

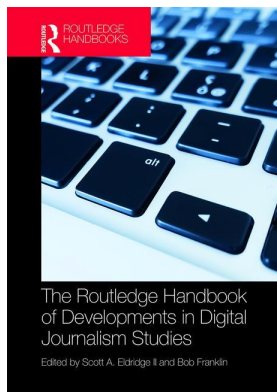
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Developments in Digital Journalism Studies

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User Comments in Digital Journalism

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315270449-37>

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Published online on: 30 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Thomas B. Ksiazek, Nina Springer. 30 Aug 2018, *User Comments in Digital Journalism from: The Routledge Handbook of Developments in Digital Journalism Studies* Routledge
Accessed on: 17 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315270449-37>

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USER COMMENTS IN DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Current research and future directions

Thomas B. Ksiazek and Nina Springer

User comments offer a unique opportunity for the public to participate in the news production process. Research suggests that in 2014 the vast majority – over 90% – of news websites offered the opportunity for users to comment on the news (Stroud et al., 2014). Commentary features allow for ‘annotative reporting’ by embedding users’ viewpoints, experiences, or expertise within an article’s context, providing readers with additional information to form opinions (e.g., Bowman and Willis, 2003), which can potentially enhance deliberative processes. However, these normative standards aren’t always met in practice: empirical research shows that user commentary tends to be shallow and uncivil, which is why some online publishers have recently banned user comments from their websites, either closing down comment sections altogether or shifting comments to third-party social media platforms.

This chapter discusses the ambivalent nature of user comments. It provides an overview of current research on user comments in digital journalism and directions for future research. The chapter profiles *commenters* by discussing who reads and writes comments as well as motivations and inhibitors for doing so. We then move to a review of existing theory and research on *the act of commenting*, including thoughts and findings on commenting as an act of public deliberation and political action. We also discuss prominent issues that come along with the bipolar nature of user comments, such as *comment in/civility*, *comment moderation*, and *organizational perspectives and commenting policies*, as well as *commenting effects*. The chapter concludes with directions for future research.

Profiling commenters and lurkers

By reading random comments on the news, one could easily get the impression that commenters often use the feature only to vent their anger and frustration. The aim of this contribution is to shed light on users, both active and passive-receptive, and the motives that drive people to read and write comments. Tracing drivers helps to understand whose standpoint is voiced and why.

There are surely narcissistic people who (ab)use the opportunity to express their anger with elite actors, such as journalists or politicians, as well as other commenters in a rough or disrespectful way; for instance, as a valve in difficult situations or when they feel superior to their discussion counterpart (Springer, 2014; see also Wu and Atkin, 2017). However, we argue here that there is more to commenting than that. In brief and in the best cases, commenting is an activity like

writing letters to the editor or debating in a club. Although it mainly serves to ‘express one’s own opinion’, it can also be a creative, socially motivated and identity-related productive activity.¹

Posting and reading comments: demography and traits

Commenting on news is a hobby in which only a few invest a great amount of time. Besides these so-called heavy users, there are many who comment once, twice, five, or 10 times, and perhaps never again (e.g., Ruiz et al., 2011: 476). The latest data for Germany suggests, for instance, that 14% of the population over 16 years commented on news sites at least once (Köcher, 2016a). This finding roughly echoes data from Sweden (Karlsson et al., 2015). Data for the US suggests that 55% of Americans have commented online, and 15% of those commenters engaged on a news site or app, specifically (Stroud et al., 2016). According to another study of the “Engaging News Project” (Stroud et al., 2017), commenters are loyal – 78% of commenters are “exclusive commenters” where they comment on one site only.²

Reading comments is somehow more attractive than writing, but shares vary from country to country, also due to different operationalizations and sample populations (e.g., for Sweden, see Karlsson et al., 2015: 303; for the US, see Stroud et al., 2016; for Germany, see Köcher, 2016a).

