. "Just because someone flags a comment doesn't mean it should be deleted," noted one journalist. "It may add something of value to the conversation, even if someone has a problem with it. In those cases, more often than not you use your gut to make the call." Commenters to stories on the two newspapers using Facebook are subject to more stringent oversight due to the social media program's internal moderation controls. As a journalist from the large daily noted, Facebook's moderation "will flag just about anything." For example, a comment to a story related to schools or education may contain the words "assign" or "class," which Facebook will detect and flag as a popular three-letter obscenity. When comments are flagged on Facebook, the supervisory journalists receive an email notification while the comment remains posted to the thread. The process of checking the comment threads on the newspapers using Facebook is "very informal," according to one of the journalists; at both newspapers, the forum is checked once or twice daily.

There is little question on the type of content that is subject to deletion on reader comment threads. Journalists from all six newspapers cited "racist remarks" and "personal attacks or threats" as clear violations of the comment policy; references were also made to "profanity" (mentioned in five of the six interviews), "potentially libelous" statements about a private citizen (four) and "unsubstantiated claims/statements" (three). In three of the six interviews, journalists referenced the newspaper's policy of "blacklisting," or banning those "habitual offenders" who frequently posted inappropriate

119

material. But all three acknowledged that the policy was rarely enforced. As one

journalist stated, "We have a policy, but we haven't used it much. Usually, when a

comment is killed, the person who posted it doesn't return." Another added that

blacklisting can be "too much of a judgment call" and that explaining the rationale to

someone who has been blacklisted "can turn into a completely different set of problems

that just isn't worth it."

Anonymity: There was universal agreement among the interviewed journalists on

the overall impact of anonymity in online forums (Q6: *In your opinion, has user*

anonymity affected the overall volume and/or tone of reader comments and the discourse

taking place in the forum?), although the direct impact of anonymous commenting was

distinctly different for the newspapers using Disqus for registration than those using

Facebook. As this study's content analysis indicated, Facebook's more stringent identity

requirements resulted in significantly lower levels of anonymous postings.

Still, journalists from all six newspapers expressed strong opinions about

anonymity and online content. A pair of journalists from a large daily, with a combined

65 years of professional experience, agreed that anonymity "makes all the difference" in

the quality of the discourse; eliminating anonymous commenting would result in fewer

personal attacks and "more diplomacy." One of the journalists, a 45-year newspaper

veteran added, "When we entered this brave new world, we were less vigilant about

(anonymity). We didn't think it would make that much difference, but clearly it has." A

small-daily journalist with more than 40 years of newsroom experience expressed a

passionate disregard for the reader comment forum and pinned much of the criticism on

the newspaper's anonymity policy:

I'm sure I am far more traditional in this than my colleagues, but I have never been able to get away from the thought that, but for us, this platform would not exist. And on this platform is a lot of bad stuff. We moderate, but we get a lot of stuff that I wouldn't let in the newspaper. It's a bad thing. This unseemliness, this gutter talk, the accusations...whatever you want to call it. I think it's too easy to say, "well, it's just commenting, we are just providing the platform, we don't have any responsibility for what is said on there." We may not be the source, but our name is on the masthead. And I'm not comfortable with that.

Journalists from another small daily with fewer years of experience took a more subtle approach in expressing concern over anonymity. A 20-year newsroom veteran acknowledged that anonymity was largely to blame for the "problematic" comments on the newspaper's site and added that "as someone who works in a profession where we sign our name to our work, I have a degree of sympathy for those who (hate) being sniped at by someone who hides behind a shield of anonymity." A colleague at the same newspaper with almost eight years of experience argued that anonymity has fueled a "very loud minority of unreasonable people" to negatively impact the potential of the reader comment forum and added, "Because of a few crazies, (the forum) gets painted with a very broad brush."

Anonymity had virtually no direct impact on the content of reader comments at the two newspapers that register online users through Facebook, although journalists at both papers noted "vast difference" in quality. "When we first introduced a reader comment forum, we wanted a community," said the large-daily journalist. "What we got was a back alley. It was vicious. It became too ugly, too early and proved to be more trouble than it was worth." Facebook registration has made the reader comment platform more effective as a public forum, the journalist added, because "most people will be more

121

responsible with what they have to say when their name is attached. Some will still be ugly as a snake, but those people are not as common." At the small daily using Facebook, online commenting has dropped by "at least 50 percent," according to its representative, although the discourse became "more civil" once users were required to register through the social media site.

Engagement: The interview question on the comment forum and reader engagement (Q7: *"In your opinion, has the reader comment forum been effective in engaging readers?"*) drew strong agreement, and equally strong opinions, among the journalists whose newspapers use Disqus for registration. A small-market journalist with more than 40 years of professional experience acknowledged that while the forum does, in fact, engage readers, "it's important to discern who it is engaging. I don't think it is a fair representation of the readers of this newspaper. It's the fringe people, the extremists, the ones who get so wound up that (the online conversation) becomes vitriolic." Drawing similar parallels to the difference between print and online readers, a large-market journalist stated bluntly, "For the most part, we don't have a very high class of commenter. Our demo for print is older, more affluent and more educated, and I don't necessarily see that reflected here." A journalist from another large daily noted, "I'm not sure if it has engaged them. I think it has enraged them, just as it has enraged us."

The response on reader engagement was mixed between the journalists representing the Facebook-moderated newspapers. The comment platform at the large daily "provides a public forum and in that sense, we're pleased with it." But the small-daily journalist expressed disappointment in the degree of engagement reflected in reader comments: "I think we all were fairly 'Pollyannaish' when (the forum) first evolved,

thinking that it would be this great way to heighten the conversation about the issues in our community. In the end, though, probably 85 percent of the time (the conversation) turns out to be mindless." Ironically, this journalist was the only one to actively participate in the discussion with readers in the comment forum. Increased interaction between journalists and audience members in online forums such as reader comments has been endorsed by scholars as an effective strategy for facilitating deliberative discourse. Engaging readers, the journalist noted, "is to simply not hide from them. I've become part of the discussion, and they know I'm there. I've seen it work before, when you stop being the anonymous moderator and start becoming a real person involved in the discussion." But the journalist's efforts have yet to produce any discernible improvement, despite the fact that most commenters are posting under their real names. "There are just a few players in this game right now, and they know each other and are perfectly fine with calling each other this or that. I want readers to be civil and have a debate with someone just as you would if you were sitting next to them in a coffee shop. I just hasn't happened here yet."

Journalistic Value: In response to Q8 *("In your opinion, do reader comments to online news stories contribute to the newsgathering process of the newspaper?"*), the interviewed journalists agreed that while the forum has had a relatively insignificant impact on the process of gathering and reporting the news, they recognize the value that can be derived from reader participation. Though "rare," "occasionally," or "in certain instances," comments add value to journalism in myriad ways.

A large-daily journalist noted that comments can sometimes contain information that a reporter has heard but has not had confirmed. "It gives us something to follow,

123

pushes us along a little bit." Another added that certain comments "can make you go

back and look at something in a different light, in a way that may have never occurred to

you." Although rare, the forum contributes "enough to do us some good," noted a small-

daily journalist, who added: "It's a little frustrating...a lot like finding clams in cheap

chowder, as the saying goes. For every nugget, there is a lot of crap. But sometimes we

gain insight into a story by what is not said rather than what is said." A colleague

concurred that, in a more general sense, reader comments can give journalists insight into

issues that are important to community members:

> (The comment forum) helps in a way to confirm that the community cares
> a lot about a particular story. The more we write about something and the
> more people comment about it is an indication that they want more. You
> look for pushback when it seems to get to a certain point; when a story has
> run dry, so to speak. But sometimes that pushback never happens, and that
> indicates to me that there may be more to the story than we know or have
> reported.

While most comments "don't really add to the sum of human knowledge," according to a

large daily journalist, reporters can benefit from being held accountable by readers. "If

you make a mistake, people can make you feel bad, but it's also a learning tool. It

reminds us that people are really reading this. So, in a sense, you are immediately

accountable. It can be enlightening and sometimes very painful but also very

productive."

A "Work In Progress:" The interviewed journalists acknowledged the role of the

reader comment forum in drawing readers to news websites. As a platform for audience

feedback and a public space for discussion and debate, the forum remains a "work in

progress" that will continue to evolve. However, their responses to Q9 *("In your opinion, has the reader comment sections been effective in advancing the overall journalistic mission of the newspaper?")* expressed views ranging from unabashed cynicism to guarded optimism.

The small-daily journalist who blamed anonymity for the vitriol expressed in reader comments and its potentially detrimental impact on the newspaper's reputation minced few words about the overall intent of the forum: "Anything that would make it more civil or get it under control would be a very positive thing. But it's not really about disseminating information. You can talk all day about forming a community, but it's all bullshit." A large-daily journalist stated that "comments will always be allowed by corporate, no matter what the numbers (reflect). It provides 'stickiness,' as they say." Executives at the newspaper had considered removing the forum, "but it always came back to the notion that it can be messy, but it is part of our obligation to provide a community forum. And it drives traffic."

At another large daily, the reader comment forum was described as a journalist as "an interesting experiment that has not quite lived up to the promise that the industry had for it. There was a lot of hope in what (interactive platforms) could do for us, but the reality is that the numbers just haven't materialized." But a small-daily journalist noted that the forum has evolved from its early "unruliness" through more rigid registration and moderation policies and has become more of a "legitimate" space for public engagement:

> It's easy to be cynical and say, "oh no, this is not journalistically viable."
> But whether or not this is the ideal way, it is the way that happens now.
> When we think about how people used to get together and discuss the

day's events, we thought of street corners and coffee shops. And this is where that happens now.

A colleague at the same newspaper characterized the reader comment forum as a product of "an extraordinary time in the industry" and an embodiment of the changing paradigm of news and interactivity: "(The forum) may be flawed, but it is what we have. You accept the bad to get to the good. For so long, we have been able to exert such control over our product that it has become very hard to give it over to someone else."

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The objective of this dissertation is to contribute to the field of communication literature by examining one of the fastest growing forms of computer-mediated communication -- reader comments to online news stories -- and its effect on public deliberation and civic engagement.

As the Internet has become more central to news presentation, publishers have moved toward their online editions for dissemination of reader views (Rosenberry, 2011). Through the use of interactive features such as reader comments to online articles, news organizations are offering a venue for broad public discourse that is more inclusive and egalitarian than the traditional feedback forum, letters to the editor. The reader comment platform's relative ease of access and use enables individuals to express personal views and exchange information on important social issues in a manner conducive to democratic deliberation and civic engagement (Leung, 2009).

The phenomenon of online interpersonal interaction, and the content that is being created and delivered between and among audience members and journalists, are areas in which researchers have only begun to explore. Yet reader comments have largely been framed in a negative context; researchers argue that the platform's potential as a new public sphere has been undermined by the proliferation of vitriolic and offensive speech

by anonymous contributors (Loke, 2011; Santana, 2012). Rather than promoting democracy by embracing the views of certain marginalized groups, the reader comment forum has been regarded as a haven for incivility that can lead to further divisiveness among citizens and an erosion of social trust.