Comparative data in regard to the commenters’ socio-demography is, again, both coherent and differing. In Sweden, commenting on news is rather popular among younger users (Bergström, 2008: 72). Similarly, age was negatively correlated with commenting frequency in a U.S. survey (Meyer and Carey, 2014: 222). Studies in Germany, however, found that commenters are older than the average users of a news site (Ziegele et al., 2013: 88; see also Springer et al., 2015). It has to be noted, though, that the German studies are nonrepresentative and that the recent shifting to social networking sites could also affect measured age levels in the future. Further, commenting in the US is, compared to comment reading, associated with lower levels of education (Stroud et al., 2016), while in the already mentioned news users’ study in Germany, findings of Ziegele and colleagues suggest a high level of education among commenters (cf. Ziegele et al., 2013; Köcher, 2016b). In regard to gender, however, available data suggests that men comment more frequently than women (e.g., Chung and Yoo, 2008; Friemel and Dötsch, 2015; Köcher, 2016b; Stroud et al., 2016).

Significant predictors for the usage of interactive features, such as the commentary feature, were found to be internet efficacy/skill and interest in new technologies (Bergström, 2008; Chung and Yoo, 2008; Larsson, 2011), as well as political interest and engagement (Chung, 2008; Köcher, 2016a; Larsson, 2011). Swiss data suggest that commenters are more conservative than comment readers (Friemel and Dötsch, 2015: 161). Similarly, a recent German study finds that commenters disproportionately support the right-wing populist party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), the liberal party (FDP), and the “Pirate Party” (Köcher, 2016b).

Comment readers, on the other hand, seem to be such a diverse group of users that a Swedish study could not find any characteristics concerning these so-called lurkers’ socio-demography or traits, such as civic or political engagement (Larsson, 2011: 1190). However, they are very frequent and intense news site visitors (ibid.: 1191). The aforementioned Swiss study suggests that, besides being more “left-leaning” than commenters, comment readers tend to be “younger than the average website user” (Friemel and Dötsch, 2015: 161). Hence, the authors assume “that reader and writer of comments on news sites differ significantly with respect to some central attributes” (ibid.: 162).

Motivations and inhibitors

Studies applying survey or content analytic techniques identified different factors that triggered commenting on news but also sought to discover de-motivations that kept people from voicing

their opinions. Since commenting starts – at least theoretically – with the article’s input, the topic should first of all influence the number of incoming comments as well as the manner in which people voice their opinions. (We discuss the topic’s influence on civility in the next section.) Available databases are solid enough to generalize that people all over the world love to discuss politics (e.g., Stroud et al., 2016; Ziegele et al., 2013: 89). This finding holds true in multi-country studies (Goodman, 2013), as well as studies of British (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011), German (Springer, 2014), Israeli (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015), Turkish (Ürper and Çevikel, 2014), and U.S. (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012) news websites. Richardson and Stanyer (2011) even showed that different media outlets relate to different commenting behaviors. On broadsheet sites, topics such as general domestic politics/party policies, U.S. politics/elections, or foreign affairs attracted the most comments, while on tabloid sites, religion- and crime-related topics generated the most comments (ibid.: 990–991).

Not only the article’s topic but also the journalist and the journalistic contextualization and interpretations of events influenced the amount of incoming user feedback. Weber (2014), for instance, showed that the news factors proximity, impact, and frequency had a significant positive effect on the number of comments, while the news factor facticity had a negative one. If journalists describe an event factually, without providing further analysis or interpretation, the news story is less likely to attract comments. If the journalistic contextualization or interpretation diverges from the perceptions and attitude of the readers, this dissonance can result in emotional pressure that some people try to ease by corrective commenting (Springer, 2014; see also Chung et al., 2015). The same holds true for “outraging posts” of fellow commenters (Springer, 2014).