Journalists have accepted interactivity and reader participation, if somewhat begrudgingly, as a new reality of twenty-first-century journalism but have largely refrained from injecting themselves into online discussions with readers. A "strong inertia" stemming from traditional journalistic norms has hindered true interactive exchange between news personnel and audience members, although journalists are increasingly aware of the growing power of audience (Wardle et al., 2009).

The dilemma faced by media companies is that interactive features such as reader comments bring people to a newspaper's website, making the online news product attractive as an advertising vehicle. Faced with the challenge of creating a financially viable business model built around its digital products, newspapers have taken steps to improve the quality of the online discourse through more stringent registration and moderation policies. These efforts have created the need for research that revisits the public sphere potential for online forums. This dissertation is an assessment of the current state of online deliberation from the perspective of those who are posting online comments to news stories and the journalists who serve as the gatekeepers of the reader comment forum.

Deliberative democratic theory was used as a framework for a content analysis of reader comments to online news stories published by six South Carolina daily

newspapers. The analysis focused on the presence of themes associated with democratic engagement, or the degree to which citizens participate in civic affairs through public deliberation. To gain insight into the motives of those participating in the reader comment forum, content was also analyzed for the presence of themes drawn from literature on uses and gratifications of media usage. In conjunction with the quantitative analysis, interviews were conducted with journalists at each of the six sampled newspapers to broaden the analytical perspective of the dissertation and further assess the impact of the reader comment forum on audience engagement and online journalism. The findings from this study offer important contributions to the field by addressing the potential for citizens to engage in democratic deliberation, the utility of the reader comment forum in fostering positive and productive discourse, and the impact that the forum has had on the traditional cornerstone of American journalism.

Among the sampled newspapers, articles on politics/government and crime/law enforcement/legal matters generated the most comments from online readers. In larger circulated papers, comments were heaviest on political stories, while smaller-circulated papers drew a majority of comments from crime stories. Because this analysis was conducted during an election year, it is possible that there were more races for elected office in the larger markets resulting in more local coverage and more comments -- a potential limitation of the study. But the findings are not inconsistent with Pew Research data, which found adults to be most reliant on local newspapers for stories on crime (36 percent) and local government (26 percent) than any other topic ("The role of newspapers," Sept. 26, 2011).

Of the two newspapers using Facebook for registration and moderation, the smaller daily generated more overall comments (n = 86) than the large daily (n = 61). Yet nearly all of the comments sampled from the large daily using Facebook were made to crime-related stories (as opposed to the other large dailies in the sample, which drew more comments to political stories). This finding was supported by information gathered from the interviews with journalists conducted for this dissertation, in which the representative from the large daily using Facebook noted the "vast difference" between the newspaper's print and online readers. "Print people want more local government and state government news," the journalist stated. "Online readers don't care at all about those things. Those stories die online." While the differences between print and online news consumers has been well documented, this observation raises an interesting question for future research about content preference and participation in reader comment forums; specifically, can comment frequency and content be predicted by one's level of interest or disinterest in certain types of stories?

There was no discernible relationship found between anonymity and story type; anonymous commenters were slightly more likely to comment on political stories than crime-related stories while non-anonymous posters were slightly more likely to respond to crime stories. More than 85 percent of all sampled comments were posted anonymously, including comments to news sites which require registration on Facebook. Although those who register through Facebook are usually identified on news sites by their real names, a pseudonym can be substituted as long as it is accompanied by a valid email address; users can be even more inconspicuous by adjusting the privacy settings on their account (Luck, 2012). The findings from this study supports evidence that the

overall participation is dramatically reduced in online newspaper comment forums that require "real" identification (Sonderman, 2011). While the two sampled newspapers using the Facebook "plug-in" were found to have few anonymous postings, they also had significantly smaller numbers of overall comments compared to those newspapers that allowed anonymous comments through the Disqus registration platform.

5.1 Research Question #1

Addressing the first of two research questions posed by this study ("Do online comments to newspaper stories reflect themes that could encourage or discourage democratic engagement among citizens?"), engagement themes (political efficacy and mobilization) were found in just over one-third of all comments. There were slightly more comments expressing some level of engagement in crime or police stories, primarily in the form of mobilizing information for reporting drunk drivers or encouraging readers to assist law enforcement in finding missing teenagers or solving various crimes in a community. Comments on political/government stories were more likely to express engagement through political efficacy, an expression of empowerment that reflects an individual's contribution to the political system. A positive relationship was found between engagement and anonymity; more than 80 percent of all engagement-themed comments were posted anonymously. One-third of all anonymous comments expressed some degree of democratic engagement, which matched the ratio of engagement themes detected in all sampled comments.

Political efficacy and mobilization was expressed in just over 40 percent of the comments to stories in the two newspapers requiring registration through Facebook,

compared to just over 33 percent of comments in newspapers using Disqus. Of particular note here was the difference in overall comments with engagement themes between the newspapers using Facebook. The large daily had engagement expressed in just over half of all sampled comments compared to just 31 percent of sampled comments from the small daily. This finding is made more relevant when considering that, of the eight journalists interviewed for this dissertation, the small-daily journalist was the only one who reported regularly interaction with users on the newspaper's reader comment forum. While inconclusive due to the small sample size, and inconsiderate of additional information on the characteristics of the newspaper's market or readership, this finding suggests the need for further research to explore the impact of journalist participation on discourse in online forums.

Themes of cynicism -- expressing anger or frustration against those in power or a degree of powerlessness in solving local problems -- were present in more than half of all comments, with stories on politics/government drawing cynical comments by an almost two-to-one margin. But no discernible differences were found in the presence or absence of cynicism across other story types, and results were inconsistent in assessing levels of cynicism among comments in small versus large papers.

A small-daily journalist interviewed for this study observed that "readers become more engaged in stories that a particularly meaningful to them or have a more direct impact on their lives." This gives additional support to the relationship between small-market commenters and crime/police stories, and the frequency of engagement themes in comments to crime stories. Incidents of crime would seem to have a greater impact on residents of small communities; subsequently, they would use the reader comment forum

132

to engage fellow citizens for the good of the community (as in establishing neighborhood watch groups) or to simply support a friend or neighbor in a time of need. The "direct impact" argument is perhaps less effective when explaining the relationship between cynicism and politics, but the result itself is not surprising. A random survey of letters to the editor sections in newspapers, large or small, will likely find a pattern of public expressions of anger, disappointment or dismay aimed at politicians or government agencies. In that context, the reader comment forum may resemble a digital extension of letters to the editor and reflect the public sphere characteristics of the traditional news forum.

As with engagement, more than 80 percent of all cynically themed comments were anonymously posted. Overall, cynicism was conveyed in reader comments by a two-to-one margin over themes of democratic engagement -- political efficacy and mobilization. Among the newspapers using Facebook for registration/moderation, the smaller-circulated newspaper drew more than twice as many comments with cynical themes compared to the large-circulated daily. This raises additional questions as to whether journalist facilitation and participation in online forums leads to a higher quality of online discourse.

When anonymity in online forums is permitted by newspapers, most users will choose to post comments under a screen name or pseudonym. When newspapers adopt stricter policies for users - such as requiring registration through social media platforms like Facebook -- there is a precipitous drop in the overall number of comments, but no discernible difference in the quality of the discourse. Users who post online comments under their true identity are nearly as likely to post cynical comments as those who post

anonymously. Regardless of their online identity, users seem reluctant to leverage the empowerment afforded by interactivity in a manner that encourages community involvement and participation. There were no comments in the sample that could be considered overly offensive or aimed at a particular socioeconomic group, perhaps a testament to the moderation efforts of newspaper staff or the self-policing of the online community by users. Still, those posting comments were less likely to engage in democratic deliberation, choosing instead to use the forum as a public platform to "vent" their anger and frustrations over those in power and against each other.

5.2 Research Question #2

Addressing the dissertation's second research question ("How are themes associated with the uses and gratifications of media use reflected in reader comments to online news stories?"), the sampled reader comments were also analyzed for the presence of themes suggesting motivations of Information, Personal Identity, Social Interaction, and Entertainment. It is a novel approach, yet one that scholars have endorsed as a means of exploring the degree to which active audiences are motivated to engage with others through computer-mediated communication.

The data indicates that while Information gratifications are expressed in two-thirds of all sampled comments, there was also a significant presence of Personal Identity (70 percent of all comments) and Social Interaction (51 percent) themes. The utilitarian function of Information -- in which users provided additional insight to a story by adding facts, asking or answering questions, or providing links to other online resources -- was often complemented by motives of Personal Identity and/or Social Interaction. More

than half of all sampled comments were found to have Personal Identity (65.3 percent) or Social Interaction (55 percent) themes in addition to Information themes. This suggests that users are more interested in immersing themselves into the online conversation by willingly sharing their own personal opinions or beliefs or responding to the comments of others. Rather than simply contributing facts to enhance an online article, users are engaging in discussion and debate in a manner that is consistent with the public sphere ideal. The engagement, however, seems to be driven by the desire to satisfy one's own social needs than to serve the greater good of the community.

This finding, in particular, brings new insight to the literature on online deliberation. Gastil (2008) created a conceptual definition of public deliberation that combined Habermas's emphasis on rigorous rational analysis (1989) with Benjamin Barber's theory on the value of "mutual discovery" in open-ended conversation (Gastil, 2008, p. 19). Merging these two notions, Gastil argued that an ideal deliberative discussion consists of an analytic process, the sharing of factual information and personal experience that fosters a deeper understanding of an issue, and a social process in which individuals see themselves as resources and interact with one another in public discourse. Manosevitch and Walker (2009) applied Gastil's concept to their examination of the deliberative quality of reader comments to online opinion journalism. By manifesting both the analytic and the social processes necessary for public deliberation, the reader comment forum offers the potential for users to engage in community problem solving. But other observations made by the researchers are particularly noteworthy and relevant to the findings in this dissertation. The newspaper comment sections analyzed by Manosevitch and Walker were designed for readers to respond directly to editorials rather

than to one another, hindering the opportunity for interaction among users and diminishing the effectiveness of the forum's deliberative potential. The researchers also found that personal experience, a key component of the analytic process and an important element of public discourse (Ryfe, 2006), was rarely found among the sampled comments. No explanation was offered for the absence of personal narratives in the reader comments, although the researchers implied that the interactive limitations of the space forum's and the newspapers' limited facilitation of the comment forum were likely to blame (p. 24). To the latter point, the authors also noted that while opinion writers may serve as "instigators of constructive public deliberation" (p. 23), at no point in the study did a journalist enter into the conversation through a comment or additional post.