A fair share of commenters appreciate engaging in a discussion with others (Springer, 2014; Springer et al., 2015; Ziegele et al., 2013: 87; Ziegele, 2016). Hence, a sense of a virtual community was found to be a relevant predictor for commenting (e.g., Meyer and Carey, 2014: 221). However – and this is supported by content analyses – this motivation is not necessarily the most important driver of comments (e.g., Jakobs, 2014: 201–203; Ruiz et al., 2011). On some news sites, comments mostly serve self-representation; they react to or echo ideological positions expressed in the articles, producing threads with low levels of discussion and little diversity of opinion. Such behavior results in what Ruiz and colleagues (2011: 480) label “dialogue of the deaf”.

On other websites, the authors found vivid “*communities of debate*” (ibid.: 482), in which people discuss diverging viewpoints in a (mostly) polite manner. Shifting user comments to social network sites is likely to encourage interactivity (Wu and Atkin, 2017), but a forum structure can also lead to a high share of interactive comments (e.g., 69% for the German online news magazine “Spiegel Online”; see Jakobs, 2014: 203). Further, previous comments should also be able to fuel discussions. Ziegele and colleagues (2014; Ziegele, 2016) drew on the news value tradition to distill “discussion factors” of (interactive) user comments. The authors found that commenters could “trigger response comments by including controversy, unexpectedness, personalization, and uncertainty in their postings and by avoiding incomprehensibility and negativity” (Ziegele et al., 2014: 1129).

When asked about their motivation to engage, commenters and comment readers mentioned or agreed to drivers that can be subsumed under the well-known “Uses-and-Gratification” categories that scholars established for traditional media usage. Besides the aforementioned need for integration and social interaction,³ users seek or provide information and express and work on their personal identity; that is, they use arguments as a means of self-presentation or expressions of others as a means for social comparison. Additionally, they comment or read comments for their entertainment and relaxation (e.g., Chung and Yoo, 2008; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011b: 5; Springer, 2014; Wu and Atkin, 2017; Yoo, 2011).

The social setting in which commenting is embedded also serves to gratify a need for recognition (e.g., Barnes, 2015: 822). Yet data also suggest that commenters who score higher on the

social-integrative dimension cannot always satisfy their need to socialize to the desired extent through the use of interactive features and become frustrated over time (Springer, 2014; Springer et al., 2015; Yoo, 2011). This could be because discussion with others always implies the persuasion of dissenters, and that understanding is complicated, as commenters are often opinionated and thus quite resistant (e.g., Springer, 2014; Springer et al., 2015).

Furthermore, social-interactive motivations were found to not only be directed at users but also at journalists (e.g., Heise et al., 2014: 418; Springer, 2014; Springer et al., 2015). However, studies show that interaction with journalists happens only rarely in public, since the authors usually refrain from engaging in user discussions below their articles (Graham and Wright, 2015; Jakobs, 2014: 201; Singer, 2009). This absence might be frustrating for users seeking to reach journalists publicly, thus possibly having an effect on the comments' civility. We discuss this in the section dealing with comment in/civility.

Beyond the analysis of de-motivations, studies also investigated why some people would not want to voice their opinions publicly. Besides restrictive time budgets (e.g. Barnes, 2015), people are hesitant to register and concerned about data protection. Another reason is simply the lack of personal involvement (Springer, 2014; Ziegele, 2016). A low sense of opinionation can be caused by disinterest, but comment readers of an Australian alternative journalism website did also express intimidation by the “textual authority portrayed by other commenters or the journalist” (Barnes, 2015: 817), indicating low levels of confidence (ibid.: 818) and the subjective perception of lacking competence (cf. Springer, 2014).

Furthermore, the perceived “quality” of discussions was found to hamper participation (Springer, 2014; Springer et al., 2015). For instance, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011b: 4) show that nonusers would not read comments on a Californian news site because they found comments uncivil. It is reasonable to assume that people would not want to discuss with or relate to such individuals, whereas some users maintain that freedom of expression should outweigh any concern for civil discussion (Robinson, 2010). Thus, studies worldwide suggest that a fair share of news audiences see comments as an “integral part of the overall story” (Barnes, 2015: 820; cf. Bergström and Wadbring, 2015: 147; Springer, 2014). This is because reading comments can gratify, especially information-related needs, and can be very entertaining – for instance, to observe and follow a heated public dispute (Springer, 2014).