In a study of audience interactivity and user motivations for visiting online newspapers, (Yoo, 2011) found an information-seeking motive to be positively associated with medium interactivity (the technological features of the media system and how individuals use them) but not human interactivity (the communication between users conducted through the system). A socialization motive had a direct effect on human interactivity, but not on medium interactivity (pp. 82-83). She argued that user motivations are critical to understanding the Internet as a goal-oriented medium and how the use of interactive features in online newspapers generate favorable attitudes which ultimately bring users back to the site (pp. 68, 84). The findings from this study suggest that while users are motivated to post informational-themed comments to online news stories, these comments tend to also reflect themes of social interaction or personal identity; thus, users are more likely drawn to reader comment forums to interact with others as a means of satisfying social needs. Evidence exists that links frequency of

online commenting (i.e., comment threads are often dominated by a small groups of "regular" users) with positively obtained gratifications, although the particular habits or patterns of individuals users was not taken into account for this study.

5.3 Takeaways From The Research

The findings in this dissertation suggest that newspapers have improved the design features of its reader comment forums to promote enhanced engagement among users. Subsequently, commenters are becoming more interactive with one another by sharing factual information as well as personal experience in a manner conducive to public deliberation.   The results from this study indicate three areas of concern that limit the ineffectiveness of the reader comment forum in serving as a "true" public sphere of democratic deliberation.

The anonymity factor. The first area of concern is the effect of user anonymity on the reader comment forum. As the data from this study indicates -- and contrary to the positions taken by other scholars -- anonymity has a greater impact on volume than quality of content. More than 85 percent of the comments sampled for this study were posted by anonymous users, yet the difference in total volume between the newspapers registering users through Facebook and those registering users through the less-restrictive Disqus program were significant. In terms of content, messages posted under a user's real name in this sample were just as likely to express cynicism than comments posted under a pseudonym. As the journalist from the large daily using Facebook noted, "You expect someone to be more civil when they identify themselves, but if questioned or

challenged by another user on an issue that is important to them, they can still become as mean as a snake."

The combination of users self-policing the forum by flagging comments (in itself, a form of engagement expressed by working together toward a common goal) and outsourcing moderation to social media programs like Facebook has greatly reduced the overly vitriolic "flaming" in online discourse that scholars have attributed to anonymity. A more pressing challenge to newspapers is the dramatic drop in overall comments that results from efforts to discourage or eliminate anonymity. Reader (2012) argues that those in society that tend to be marginalized may be more likely to participate in public discourse if they can shield themselves through anonymity. In online news forums, when a user is forced into personal accountability by commenting under their real name, they simply opt not to participate.

Online interactive forums such as reader comments are traffic-generation tools for newspapers; online readership is critical to growing digital advertising revenues. Sacrificing volume in an attempt to improve the quality of online discourse seems misguided, based on the findings from this study. Perhaps equally concerning to news organizations is that the responsibility for increasing participation in reader comment forums will likely fall to journalists who have oversight and control over the forum -- the same ones who continue to keep their distance for online users.

Journalist participation. The second area of concern raised by this dissertation is the continued reluctance of journalists to become active participants in online discussions with readers. While online conversations among readers have become more civil than

previous studies indicate -- a reflection of improved registration and moderation policies implemented by newspapers -- journalists remain skeptical over the deliberative value of the comment forum and remain largely detached from the discussion. Findings from this study's journalist interviews revealed that only one of the six sampled newspapers had a journalist who regularly participated in the discourse in the reader comment forum. But as the participating journalist admitted, and the data analysis confirmed, involvement in the online discussion with readers neither engaged readers at a higher level nor improved the civility of the discourse. At no other time during the interview phase of this dissertation did journalists from the other five sampled newspapers express a need or desire to join the conversation with readers. The consensus was that more vigilance in user registration -- through programs that discouraged anonymity -- or comment moderation -- encouraging users to maintain civility in the "community" by flagging questionable comments -- was key to improving online discourse.

In his 2005 study of interactivity on newspaper websites, Rosenberry cited a primary weakness of the "cyber-utopian" theory of free-form, online deliberation: Just because an online platform makes certain actions and interactions possible doesn't make them inevitable (also see Barber, 1997; Wilhelm, 2000). Structure and facilitation, including journalist participation, were necessary "tools of engagement" for improving public discourse and enabling newspapers to "reclaim the mantle" of the Fourth Estate (Rosenberry, 2005, p. 66). Journalists have acknowledged the inevitability of interactive audiences and accepted their role as gatekeepers of reader comments. Yet the results from this study suggest that journalists remain passive observers, rather than active participants, in online forums such as reader comments. With the forum firmly

139

entrenched as a interactive feature on newspaper websites, future research should consider the effect that journalists have on the quality of the discourse as well as overall participation from audience members in online forums.

The will of the public. The third area of concern for online deliberation and democratic engagement in reader comment forums is the degree to which the public is . This study's findings suggest that individuals are posting comments on newspaper websites as a means of interacting with and responding to others in the forum, as well as enhancing news stories by adding information or personal observations. In the context of democratic engagement, the reader comment forum is being used as an outlet for expressing cynicism rather than empowerment and social trust reflected by expressions of political efficacy and mobilization. Thus, it can be argued that interactive forums are more effective in satisfying the social needs of users than serving to improve democracy. In her analysis of reader comments to online blog posts, Leung (2009) found that users -- anonymous or otherwise -- find significant gratification in being recognized for their own expertise and credibility and frequent such forums to express their views to others "Wanting to be recognized" is the strongest motivation for commenting on someone else's work (p. 1340).

Other scholars concur that social utility motivations are powerful predictors of online content generation, from those who write blogs (Nardi et al., 2004; Papacharissi, 2003; Trammell et al., 2004) to those who respond to or comment on the work of others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Zhou & Pinkleton, 2012). While the sharing of information or personal experience through reader comments is a foundational element of public deliberation, the absence of themes associated with

140

democratic engagement -- political efficacy and mobilization -- suggests that readers are more interested in the gratifications achieved from merely participating in the conversation than from taking an active role in solving local problems.

The core of Habermas's public sphere ideal is that the public must participate in dialogue to be able to engage in meaningful citizenship. The dialogue in the public sphere, however, must be "respectful and reflexive" and capable of transforming "self-seeking individuals" into "publicly oriented citizens" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 620). Online news sites that offer platforms for human interactivity can serve as a foundation for public deliberation (McMillan, 2002; Yoo, 2011). In this digitized versions of the public sphere, the ritualized communication ideal of James Carey (1989) can be realized as individuals empower themselves through shared beliefs and an collective interest in the greater good of the community.

In theory, it is an exhilarating premise. We are reminded, however, that democratic engagement is predicated on how people use media (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001). The complexity of digital communication and interaction media platforms clouds the issue even further. Audience members can "engage" in online forums such as reader comments, if for no other reason than to concur or refute the posting of another user on a matter that has no relevance to the greater good of the democracy. In communities large and small, citizens gathering in an online "community" can mobilize others to attend prayer vigils for a missing child or donate blood to accident victims. A few pages (or "clicks") away, those same citizens can "engage" in a war of words by questioning each other's integrity or intelligence. Some may call this deliberation; others may call it democratic. The findings from this

study suggest that the discourse taking place in reader comment forums reflects more of the latter than the former.

Future research should continue to explore online deliberation and the gratifications of those who read and write comments on news websites. In particular, as news organizations move toward eliminating anonymity from online comments, surveys or focus groups of individuals who regularly contribute to these forums may offer new insight to the field.

Finally, it should be noted that the foundation of this dissertation – democratic deliberation and the value of a free press – is philosophical in nature. However, big data allows researchers to take such an approach and apply it at an individual level to enhance our understanding of how and why individuals use media. It is "the raw material that we drill and vet for patterns that are not only statistically significant but logically plausible" (Kobielus, 2013).

5.4 Limitations Of The Study

There are several aspects of this dissertation that limit the generalization of its findings. The most obvious limitation to this dissertation is the sample size. Academic studies of online news sites have used relatively small samples, as have similar studies using qualitative methods such as interviews. This was a purposive sample drawn as part of a larger study on the digital evolution of daily newspapers in South Carolina. Thus, the generalizability of the study is limited to the geographic scope of the sample.

This particular study does not take into account the demographic characteristics of the audiences of these particular newspapers. Because survey methodology was not used

in this dissertation, demographic information on commenters was not obtained. Data on online media use indicates that younger audiences are more likely to participate in reader comment forums (Miller et al., 2012). There is a belief among journalists that those who actively comment to online news stories do not necessarily reflect the newspaper's readership. Other than the statements provided by journalists interviewed for this study, any inferences made in regard to user demographics are purely anecdotal.

This study did not take into account the number of comments posted by individual users nor make any attempt to identify specific users (by either real or screen name) as a way of drawing specific conclusions on patterns of usage or types of comments posted. Those observations could provide insight into the quality of deliberative discourse and civic engagement. The study did not operationalize the "back-and forth" exchanges between participants in online forums beyond the uses and gratifications typology of "Social Interaction." Researchers have suggested that this phenomenon is an indication of a social deliberative process that should be considered in future studies of reader comment forums (Manosevitch & Walker , 2009).

From the qualitative data collected for this dissertation, no clear relationships could be established between the journalists' professional experience and their opinions on the reader comment forum as a platform for democratic discourse. Statements from a journalist with more than 40 years of experience were reported as an illustration of disregard for anonymous commenting, but no common themes were found that could link support of the interactive forum and professional tenure. Still, further investigation into the evolution of newspapers from traditional to digital delivery and the schools of thought

among different generations of journalists would, in the opinion of this researcher, make

a compelling contribution to the field.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As an examination of the reader comment forum in online newspapers, this dissertation seeks to bring insight to the study of computer-mediated communication and the degree to which interactive forums can promote deliberative democracy. The results from this study indicate that while online forums have the potential to effectively serve as public spheres for democratic engagement among users, that potential has yet to be realized.

While scholars continue to debate the capacity of ordinary citizens to actively participate in their own self-governance, the findings presented here suggests that technology has, in fact, had little impact on eliminating the obstacles to democratic deliberation that have existed for more than 100 years. The Internet created a massive paradigm shift in journalism and interpersonal communication. But just as the world has changed, in many ways it has remained the same.

Deliberative democratic theorists such as John Dewey and Jurgen Habermas believed that the public was capable of more than merely legitimizing government

through elections. When given the proper tools under the proper conditions, ordinary citizens can effectively navigate complex public issues and produce actionable knowledge for intelligent and just public policy (Kadlec, 2007, p. 119). Dewey argued that newspapers were the fulcrum of public deliberation by providing the platform for debate, helping citizens to understand the connection between decisions and their outcomes, and then encouraging them to act on this knowledge.

A staunch critic of traditional democracy, Walter Lippmann doubted that citizens could sustain a level of quality deliberation that could support democratic ideals in a civil society. Americans had become disillusioned with democracy, and their disenchantment was reflected in an erosion of public trust. For Lippmann, newspapers could no longer educate a public that had limited time, knowledge and intellectual capacity (Friedland, p. 123).

Lippmann's "disenchanted man" of the late 1920s and 1930s could just as appropriately describe the American citizen of the early 1990s. Similar declines in public trust, as well as growing skepticism over the credibility of newspapers, drove the movement behind civic, or public, journalism. Civic journalism sought to revive the notion of "reasoned and pragmatic deliberation" among citizens (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 188) with journalists organizing and moderating discussions of key community issues (Parisi, 1997, pp. 680-81). Yet the goal of creating a more thoughtful, active citizenry requires more than the power of the media.   While the press can provide readers and viewers with the tools for civic participation, the voluntary participation of individual citizens remains paramount to a thoughtful deliberative process (Bohman, 2000). Dewey (1927) cautioned that mere activity in a community does not constitute

146

civic engagement and acknowledged that there were too many publics in America that are scattered and diffuse. His desire was for a public whose members had developed habits of intellectual inquiry; communities where there exists a "lively sense of shared interest" (p. 156).

The concept of community, however, takes on a different context in an online environment. In a world the offers seemingly unlimited options for obtaining news and information, people in different situations use different media for different reasons. As journalists claim, and industry data supports, there are discernible differences between readers of print and online newspapers. Print readers have long been the beneficiaries of having the news delivered in a context that is meaningful to them. They are more invested in the "physical" community and believe they can make a difference in where they live. Online readers, including those who actively participate in reader comment forums, are less concerned with democracy and their role in self-governance (recall the comment from the large-market daily journalist about political stories that "die online"). This study suggests that online users are more focused on conversation -- motivated by personal identity and social interaction gratifications -- than on substantive discourse on the news of the day.

Newspapers still fill a critical need in satisfying the public's need for news while providing a space for deliberation. The public's role of holding journalists accountable, as well as those in power, is equally important to a democracy. At the same time, we shouldn't expect too much, or demand too much, from the public in taking an active role in their own governance. Interactivity has the potential to bring individuals together in one unbounded, unbridled public sphere. But they are more likely to gather in their own

147

public spaces, motivated by shared interests, beliefs and ideals. Giving people the tools

to engage in democratic deliberation is only as effective as the degree to which they

choose to use them.

Still, news organizations should be applauded for fostering public deliberation

and continuing to seek ways to improve the quality of the discourse, regardless of their

own motivations. If reader comment platforms do little more than help drive traffic to

newspaper websites, so be it.   Any initiative that allows newspapers to continue to be

financially viable in serving the needs of local citizens should be commended, not

scrutinized. Once journalists decide to temper their disdain for audience intrusion into

contemporary newsrooms, progress may be made in the quest for constructive

conversation in the online public sphere. In the interim, the online reader comment

forum will remain a "work in progress." To paraphrase one of the journalists interviewed

for this dissertation, it may not be perfect, but it's the best that we have.

REFERENCES

Abdul-Mageed, M.M. (2008). Online news sites and journalism 2.0: Reader comments on Al Jazeera Arabic. *Triple C, 6*(2), 59-76.

Abernathy, P. & Foster, R. (2010). The news landscape in 2014: Transformed or diminished? *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations, 2*, 9-30.

Ashley, J. (2003, Dec.). Synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership. Retrieved from http://www.asaecenter.org/Resources/articledetail.cfm?itemnumber=13572

Atton, C. (2009). Alternative and Citizen Journalism. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Bailey, G. & Hackett, R. (1997). Newswatcher's guide to content analysis. Newswatch Canada. Retrieved from http://www.cmns.sfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/newswatchers-guide-final.pdf

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Barber, B. (1997). The new telecommunications technology: Endless frontier or the end of democracy? *Constellations, 4*(2), 208-228.

Baltes, B., Dickson, M.W., Sherman, M.P., Bauer, C.C. & LaGanke, J.S. (2002). Computer-mediated communication and group decision making: A meta-analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 87*(1), 156-179.

Barlow, A. (2008). *Blogging America: The new public sphere*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Baughman, J. (2009). Wounded but Not Slain: The Orderly Retreat of the American Newspaper. In D.P. Nord, J.S. Rubin, & M. Schudson (Eds.), *A History of the Book in America* (Vol. 5). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Barnhurst, K. (2010). Technology and the changing ideal of news. International *Journal of Communication, 4*, 1082-1099.

Beam, R. (2003). Content differences between daily newspapers with strong and weak market orientations. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 80*(2), 368-390.

Bennett, S., Rhine, S., Flickinger, R. & Bennett, L. (1999). "Video malaise revisited: Public trust in the media and government. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 4*, 8-23.

Bergland, R., Crawford, L., Hon, D. and Noe, S. (2012). Multimedia and interactivity on newspaper websites: A multi-study analysis of six English-speaking countries. Unpublished paper, Missouri Western State University.

Bhutani, A., Misra, D., & Toshniwal, S. (2012). Detecting Socially Offensive Comments. Retrieved from http://home.iitk.ac.in/~dkmisra/CS685Report.pdf

Bivings Group (2006). Internet Role in Political Campaigns. New York: The Biving Group. Retreived from http://bivingsreport.com/campaign/2006_campaign_study.pdf.

Blazier, T.F. & Lemert, J.B. (2000). Public journalism and changes in content of the Seattle Times. *Newspaper Research Journal, 21*(3), 69-80.

Bloom, J. D. (2003). The Blogosphere: How a once-humble medium came to drive elite media discourse and influence public policy and elections. Paper presented at the Pre-APSA Conference on Political Communication: Mass Communication and Civic Engagement. Retrieved from file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/phd/My%20Documents/SI/articles/Political_Blogs/bloom.pdf

Blumler, J.G. (1979). The role of theory in uses and gratifications studies. *Communication Research, 6*(1), 9-36.

Boczkowski, P. (1999). Understanding the development of online newspapers using computer-mediated communication theorizing to study Internet publishing. *New Media & Society, 1*(1), 101-126.

Boczkowski, P. (2004). The processes of adopting multimedia and interactivity in three online newsrooms. *Journal of Communication, 54*, 197-213.

Boczkowski, P. & Mitchelstein, E. (2011). How users take advantage of different forms of interactivity on online news sites: Clicking, e-mailing, and commenting. *Human Communication Research, 38*, 1–22.

Bohman, J. (2000). *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bowman, S. & Willis, C. (2003). *We media: How audiences Are shaping the future of news and information.* Reston, VA: The Media Center at the American Press Institute. Retrieved from http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf

Brady, J. (2006, Jan. 20). Transcript from AskPost.com. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/discussion/2006/01/20/DI2006012000566.html.

Brannon, J. (2008). Maximize the medium: Assessing obstacles to performing multimedia journalism in three U.S. newsrooms. In D. Domingo and C. Patterson (Eds.), *Making Online News* (pp. 99-112). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Brooks, D. J., & Geer, J. G. (2007). Beyond negativity: The effects of incivility on the electorate. *American Journal of Political Science, 51*(1), 1-16.

Bucy, E. (2004). Interactivity in society: Locating an elusive concept. *The Information Society, 20*, 373–383.

Burgess, R. (1982). The unstructured interview as a conversation. *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*, 107-10.

Burroughs, A. (2006). Civic Journalism and Community Newspapers: Opportunities for Social and Civic Connections (Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University). Retrieved from http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-11052006-094055/unrestricted/Burroughs_thesis.pdf

Butler, D. M., & Schofield, E. (2010). Were newspapers more interested in pro-Obama letters to the editor in 2008? Evidence from a field experiment. *American Politics Research, 38*(2), 356-371.

Cappella, J. & Jamieson, K.H. (1997). *The spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Cappella, J., Price, V. & Nir, L. (2002). Argument repertoire as a reliable and valid measure of opinion quality: Electronic dialogue in campaign 2000. *Political Communication, 19*, 73–93.

Carey. J. (2009). Communication as culture (revised edition): Essays on media and society. New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published in 1989)

Case, T. (1994). Public journalism denounced. *Editor and Publisher*, 14-15.

Chaffee, S., McDevitt, M., & Thorson, E. (1997). Citizen Response to Civic Journalism: Four Case Studies. Presented at AEJMC convention, March, 1997.

Chambers, S. (2003). Deliberative democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science, 6*, 307-326.

Charney, E. (1998). Political liberalism, deliberative democracy, and the public sphere. *The American Political Science Review, 92*(1), 97–110.

Choi, Y. (2004). Study examines daily public journalism at six newspapers. *Newspaper Research Journal, 25*(2), 12-27.

Chung, D. (2008). Interactive features of online newspapers: Identifying patterns and predicting use of engaged readers. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*, 658–679.

Citrin, J. (1974). Comment: The political relevance of trust in government. *The American Political Science Review, 68*(3), 973-988.

Creswell, J. (2002). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Pearson Education.

Croteau, D. & Hoynes, W. (2001). *The business of news: Corporate media and the public interest.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Cowles, D. (1989). Consumer perceptions of interactive media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 33*, 83–89.

Cutler, N. & Danowski, J. (1980). Process gratification in aging cohorts. *Journalism Quarterly, 57*(2), 269-76.

Dahlberg, L. (2001). The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Information, Communication & Society, 4*(4), 615–633.

Dahlberg, L. (2004). The Habermasian public sphere: A specification of the idealized conditions of democratic communication. *Studies in Social and Political Thought, 10*, 2-18.

Dahlgren, P. (2003). Reconfiguring civic culture in the new media milieu. In J. Corner & D. Pels (Eds.), *Media and political style: Essays on representation and civic culture.* London: Sage.

Davis, R. & Owen, D. (1998). *New media and American politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

December, J. (1996). Units of analysis for Internet communication. *Journal of Communication, 46*, 14–38.

Delli Carpini, M. (2004). Mediating democratic engagement: The impact of communications and citizens' involvement in political and civic life. In L. Lee Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Delli Carpini, M., Cook, F. & Jacobs, L. (2007). Public deliberations, discursive participation and citizen engagement: A review of the empirical literature. *Annual Review of Political Science, 7*(1), 315-344.

Denton, F. & Thorson, E. (n.d.). Civic Journalism: Does it Work? A Report for the Pew Center for Civic Journalism on the "We the People" project, Madison, Wis. Retrieved from http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/research/r_doesit.html

Deuze, M. (2003). The Web and its journalisms: Considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online. *New Media and Society, 5*(2), 203–230.

Dewey, J. (1925/1988). Experience and nature. In J. Boydston (Ed.), *The later works of John Dewey* (Volume 1). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1927). *The Public and its Problems*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow.

Diaz Noci, J., Domingo, D., Masip, P., Lluis Mico, J. & Ruiz, C. (2010). Comments in news: Democracy booster or journalistic nightmare: Assessing the quality and dynamics of citizen debates in Catalan online newspapers. Presented at International Symposium on Online Journalism.

Diakopoulos, N. & Naaman, M. (2011a). Towards quality discourse in online comments. Proceedings of the Association for Computing Machinery 2011 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, March 2011, Hangzhou, China.

Diakopoulos, N. & Naaman, M. (2011b). Topicality, time, and sentiment in online news comments. Proceedings of the Association for Computing Machinery 2011 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, May 2011, Vancouver, British Columbia.