Comments as public deliberation

Since the integration of commenting platforms directly below news stories offers a unique opportunity for ‘ordinary people’ to engage in immediate public discussion of the news – including the *observation* of these discussions and the *receiving* of input beyond peer-group opinions – it is no wonder that research on user comments often draws on philosophical notions of the public sphere as an overarching theoretical framework. This understanding of comments adapts the work of Habermas (1989) to describe a space where the public can engage in rational, civil discussion about the important events and issues of the day. Unlike the in-person coffee houses and salons that Habermas depicted, comments are seen as a *virtual* opportunity for engaging in public deliberation.

While both journalists and users see the deliberative potential in commenting platforms, there is widespread concern about the quality of discussion occurring in these spaces (Barnes, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Lee, 2012; Meltzer, 2015; Nielsen, 2012; Santana, 2011, 2014; Springer et al., 2015). Broadly echoing what Singer et al. (2011) found in a collaborative study, a 2013 study from the World Association of Newspapers conducted interviews with news professionals from over 100 organizations across 63 countries (Goodman, 2013). The study found that journalists valued user comments, particularly for engaging users, promoting loyalty, and encouraging

community, which all indirectly contribute to increased revenue, but they also expressed concern about the general quality of these discussions and the resources necessary to curate productive discussion spaces. Similarly, Meltzer (2015) analyzed industry discourse about user comments, finding widespread concern among news professionals about incivility in comments. Others have found similar evidence that journalists and news organizations see a need to improve the quality of user comments (e.g., Nielsen, 2012; Santana, 2011) and that journalists and their organizations should be responsible for encouraging more civil discussion.

Comment in/civility

In response to these concerns, we have seen the emergence of a substantial body of research on the quality of user comments, focusing particularly on the civil and/or hostile nature of user comments. Hostility, or incivility, is commonly identified as comments “intentionally designed to attack someone or something and, in doing so, incite anger or exasperation through the use of name-calling, character assassination, offensive language, profanity, and/or insulting language” (Ksiazek et al., 2015: 854). Civility is less easily defined. While Herbst (2010: 19) offers a useful conceptualization of civility as “constructive engagement with others through argument, deliberation, and discourse”, Ksiazek and colleagues (2015) find that much of the literature simply treats civility as the absence of hostility.

Research suggests the in/civility of comments can be explained by a variety of factors, including: story topic, sources, journalist participation in comment threads, journalist demography, and organizational commenting policies (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011a; Ksiazek, 2016). It seems reasonable to assume that the nature of comments will vary across different topics, especially considering that comments are an “emotional response to the story” (Braun, 2015: 818). This is supported by interviews with news professionals, who regularly observe that the tone of user discussions is linked to the story topic (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011b; Goodman, 2013).

Research also demonstrates that comment in/civility varies across story topics. Coe et al. (2014) found that hard news stories were more likely than soft news stories to exhibit incivility in comments (sports being the exception). Ksiazek (2016) found variations in in/civility across political news topics, with controversial topics (e.g., gun control) predicting not only more comments but also more hostility in those comments.

In addition to story topic, the sources used in a given story also explain variations in comment in/civility. Research suggests the inclusion of sources as a journalistic practice is positively related to more hostility in user comments (Ksiazek, 2016). However, it is quite possible that the use of sources, as a general practice, is less important than the actual sources quoted. The decision to comment and the tone of that comment is likely to stem from a cognitive and emotional reaction to the source itself. In fact, Coe et al. (2014) found variations in incivility depending on the specific source quoted in a story (e.g., stories with quotes from Barack Obama had more incivility in the user comments).