Dibean W. & Garrison, B. (2001). How six online newspapers use web technologies. *Newspaper Research Journal, 22*(2), 79-93.

Dicken-Garcia, H. (1998). The Internet and continuing historical discourse. *Journalism & Mass Communication, 75*(1), 19-27.

Disqus (n.d.). "Publishers: Engage your audience, increase activity, discover your community." Retrieved from http://disqus.com/for-websites/publishers

Doctor, K. (2010). *Newsonomics: Twelve New Trends That Will Shape the News You Get*. New York, NY: Martin's Press.

Domingo, D. & Heinonen, A. (2008). Weblogs and journalism: A typology to explore the blurring boundaries. *Nordicom Review, 29*(1), 3–15.

Downie, L. & Kaiser, R. (2002). *The News About the News*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Dubrovsky, V., Kiesler, S., & Sethna, B. (1991). The equalization phenomenon: Status effects in computer-mediated and face-to-face decision-making groups. *Human-Computer Interaction, 6*(2), 119-146.

Dunleavy, P. & Weir, S. (1998). How to freshen up democracy. *New Statesman, 11*, 535, 571–572.

Dryzek, J. & Berejikian, J. (1993). Reconstructive democratic theory. *The American Political Science Review, 87*(1), 48-60.

Dyson, E. (1998). *Release 2.1: A Design for Living in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Edmonds, R., Guskin, E., Rosenstiel, T. & Mitchell, A. (2012). Newspapers: By the Numbers. The State of the News Media 2012; The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Retrieved from http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/newspapers-building-digital-revenues-proves-painfully-slow/newspapers-by-the-numbers/

Ellis, J. (2011, April 20). The writing on the wall: Why news organizations are turning to outside moderators for help with comments. Neiman Journalism Lab. Retrieved from http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/04/the-writing-on-the-wall-why-news-organizations-are-turning-to-outside-moderators-for-help-with-comments/

Erjavec, K. & Poler Kovačić, M. (2012). "You don't understand, this is a new war!" Analysis of hate speech in news web sites' comments. *Mass Communication and Society, 15*, 899-920.

Facebook Developers (2012a). "Comments Box." Retrieved from http://developers.facebook.com/docs/reference/plugins/comments/

Facebook Developers (2012b). "Registration." Retrieved from https://developers.facebook.com/docs/plugins/registration/

Fallows, J. (1996). *Breaking the news: How the media undermine American democracy*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Fallows, J. (2010, June). How to Save the News. *The Atlantic*, 45-56.

Feinberg, W. (1992). Progressive education and social planning. John Dewey. Critical Assessments. Edited by J.E. Tyles, 2, 168-190.

Fico, F. & Drager, M. (2001). News stories about conflict generally balanced. *Newspaper Research Journal, 22*(1), 2-11.

Fidler, D. (2012). Understanding work skills for the decade ahead. *Information Outlook, 16*(4), 10-12.

Fishkin, J. (1995). *The voice of the people*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Fogg, B., Kameda, T.,Marshall, J., Sethi, R., Sockol, M., & Trowbridge, T. (2002). Standford-Makovsky Web credibility study 2002: Investigating what makes Web sites credible today. Retrieved from http://captology.stanford.edu/pdf/Stanford-MakovskyWebCredStudy2002-prelim.pdf

Fouhy, E. (1994). The dawn of public journalism. *National Civic Review, 83*(3), 259-266.

Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Friedland, L. (2000) Public Journalism and Community Change, in A. Eksterowicz & R. Roberts (Eds.), *Public Journalism and Political Knowledge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Fry, D. & McCain, T. (1983). Community influentials' media dependency in dealing with a controversial local issue. *Journalism Quarterly, 60*, 458–463.

Gans, H. (1977). Audience mail: Letters to an anchorman. *Journal of Communications, 27*(3). 86-91.

Gastil, J. (2000). *By Popular Demand*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gaynor, D. (1996). Democracy in the Age of Information: A Reconception of the Public Sphere. Georgetown University. Retrieved from http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/gaynor/intro.htm

Gil de Zúñiga, H. & Valenzuela, S. (2011). The mediating path to a stronger citizenship: Online and offline networks, weak ties, and civic engagement. *Communication Research, 38*(3), 397-421.

Gillmor, D. (2006). From Tom Paine to Blogs and Beyond, 1-22. In *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People.* Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.

Giroux, H.A. & McLaren, P. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: The case for democratic schooling. *Harvard Educational Review, 56*(3), 213-239.

Glasser, T.L. (Ed.) (1999). *The Idea of Public Journalism*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Goldberg, S. (2010, July 19). CNN. News sites reining in nasty user comments. Retrieved from http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-19/tech/commenting.on.news.sites_1_comments-news-sites-credit-card?_s=PM:TECH

Goode, L. (2009). Social news, citizen journalism and democracy. *New Media & Society, 11*(8), 1287-1305.

Greenwald, M. (2002). Considering 10 Years of Public Journalism. *The American Editor,* Jan.-Feb., 10-12.

Greer, J. & Mensing, D. (2006). The evolution of online newspapers: A longitudinal content analysis, 1997-2003. *Internet newspapers: The making of a mainstream medium*, 13-32.

Grey, D. & Brown, T. (1970). Letters to the editor: Haze reflections of public opinion. *Journalism Quarterly, 47*, 450-456.

Grimes, C. (1999, Feb). Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon? Discussion Paper, The Joan Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Retrieved from http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d36_grimes.pdf

Grossman, L. (1995). *The Electronic Republic: Democracy in the Information Age*. New York, NY: Viking.

Gsell, L. (2009). Comments Anonymous: Newspaper websites wrestle with offensive blog comments. *American Journalism Review*, Feb/March 2009, pp. 16-17.

Gurak, L (1997). *Persuasion and privacy in cyberspace*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Habermas, J. (1984). The Theory of Communicative Action (Vol. 1): Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published in 1962)

Harwood, R. (2000). *Tapping civic life* (2nd Edition). Washington, D.C.: Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

Hays, R. A. (2007). Community activists' perceptions of citizenship roles in an urban community: A case study of attitudes that affect community engagement. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 29*(4), 401-424.

Hecht, J. (2003). The fight for online content's hegemony: The case of the TalkBack. *Internet Association Magazine.* Retrieved from www.isoc.org.il/magazine/magazine4_3.html#5

Heeter, C. (1989). Implications of new interactive technologies for conceptualizing communication. In J. L. Salvaggio & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Media use in the information age: Emerging patterns of adoption and consumer use* (pp. 217–235). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Heflin, K. (2010). The future will be televised: Newspaper industry voices and the rise of television news. *American Journalism, 27*(2), 87-110.

Herbert, J. & Thurman, N. (2007). Paid content strategies for news websites: An empirical study of British newspapers' online business models. *Journalism Practice, 1*(2), 208-226.

Herbst, S. (2010). *Rude Democracy: Civility and incivility in American politics.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Hermida, A. & Thurman, N. (2008). A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice, 2*, 343-356.

Hester, J. & Dougall, E. (2007). The efficiency of constructed week sampling for content analysis of online news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 84*(4), 811-824.

Hibbing, J. & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). Stealth democracy: American's beliefs about how government should work. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hill, D. (1981). Letter opinion on ERA: A test of the newspaper bias hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 45*(3), 384-392.

Hoffman, L. (2006). Is Internet content different after all? A content analysis of mobilizing information in online and print newspapers. Journalism *& Mass Communication Quarterly, 83*(1), 58-76

Horrigan, J. (2006). Online News: For many home broadband users, the internet is a primary news source. Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Broadband_trends2006.pdf.

Hollander, B. (2010). Local government news drives print leadership. *Newspaper Research Journal, 31*(4), 6-16.

Hwang, S. & Cameron, G.T. (2008). Public's expectation about an organization's stance in crisis communication based on perceived leadership and perceived severity of threats. *Public Relations Review, 34*(1), 70-73.

Hynds, E. & Martin, C. (1979). How non-daily editors describe status and function of editorial pages. *Journalism Quarterly, 56*(2), 318-23.

Imfeld, C. & Scott, G.W. (2003). Under construction: Measures of community-building at newspaper websites. Presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kansas City, MO.

Johnson, J. (2008). The Use of Internet by America's Largest Newspapers (2008 edition). Bivingsreport.com. Available at: www.bivingsreport.com/2008/the-use-of-the-internet-by-americas-largest-newspapers-2008-edition/

Johnson, T. & Kaye, B. (1998). A vehicle for engagement or a haven for the disaffected? Internet use, political alienation, and voter participation. In T.J. Johnson, C.E.

Hayes, S.P. Hayes (Eds.), *Engaging the public: How government and media can reinvigorate American democracy.* New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.

Jones, R. & Carter, R. (1959). Some procedures for estimating 'news hole' in content analysis. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 23*, 309-403.

Kadlec, A. (2007). *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism*. Washington D.C.: Lexington Books

Kapoor, S. (1995) Most papers receive more letters. *The Masthead 47*(2), 18–21.

Kapoor, S. & Botan, C. (1992). Studies compare how editors use letters. *The Masthead, 44*(1), 5.

Karlekar, K. & Radsch C. (2012). Adapting concepts of media freedom to a changing media environment: Incorporating new media and citizen journalism into thefreedom of the press index. *Journal for Communication Studies, 5*(1/), 13-22.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communication: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 19–34). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Katz, J., Rice, R. & Aspden, P. (2001). The Internet, 1995–2000: Access, civic involvement, and social interaction. *American Behavioral Scientist, 45*(3), 404–419.

Kaufhold, K., Valenzuela, S., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2010). Effects of citizen and professional journalism on political knowledge and participation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 87*(3), 515-529.

Kensicki, L. (2004). No cure for what ails us: The media-constructed disconnect between societal problems and possible solutions. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 81*(1), 53-73.

Kenski, K., & Stroud, N. J. (2006). Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 50*(2), 173-192.

Kerbel, M. (1995). *Remote and controlled: Media politics in a cynical age.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., & McGuire, T. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication. *American Psychologist, 39*(10), 1123-1134.

Kiesow, D. (2011). Portland Press Herald drops reader comments in response to "vicious postings." The Poynter Institute. Retrieved from http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/106403/portland-press-herald-drops-reader-comments-in-response-to-vicious-postings/

Kim, A. (2000). *Community building on the Web*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.

Kim, S. & Chung, M. (2009). More secure remote user authentication scheme. *Computer Communications, 32*(6), 1018-1021.

Kiousis, S. (2002). Interactivity: A concept explication. *New Media and Society, 4*(3), 355–383.

Kline, D., Burstein, D., De Keijzer, A.J. & Berger, P. (2005). *Blog! How the newest media revolution is changing politics, business, and culture*. New York, NY: CDS Books.

Kobielus, J. (2013, May 30). Big data philosophies: More practical than you might think. The Big Data Hub blog. Retrieved from http://www.ibmbigdatahub.com/blog/big-data-philosophies-more-practical-you-might-think

Koehler, W. (1999). An analysis of web page and web site constancy and permanence. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science, 50*, 162–180.

Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. (2001). *The Elements of Journalism*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kuehn, S. (1994). Computer-mediated communication in instructional settings: A research agenda. *Communication Education, 43*, 171–182.

Lacy, S. & Riffe, D. (1993). Sins of omission and commission in mass communication
    quantitative research. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 70*(1), 126-
    132.

Lacy, S. & Riffe, D. (1996). Sampling error and selecting intercoder reliability samples
    for nominal content categories. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly,
    73*(4), 963-973.

Lacy, S., Fico, F., Baldwin, T., Bergan, D., Wildman, S. & Zube, P. (2012). Dailies still
    do "heavy lifting" in government news, despite cuts. *Newspaper Research
    Journal, 33*(2), 23-39.

Lacy, S., Riffe, D., Stoddard, S., Martin, H., & Kuang-Kuo, C. (2001). Sample size for
    newspaper content analysis in multi-year studies. *Journalism & Mass
    Communication Quarterly, 78*(4), 836-845.

Lemert, J. (1981). *Does mass communication change public opinion after all?* Chicago,
    IL: Nelson, Hall.

Lemert, J. (1992). Effective public opinion. In J.D. Kennamer (Ed.), *Public opinion, the
    press and public policy.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Lemert, J., Mitzman, B., Seither, M., Cook, R., & Hacket, R. (1977). Journalists and
    mobilizing information. *Journalism Quarterly, 54*(4), 721-726.

Leung, L. (2009). User-generated content on the Internet: An examination of
    gratifications, civic engagement and psychological empowerment. *New Media &
    Society, 11*(8), 1327-1347.

Levinson, P. (2009). *New new media*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Li, X. (1998).Web page design and graphic use of three U.S. newspapers. *Journalism and
    Mass Communication Quarterly, 75*(2), 353–365.

Lippmann, W. (1927). *The Phantom Public*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.

Loader, B. (2007). *Young citizens in the digital age: Political engagement, young people
    and new media.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Loke, J. (2011). Amplifying a Public's Voice: Online news readers' comments impact on journalism and its role as the new public space. Dissertation presented to the Graduate School, University of Texas at Austin.

Lombard, M., Snyder-Duch, J., & Bracken, C. (2002). Content analysis in mass communication: Assessment and reporting of intercoder reliability. *Human communication research, 28*(4), 587-604.

Lundén, K. (2009). The Death of Print? The Challenges and Opportunities facing the Print Media on the Web. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/fellows __papers/2008-2009/Lunden_-_The_Death_of_Print.pdf

Maisel, R. (1973). The decline of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 37*(2), 159-170.

Manosevitch, E. & Walker, D. (2009). Reader comments to online opinion journalism: A space of public deliberation. Paper prepared for presentation at the 10th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX.

Martin, S. (1998). How news gets from paper to its online counterpart. *Newspaper Research Journal, 19*(2), 64-73.

Massey, B. & Hass, T. (2002). Does making journalism more public make a difference? A critical review of evaluative research on public journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 79,* 559-86.

Massey, B. & Levy, M. (1999). Interactivity, online journalism, and English-language Web newspapers in Asia. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 76*(1), 138-151.

McChesney, R. & Nichols, J. (2010). *The Death and Life of American Journalism.* Philadelphia, PA: Nation/Perseus.

McClatchy Newspapers (2012, August). McClatchy Interactivity Study Group. Internal document provided to researcher.

McCluskey, M. & Hmielowski, J. (2011). Opinion expression during social conflict: Comparing online reader comments and letters to the editor. *Journalism, 13*(3), 303-319.

McDevitt, M., Kiousis, S., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2003). Spiral of moderation: Opinion expression in computer-mediated discussion. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 15*(4), 454–470.

McGuire, W. J. (1974). Psychological motives and communication gratifications. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 167–196). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

McMillan, S. (2002). A four-part model of cyber-interactivity: Some cyber-places are more interactive than others. *New Media and Society, 4*(2), 271–291.

Mendelberg, T. (2002). The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence. *Political Decision Making, Deliberation and Participation, 6,* 151-193.

Meraz, S. (2007). Analyzing Political Conversation on the Howard Dean Candidate Blog, in M. Tremayne (Ed.), *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Merritt Jr., D. (1995). *Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News Is Not Enough.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Merritt Jr., D. (1996). Missing the Point. *American Journalism Review, July/August*. 29-31.

Merritt Jr., D. (1998). *Public journalism and public life: Why telling the news is not enough.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Merritt, D. & Dvorkin, J. (2001). Can Public Radio Journalism Be Re-Invented? Retrieved at http://www.npr.org/yourturn/ombudsman/010705.html

Merry, M.K. (2010). Blogging and environmental advocacy: A new way to engage the public? *Review of Policy Research, 27*(5), 641-656.

Meyer, P. (2004). The influence model and newspaper business. *Newspaper Research Journal, 25*(1), 66-83.

Miller K. (2004). *Communication theories: Perspectives, processes, and contexts*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Miller, A., Goldenberg, E.N. & Erbring, L. (1979). Type-set politics: Impacts of newspapers on public confidence. *American Political Science Review, 73*, 67-84.

Miller, C., Purcell, K. & Rosenstiel, T. (2012). 72% of Americans follow local news closely. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Local-news-enthusiasts.aspx.

Myers, D. (1987). "Anonymity is part of the magic:"Individual manipulation of computer-mediated communication contexts. *Qualitative Sociology, 10*(3), 251-266.

Nagar, N. (2009). The loud public: Users' comments and the online news media. Paper presented at the Online Journalism Symposium, April 2009, Austin, Texas. Retrieved from http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2009/papers/Nagar09.pdf

Narula, U. (2006). *Handbook Of Communication Models, Perspectives, Strategies*. New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.

Neuendorf, K. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Neuman, W. (1986). *The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Neuman, W., Just, M. & Crigler, A. (1992). *Common knowledge: News and the construction of political meaning.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Newhagen, J. & Rafaeli, S. (1996). Why communication researchers should study the Internet: A dialogue. *Journal of Communications, 46*(1), 4–13.

Newspaper Association of America (2010, Feb. 18). Size matters: The value of local newspaper websites. Retrieved from http://www.naa.org/Topics-and-Tools/Advertising/Research/2010/Site-Matters.aspx

Nie, N. & Erbring, L. (2000). *Internet and society: A preliminary report*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, Stanford University.

Nielsen, C. (2010, Aug. 4). Community conversation or 'the new bathroom wall'? Anonymous online comments and the journalist's role. Presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Newspaper Division, Denver, CO.

Nip, J. (2006). Exploring the second phase of public journalism. *Journalism Studies, 7*(2), 212-236.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The spiral of silence: Public opinion -- our social skin.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1980).

Nord, D. P. (2001). *Communities of journalism: A history of American newspapers and their readers.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Norris, P. (2000). *A virtuous circle: Political communications in postindustrial societies*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Oblak, T. (2003). Boundaries of interactive public engagement: Political institutions and citizens in new political platforms. *Journal of Computer‐Mediated Communication, 8*(3), 0. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00211.x

Ognyanova, K., Chen, N. T. N., Ball-Rokeach, S., An, Z., Son, M., Parks, M., & Gerson, D. (2012). Online participation in a community context: Civic engagement and connections to local communication resources. Retrieved from http://www.kateto.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/

Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media and Society, 6*, 259-284.

Parisi, P. (1997). Toward a "philosophy of framing": News narratives for public journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 74*(4), 673-686.

Patterson, T (1993). *Out of order.* New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Paulussen, S. & Ugille, P. (2007). User generated content in the newsroom: Professional and organisational constraints on participatory journalism. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 5*(2), 24-41.

Pérez-Peña, R. (2010). Study finds that real news comes from the newspapers. *New York Times*, 11 January, B9.

Perreault, W. & Leigh, L. (1989). Reliability of nominal data based on qualitative judgments. *Journal of Marketing Research, 26*, 135-148.

Perry, D. (2003). *Roots of civic journalism: Darwin, Dewey, and Mead*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Pew Internet & American Life Project (2013). Trend Data: Demographics of Internet Users. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009). The State of the News Media 2009. Retrieved from http://stateofthemedia.org/2009/

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2011). Methodology: PEJ News Coverage Index. Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology

Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2012). Overview: The State of the News Media 2012. Retrieved from http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/overview-4/

Price, V. (2006). Citizens deliberating online: Theory and some evidence. In T. Davies & B.S. Noveck (Eds.), *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*. CSLI Publications. Retrieved from http://www.hks.harvard.edu/netgov/files/talks/docs/11_13_06_seminar_Price_citizens-delib_online.pdf

Price, V. & Cappella, J. (2002). Online deliberation and its influence: The electronic dialogue project in campaign 2000. *IT Sociology, 1*, 303–328.

Price, V., Goldthwaite, D. & Cappella, J. (2002). Online deliberation, civic engagement and social trust. Paper presented at the annual meetings of the International Communication Association, Seoul, South Korea.

Price, V., Goldthwaite, D., Cappella, J. & Romantan, A. (2003). Online discussion, civic engagement, and social trust. Working paper, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Price,V., Nir, L. & Cappella, J. (2002). Does disagreement contribute to more deliberative opinion? *Political Communication, 19*, 95–112.

Pritchard, D., & Berkowitz, D. (1991). How readers' letters may influence editors and news emphasis: A content analysis of 10 newspapers, 1948-1978. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 68*(3), 388-395.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Shuster.

Randle, Q. & Mordock, J. (2002). How radio is adapting weather to the Web: A study of weather strategies on local news/talk radio, television, and newspaper home pages. *Journal of Radio Studies, 9*(2), 247-258.

Reader, B. (2005). An ethical 'blind spot': Problems of anonymous letters to the editor. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 20*(1), 62–76.

Reader, B. (2012). Free press vs. free speech? The rhetoric of "civility" in regard to anonymous online comments. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 89*(3), 495-513.

Reader, B., Stempel III, G.H., & Daniel, D.K. (2004). Age, wealth and education predict letters to the editor. *Newspaper Research Journal, 25*(4), 55–66.

Readership Institute (2004, July). New Readers Study. Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University. Retrieved from http://www.readership.org/new_readers/newreaders.asp

Rebillard, F. & Touboul, A. (2010). Promises unfulfilled? 'Journalism 2.0', user participation and editorial policy on newspaper websites. *Media, Culture & Society, 32*, 323–334.

Reese, S.D., Rutigliano, L., Hyun, K. & Jeong, J. (2007). Mapping the blogosphere: Professional and citizen-based media in the global news arena. *Journalism, 8*(3), 235-261

Renfro, P. (1979). Bias in selection of letters to the editor. *Journalism Quarterly, 56*, 822–826.

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Riffe, D., Aust, C. & Lacy, S. (1993). The effectiveness of random, consecutive day, and constructed week sampling in newspaper content analysis. *Journalism Quarterly, 70*, 133-139.