As discussed earlier, research has also considered the role of journalist participation in comment sections. Despite concerns about intruding on “user” space (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011b; Robinson, 2010) and the increased demand on journalists’ time in order to participate (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011b), when journalists contribute comments to these discussions we see more comments and more civil comments overall (Ksiazek, 2016). In terms of general engagement (i.e., the volume of comments), perhaps users see participation by journalists as an indicator of the value of commenting on news stories. It is also possible that users see this as an opportunity to directly interact with professional journalists, something that was previously relegated to letters to the editor and news talk radio. Regarding the improved civility of discussions where journalists contribute, this finding seems to support a surveillance effect where

users are more likely to act in a civil manner if they are aware that journalists are monitoring their comments.

Organizational perspectives and commenting policies

There is general disagreement among journalists about whether they should take part in user discussions. Robinson (2010) finds contrasting philosophies on the role of journalists in commenting platforms. Based on ethnographic interviews, she found two camps: “Traditionalists” wanted to maintain a hierarchical relationship with the audience, while “Convergers” pushed for more interactivity with their users.

Meanwhile, at the organizational level, Goodman (2013) found widespread agreement among news organizations across the world that active participation in comment forums improves the quality of comments, and the World Association of Newspapers included this as one of their “best practices”. Consistent with this, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011b) note that both users and journalists wanted to see more journalist participation, although some editors did express concerns about intruding on a ‘user’ space and the increased demands on reporters’ time, as noted earlier.

News organizations typically have specific policies governing their comment sections. For the most part, these are designed to encourage civil, productive dialogue among users. These policies often include required user registration and profanity filters as well as more active pre- and post-moderation strategies, prohibiting anonymous usernames, and allowing users to rate and rank each other’s comments (Domingo, 2011). Research has explored the implementation of various combinations of these policies, as well as their effectiveness in promoting more civil comments (Braun, 2015; Coe et al., 2014; Ksiazek, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014). Each of the aforementioned policies has demonstrated a positive relationship with civil commenting independently. However, when we account for these policies collectively and control for other explanatory variables (story topic, use of sources, journalist participation), only pre-moderation, post-moderation, reputation management (i.e., allowing users to police themselves through rating/ranking systems), and prohibiting anonymity predicted more civil and/or less hostile comments (Ksiazek, 2016).

There is a growing body of research on the role of anonymity in commenting (e.g., Ksiazek, 2015, 2016; Santana, 2014). Reflecting on these findings, two patterns emerge. First, prohibiting anonymity can encourage more civil discussion. When commenters are accountable and identifiable, they contribute in more productive ways and tend to eschew hostility/incivility. However, it also seems that a policy of prohibiting anonymity discourages user engagement, in general; stories on sites that prohibit anonymous usernames exhibit less comments, overall, than those on sites that allow anonymity (Ksiazek, 2016). Santana (2014) finds that U.S. news organizations are divided in their approach to anonymity: roughly half require identifiable usernames, while half allow anonymity. While some news organizations prohibit anonymous comments in an effort to improve the civility of user comments, others may allow anonymity to encourage overall user engagement.

Comments as political action: against the media, against the elite

One reason why user discussions tend to become uncivil is because user comments often criticize. Commenters challenge the journalistic interpretation or point out factual mistakes; they criticize actors cited in the articles or fellow commenters (e.g., Baden and Springer, 2014; Springer, 2014). It is reasonable to assume that some of them take a critical stance toward political institutions, the ‘mainstream society’, and the elite actors ruling it. For instance, in light of what was said about

the overrepresentation of conservative stances among commenters, it makes sense to presume that they use this tool to actively “correct” or “counterbalance” the perspectives of the more left-leaning journalists (e.g., Willnat and Weaver, 2014 for the US; Steindl et al., 2017 for Germany; see also Chung et al., 2015). It might not be far-fetched to characterize some users who comment on news as ‘media skeptics’; such people perceive journalists and products of their work as selective and biased (Tsfati and Cappella, 2005).

The relationship between coverage and “follow-up” or “talk back” communication of the audience has been investigated intensively (e.g., Baden and Springer, 2014; Douai and Nofal, 2012; Reader, 2012; Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015). Findings suggest that comments are not only replications or reproductions of media frames but also offer modifications and additions: Users challenge and render journalistic interpretations in a different light by proposing alternative interpretations. However, it is certainly questionable whether some of the formulated standpoints are socially desirable or beneficial for democratic discourse (e.g., Baden and Springer, 2014; Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015).

As previously mentioned, it has been acknowledged that users’ opinions help readers to get a feeling about the “pulse of the public debate” (Douai and Nofal, 2012: 269; Springer, 2014) and give these posts at least short-term persuasive potential, which we will discuss in the next section. Thus, measures are applied to use the tool to spread opinions strategically (be it manually or automated) and make them appear more popular than such viewpoints might actually be. For instance, the so-called “Russian troll army” as a means of “information war” was discussed in the media recently (e.g. Higgins, 2016), and “below the line” discussions (Graham and Wright, 2015: 317) on the latest forced migration movements were reportedly regularly dominated by right-wing populists’ opinions (e.g., Faiola, 2016).

Given the intensity of these public debates, one might reasonably assume that “powerful counter (sub)public sphere[s]” emerge (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015: 482). It is suspected that anonymity can not only be responsible for incivility but also for the infectious spreading of discriminating opinions. First, since people do not need to fear sanctions in their “real lives”, they feel safe to utter what they might fear to say in their “offline world” (cf. Springer, 2014). Second, specific viewpoints may become more visible and thus “louder” simply because of the comments’ reach: while personal communication has a natural border that ends with one’s contacts, the commentary feature can facilitate communication among people who do not personally know each other, living all over a country but sharing the same attitudes (ibid.). This could lead to commenters identifying with similar others, conferring upon a minority confidence to speak out. Apart from socially undesirable viewpoints, such a ‘spiral of silence’ effect could have positive effects, too, for instance in light of the (de-)marginalization of minorities.

Commenting effects

Actors interested in influencing public opinion would not invest resources if they did not assume that user comments had an effect on others. For instance, the concept of the ‘spiral of silence’ proposes that we observe our environment closely to assess climates of opinion on issues at stake. User comments provide such social cues. Hence, Lee (2012) found that comments can impact users’ perceptions of broad public opinion. In particular, when high-ego-involvement users experience comments that contradict their opinions, they believe the public (and the media) is against their position.

Available studies drawing upon experimental settings repeatedly show, at the least, the short-term persuasive potential of comments. For instance, there is support for a negative spillover effect on perceptions and actions. Negative comments can diminish the persuasive influence of a news article (Winter et al., 2015). Similarly, criticizing or uncivil comments can negatively

affect the perception of an article's quality (Kümpel and Springer, 2016; Prochazka et al., 2016). Another study indicated that people's exposure to prejudiced comments led them to post more prejudiced comments themselves (Hsueh et al., 2015).

However, studies also found positive spillover effects (e.g., Kümpel and Springer, 2016). For instance, positive comments can lead to a more favorable assessment regarding the perceived public opinion climate, responsibility attribution, and attitudinal evaluations of a financial manager scandalized by the news (von Sikorski and Hänelt, 2016). However, this study also found a contrast effect of comments. In comparison to balanced comment threads, the study's participants who were only exposed to threads with one-sided, negative comments assessed the article's journalistic quality significantly higher (*ibid.*: 563). Such contrast effects could stem from audience resistance. The processing of user comments seems not only to be influenced by the recipients' predispositions and the relevance of the topic (e.g., Anderson et al., 2014; Winter et al., 2015) but also by the comments' substance. For instance, Chen and Ng (2016) showed that participants exposed to civil comments presumed their influence on the opinions of others to be clearly higher than participants exposed to uncivil comments.

To summarize, the literature on commenting effects shows that user comments serve the audience as information for what others think about controversial topics and mainstream media coverage in general and that they have the potential for at least short-term influence, such as affecting the audience's perception of journalistic quality. Thus, user comments' relevance cannot be ignored. However, there are still numerous questions we cannot answer yet. We will outline some of the most pressing ones in the chapter's final section.

Future research

Over the last several years, comments have been praised, analyzed, criticized, and, as a result, sometimes banned from news sites. The quality of user comments is the most pressing issue, and we see two solutions: either shut comments off entirely or take ownership. Let's face it: media outlets introduced commenting spaces to build user engagement and generate revenues, and curating public discussions was never really a priority. Since they did not take great interest in what happened 'below the line', comment threads tended to become shout boxes. If we thought that shutting down comments was the right solution, we would not bother to write this last section. Instead, since we think that there is still potential for these discussion spaces, we hope that scholars will begin to determine how the decline of user comment sections can be averted. This will require becoming more interdisciplinary and more collaborative.

The media, communication scholars, and computer scientists should talk to each other on a more regular basis. Together they can investigate resources for more advanced and efficient ways to moderate, a practice that was found to have a positive influence on the degree of civility in comments (Ksiazek, 2015, 2016). For instance, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011b) recommend filtering comments based on sentiment to improve the quality of comments on news websites, while Braun (2015) observes the increasing use of "collapsing algorithms" that effectively filter out (or "collapse") comments that reach a threshold of low ratings. Interestingly, this latter practice integrates two of the organizational commenting policies that seem to have a positive impact on comment quality: automated moderation and socially driven reputation management systems, where communities of users hold each other accountable through ratings and rankings. Both practices warrant further investigation.

Further, we recommend taking the task of moderation more seriously. Moderation as it is organized today predominantly consists of banning and blocking or publishing. But moderation should strive to be much more than that; moderators of group discussions pose questions, they summarize or mediate results of discussions (in the case of online commentary, to

participants and the newsrooms that host them). If we model moderation as more dialogical, this of course comes with the investment of resources. Thus, automated tools could be useful: chat bots, for instance, are able to imitate human communication. Such chat bots could be trained and implemented transparently. Experiments then need to show whether such chat bots would be 'accepted' by the participants and thus be able to positively influence the discussions' climate. Comment moderation still seems to be a highly experimental field that definitely calls for a more systematic analysis.

The media has the data and access to the field; communication scholars have the empirical and theoretical backdrop; and computer scientists have the know-how of automation for cost reduction. Collectively, we should start to investigate the effects of not only passive moderation through automated filters but also active moderation strategies. At the same time, while filters, collapsing algorithms, and chat bots might better the overall quality of these virtual discussions of current events, we need to be wary of the potential for these tools to silence commenters. If we truly value commenting spaces for their potential to facilitate public deliberation and political action, then as we pursue more innovative moderation techniques and other strategies for improving the quality of user comments, we should aim to ensure that these attempts to promote civil discussion do not limit free speech.

Further reading

For additional reading, consider work by Singer and colleagues (2011) and Ziegele and colleagues (2017). Singer et al.'s monograph is based on the impressive fieldwork of a consortium of prestigious scholars from around the world. It reflects on "how journalists in Western democracies are thinking about, and dealing with, the inclusion of content produced and published by the public". Ziegele and colleagues (2017) guest edited a recent special issue of the ICA-affiliated open-access journal *Studies in Communication and Media (SCM)* that contains multidisciplinary and up-to-date studies on user commentary.

Notes

- 1 For the "profiling", "action" and "effects" sections, parts of the research reviews are adapted from Springer & Kümpel 2018 [in German language].
- 2 For the frequency of commenting on news in social media, comparative data can also be found in the annual Reuters Institute Digital News Report from 2014 on.
- 3 Even comment readers can experience a certain feeling of belonging: Barnes (2015: 822), for instance, found for an alternative journalism website that readers wanted to learn what the community thinks about issues at stake, to sympathize by reading others' opinions, and to associate themselves with the views of likeminded commenters (see also Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011b).

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