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F. (1998). *Analyzing media messages: Quantitative content analysis.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Robinson, M.J. (1975). American political legitimacy in an era of electronic journalism: Reflections on the evening news. In D. Cater & R. Adler (Eds.), *Television as a social force: New approaches to TV criticism.* New York, NY: Praeger.

Robinson, M.J. (1976). Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise. *American Political Science Review, 70,* 409-442,

Robinson, S. (2007). "SOMEONE'S GOTTA BE IN CONTROL HERE" The institutionalization of online news and the creation of a shared journalistic authority. *Journalism Practice, 1*(3), 305-321.

Robinson, S. (2010). Traditionalists vs. convergers: Textual privilege, boundary work, and the journalist–audience relationship in the commenting policies of online news sites. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 16*(1), 125–143.

Robinson, S. (2011). "Beaming up" traditional journalists: The transition of an American newspaper into cyberspace. In D. Domingo and C. Patterson (Eds.), *Making Online News, Volume 2* (pp. 31-44). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Rogers, E. (1986). *Communication technology: The new media*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Rogers, M. (2009, March 6). The Importance of Community Newspapers. Inside the Newsroom blog, Michigan Press Association. http://heritageweststaffblog.blogspot.com.

Rogers, M. (2010). Dewey and his vision of democracy. *Contemporary Pragmatism, 7*(1), 69-91 .

Rosen, J. (1991). Making journalism more public. *Communication, 12*, 267-284.

Rosen, J. (1993). *What Journalists Are For*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rosen, J. (1994). Public Journalism: First Principles. In J. Rosen and D. Merritt Jr. (Eds.), *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.

Rosenberry, J. (2005). Few papers use online techniques to improve public communication. *Newspaper Research Journal, 26*(4), 61-73.

Rosenberry, J. (2011). Users support online anonymity despite increasing negativity. *Newspaper Research Journal, (32)*2, 6-19.

Rosenstiel, T., Mitchell, A., Purcell, K., & Rainie, L. (2011). How people learn about their local community. Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved November 1, 2011, from pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Local-news.aspx.

Rubin, A. M. (1983). Television uses and gratifications: The interactions of viewing patterns and motivations. *Journal of Broadcasting, 27*, 37–51.

Ruggiero, T. (2000). Uses & Gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication & Society, 3*(1), 3-27.

Ruiz, C., Domingo, D., Micó, J. L., Díaz-Noci, J., Meso, K., & Masip, P. (2011). Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 16*(4), 463-487.

Russial, J. (2009). Growth of multimedia not extensive at newspapers. *Newspaper Research Journal, 30*(3), 58-74.

Sabato, L. (1993). *Feeding frenzy: How attack journalism has transformed American politics*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Saltmarsh, J., Hartley, M., & Clayton, P. (2009). Democratic engagement white paper. Retrieved from http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044

Salwen, M. (2005). Online news trends. *Online news and the public*, 47-79.

Santana A. (2010) Conversation or cacophony: Newspapers reporters' attitudes toward online reader comments. Presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Newspaper Division, August 4, 2010, Denver, CO.

Santana, A. (2011). Online readers' comments represent new opinion pipeline. *Newspaper Research Journal, 32*(3), 66-81.

Scholtz, A. (2007). Anonymous web posts should be curtailed. *Quill, 95*(6), 39.

Schudson, M. (1997). Why conversation is not the soul of democracy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 14*, 297-309.

Schudson, M. (1978). *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schultz, T. (2000). Mass media and the concept of interactivity: An exploratory study of online forums and reader email. *Media, Culture & Society, 22*(2), 205-221.

Schultz, T. (1999). Interactive options in online journalism: Content analysis of 100 U.S. newspapers. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 5*(1). Retrieved from http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol5/issue1/schultz.html

Shah, D.., Kwak N. & Holbert, R. (2001). "Connecting" and "disconnecting" with civic life: Patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. *Political Communication, 18*, 141-162.

Shah, D.., McLeod, J.M., & Yoon, So-Hyang (2001). Communication, context, and community: An exploration of print, broadcast, and Internet influences. *Communication Research, 28*(4), 464-506.

Shah, D., Schmierbach, M., Hawkins, J., Espino, R. & Donavan, J. (2002). Nonrecursive models of Internet use and community engagement: Questioning whether time spent online erodes social capital. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 79*, 964-987.

Shao, G. (2009). Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: a uses and gratification perspective. *Internet Research, 19*(1), 7-25.

Shepard, A. (1996). The Pew Connection. *American Journalism Review, 18*(3), 24–29.

Shoemaker, P. & Reese, S. (1990). Exposure to what? Integrating media content and effects studies. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 67*(4), 649-652.

Shook, J.R. (2004). Deliberative Democracy and Moral Pluralism: Dewey versus Rawls and Habermas. In J.D. Ryder & K. Wilkoszewska (Eds.), *Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Central European Pragmatist Forum*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Sigelman, L., & Walkosz, B. J. (1992). Letters to the editor as a public-opinion thermometer: The Martin Luther King holiday vote in Arizona. *Social Science Quarterly, 73*(4), 938-946.

Sigelman, L., Sigelman, C. K. & Walkosz, B. J. (1992). The public and the paradox of leadership: An experimental analysis. *American Journal of Political Science*, 366-385.

Singer, J. (1996). Virtual anonymity: Online accountability and the virtuous virtual journalist. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 11*(2), 95-106.

Singer, J. (1998). Online journalists: Foundations for research into their changing roles. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 4*. Retrieved from http://jcmc.huji.ac.il/vol4/issue1/smith.html#ABSTRACT

Singer, J. (2006). Stepping back from the gate: Online newspaper editors and the co-production of content in campaign 2004. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 83*(2), 265-280.

Singer, J., Hermida, A., Domingo, D., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Quandt, T., Reich, Z. & Vujnovic, M. (2011). *Participatory Journalism: Guarding open gates at online newspapers.* New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sirianni, C. & Friedland, L. (2001). *Civic innovation in America: Community empowerment, public policy, and the movement for civic renewal.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Smith, S. (2001). Alone Again Naturally: A Short History of Civic Journalism and Time. Keynote Address, Conference on Civic Innovations in Newsrooms and Classrooms, Feb. 10, 2001, Eugene, Oregon. Retrieved from http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/conf/smitheugene.html

Snyder, J. & Strömberg, D. (2008). Press Coverage and Political Accountability. Working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from http://www.nber.org/papers/w13878

Song, I., LaRose, R., Eastin, M.S. & Lin, C.A. (2004). Internet gratifications and Internet addiction: On the uses and abuses of new media. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 7*(4), 384-394.

Sood, S. & Churchill, E. (2010). Anger management: Using sentiment analysis to manage online communities. Grace Hopper Celebration. Retrieved from http://research.yahoo.net/files/SentimentSoodChurchillFinal.pdf.

South Carolina Press Association (2012). South Carolina Newspaper Directory 2012-2013.

Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*, 491-503.

Sproull, L. & Kiesler, S. (1986). Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management science, 32*(11), 1492-1512.

Stamm, K. (1985). *Newspaper use and community ties: Toward a dynamic theory*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp.

Starr, P. (2010, Jan/Feb). Governing in the Age of Fox News. The Atlantic. Retrieved from http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2010/01/governing-in-the-age-of-fox-news/7845/

Stempel, G. (1952). Sample size for classifying subject matter in dailies. *Journalism Quarterly, 29*, 333-334.

Stempel, G. (1989). Content analysis. *Research methods in mass communication, 2*, 125-136.

Sonderman, J. (2011, Aug. 18). News sites using Facebook Comments see higher quality discussion, more referrals. Poynter. Retrieved from http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/media-lab/social-media/143192/news-sites-using-facebook-comments-see-higher-quality-discussion-more-referrals/

Sunstein, C. (2001) *Republic.com.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Swanson, D. (1987). Gratification seeking, media exposure, and audience interpretations. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 31*, 237–254.

Swanson, D. (1992). Understanding audiences: Continuing contributions of gratifications research. *Poetics, 21*(4), 305-328.

The Roper Organization, Inc. (1977). Changing Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media 1959-1976. New York, NY: Television Information Office.

The Source: Newspapers by the Numbers 2005. National Newspaper Association of America. Available at: http://www.naa.org/thesource/

The State of the News Media 2012. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/newspapers-building-digital-revenues-proves-painfully-slow/newspapers-by-the-numbers/

Thornton, P. (2009, July 23). Racism, Attacks Lead News Sites to Disable Story Comments. Poynter. Retrieved from: http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/topstories/97416/racism-attacks-lead-news-sites-to-disable-story-comments/

Tichenor, P.J., Donohue, G.A. & Olien, C.N. (1980). *Community Conflict and the Press.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2001). Letters to the editor as a forum for public deliberation: Modes of publicity and democratic debate. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 18*(3), 303–320.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2002). The normative-economic justification for public discourse: Letters to the editor as a wide-open forum? *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 79*(1), 121-133.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2007). *Journalists and the Public. Newsroom Culture, Letters to the Editor, and Democracy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. & Hanitzsch, T. (2009). *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Wardle, C., Williams, A. & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2009, May 20). ugc@thebbc: A production study examining the ways in which audience material is used at the BBC. Presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Weare, C. & Lin, W. (2000). Content analysis of the World Wide Web: Opportunities and challenges. *Social Science Computer Review, 18*(3), 272-292.

Weber, L.M. & Bergman, J. (2001). Who participates and how? A comparison of citizens "online: and the mass public. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Las Vegas, NV.

Wenner, L.A. (1985). The nature of news gratification. In K.E. Rosengren, L.A. Wenner & P. Palmgreen (Eds.), *Media gratifications research: Current perspectives* (pp. 171–194). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Williams, F., Rice, R.E. & Rogers, E.M. (1988). *Research methods and the new media*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Wimmer, R. & Dominick, J. (1997). *Mass media research: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Yoo, C. (2011). Modeling audience interactivity as the gratification-seeking process in online newspapers. *Communication Theory, 21*, 67–89.

Xenos, M. & Moy, P. (2007). Direct and differential effects of the Internet on political and civic engagement. *Journal of Communication, 57*(4), 704–718.

Zhou, Y. & Pinkleton, B. (2012). Modeling the effects of political information source use and online expression on young adults' political efficacy. *Mass Communication and Society, 15*, 813–830.

Zwick, R. (1988). Another look at interrater agreement. *Psychological Bulletin, 103*(3), 374.

ORIGINAL TYPOLOGIES, NEWS STORY TOPICS

Table A.1

Main Subject/Topic	Description of Content
Politics/government	Local/state/national representatives; elections, campaigns.
Police/crime/legal	Crime or criminal activity; trials, sentencing, legal action.
Business/economy	Local business/economy; job growth/decline; new initiatives.
Education/schools	Local administration; district policies/proposals; performance.
Accidents/tragedies	Events resulting in property damage, personal injury, death.
Natural disaster/weather	Preparation/aftermath of storms, floods.
Civic groups/organizations	Organizations for community enhancement/fund-raising.
Deaths/obits	Notification of death as news story or follow-up report.
Entertainment/arts	Performance/concert/artistic display.
Sports/recreation	Local sports teams, professional/amateur events, awards.
Health/fitness	Local health care; fitness/diet/disease prevention.
Religion/spirituality	Churches/clergy/faith-based groups; issues of religion/faith.
Events/activities	Local social events/exhibitions/fairs/festivals.
Environment/weather	Local atmospheric conditions; noteworthy weather patterns.
Wildlife/animals	Interactions/incidents with wildlife; animal control/care.
Roads/transportation	Transportation proposals/projects.
Science/technology	Science/tech news with local angle.
Ordinary people	Special recognition of local citizens; overcoming obstacles.
Military/nat'l security	Local military personnel/facilities; security breaches/threats.

CODEBOOK AND CODING INSTRUCTIONS

VAR COLS   VARIABLE/DESCRIPTIONS

V1   **Coder ID Number** (One-digit code: 0, 1)

        0 – Sally Carpenter
        1 – Ellis Harman

V2   **Issue/Posting Date** (Six-digit numerical; e.g., July 1, 2012 is
        070112). Actual date (month/day/year) in which the article
        appears on the front page of the **printed edition** of the
        newspaper.

V3   **Newspaper** (Each assigned a one-digit code)
        Name of the newspaper in which the article appears.
        Descriptors are used in place of the newspaper name to ensure
        confidentiality. "(D)" denotes newspapers using Disqus
        program for user registration; "(FB)" denotes
        newspapers using Facebook for user registration.

        1 – Small Daily 1 (D)
        2 – Large Daily 1 (D)
        3 – Large Daily 2 (D)
        4 – Large Daily 3 (FB)
        5 – Small Daily 2 (D)
        6 – Small Daily 3 (FB)

V4   **Day of Publication** (Each day assigned a one-digit code)
        This is the actual day of the week in which the article appears.

1 – Monday
2 – Tuesday
3 – Wednesday
4 – Thursday
5 – Friday
6 – Saturday
7 – Sunday

V5   **Type of Story/Article** (Each article assigned a one-digit code)

This is the subject/topic of the article being coded. The sample is limited to news or feature reports written by a staff employee (writer/reporter/editor) whose byline appears on the published article both in print and online versions. Analysis (evaluation), commentary (the expressed opinion of the writer) or editorials (a statement of the newspaper's official position on an issue/event) are excluded from this sample. Only **one subject/topic** must be coded, so check the subject/theme that **best describes** the **primary or main theme** of the article.

1 – Politics/government/elected officials/candidates (Issues involving mayor, city/county council, state/national representatives, other elected or appointed officials; local or state elections, campaigns, debates).

2 – Police/crime/courts or court proceedings/legal matters (Event involving law enforcement response or investigation, reports of crime or criminal activity, arrests or identification of suspects, indictments, warrants, preliminary hearings, trials, sentencing, legal opinions or actions taken).

3 – Business/economic development (Articles on local businesses, economic growth/decline, new business opening/new service offered, job growth/decline, new industry or economic initiatives).

4 – Education/schools
(Local school administration, teachers, students, parents; enrollment, curriculum, schedule, district policies/directives/proposals, performance reports/benchmarks; new school construction/consolidation; teacher hirings/layoffs).

5 – Accidents/tragic occurrences
(Unexpected events/occurrences resulting in evacuation, property destruction, personal injury and/or death; auto accidents, fire, explosion, building collapse, gas leaks).

6 -- Ordinary people
(Feature-type stories on local citizens; achievements/accolades/honors/special recognition of private citizens; also accounts of hardships/personal struggles/conflict and/or success stories of overcoming obstacles).

99 – Missing data (coded for articles with subjects/topics not included in above list).

V6 **Number of comments per story**

The total number of posted comments to a news story, including replies, hidden/collapsed comments, etc., at the time of collection.

0 – 1 to 10 comments
1 – 11 to 20 comments
2 – 21 or more comments

V7 **Identification of Commenter**

This is to determine if contributors are posting anonymously (using screen names or pseudonyms) or using their real names when posting. This may be determined by the registration requirements of the sampled newspaper. The standard to be applied is if a first and last name is used, it will be considered a "true" identity and

coded as "1." Otherwise, the post must be coded as "0" even if a seemingly "real" first or last name is used alone (example: Someone posting as "Carter" could be one of many with that name in the area and could not be a specific identifier). If for some reason it cannot be determined if the identity is real or a pseudonym, code as 99 for "missing data."

> 0 – User ID by anonymous (screen name/pseudonym)
> 1 – User ID by full (first and last) name
> 99 – Missing data

Themes of Democratic Engagement

Use a one-digit code for the absence or presence of each theme (two-digit 99 code for "missing data" if unable to determine or theme is unidentifiable).

> V8 **Engagement**
>
>> Engagement is expressed through the attitudinal dimension of *political efficacy*, which implies that one's participation in civic affairs can actually make a difference (internal efficacy) or that those in power would welcome/be responsive or receptive to one's participation (external efficacy). Examples: "Your voice needs to be heard," your vote is important," "please let them know how you feel," "we/they need your help," "you/we can make a difference."
>>
>> Engagement can also be reflected through *mobilization*, a "call to action" that provides specific information on how people can actively participate in a civic matter. It includes contact information such as addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, websites, meeting locations, dates, and times. It can also identify a specific entity as an appropriate contact, or offer tactical information such as "how-to's," tips or strategies that would enhance the effectiveness of mobilization. If a post provides a link to another story/resource, it must be information that encourages or solicits participation(i.e., "Check out this site for information on how to sign up/participate").
>>
>> 0.   Absent
>> 1.   Present
>> 99.   Missing data

V9   **Cynicism**

The attitudinal theme of ***cynicism*** reflects a degree of negativity about the government/organization/civic entity or individual(s) associated with it that suggests anger, frustration, distrust, alienation, or powerlessness. Cynicism can also be targeted toward others in the community with statements that are insensitive, vulgar, or threatening, suggesting a lack of cohesiveness among citizens.

Examples: "He/she/they are crooks," "He/she/they don't care about the rest of us," "There is nothing you/we can do to stop it," I/we feel helpless," "they don't want my/your/our help," "he/she/they can't be trusted," etc.

0.   Absent
1.   Present
99.   Missing data

Themes of Motivation (Uses & Gratification)

Use a one-digit code for the absence or presence of each theme (two-digit 99 code for "missing data" if unable to determine or theme is unidentifiable).

V10   **Information**

This is traditionally defined as "surveillance" in uses & gratifications   studies. As a motivational factor for using or consuming media, it refers to a means of information gathering. For the purpose of this study, it is the presence of words and/or phrases indicating an effort to obtain information by asking questions, or to educate or inform others by answering questions; adding information (e.g. facts, insight, background, observations, links to relevant resources); clarifying points; noting missing information; attempts to balance a discussion; pointing out incorrect information (e.g. inaccuracies, false statements, factual errors, or misinformation).

Simply stated, it is the comment that contributes something substantive to the discussion in a very straightforward manner; one

that is based in fact and not reflective of the contributor's personal feelings, beliefs, etc. (that would be next).

   0.   Absent
   1.   Present
   99. Missing data

V11   Personal Identity

Individuals motivated by personal identity use media content to give added salience to something in their own lives or personal situations. Using media for personal identity is to help resolve a personal dilemma, reinforce one's own values, ideologies or beliefs, or justify a change in attitudes, ideologies, or beliefs. The use of first-person pronouns is an indicator of personal identity and often reflects a sharing of first-hand experience or personal knowledge.

Words and/or phrases of personal identity can be reflected by an intense interest or emotional response to a story or issue, either positive (gratitude, appreciation, praise) or negative (anger, outrage, personal attack, "venting"). Indicators of this kind of passion or emotion in a comment is the use of ALL CAPS (reflecting the raising of one's voice), or the use of multiple exclamation points ("!!!!!") or question marks ("????") to add emphasis to their point.

   0.   Absent
   1.   Present
   99. Missing data

V12   Social Interaction

These uses are social in that they are emotional expressions explicitly directed at other people in the online community. The most obvious indicator of a social interaction theme is a post that is marked as a "reply" or "response" to a previous post.

Themes of social interaction are reflected in words/phrases that express sympathy or condolences to others, or that applaud good

work by reporters or acknowledge agreement with other commenters. Conversely, it can also be expressed in comments that question, challenge, or refute the comments made by others. The consideration here is not whether the post is positive or negative in its response to others, but that it is simply a direct response or reaction.

Social interaction can be reflected in words/phrases that attempt to persuade others, such as trying to get the newspaper to take some action or cover a particular story.

     0.   Absent
     1.   Present
     99.   Missing data

V13   **Entertainment**

As a motivational factor for writing online comments, themes of entertainment are reflected in words and/or phrases that inject humor into a discussion or debate or "lighten the mood" of the discourse by making a joke or a humorous observation. It is not designed to give perspective to a comment thread, but is instead simply an injection of humor in an attempt to be funny.

     0.   Absent
     1.   Present
     99.   Missing data

BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEWED JOURNALISTS

Table C.1

Newspaper	Circulation	Journalist	Title	Years/ Position	Years/ Newspaper	Years/ Journalism
Small Daily 1 (D)	23,500	SDJ 1	Editor in Chief	18	18	40
Large Daily 1 (D)	83,400	LDJ 1	Managing Editor for Online	5	19	35
Large Daily 2 (D)	38,900	LDJ 2	Online G.M.	8 months	6	21
		LDJ 3	Editor/V.P.	1 1/2	12	36
Large Daily 3 (FB)	36,100	SDJ 2	Executive Editor	3	29	32
Small Daily 2 (D)	19,000	SDJ 3	Editor	12	20	20
		SDJ 4	Online Editor	1 1/2	1.5	7
Small Daily 3 (FB)	15,500	SDJ 5	Dir., Multimedia Development	1	8	15

SCRIPT FOR JOURNALIST INTERVIEWS

Introduction: Protocol statement

1.   How long has your newspaper offered reader comment sections on its website?

2.   Are users required to register before being able to comment on new stories?

3.   Are reader comments permitted on some stories and not others?

4.   How are reader comments moderated or monitored by your newspaper?

5.   Since implementing your reader comment section, have you had to change or alter your policy regarding user registration or moderation of content?

6.   In your opinion, has user anonymity affected the overall volume and/or tone of reader comments and the discourse taking place in the forum?

7.   In your opinion, has the reader comment forum been effective in engaging readers?

8.   In your opinion, do reader comments to online news stories contribute to the newsgathering process of the newspaper?

9.   In your opinion, has the reader comment sections been effective in advancing the overall journalistic mission of the newspaper?

10. Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

Demographic Information (*to be kept confidential*)

Full name:

Title:

Number of years in this position:

Number of years at this newspaper:

Number of years as a professional journalist: