Towards a Better Inclusivity: Online Comments and Community at News Organizations

by

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in Comparative Media Studies

ABSTRACT

Over the past several years, traditional – or legacy – news organizations have faced enormous challenges as a result of financial pressures and the advent of the participatory internet. This paper traces the new journalistic contenders, new audience behaviors, and new business models that are emerging in participatory news spaces. This thesis situates the most visible form of online news participation – the comments section – within a broader and evolving debate over how news organizations create relationships with audiences. It draws upon existing literature and history as well as interviews with members of audience engagement and community management teams at news organizations, online comment communities, and comment-based startups.

The first chapter of this thesis outlines "The Spectrum of Comments", a visual and text-based explanation of four key dimensions along which comments are organized in different online spaces ranging from social media to the *New York Times.* This section explores how news organizations balance the competing desire for audience participation with an impulse towards maintaining editorial control.

The second chapter deals with the rise of "engagement," as both a commercial discourse and a new way to envision audience relationships. It begins by tracing the history of journalistic relationships to audiences, offering a taxonomy for these relationships based on monological and dialogical modes of conversation, as well as ritual and transmission views of communication. I introduce the term "multi-logical" to capture the asynchronous and multi-voiced communication that occurs in participatory online spaces. Through this theoretical framework, I then examine a few examples of how news organizations operationalize the nebulous term "engagement."

The third chapter focuses on how audience engagement teams encounter and cope with abuse – particularly bigotry and harassment - online, and compares moderation work to Hochschild's emotional labor. I find that abuse affects workers across the journalistic enterprise, and that one of the key focus areas for news organizations as they move forward with engagement should be to develop policies and internal guidelines for how to handle some of the risks of engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2015, the online magazine *The Verge* decided to suspend the comments sections on its online stories. In explaining the decision, editor-in-chief Nilay Patel wrote: "What we've found lately is that the tone of our comments (and some of our commenters) is getting a little too aggressive and negative — a change that feels like it started with GamerGate and has steadily gotten worse ever since" (2015).

The Verge was not the only organization to question the purpose and value of the online comments section. Through 2014 and into 2015, several publications decided to either suspend their online comments sections for a while or disband them entirely. These publications included online-only publications like *The Verge,* technology-focused *Re/code* and the general interest *Daily Beast* and *Mic;* as well as legacy news publishers like *Popular Science, Reuters, Bloomberg,* the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Toronto Star*[1]. When explaining the decision, some editors (like Patel) pointed to negativity in the comments section, and in particular to the problem of abusive or derogatory comments. Others pointed out that commenters represented only a fraction of the news organizations' overall audience (O'Donovan, 2015). And still others wondered if comment boxes, as a medium, were fundamentally flawed. Derek Mead, editor-in-chief of the online magazine *Motherboard,* expressed that viewpoint when he wrote, "What percentage of comments on any site are valuable enough to be published on their own? One percent? Less? Based on the disparity in quality between emails we get and the average state of comments here and all over the web, I think the problem is a matter of the medium" (Mead, 2015). Finally, some editors – like *Reuters'* Dan Colarusso – pointed out that much of the discussion around news had already migrated to social platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Colarusso, 2014). The diversity of the organizations shutting down comments – digital, legacy, niche, general - suggests the seriousness of the problems prevalent in comment sections, or at the very least, the lack of a compelling case to keep them.

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[1] Most news organizations that have suspended comments have issued statements or explained the decision publicly (sometimes both). The *Chicago Sun-Times* is an exception. In a September 16, 2015 article, Justin Ellis of *Nieman Lab* cites the *Chicago Sun-Times* as having suspended comments. Following the embedded link in Ellis' article, however, leads to a "Page Not Found" error on the *Sun-Times* website, under a URL that reads "http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/sick-of-web-comments-us-too-heres-what-were-doing-about-it/". Further searching for that URL reveals a reddit discussion titled "Sick of Internet comments? Us too – here's what we're doing about it; Chicago Sun-Times will no longer run comments on articles." Although the link in this reddit discussion leads to the same "Page Not Found", the reddit discussion around the article remains (and includes quotes from the original article). Based on this evidence, I conclude the most likely situation is that the *Sun-Times* did suspend commends for a while, but the original announcement of that suspension has now been removed from the website. *The Verge* suspended comments, but has since reinstated them.

But at the same time that some news organizations are shutting down comments and moving to social, other organizations are investing in comments, possibly with the goal of turning them into positive spaces that nourish civic discussion. In June 2014, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation – a leading organization in the journalism world – announced a multi-year, $3.89 million grant to create the Coral Project, "a new content and commenting platform that will allow audiences to more deeply engage with media coverage and help news organizations everywhere better manage user comments and contributions" (Knight Foundation, 2014). As part of this thesis, I spoke with Coral Project Lead Andrew Losowsky. He insisted the project is actually about much more than comments. Losowsky linked the debate over comments to a broader set of questions about journalism. None of these questions can be treated in isolation:

> I was very clear that this is not just about comments. You start pulling on that thread and you get to "well what are we here for? What is journalism good for? What are we trying to achieve? What is the societal benefit in the first place? And if the audience doesn't – or the community around, whatever, whichever words you use, the users – if they don't feel

> part of that then…they're going to be doing something else (Losowsky, Project Lead, Coral Project, 2015).

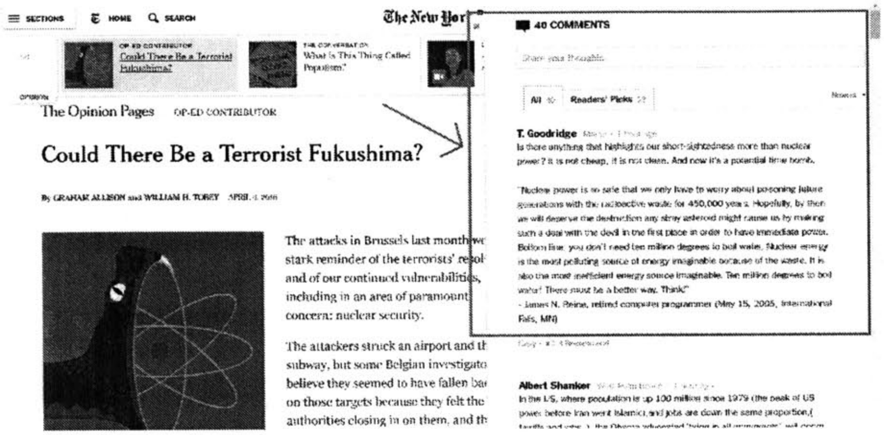
Losowsky's quote illustrates both enormous urgency and a sense of very high stakes. For him, the question of comments ties into larger questions about journalism's role in society and how news organizations can fulfill that role alongside an increasingly active and participatory public. He also identifies some of the key tensions in the debate over participation and journalism, starting with the basic question of whether to refer to readers as "audience", "community" or "users."

When I set out to write the chapters that follow, I wanted to understand the tension over comments, but also to explore how the tension over comments sheds light on these broader questions within the news industry. How do news organizations envision their audience as mechanisms for participation become more diverse and widespread? Who is responsible for crafting relationships with audiences on these new and emerging platforms? Why are some organizations shutting down comments, while others are investing in them, and what does that say about journalism?

The definition of comments is slippery, it turns out. For many years, news organizations have defined comments as the clearly delineated sections at the bottom or sides of news organization webpages. Readers submit text responses to the story, and then a moderated selection of these responses are posted to the web for everyone to see. Of course, this is not *everything* that comments are, and this is why news organizations find themselves especially beleaguered.

Both audiences and news organizations are aware that the traditional view of the comments section – as a space at the bottom or side of a journalistic story – has become far too narrow and limiting. Comments now include the 140-character messages that users can direct at each other, at news organizations, and at celebrities, over Twitter. Unlike onsite news comments, Tweets face no barrier to publication. Tweets do not need to be read or approved by a newsroom editor or a senior moderator prior to being published. Twitter users can communicate with an enormous variety of people and organizations, pretty much in real time. Then there are the comments left - often, but not always, within relationship networks – on the social networking site Facebook. Conversations on Facebook exist within a loose framework of micro-interactions known as reactions. The like button, one of Facebook's most iconic features, is also a form of comment, but a wordless and affective one. It's more like a smile than a conversation, but "Facebook's 1.6 billion users click on it[the Like button] more than 6 billion times a day—more frequently than people conduct searches on Google—which affects billions of advertising dollars each quarter" (Frier, 2016). Recently, Facebook made the relationship between "like" and emotion explicit, by announcing that it will offer users the option to rate stories using both the like button and a series of emojis, or emoticons. The five emojis chosen for global rollout, after extensive international testing, were love, haha, wow, sad and angry. These micro-indicators are comments, too. They are a part of the conversations that people have online, and shape emerging models of journalistic communication.

Part of the problem, then, with on-site comments sections might be the way these sections are currently structured on news sites. Since the advent of the newspaper business, journalists have produced stories that have been transmitted to readers. This mentality carried over into the online medium. For years, the main content on a news site's web page were its articles, often written and produced by people who were paid by the news organizations. By contrast, the comments section was defined by its liminal positioning and its amateur origin: in most places, comments were a clearly delineated section at the bottom or to the side of the main story where unpaid readers were invited to submit reactions and opinions.



The Opinion Pages OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Could There Be a Terrorist Fukushima?

By GRAHAM ALLISON and WILLIAM H. TOBEY APRIL 4, 2016

The attacks in Brussels last month we
stark reminder of the terrorists' resol
and of our continued vulnerabilities,
including in an area of paramount
concern: nuclear security.

The attackers struck an airport and th
subway, but some Belgian investigato
believe they seemed to have fallen ba
on those targets because they felt the
authorities closing in on them, and th

40 COMMENTS

Share your thoughts.

T. Goodridge
Is there anything that highlights our short-sightedness more than nuclear power? It is not cheap, it is not clean. And now it's a potential time bomb.

"Nuclear power is so safe that we only have to worry about poisoning future generations with the radioactive waste for 450,000 years. Hopefully, by then we will deserve the destruction any stray asteroid might cause us by making such a deal with the devil in the first place in order to have immediate power. Bottom line: you don't need ten million degrees to boil water. Nuclear energy is the most polluting source of energy imaginable because of the waste. It is also the most inefficient energy source imaginable. Ten million degrees to boil water! There must be a better way. Think!"
- James N. Reine, retired computer programmer (May 15, 2005, International Falls, MN)

Albert Shanker
In the US, where population is up 100 million since 1979 (the peak of US power before Iran went Islamic), and jobs are down the same proportion,(

Figure 1. A screenshot of comments on a NYT story, April 2016. The main article content appears under the headline "Could There Be a Terrorist Fukushima?" The comments section is outlined.

In many ways, the main work that the online comments section does is ideological – it separates the professionally-produced content of the journalistic story from the amateur content of the participatory web. In doing so, it also creates a visible point of division between old traditions and expectations and new ones.

Another challenge I encountered – which is hinted at by the number of news sites decamping from comments to social media – is the increasing border smudging between what is and is not a news site. The social media site Facebook conveys news, and in fact, the individualized timeline it provides to each user is referred to as a "NewsFeed." The structure of the Facebook "NewsFeed" challenges some of the basic tenets of the legacy newspaper. The articles that appear in the NewsFeed are chosen by an algorithm that takes a user's preferences and history into account to provide her with a series of stories relevant to her life. A newspaper's pages are arranged by a team of editors who do not know the individual reader. The newspaper is customized based upon where it is distributed, but not based upon the exact preferences of the person reading it. No two users will ever have the same NewsFeed, but everyone in New York can receive the same copy of a New York newspaper. NewsFeed stories appear, for the most part, in chronological order. A newspaper's front page is arranged based upon what editors consider to be most important. And yet, because of Facebook's enormous number of users, the company's decisions are momentous for publishers. As Emily Bell, director of the Tow Center for Journalism at Columbia University, put it: "No other single branded platform in the history of journalism has had the concentration of power and attention that Facebook enjoys" (Bell, 2014). Although Facebook is seen as a platform rather than a publisher, in chapter one, I examine the ways in which Facebook's evolving Community Standards challenge Facebook's status as an unmoderated space.

Meanwhile, continuing this challenging of what constitutes news, new media companies like BuzzFeed cover news, but in a variety of formats. They embrace user-generated material not just in specifically demarcated comments sections but on their main story pages. And they often categories stories not just by topic or time, but around emotional reactions like "lol" and "WTF." Online-native publications have rapidly grown in popularity and prominence, and are often more closely adapted to the social web than legacy publishers. Many have now moved into the space that legacy news organizations once solely occupied. Although the Huffington Post began as a blog network, in 2010-2011 they began to hire more mainstream reporters and writers. In 2012, a series written by Huffington Post reporter David Wood won the Pulitzer Prize, journalism's highest honor. In celebrating the win, Huffington Post executive editor Timothy O'Brien said, "We're also grateful that the Pulitzer committee recognized that great, hard-won journalism can thrive and flourish on the web" (Calderone, 2012). The *Huffington Post* was able to deliver high quality content, but without the burdens – or traditions – of a print distribution infrastructure.

Finally, there are legacy news publishers. In this thesis, I use the term "legacy" publishers to refer to publishers who first existed in print or broadcast, and later migrated to online platforms. This prior history of having published in another medium – and the protocols and audience expectations of that medium – is one of the reasons legacy publishers have struggled to adapt to the participatory web. At some of these publications, the news comments section has remained relatively unchanged for nearly a decade (and in some cases longer than that.) When news organizations first began putting stories online, they added a comments section because such a section was one of the expected affordances of online space. For news organizations, the closest correlate might have been the Letters to the Editor that readers had previously mailed. But neither the structure nor the design of online comment spaces reflect purely journalistic goals. In a piece in *The New York Times Magazine,* journalist and author Michael Erard traces how the structure of online comments sections actually owes more to 1970s BBS:

> Comments as we know them — lines of text stacked atop one another in chronological order — are direct descendants of bulletin-board systems, or B.B.S., which date to the 1970s; users could dial in with a modem and contribute to discussion forums (2013).

Ben Frumin, editor-in-chief of TheWeek.com, pointed out that comments had almost been grandfathered into newspapers when they went online, telling research and news publication *Nieman Lab* that "if there was no convention of Internet commenting, if it wasn't this thing that was accepted, you would think that was a crazy idea" (Ellis J. , 2015).

For years, comment sections have existed at the bottom or side of news stories, an afterthought or an addendum to the main article. News organizations employed moderators to read, vet and delete comments, but many moderators did not have the technological tools they needed to grow flourishing discussions, in particular, many found they could not permanently ban commenters who were abusive towards others. Perhaps because of these factors, news organizations' comment sections slowly developed a reputation for intense negativity, leading to popular wisdom like "Don't Read the Comments." This reputation became so widespread that developers created extensions for web browsers that block out comments sections entirely. The creators of the Chrome extension "Don't Read the Comments" justify the product: "Do you ever unconsciously scroll down the page to read the comments, even though you know you'll regret it? Don't Read The Comments!"

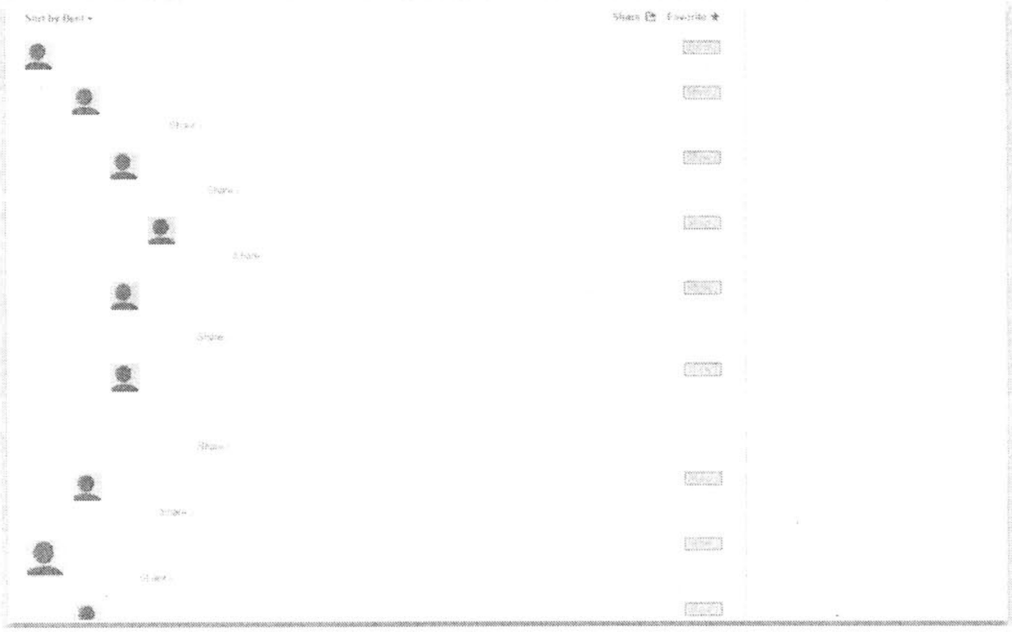


Figure 2. Drestuart's online extension for Chrome blocks out internet comments.

Comments in their current form can be far from the idealized issues-oriented public discussion that journalists might desire with audiences. At their worst, comments sections are riddled with infamously abusive and damaging material that no one wants to read, much less moderate. Some organizations that shut down comments have looked to social media as the new hosts of reader discussion. *Reuters*, for example, shut down comments because of the perception that most of the "well-informed discussion" around stories had "moved to social media and online forums" (Colarusso, 2014). Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have lured publishers with their enormous distribution power, as well as with access to the world of advertising that has grown up around measurable metrics like Facebook "Likes" and Twitter "ReTweets." The social web – which focuses on content that is shared from one user to another and that allows for endless unmoderated comments on content – has led to a massive industry of people attempting to understand how journalism can adapt to these new platforms.

News publishers' motives for engaging with social media differ, and I explore these sometimes conflicting motivations more fully in chapter two, where I talk about forming new communities and attracting audiences, and in the conclusion, where I examine new modes for operationalizing engagement. For legacy publishers, online audiences offer a way to attract potential digital revenue at a time when print advertising revenue is stagnant or falling. The desire to find ways to monetize online audiences has led to a flourishing of new online audience measurement techniques, in an attempt to quantify the possible value of digital readers to advertisers. On the other side of this discussion, the desire for new revenue models has led to a push for new direct-to-reader revenue models, including crowd-supported journalism[2]. The communities on social media and online forums also offer journalists new ways to attract and communicate with readers, especially young readers who are perceived as less likely to read print newspapers[3]. Staffers at news organizations now regularly devote their time to understanding how audiences produce and share content in these communities, with the goal of finding new audiences, new stories and new sources. But because these methods of engagement are so varied and so rapidly changing, engagement is one of the most ambiguous, shifting and important words in the world of journalism, and these staffers – who sit in specialized audience engagement teams – find that their work is constantly in flux.

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[2] In spring 2013, the Dutch journalism platform *De Correspondent* set a world record by raising a reported $1.7 million in crowdfunding. On a smaller scale, Tipsy, a free Chrome extension created by MIT professor David Karger, tracks the time users spend on particular sites and then divides up a predetermined amount of money into micro-donations to the producers of that content.

[3] According to a Pew report, in 2014, 17 per cent of 18-24 year olds reported having read a daily newspaper yesterday, whereas the corresponding figure was 52 per cent for those over age 65. In 1999, the earliest year for which data appear, the percentage of people over age 65 who read a daily newspaper the day before was 72 per cent http://www.journalism.org/media-indicators/newspaper-readership-by-age/

An emerging concern for legacy publishers – those with a long history prior to the internet – is the way in which the availability and quality of user-generated content and social media have changed the types of material that can be considered news. Content produced by unpaid audience members has become both controversial and essential to news reporting. Often referred to as user-generated content (UGC), this type of content has become a mainstay in traditional journalistic reports (Wardle, Dubberley, & Brown, 2014) as well as at newer online-only publications. In 2005, the Huffington Post launched as a curated collection of blogs. In 2006, the media company BuzzFeed was born. In addition to material produced by paid staffers, BuzzFeed regularly highlights light-hearted and socially-optimized content produced by members of its unpaid "community." These stories, bylined in a similar fashion to staff stories, can get promotion on the homepage, and the organization has a structured program to recruit and train talented community members as full-time BuzzFeed staffers. The distinction between professional and amateur content has changed, as has the definition of what it means to be a professional versus an amateur content producer. The comments section – with its clear lines between producer and consumer – does not reflect these shifting roles.

Legacy news organizations *have* expanded their own engagement with the social and participatory web. Journalists at mainstream news organizations now regularly engage with audiences on Twitter and Facebook, as well as on user-powered comment-based communities like reddit. Increasingly, these journalists find themselves facing the question of how to improve readers' "user experience." Even if Facebook's reach and agenda-setting did not challenge news, its comment modalities would. How does a user feel when, after leaving an immediate comment on a news story on a friend's Facebook page, a comment that appears at the top of the page and is deemed important because of his relationship to his friend, he then goes to the news organization's website and has to wait two hours for his comment to be approved and posted at the bottom of a page under a long string of comments that are visually indistinguishable from each other?

Social networks are not the only sites providing alternative user experiences that affect journalism. There are other online communities where users exchange information with each other, based upon common interests. Communities like Slashdot, MetaFilter and reddit offer these types of interfaces. Each community is different, but one thing they have in common is that moderators – a mix of paid and unpaid – are peers, which means that they are chosen as moderators because of the time they've spent on the site and their demonstrated ability to effectively manage relationships online. Just like at news organizations, moderation is a crucial and involved task. It's not just a matter of approving or dis-approving a comment, but often of understanding and evaluating the interplay of relationships and feelings among a variety of contributors. These moderators set guidelines, both explicitly and through their behavior. What does it mean for a commenter to move from a community like this, where a moderator is someone with whom he has a relationship, to a news organization website, where his comment may be deleted by someone whose username he will almost certainly never know and who would never participate in the conversation unless required to for their job? These user experiences and expectations exercise an enormous influence over how journalism moves into the future. Part of my goal in this project is to understand who at news organizations is responsible for navigating these emerging user expectations.

Much of the tension in these emerging journalistic spaces is not just over comments, but over what comments should be permitted, where they should appear, and who should get to make these decisions. My goal in this thesis is to map these tensions and decision-making processes within the journalism world. I'm especially interested in transitions in roles and practices within news organizations as they try to re-envision their relationships with audiences. I have focused much of my research on audience engagement and community teams within news organizations, who are responsible for figuring out what the daily work of moderation and engagement – from a news organization's perspective – should look like. For people in these teams, the key question is how to handle the ongoing transition from the news audience – the paying subscribers who bought and ostensibly read newspapers in print – to the participatory public that today neither buys newspapers nor lingers for long even on their webpages. What does it mean to create and maintain a relationship with a readership, and what does it mean when readers – informed by the practices they've experienced in other online spaces – expect to have a more active and immediate line of feedback to journalists and news organizations? For new media players, how can the emerging possibilities of online content production – including user-generated content – be successfully integrated with the priorities of legacy journalism, which include driving national conversation and agenda? For social platforms, the question is how to welcome a wide swathe of users and conversations, while increasingly taking a stand on the types of issues and tone of discussion that people have in these spaces. The current conversation over comments offers insight each of these big questions.

In addition to comment moderation, I also examine "audience engagement," which in many news organizations today is the broader set of workflows within which comment moderation exists. These workflows include the ways in which news organizations forge relationships with audiences in comment sections, as well as on social media and in other participatory spaces. As an increasing number of news organizations turn off comments sections while continuing their activities on social media, it may seem as if these are two entirely separate streams of work. In some ways, they are. No news organization can ever hope to have the same control over Twitter, for example, that it exercises over its own on-site comments sections. But audience engagement is also a set of principles, the idea that news organizations should strive to deal with audiences in a way that goes beyond traditional subscription. Comment moderation and audience engagement are often performed by the same teams, and flow from the same ideology. Crucially, for moderators, they involve some of the same risks. Shutting down comments sections does not necessarily remove these risks, especially the overarching fear of online abuse and negativity that has prompted so many comment section shutdowns. Comments provide a framework through which to understand news organizations' relationships with audiences. They also provide an early and crucial insight into the increasingly urgent problem of online abuse and targeting. As more news organizations hire engagement editors and moderators, and require engagement work of all their staffers, how should organizations protect and empower workers to deal with the darker side of the internet? This dark side goes beyond abusive comments to include targeted harassment campaigns on Facebook, Twitter and other collaborative platforms. Emerging data – which I discuss in chapter three – demonstrate that women and minority journalists receive more abuse than white male counterparts, which has enormous significance for how news organizations structure their workforces. Should news institutions – not just individuals – take on responsibility for better fighting back against online abuse?

Internally, bellwether news organizations – those that have long set standards the rest of the industry has attempted to follow – have responded to the need for engagement with massive internal restructuring, an internal restructuring that has already had and will continue to have far-reaching impacts on organizational values. They have changed the types of people they hire, placing greater emphasis on roles in community and audience engagement teams. These areas are now perceived as so critical that the *New York Times,* in an internal review, listed audience engagement and reader experience as among the organization's key strategic priorities for the future (New York Times, 2014). Some of the engagement specialists now entering the newsroom have worked as journalists before, but others arrive with very different cultural expectations. Who are these new workers, and how can organizations better find and retain them? How do they experience and deal with abuse? And how are they defining this crucial space?

Literature Review

In preparing for this project, I read a large set of existing literature on news organizations and online participation, particularly comments. Much of this academic work I consulted has been qualitative, specifically seeking to understand how individuals within news organizations – especially the writers and editors who produce news stories – grapple with the concerns raised by participation in general and comments specifically.

This early research has provided useful scene-setting, identifying many of the tensions in this space. Graham and Wright, in an examination of two comment threads related to climate change on the *Guardian* newspaper's website, found that even when the comments on stories were civil, journalists did not engage in comments (2015, p. 324). They cited earlier research that suggested that contributory spaces like comments sections can clash with a journalistic culture of "professional distance" (p. 319), and also found that "a disjuncture between the theoretical potential and actual practice [of comments]" means that "take up by journalists has generally been quite conservative" (p. 320).

In the past, journalists have reported being distrustful of comments for many reasons, including uncertainty over comment value and a sense that comment moderation is a separate space from journalism. When Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle interviewed news editors in 2010, one journalist told them, "From a purely selfish news point of view, we are not interested in what 90% of people have to say" (p. 21). Perhaps not surprisingly, this distrust was also expressed by the readers who were interviewed, who saw comments as "ill-informed, repetitive and extremist" (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle, 2010, p. 1). According to the authors, concerns arose in audiences' minds over whether commenters could really be trusted to have qualified opinions regarding the subjects they were writing on, while journalists were mainly interested in commenters as potential sources for stories.

As Patel and Mead's comments suggest, the frustration with comments sections also speaks to an evolving tension over what role journalists should play in public discourse as more of that discourse shifts online. An injunction to "Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they [journalists] find repugnant" appears in the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, a set of guidelines taught in journalism schools around the country (SPJ, 2014). The SPJ Code reflects the perception that journalistic work can serve an important democratic function by being "vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable" (SPJ, 2014). But as Graham and Wright found, these ideals can be difficult to incorporate into daily online practice.

Drawing on the tradition of journalism's civic purpose, many researchers who have examined news organizations comments sections have chosen to do so through the lens of public sphere theory (Graham & Wright, 2015) (Lampe, Zube, Lee, Park, & Johnston, 2014). According to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1964). A public sphere has several key characteristics, among them the idea that "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1964, p. 49). In their 2015 study of comment sections on the *Guardian* website, Graham and Wright drew on this framing, writing, "Such [comment] spaces are important and unique because they give audiences a space to debate and discuss news content with each other—and journalists themselves—and this could, in theory, shape the practice of journalism and impact both the mediated and general public spheres" (p. 318).

But conceptually as well as practically, the online comments sections on news organization websites are troubled and fragmented spaces. Neither their affordances nor their workflows are designed around the lofty ideals presented by Habermas and the SPJ Code of Ethics. Comment sections differ widely among organizations, both in terms of how they are moderated (on a spectrum that ranges from 'not at all' to 'heavily') and in the types of interaction they allow among users. Indeed, the notion that the online comments section could or even should serve as an idealized public sphere is one that has been suggested by researchers, possibly post-hoc. Practicing journalists themselves have expressed more ambivalence. In a 2012 series of in-depth interviews of 30 journalists across news organizations, Jaime Loke found that many faced a constant tension between public purpose and practical efficiency: "Journalists suddenly find themselves caught between the traditional responsibility of fostering public participation and the emerging frustration of losing control over content on their space" (p. 236). There were no clear rules about how much anonymity was permitted in comment sections, Loke found. Many journalists also told Loke they felt unprepared to engage with comments, especially when comments featured personal attacks on sources (p. 239). Loke's work identified a key tension between the ideals of participation and the workflows embedded in legacy journalism, a conflict that comes to bear when journalists are asked to perform work in comment sections online.

From the perspective of the public sphere, the most pressing political issues of the day are often the ones where journalists are most in need of tools for moderation participation – and least likely to have them. One such issue, especially in the American context, is race. In a 2015 study, Summer Harlow used content analysis to examine the ways in which commenters brought up race in online comment sections. She discovered that even when articles did not mention race and ethnicity, commenters often raised the issue in the comments, and that the majority of these comments referred to race in a stereotypical manner (p. 34). Harlow concluded that "online newspaper forums appear to be providing an outlet for the loudest voices to be heard – even if those voices are spouting racism – rather than providing a democratic forum, a public sphere" (p. 35). Harlow's suggestion was that newspapers should "rethink their commenting procedures, perhaps even doing away with commenting privileges altogether" (p. 38). That exact approach, however, has been criticized by Loke in a 2013 study, in which she argued that the appearance of racist comments is a signal that journalists must engage more meaningfully with their audiences, rather than follow an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" attitude towards comments (p. 194). Loke does not suggest what this meaningful approach might entail, however, or how it might vary among organizations and audiences. Harlow and Loke's work, taken together, embody the challenges facing many news organizations in comments sections. On the one hand, comments sections offer a journalism-delineated space within which to examine important public issues, but on the other hand, they have neither been constructed nor managed to support debate on those issues. Harlow's work also identifies a key problem, which is the ways in which comment sections can be used by vocal minorities to target journalists and readers with specific forms of (often race- and gender-based) harassment and abuse.

Research Questions

While I found this initial literature to be hugely helpful in describing why and how journalists have engaged with comment sections thus far, I wanted to place this understanding within a broader context. Specifically, I wanted to add to this existing literature by interviewing comment moderators within newsrooms. As participation has become an increasingly significant part of journalistic organizations' focus, many news organizations have hired and expanded teams whose main goal is to navigate relationships with audiences. The members of these "community" and "audience engagement" teams are often the first or second generation of people to be hired into these jobs, which means they are setting standards that will impact future newsroom practice. A mix of self-identified journalists and people from other disciplines, these teams handle comment moderation, social media and user-generated content. They are responsible for the news organization's evolving relationship with audiences on both a strategic and an operational level. In positioning themselves as moderators, their work shares characteristics with labor performed outside the journalism industry, especially in comment-based communities online. In this project, I started with the tensions of the comments section in order to understand the broader shifts happening within the news industry.

I structured my research around the following questions:

Q1. What priorities and traditions do comment moderators at news organizations navigate in the decisions they make around comments? How do the decisions made at news organizations compare with practices in other spaces like social media?

Q2. How has the rise of new platforms – especially social media – changed the way that people communicate? What new expectations have they led to, and how are news organizations addressing those expectations?

Q3. Much of the evolving discussion around comments focuses on online abuse. How do the people working within comment moderation roles face abuse? On what dimensions and in what environments do they encounter negativity, and what impact does it have on them?

Q4. As news organizations – both legacy and digital – increasingly seek to carve out new participatory spaces, what do these spaces look like? What are some initiatives and ideas that define this still-evolving set of priorities?

Interviews

In order to answer these questions and in order to situate my work within the qualitative frame provided by Loke, Graham & Wright, and Nielsen, I decided to approach these questions through the lens of interviews. I conducted these interviews over the course of a year, with the bulk taking place in New York, Washington DC and over Skype in the summer of 2015. The goal of these interviews was to understand how the work of comment moderation and audience engagement takes place at news organizations. For additional context, I also spoke with moderators at collaborative comment-based sites like reddit and MetaFilter.

The people I interviewed worked at the following types of organizations:

1. *Large national news organizations.* These organizations were present in the cities I visited, had a history of dealing with comments, and often had at least one editor devoted

to engagement. When it comes to defining community, they also had a history of being both print and online, or in one case, both broadcast TV and online. Also referred to as "legacy" media. Many of these news organizations had ideals that originated in democratic notions of journalism.

2. *Large national digital media.* Similar to the above in terms of reach, but with no history of having existed in print, magazine or broadcast form prior to online. Many came into existence alongside or after social media.
3. *Smaller digital media.* Catering to niche audiences, or with much smaller audiences, and with no history of ever having published a print, magazine or broadcast product.
4. *Comment-based communities.* Communities like MetaFilter, reddit and Slashdot.
5. *Startups devoted to commenting tools.* Both the Coral Project and Civil Comments fall into this category.

I spoke with people who had the following professional designations:

1. *News organization comment moderators, audience engagement editors and community managers/editors.* These were people working at self-identified news organizations and media companies whose primary role and specific designation included the terms mentioned above. The mélange of titles suggests the blended nature of the work that these teams perform: social, emotional and editorial functions and priorities are delegated to these teams.
2. *Comment moderators at other organizations.* I spoke to people who had done moderation work at the online sites MetaFilter, reddit and Slashdot. All of these interviews were individual interviews, although in the case of MetaFilter I spoke with more than one person who had worked as a moderator on the site.
3. *Team members at organizations devoted entirely to comments.* I spoke with several team members at the Coral Project, based in New York City, as well as Civil Comments, a startup. Both of these organizations are specifically focused on developing tools for

commenting and community, for news organizations. I discuss their approach – as well as what it means for the evolution of relationships with audiences, in the final section.

These interviews took several formats:

1. *Group interviews.* At several news organizations with large audience engagement teams, I had the opportunity to speak with multiple members of the team together. These interviews lasted 45-90 minutes, and offered me an opportunity to observe the dynamic among team members as well as to understand how different team members contributed to the team's performance and pursued similar goals across different platforms.
2. *Individual interviews.* Conducted in person, over phone or over Skype, these 60-minute individual interviews allowed me to ask moderators and editors about their work history, their involvement in online communities, and their current and future professional aspirations. Deeply personal and telling, these interviews offered me the chance to understand what is or is not working for people in these roles, and formed the bulk of what I allude to in the audience engagement section on the emotional toll of engagement work.

As is often the case in projects like these, my sample was affected by whom I could speak to, the breadth of topics I chose to cover, and the time available exclusively for qualitative research. Partly as a result of these factors, I spent a great deal of time speaking to people at large news organizations based in large cities on the East Coast. Much of my evidence derives from these organizations. As a result, my findings map some of the tensions and workflows specific to these teams. This work is exploratory rather than representative, and aims to map part of an industry at a moment of important transition.

At the same time, within my chosen scope, I did have the good fortune to speak in-depth with moderators and editors at several of the larger organizations that influence and shape conversation at the national level, and to get a broad sense of some of the concerns and frustrations that exist in the tense space that comments inhabit.

A final note: I have chosen to keep the majority of interviewees anonymous, although in some cases (with permission) I have identified the organizations that they work for. In the conclusion, I cite some projects and practitioners by name. I have done this for reasons of practicality as well as principle. In some cases, one interviewee at a particular organization was comfortable with being named, while his colleagues were not. In order to avoid individual exposure in that case, I chose to keep several members of the team anonymous. In terms of principle: my goal was to explore large and small issues in audience engagement, and keeping individuals' names out of the spotlight made sense to me as a way to keep the focus on the larger issues raised by this work. It is also in keeping with traditional practice in qualitative research.

I use the chapters that lie ahead to explore each of my research questions in turn, as well as to draw out the connections between my ideas, evidence and themes. In the first chapter, I ground the thesis project by beginning with an overview of comments practice in a variety of online spaces, from social media to news organizations. I draw out the ways that social media and journalistic organizations operate differently, especially when it comes to crucial decisions like what comments are allowed, where these comments appear, and who gets to moderate. I suggest that social media are more aligned towards participation, while news organizations lean towards editorial control. But I also identify moments of tension, where these preferences are being challenged.

I also introduce the types of moderators I met, offering a taxonomy of moderator motivations. In exploring moderators' backgrounds and interests, I shed light on how moderators' professional backgrounds and personal beliefs prepare them for the challenges and questions of the work. I focus on how many of these moderators are only the first or second generation of employees within news organizations to hold their particular jobs, and so their beliefs and practices will create a legacy for their successors. This chapter sets up the second but especially the third, which will focus extensively on these moderators' experiences.

The second chapter steps back from daily news practice to take a look at how definitions of engagement and audience are shifting, and what these shifts mean for journalism. I introduce Sonia Livingstone's writing around audiences to provide a framework for examining how the participatory web is changing audience behavior and expectations. I detail the old model of journalistic conversation, focusing on the monological relationship that early American newspapers enjoyed with their civically-framed audience. This relationship between the newspaper and the audience was marked by one-way communication, and a focus on transmission of information. As a challenge to monological conversation, I then look at two examples of participatory online communities. Online communities of interest build relationships around shared expertise, while communities of affect are bound by sharing and emotional response. In exploring these communities, I explore what it means to have a conversation online, and how the discussions among members of these communities are dialogical and even multi-logical in nature, flowing in multi-layered conversational loops. The goal of juxtaposing these two sets of examples is to demonstrate how much the definition and role of the audience has changed, and how these changes create challenges for audience engagement teams at news organizations. I look at how these still-new teams are operationalizing the new mentality of audience engagement, which focuses on finding and communicating with audiences in these multi-logical online environments.

Finally, I move into a crucial discussion – set up by the first and second chapters - of the price of engagement and the dark side of comments. I explore the ways that the experience of online abuse, and in particular constant exposure to bigoted or threatening online comments, shapes moderators' and editors' perceptions of themselves and their professional roles. I stress that constant exposure to online abuse can change moderators' faith in the journalistic system, and complicate their relationships with offline peers. This discussion of online abuse moves into understanding the ways that moderation work, with its intense focus on community and emotional management, aligns with emotional labor. I do not examine the normative question of whether or not news organizations *should* require their employees to engage in emotional labor, but rather point out the reality that in many cases they already do. Considering that reality, I suggest that in order to continue working in online dialogical spaces, news organizations might want to craft policies around emotional labor. Finally, I conclude the chapter by diving into some of the emerging research around emotional labor, moderation and inclusivity, suggesting that building better internal frameworks for emotional labor could be part of a broader focus on inclusivity both within news organizations and within the audiences they serve.

My final section, a conclusion, brings these questions together again, summarizes the findings, and then outlines a few interesting initiatives in this increasingly blended participatory-journalistic space. I end by suggesting directions for future research, and with an acknowledgment of the enormous changes that will no doubt take place even within the next five years.

CHAPTER ONE: THE STATE OF COMMENTS

1. The Spectrum of Comments

My first research question focuses on how comments are managed in online spaces. In this chapter, I provide a framework for answering this question. Drawing on data from in-person interviews as well as existing research and articles about how news organizations handle comments, I created a visualization called the "spectrum of comments" that will be useful for situating further discussions about commenting along a continuum of current practices in the field.

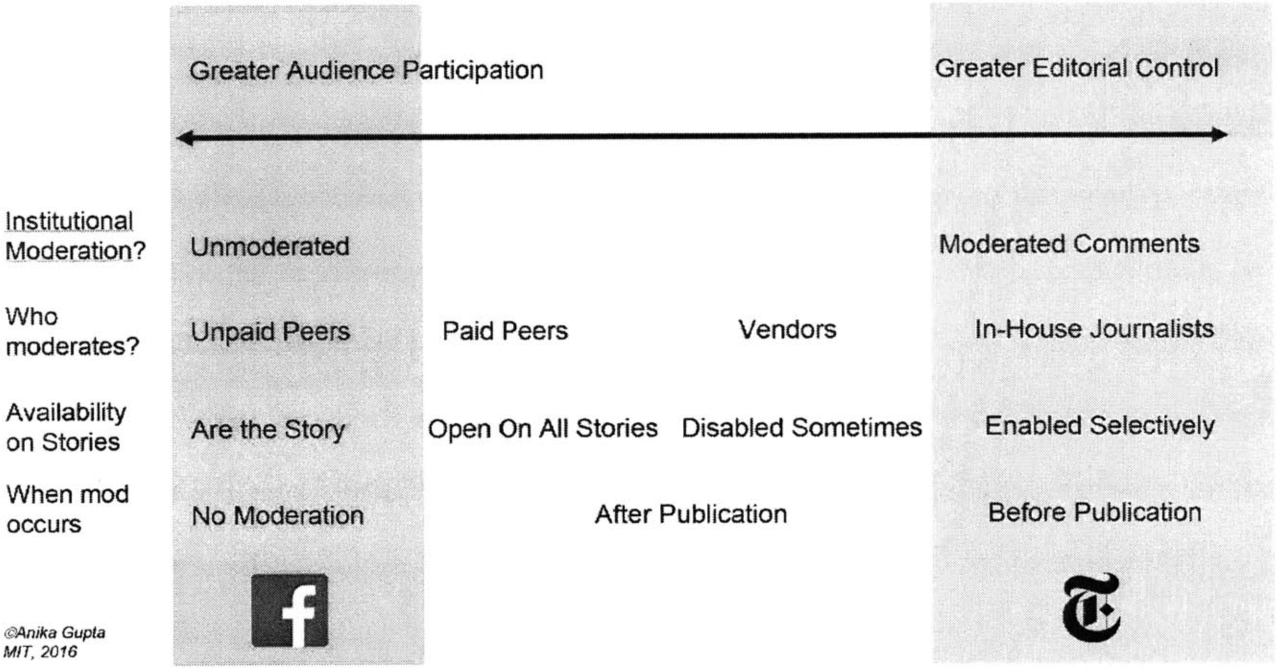
Greater Audience Participation
Greater Editorial Control
Institutional Moderation?
Unmoderated
Moderated Comments
Who moderates?
Unpaid Peers
Paid Peers
Vendors
In-House Journalists
Availability on Stories
Are the Story
Open On All Stories
Disabled Sometimes
Enabled Selectively
When mod occurs
No Moderation
After Publication
Before Publication
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Figure 3. The Spectrum of Comments, which situates key decisions and workflows based upon whether they adhere more to a philosophy of enabling greater participation or greater editorial control.

The spectrum of comments addresses several key aspects of the ways in which comments are moderated, and situates these aspects along an ideological spectrum that ranges from participation to control. In the introduction to this thesis, I quoted from Jaime Loke, who found that journalists' struggle over comments derives from being caught between a desire to foster participation and a fear of losing control over the content that appears on webpages.

By and large, existing commenting practices can be grouped along this spectrum, with many cases falling in the middle. In the graphic above, I examined four key dimensions: the presence or absence of institutional moderation, the identity of comment moderators within the communities they serve, the availability of comments on stories, and when moderation occurs. On each of these dimensions, I examine how the tension between participation and control is resolved. I have explained some of the key findings below, but I also want to emphasize that these decisions often work together, and an organization's identity is shaped by how these decisions are made together, rather than by any one decision or dimension in isolation.

a. Presence or absence of institutional moderation.

One of the key decisions that online comment platforms face is whether or not to have an institutional moderator. An institutional moderator is not a single person, but rather whether or not the organization that hosts the discussion exerts a top-down judgment on what comments can and cannot be posted to the site. Almost all news organizations exercise some form of institutional moderation over comments, which means that a person or team of people who is answerable to the institution is responsible for examining the comments and deciding whether or not they should remain on the platform. By exercising institutional moderation, a news organization like the *New York Times* can exercise control over the tone of comments as well as the cohesion and content of a comment discussion.

On the other side of the spectrum are fully participatory spaces like Facebook and Twitter, which describe themselves as platforms rather than publishers. Platforms generally have no explicit form of institutional moderation. This does not mean that there is no moderation:

Facebook, famously, uses filters to remove images that might be pornographic or pose intellectual rights violations. But these organizations do not exercise what might be considered editorial control: there is no organization-wide "content strategy" that shapes what appears on the site.

Online comment communities like MetaFilter and reddit offer interesting blended models, and whether or not they have institutional moderation could be up for debate. An organization like MetaFilter allows members to post on a variety of topics, but because they employ a single moderation team that sets community guidelines and norms for the site's entire community, they have a light form of institutional moderation. I would argue that an organization like reddit does not have institutional moderation, even though the administrators of individual subreddits set guidelines for content and tone, and the site as a whole disallows subreddits on borderline illegal topics.

Institutional moderation could also be seen as a measure of the extent to which an institution takes responsibility – legal or otherwise – for the content that appears in comments. The community team at the *New York Times* clearly feels a certain responsibility for what appears on the organization's webpages, a reflection of the attitude of the news organization as a whole. A member of the community team described to me how, when the *New York Times* first began allowing comments, these comments were published on a separate page from stories, partly due to newsroom concerns over whether the *NYT* could "publish these random people's opinions along with our best journalism" (Editor C. , 2015). What is central here is not the gatekeeping, but rather the ways in which an institutional focus on content and a protectiveness of what is seen as the page can migrate into comment moderation practices.

News organizations are not the only spaces that exercise institutional moderation, however. At a comment community like MetaFilter, the moderators also feel responsible for what appears on the site, and this sense of responsibility manifests in the decisions the moderation team makes regarding the tone and content of comments. One moderator at the site explained the types of comments that might not be allowed and why: “sexist comments about women’s appearance, that’s against the rules, night off, we’re done….it wasn’t going to be ‘anything goes’ space. We wanted women of color and people from other countries to be included” (moderator, 2015). This is not to say that sexist comments have never appeared on MetaFilter, but rather that the moderators felt a sense of responsibility to remove them, and that this sense of responsibility drew on institutional priorities regarding the site’s purpose.

This sense of responsibility manifests very differently at a site like MetaFilter than at a news organization, however. MetaFilter’s community guidelines offer the following instructions to commenters: “Comments about the quality of a post are better left for MetaTalk. Comments should not be directed at other members of the site” (MetaFilter). News organizations clearly do care about comments on the quality of stories, and often permit and respond to them. But a site like MetaFilter is still more moderated than a space like Facebook, as is evident in the moderator’s own comparison of MetaFilter to an “anything goes space.”

That said, the extent to which Facebook is an “anything goes” space is also changing, and the extent to which Facebook can or should exercise institutional moderation is an area of ongoing and extensive debate. The organization does not produce content, but in 2015 the company released an updated set of “community standards” that attempted to explain when and why the organization may choose to remove content that users have posted. The guidelines for “nudity” read as follows:

> We remove photographs of people displaying genitals or focusing in on fully exposed buttocks. We also restrict some images of female breasts if they include the nipple, but we always allow photos of women actively engaged in breastfeeding or showing breasts with post-mastectomy scarring. We also allow photographs of paintings, sculptures, and other art that depicts nude figures. Restrictions on the display of both nudity and sexual activity also apply to digitally created content unless the content is posted for educational, humorous, or satirical purposes. Explicit images of sexual intercourse are prohibited. Descriptions of sexual acts that go into vivid detail may also be removed (Facebook, 2015).

The extensive detail in this description suggests that Facebook as an institution is sensitive to the tone of messages, and also that it likely has a review team who distinguish between material that is "educational" and "humorous" versus content that is neither. There is a great deal of subjectivity in some of these guidelines – for example, what constitutes "vivid detail", and do the same rules apply if the "vivid detail" is provided in an educational context? Facebook's move towards exerting greater control over content may be seen as a move towards editorial control, or possibly as a move away from legal liability. Either way, the content platform's role in this space is in a state of flux, and the pressures that come to bear on news organizations' comment sections may also be acting upon social media companies – an interesting point of converging concern for both platforms and publishers.

b. Identity of the moderators

Online comment spaces, if they are moderated, must also decide who does the moderating and how professionalized these moderators should be. In the case of Facebook, an algorithm chooses what material is displayed. An individual can post, edit and delete comments on her own Facebook timeline, but has almost no control over what another user sees on his timeline. In this sense, moderation is extremely limited. To the extent that individuals delete others' comments on their own timelines, they exercise some moderation rights, but again, in very limited fashion.

The term "peers", for the purposes of this paper and this description, refers to moderators who are chosen to moderate partly because they have a pre-existing identity as commenters within the community. Their involvement is transparent, and they have peer relationships with members of the community that predate moderation responsibilities. This model is most commonly found in online comment communities: Slashdot, reddit and MetaFilter all employ some form of peer moderation. At MetaFilter, those peers are paid, which adds a layer of professionalization to moderation practice. (Unpaid moderators in other communities often perform similar functions, but alongside full-time employment that might be entirely different.) Again, an example from a moderator at MetaFilter illustrates the centrality of peer involvement prior to becoming a moderator: "We exclusively hire from within the user base, we can't get someone up to speed fast enough" (Moderator C. , MetaFilter, 2016). Involvement as a user within the community prepares that user for moderation, but it also continues to shape the function of moderation work. One moderator at MetaFilter mentioned to me that moderators can continue to participate on the site using their earlier user identity, and posts/comments that they choose to make as moderators will appear in a different style. So in this case, the term "peer" represents not just an identity that existed prior to moderation, but one that continues to co-exist with and influence moderation work.

By contrast, towards the editorial control end of the spectrum, we see the emergence of in-house teams as authorities who decide what appears on comment pages, but whose decisions are often opaque to site users. One news organization moderator explained to me the popular practice of outsourcing comment moderation work to vendors. These vendors are often responsible for reading comments that have been “flagged” as negative. Because large news organizations can receive comment volumes of many tens of thousands of comments a day, it is easier for them to outsource the task than to hire a team of entirely in-house moderators. A few interesting facts about the ways vendors participate on sites: they often look at offensive content, because they look at what is flagged. And they also do not participate as users on the site, in the sense that they do not post comments or moderation decisions under their own usernames. The relationship is exclusively professionalized, with moderators reporting to a team lead who then communicates with the in-house team at the news organization. Most commenters do not know the vendors exist, and would never be able to communicate with one of them. In employing this type of network, a news organization does cede some control, but they gain greater flexibility and scale, and they still maintain a powerful position as the vendor’s client and an ability to oversee the decisions that contract moderators make.

On the furthest “editorial control” side of the spectrum, news organizations employ journalists as the members of in-house moderation teams. When I say “in house,” I mean people who are employed full-time by the news organization. I use the term “journalist,” both here and throughout this paper, as a descriptor for people who fulfill one or both of the following conditions: they majored or minored in journalism in college, and/or they describe themselves as journalists. People in this category often told me they had a journalism background, and many of them related their comment moderation work to ideals of journalistic ethics or practice (more on this identification in the section on moderator types). Journalist moderators, because they have studied journalism in school, often share the ideological and professional position of other editors and producers within the newsroom, rather than a position as commenter peers. The gap between a commenter and a journalist is not just one of payment, but rather one of how participation is structured: the journalist is participating in his professional capacity, while the commenter is often participating as an individual outside of her usual professional activities. This means the journalist will bring certain expectations of professionalism and editorial ethics to her work in comment sections, while commenters might not.

Within this dimension, the media company BuzzFeed offers a fascinating edge case. The organization has a "Community" team whose goal is to produce the socially optimized content that appears on the site, but since 2011, they also have a news team whose goal is to produce more traditional stories. In the explaining the difference, one member of BuzzFeed's community team outlined the two teams' strategies as follows:

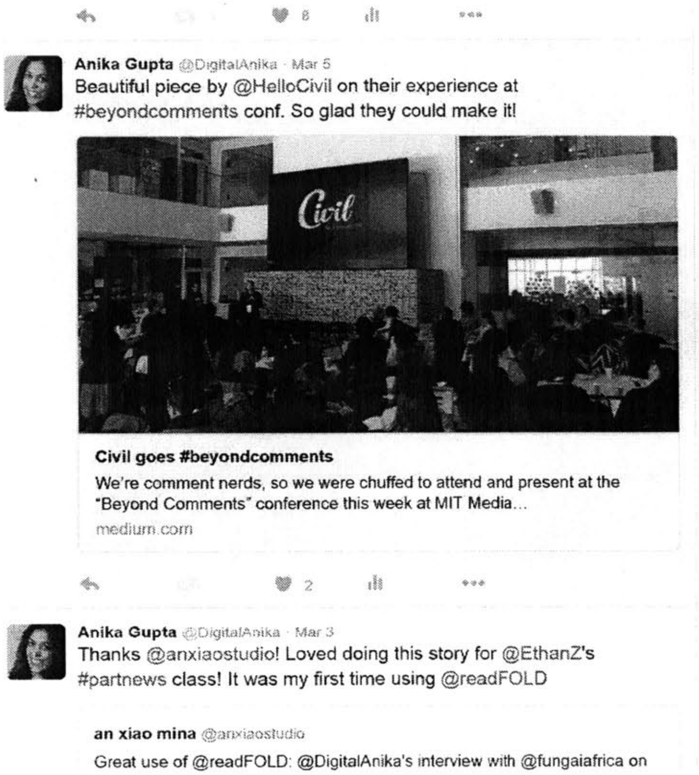
> When I interview the fellows who have news backgrounds who ask about the difference between [Community] and News, the example I give is the Sony [email] hacks. We [the Community team] wouldn't report on 'this is what's going on, this is what's being leaked.' We would do an article about the one weird thing everyone remembered from the Sony hacks, like that editor who called Leonardo DiCaprio 'buddy.' Not the breaking stuff, but the thing that everyone on the internet is gravitating toward really loving (Member, 2015).

In addition to having a clearly outlined and social media-friendly editorial stance, several members of the BuzzFeed Community team have been hired through the BuzzFeed Fellowship, an intensive writing program that recruits members of BuzzFeed's user community and trains them to be full-time staffers. Although the Community team at BuzzFeed handles the same tasks as journalists in audience engagement and community roles at legacy media organizations, several of the editors are peers in the sense that they began their work with the organization as contributors to the site's user-generated content side. The awareness of the site that team members built while they were contributors continues to inform their work as full-time staffers. Although the Community team does not write news content, they move into the news space when they moderate comments on news stories. In this sense, BuzzFeed operates as a news organization but also like a comment community, a blended model that makes sense since BuzzFeed positions itself as a media company rather than exclusively as a news organization. Other online-native publications have also embraced the peer model.

This blended model might be an interesting harbinger of where some news organizations might head in the future, as well as new models of moderation and community that might emerge as digital media and news continue to evolve.

c. *Availability of comments on stories*

Organizations must also decide where and how to make comments available on stories. At the participation end of the spectrum, comments become the story, as is visible on a site like Twitter, where comments form the entirety of the site's content:



Anika Gupta @DigitalAnika · Mar 5
Beautiful piece by @HelloCivil on their experience at #beyondcomments conf. So glad they could make it!

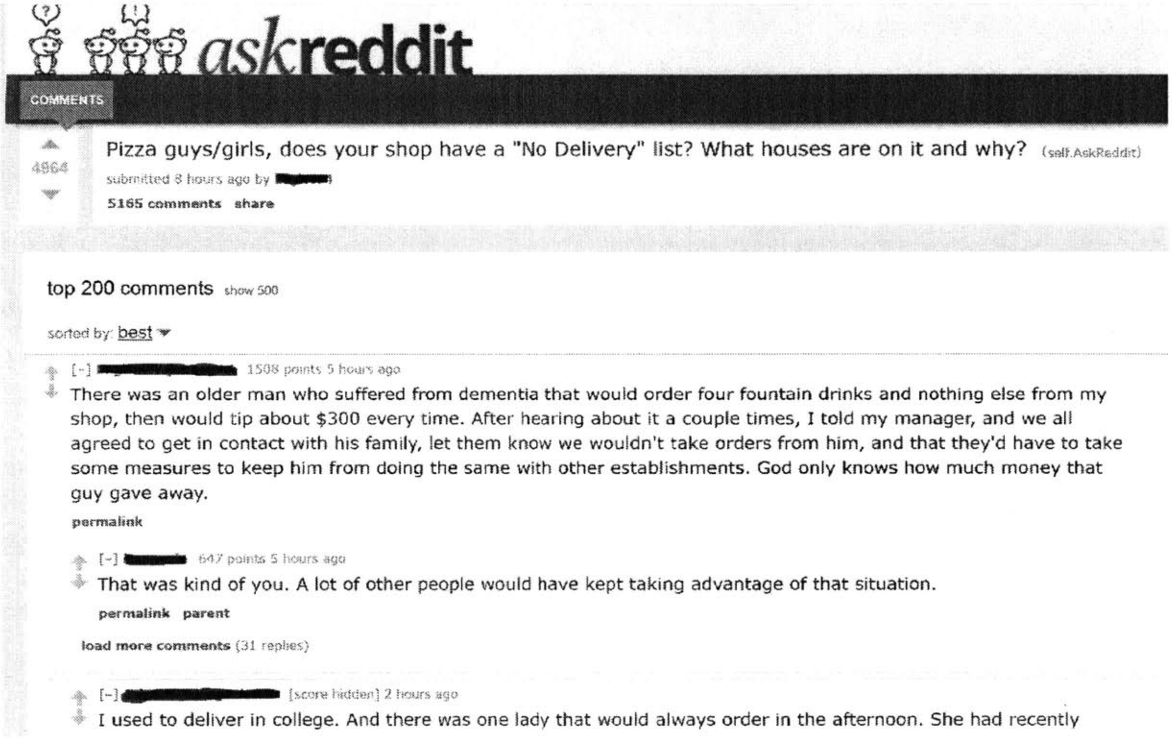
Civil goes #beyondcomments
We're comment nerds, so we were chuffed to attend and present at the "Beyond Comments" conference this week at MIT Media…
medium.com

Anika Gupta @DigitalAnika · Mar 3
Thanks @anxiaostudio! Loved doing this story for @EthanZ's #partnews class! It was my first time using @readFOLD

an xiao mina @anxiaostudio
Great use of @readFOLD: @DigitalAnika's interview with @fungaiafrica on

Figure 4. Snapshot of a Twitter stream. Comments form the content.

Also on the participation end of the spectrum, a conversation in the comment community reddit might look like this, with a link or a question at the top and the bulk of the page reserved for the unfolding discussion:



Pizza guys/girls, does your shop have a "No Delivery" list? What houses are on it and why? (self.AskReddit)

submitted 8 hours ago by [redacted]

5165 comments share

top 200 comments show 500

sorted by: best

[–] [redacted] 1508 points 5 hours ago

There was an older man who suffered from dementia that would order four fountain drinks and nothing else from my shop, then would tip about $300 every time. After hearing about it a couple times, I told my manager, and we all agreed to get in contact with his family, let them know we wouldn't take orders from him, and that they'd have to take some measures to keep him from doing the same with other establishments. God only knows how much money that guy gave away.

permalink

[–] [redacted] 647 points 5 hours ago

That was kind of you. A lot of other people would have kept taking advantage of that situation.

permalink parent

load more comments (31 replies)

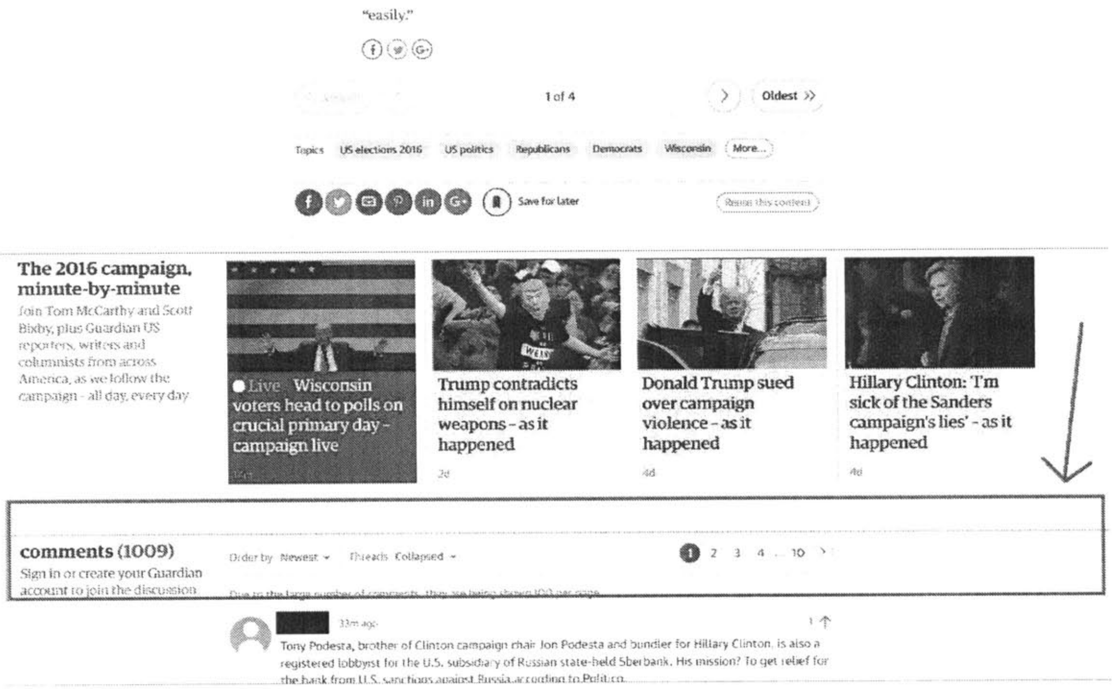
[–] [redacted] [score hidden] 2 hours ago

I used to deliver in college. And there was one lady that would always order in the afternoon. She had recently

Figure 5. A conversation on Reddit's popular "Ask Reddit" subreddit. In other conversations, the question at the top might be replaced with a link to an article.

The decision to place comments at the top of the page signals that participation is central to the experience of the site, as well as to the site's purpose. In these cases, the comments created by users are the primary material, and from that we can extract the suggestion that participation and conversation among members is the bulk of what the sites hope to promote.

In the introduction to this thesis, I looked at how the *New York Times* positions comments as an option to the right of the screen. (When a reader clicks to see comments, the comments appear as a sidebar.) But among legacy news organizations as well as some newer online-only news organizations, the *New York Times* gives comments an unusual precedence. On the website of the news organizations the *Guardian,* comments appear at the bottom of stories. In many cases, comments appear under ads or related stories. The first thing that a user sees when she approaches or opens a webpage on the news organization's main website is the story, produced by a professional or affiliated staffer of the news organization.



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Trump contradicts himself on nuclear weapons – as it happened
2d

Donald Trump sued over campaign violence – as it happened
4d

Hillary Clinton: 'I'm sick of the Sanders campaign's lies' – as it happened
4d

comments (1009)
Sign in or create your Guardian account to join the discussion

Due to the large number of comments, they are being shown 100 per page.

[redacted]

Tony Podesta, brother of Clinton campaign chair Jon Podesta and bundler for Hillary Clinton, is also a registered lobbyist for the U.S. subsidiary of Russian state-held Sberbank. His mission? To get relief for the bank from U.S. sanctions against Russia, according to Politico.

Figure 6. A snapshot of a story on the Guardian's website, with the comments at the bottom.

This placement indicates that comments are very much additional material, and not the main reason or purpose for the page to exist. The decision by the editors at the *New York Times* to give comments greater prominence has been both deliberate and piecemeal. Over time, comments on *New York Times* articles have steadily encroached further and further upon the article page, recently reaching the center (Lichterman, 2015). The visible rise of comments on the website of one of the country's most influential news organizations demonstrates the increasing prominence of conversational stimulus and participation as news organization goals.

That said, comments at the *New York Times* still exist within a relatively controlled framework. Another aspect of 'availability of comments' is where and which topics are open for comment. On a site like Facebook or Twitter, users face almost no restriction on the topics they can discuss, allowing them to craft their own conversational agenda. They can also link to almost any news organization they choose and discuss the story. News organizations do not allow such an unlimited freedom. In 2012, the *New York Times* opened 17 articles a day for comments, although that number has recently expanded (Sullivan, 2012). Despite this, comments are enabled on a small fraction of the stories that the *New York Times* publishes.

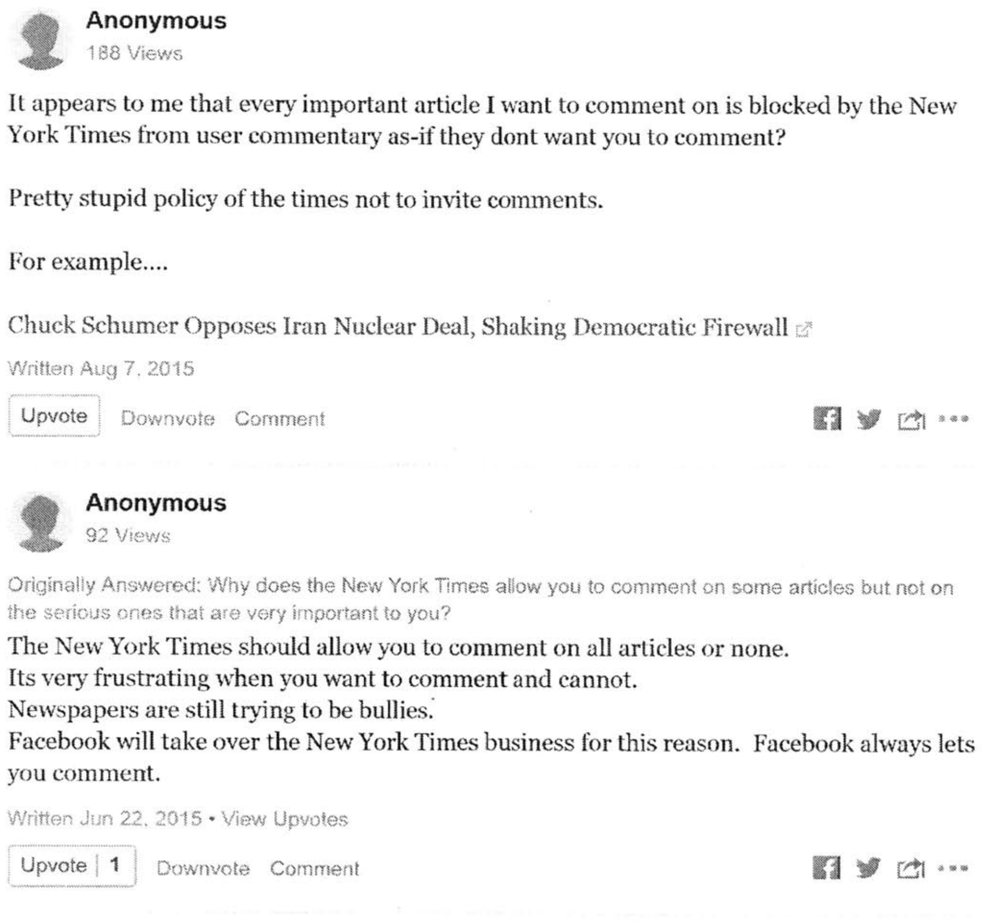
Among organizations that allow default commenting on all or almost all stories, editors I spoke with suggested an increasing tendency to shut down comments early, particularly around topics that tend to attract conflict in comment sections. The *Guardian* recently announced that stories related to race, immigration and Islam would have comments disabled by default, "unless the moderators knew they had the capacity to support the conversation and that they believed a positive debate was possible" (Pritchard, 2016). The *Guardian's* policy is explicit, and applies to *Guardian* publications around the world. Other organizations might not have an explicit policy about shutting down comments on particular topics, but they have internal practices that reflect similar priorities. One editor at a national legacy news organization told me that their organization circulates a nightly list of stories that "maybe don't need comments" (Editor C. , 2015). These stories include:

> crime stories, stories about race, stories that may be about other social justice issues, LGBT issues, sexual assaults, we just sort of know that there are some topics that are just …more likely to lead to vitriol and hate speech (Editor C. , 2015).

The tendency to move towards shutting down comments on particular topics reflects three things: the limitations of the comment format, as it has evolved or not evolved over the past several years; the resources and energy that news organizations can devote to the time-consuming task of human moderation; and the enormous negative impact that online abuse has had on newsroom practice. There is a growing awareness among news organizations and in other online community spaces that community management is a specialized and challenging task, and part of this awareness might be hard-won after years of moderating offensive or abusive material about these particular subjects. At the same time, the contention over what should be allowable speech in comment sections is a perfect lens through which to view the clash between traditional journalistic agenda-setting and the emerging culture of participatory user experience. The same editor I spoke with above explained the commenting policy to me as being guided by an editorial sense of what commenters can "add" to a story:

> If we can't answer the question of 'what can readers really add here' then we don't need to have them (Editor C. , 2015).

The news organization clearly views the purpose of the comments section as a way to add value to an existing story, and is comfortable removing comments in spaces where users' comments might not fit into that mold. Of course, visitors themselves can have very different notions about whether or not they should be permitted to comment. On the question-and-answer site Quora, a series of visitors have asked why the *New York Times* does not allow for wider commenting:



Anonymous
188 Views

It appears to me that every important article I want to comment on is blocked by the New York Times from user commentary as-if they dont want you to comment?

Pretty stupid policy of the times not to invite comments.

For example....

Chuck Schumer Opposes Iran Nuclear Deal, Shaking Democratic Firewall

Written Aug 7, 2015

Anonymous
92 Views

Originally Answered: Why does the New York Times allow you to comment on some articles but not on the serious ones that are very important to you?

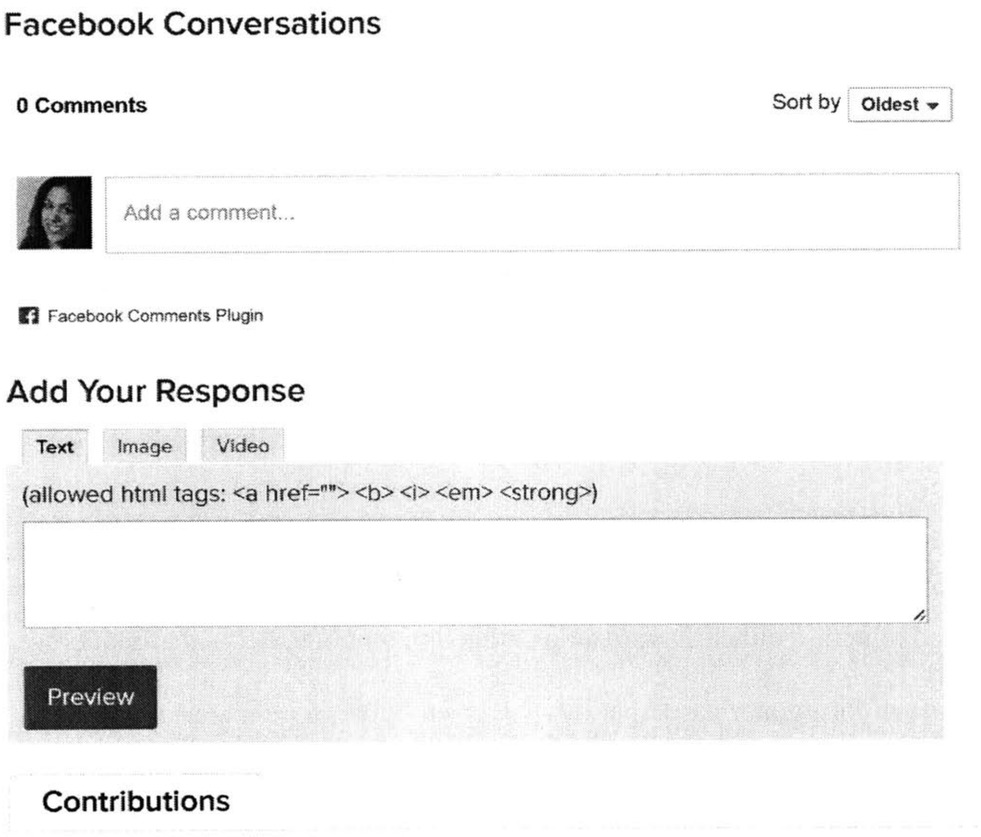
The New York Times should allow you to comment on all articles or none.
Its very frustrating when you want to comment and cannot.
Newspapers are still trying to be bullies.
Facebook will take over the New York Times business for this reason. Facebook always lets you comment.

Written Jun 22, 2015 • View Upvotes

Figure 7. Users on question and answer site Quora express dissatisfaction about the New York Times' comment policy. Captured April 13, 2016. Source: https://www.quora.com/Why-does-the-New-York-Times-allow-us-to-comment-on-some-articles-but-not-others

The goal here is not to suggest that either group is right or wrong, but to ask where users developed the idea that they should be able to comment on any news story, especially since that right has historically never been part of the implied newspaper-public contract. The contrast in the second anonymous user's quote pits the *New York Times* against Facebook, suggesting a clear origin for users' emerging expectations of unfettered participation. It also highlights the fact that even when news organizations close down comments on their own sites, discussion about these shutdowns and about the controversial material in question frequently moves to other comment-powered sites, which many engagement and community editors know. The example that began this paper, of the decision by *The Verge* to suspend comments, immediately led to readers starting a thread on reddit to discuss and critique the decision as well as the reasons offered for it.

In this area, as well, BuzzFeed offers an interesting case. In the past and even today, BuzzFeed offers readers the option to comment on stories using a native comment application as well as Facebook comments. Facebook comments is a feature that allows visitors to use their Facebook identity to leave comments on a non-Facebook webpage.


Facebook Conversations
0 Comments
Sort by
Oldest
Add a comment...
Facebook Comments Plugin
Add Your Response
Text
Image
Video
Preview
Contributions

(allowed html tags: <a href=""> <b> <i> <em> <strong>)

Figure 8. Facebook comments and native comments on a BuzzFeed story. The Facebook comments option appears on top. Captured April 13, 2016.

The Facebook comments function appears above the native comments section. The organization has since decided to remove the native commenting function from news stories, but not from community stories, partly because the anonymous native comments on news stories were bringing in too much material that was perceived as vitriolic:

> If you're tackling a very serious political story – you have some people who crawl out of wherever to comment in there sometimes. But on news posts only Facebook, the native ones [comments] are disabled to relieve some of the pressure (Member, 2015).

The BuzzFeed decision illustrates a few salient points, the first being that news comments do seem to be a special case within the world of commenting, and the second being that even a very participatory media company can face challenges in administering the comments on news stories. When it comes to moderating comments on news, especially on controversial subjects, legacy and digital publishers face a convergence of needs: a desire to carve out a news-specific space of commentary that reflects but does not copy the unlimited commenting affordances of social media. At the same time, social media companies may also be under increasing pressure to limit these affordances, as Facebook's evolving Standards demonstrate.

d. *When moderation occurs*

Finally, news organizations face an important decision: when are comments moderated? This is not a meaningless distinction either. Organizations that do not moderate or that moderate ad-hoc after publication allow for greater participation, in the sense that more material will be published. To the extent that Facebook exercises any moderation, it is all post-publication, and only at the behest of users who feel that a particular comment violates the organization's stated policies. Facebook does not comprehensively review all material. Conversations on post-moderated threads can also unfold more similarly to the way an in-person conversation does, with both parties exchanging information in real-time. With post-moderation, some readers will see an objectionable comment before it is later removed, which allows these viewers the opportunity to comment on the removal decision if it occurs.

On the other side of the scale, some organizations moderate all comments before they appear, thus keeping decisions about allowable speech entirely within the private purview of a moderation team. The most visible proponent of this strategy is the *New York Times,* who moderate almost all comments before they appear, and explain the decision as follows:

> Our goal is to provide substantive commentary for a general readership. By screening submissions, we have created a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of our news and information (New York Times Help - Comments).

Moderating comments beforehand reflects the *New York Times'* editorial priorities, which favor a particular definition of "intelligent and informed commentary" and "quality" of news and information. At the same time, the decision to publish comments becomes the province of editors, not commenters (some comments make it through the process, while others do not). Pre-moderating comments is time-consuming, and it can also disrupt conversational loops. When commenters are not sure when or if their comment will appear, they will not be able to reply in real-time to other commenters. The structure of conversation on post-moderated threads, therefore, will be very different from that on pre-moderated threads.

The decision to moderate comments beforehand clearly reflects the desire for greater editorial control, while the decision to moderate after the fact reflects a drive towards greater participation. Worth noting is that organizations that do not moderate comments beforehand might face a lack of the resources required to do so, rather than a lack of desire. Human moderation is both expensive and time-consuming. The *New York Times* is not unique because of its desire for editorial controls, but rather for the resources it has devoted to building an in-house moderation team devoted to comments.

2. Moderator Types

At many of the organizations I went to, comment moderation did not exist in isolation, but as part of a series of workflows nested within the rising idea of "audience engagement" and "community." The rise of dedicated "audience engagement" and "community" teams within news organizations means that there are entire groups of people whose sole function is to manage relationships with, and the reactions of, audiences.

What motivates journalists to take on jobs within audience engagement, which is still very much an evolving field within journalism and one that increasingly requires specialized skills? In practice, I found that motivation varied depending on the organization, the role of engagement in the organization's broader mission, and the journalist's individual preferences. Below, I attempt to provide some general categories that capture the varieties of motivations I encountered among people who worked in these teams, and what they might suggest about where audience engagement work is headed in the future. In this section, I largely examine people who work within news organizations, partly because I want to use this information to understand how the shift towards engagement might affect future work at news organizations, and partly because I wanted to understand how people who trained as journalists reconcile community work with their previous expectations and training and their future professional plans. I use the term "moderator" even though many of these individuals were not solely moderators – a shift that I will examine in greater detail in chapter two.

a. The accidental moderator

I define an accidental moderator as someone who never planned on entering a community management role, possibly because he entered journalism before these roles existed. This type of moderator, if he studied journalism in school, studied a traditional curriculum, and found himself in community engagement because that is where jobs opened up in the post-recession journalism industry. I spoke to a couple of moderators who fit in this category, not all of whom anticipated staying in community management long-term. Their motivation was often to get into other areas of journalism, as typified by one moderator whom I spoke with at a national news organization:

> I didn't even know about this [audience engagement jobs]. I was on a very hard news track, and I went from that to wanting to work for magazines. I'm still a writer but I think I became a moderator at the [news organization] because I wanted to work at the [particular news organization] but I learned a lot. I'm on this team where we do a mix of everything, so it's sort of just a weird path to take to ultimately get what I want (Editor C. , 2015).

This particular editor's quote demonstrates a perception that audience engagement is a different type of work from "hard news." It also demonstrates the ways that audience engagement captures a variety of tasks, and is still in flux, as evident in the phrase "we do a mix of everything". Nonetheless, the distinction that existed in this erson's mind might mirror a distinction in how journalism is taught in schools and structured within news organizations.

For another accidental moderator whom I spoke with, audience engagement offered a way to break into the journalism industry. Now an engagement editor at a mainstream news organization, she did not study journalism in college, and struggled to get journalism jobs until an opening appeared in a newly-formed audience engagement team:

> I wanted to work on the editorial side but I didn't have any journalism experience and it's hard to break into that side. I was exploring options when an editor said they're creating this new position with the community team (Editor2, 2015).

Some accidental moderators ended up moving on to other roles, but others stayed within community work. For those who did, staying meant working to reconcile the values and structure of the work they did with the values that had attracted them to journalism in the first place. The editor mentioned above, for example, referred to community engagement as a "public service," tying her work to larger public service ideals within newsrooms. Several editors whom I spoke with had spent a great deal of time thinking about how audience engagement linked back to broader and more traditional mainstream journalism ethics.

The accidental moderator is, to an extent, a reflection of a nascent field that is still in flux. As journalism institutions – including colleges – expand their curricula to include community management skills, and audience engagement becomes a more established journalistic role with its own requirements and background, it is possible that the number of accidental moderators will decline.

b. The attracted moderator

The second type of moderator is the attracted moderator. These people joined news organizations to do non-moderation tasks, but then sought out or volunteered for moderation work, often in addition to other journalistic responsibilities. An attracted moderator might be drawn to moderation because of affinity for a particular topic area or a particular community. An attracted moderator is in a special position because moderation is not always part of the work he is paid to do, so moderation work exists in both a part-time and an institutionally invisible space. One journalist who started a blog at a mainstream news organization and then decided to moderate the comments, expressed her motivation for doing so:

> Moderation? It was something I did because I wanted to. I wanted [the blog] to be an inviting space. I didn't want people to come onto [it] and see the comments and see horribleness, I wanted it to be positive. Because I loved it (Moderator C. , 2015).

This particular moderator mapped her motivations to traditional news values and objectives:

> I got this fantasy notion that if comments were useful or people not just slinging mud at each other that the conversation would get deeper and the story would become a subject of conversation.

Traditional news organizations value setting the agenda and stimulating wide reaching debate, as well as "support[ing] the open and civil exchange of views" (SPJ, 2014).

But the main challenge for attracted moderation lies in the conflict between a moderator's deeply personal commitment to their moderation work and the lack of official support for it, either in the form of a lack of established rules or training, or in terms of a lack of teammates with whom to share challenges and best practices, or just general lack of awareness of the toll that part-time moderation can take on practitioners. To an extent, writers who find themselves engaging around their articles on Twitter are also attracted moderators, and might face some of the same concerns and constraints.

Attracted moderators can be deeply invested in a particular article, story or community, and because their moderation work is sometimes conducted outside the scope of their usual assignments, they might struggle the most to disengage from negative comments or feel like their values as moderators are shared across the organization. Moderators like these also run the risk of getting burned out on moderation. "Burnout" is a term used to describe the results of ongoing emotionally draining work (I explore burnout in greater depth in chapter three). Because the moderation work is part-time and chosen, attracted moderators are least likely to be trained for moderation work, and the least likely to enjoy the regular support of a team of colleagues who are also trained in and dedicated to moderation work.

The reason I include the attracted moderator as a category is because, as an increasing number of journalists find themselves using social platforms to promote their work or engaging with audiences online through online forums, even those whose roles do not fall within "audience engagement" specifically can become attracted to moderation-style work, and face the challenges and frustrations common to engagement. Although "engagement" teams specialize in these engagement-related skills, audience engagement work is often performed across a news organization by a wide swathe of actors.

c. *The acknowledged moderator*

The final category of moderator is the acknowledged moderator, so called because they specifically seek out audience engagement or community work. Their motivations stem from interest in new technology, to a familiarity with online media, to a deep interest in the soft skills of moderation – watching online communities form and grow. The moderators whom I met who fell into this category cited social media or community management as their first choice of job, and expressed openness to working at digital-only or non-traditional news organizations. One social engagement editor at a young web magazine typified the mentality:

> While I was at school I just became very aware of – I was much more attracted to organizations that embraced the future and were more experimental in terms of how they interacted with audiences and how they did their stories and at this point a lot of publications that are web-only are kind of the best at being more experimental and innovative in that way (editor, 2015).

A recent graduate from journalism school, this moderator mentioned that her curriculum had covered social media as a crucial job skill. Another community editor was not trained in the role, but chose to apply for a community job after years in more traditional journalistic spaces, because she had enjoyed working with a community of advertisers in her previous job at a trade publication.

> [The job] was about engaging audiences and involving them in the [news organization's] news coverage. How do you get people to participate and tell their stories better? That sounded very appealing to me because it was what I'd been doing on a smaller scale, and this was going to allow me to apply those techniques to a broader range of news stories (Editor A. , 2015).

Acknowledged moderators were also most likely to say that their work was a new form of journalism or added value to journalism.

In this category, I also include moderators who sought out audience engagement work specifically, but who did not have prior exposure to journalism. I encountered fewer of these types of moderators at large legacy news organizations, but I suspect this background will become increasingly common at web startups and online publications. One moderator who did not study journalism, and who said he had never and would never work a traditional reporting job, couched his interest in community management in terms of his natural skills:

> I am extroverted, I like getting to know new people, I like throwing myself into social settings (Manager1, 2015).

This moderator started out on Facebook, managing communities around topics he felt passionately about. This unpaid work, which he says he did because he loved it, led to him being hired by a new media company as a community manager. He focused on the nature of the work involved – managing communities and relationships – as natural extensions of facets of his personality that he deeply prized. In this case, his extroversion.

These moderators differed in terms of the types of organizations they worked at, the level of support they received in terms of tools, finances, visibility and training, and their desire to be in moderation jobs. Nonetheless, they found themselves facing many of the same challenges, some of which I will outline in chapter three, which covers the risks of engagement.

One of the emerging questions for news organizations is how to attract people with engagement-specific skills as well as how to promote and motivate them within legacy news organizations that might usually recruit for different skill sets. I look at some suggestions in the conclusion to this piece, but in the meantime, I offer the following quote from a community editor whose role includes hiring and managing an audience engagement team at a legacy news organization:

> We've struggled sometimes to retain people because they didn't see real opportunities for promotion, for what would come next after social media or community editing. The main trajectories might be moving to be a desk editor, which isn't the same skill set, and for people who enjoy this kind of work that wouldn't be the best use of their skills.

How can news organizations better employ and motivate these teams? This is an urgent question for the industry if it plans to continue on its current trajectory, and I return to it in the conclusion.

In this section, we explored the ways in which news organizations approach comments, and how both institutions and individual moderators make decisions along a spectrum that ranges from enabling audience participation to exercising editorial control. In the next section, I return to this same set of priorities, but within a wider world of audience engagement. Audience engagement work flows from some of the same tensions and questions that arise over comment moderation. But because engagement is a broader space than comment moderation, it also raises concerns of its own.

CHAPTER TWO: THE RISE OF ENGAGEMENT

> I think we have a terminology problem right now. 'Audience' suggests passive recipients, 'community' suggests people who are invested and contribute…Is somebody who reads an article and the comments, are they audience or community? Or are they consumers? Or if they don't say anything but hit "like" [on Facebook], are they now a commenter? Or are they still a reader? Or are they somewhere in between? They're participating, but in a more silent way. There aren't clear lines, I don't think, between these kinds of behaviors. If someone emails the journalist but doesn't leave a comment, are they a contributor? Is that different, or an extension of the same thing? Does it matter that they're not doing it in public?
>
> -Andrew Losowsky, Project lead, Coral Project (2015).

The goal of this chapter is to understand the term engagement, and to place it within the broader context of news organizations' ongoing efforts to define themselves in relation to their shifting audiences. As the quotation above demonstrates, the expanding landscape of participation has challenged not just the relationship between journalists and readers, but the very language used to describe and structure these relationships. This shift has been ongoing for a while, and is driven in part by the expanding participatory potential of the web, which has in turn changed the way that people receive, produce and consume news. Many scholars have come up with terms to try and capture the ways that participation is challenging traditional notions of audience behavior. In *We the Media,* Dan Gillmor refers to the "former audience," (Gillmor, 2004) while Jay Rosen has written about "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006). In 2011, Rosen told *The Economist* that the "the shift of the tools of production to the people formerly known as the audience" had transformed news gathering and reporting from the exclusive province of news organizations to a much wider enterprise (The Economist, 2011).

At the same time that former audiences assume greater control of production mechanisms through the adoption of blogging, social media and mobile imagery, their expectations of media shift. Communications scholar Sonia Livingstone summarizes one attempt to "periodise" these shifts in audience:

> Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), to take but one, identify three broad phases of the audience: first, the simple co-located face-to-face audience; second, the mass audience – lasting throughout modern history – aligned to the boundaries of the nation state and so most readily identified both with public service and with the needs of citizens; and third, the diffused audience, no longer containable in particular places and times, but rather part and parcel of all aspects of daily life, certainly in industrialised nations and increasingly globally (2005, p. 26).

In the following sections, as I talk about different modes of community online, I lay out and define an affective community and a relationship-driven community of interest. In understanding how both of these communities came to be, however, it is valuable to think about shifts in communication behaviors within these communities as part of an ongoing shift in audience behavior. As audiences consume more media, and participate more in media interfaces, these interfaces – and the resulting idea of audience – expand their scope. The audience becomes more diffuse. So yes, the former audience can now create news on their mobile phones. But they can also share that news, create relationships and interpret messages through these same interfaces, and these behaviors are related to each other and increasingly a ubiquitous part of life.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, comment moderation work at news organizations increasingly falls under the heading of "audience engagement." Audience engagement is a series of workflows, but also an attempt to relate news organizations to the shifting expectations of the former audience. As Losowsky's quote above demonstrates, audience engagement is a staggeringly complex task. As news organizations adapt to the web, understanding audiences has become its own ideology. "Audience engagement" draws language and protocol from journalism, software, and design. Considering the rapid pace of change, engagement is a site of conflict and ambiguity – a place where news organizations seek to reconcile the legacies of the past with the emerging cultures of online communication and production.

In this chapter, I examine the legacies of the past as well as the expectations of the future, and provide a basic mapping of engagement practices in the present. In the first section of this chapter, I examine how news organizations traditionally related to audiences. In order to frame and structure this section, I turn to communications scholar John B. Thompson's framework of "monological" versus "dialogical" conversation, which I co-locate with James Carey's notion of "transmission" and "ritual" based views of communication.

According to Thompson, the communication between mass media and their audience is characterized by a "flow of communication [that] is predominantly one-way" (1995, p. 84), a mode that he refers to as "monological." I demonstrate how the early model of American newspapers, which relied on one-way communication from printers to public, was created and reinforced by distribution mechanisms and early news practice. I focus on the role of the printer as the originator of the conversation, who maintained a strong control over the flow of information, as an example of how transmission-based communication worked alongside monological relationships with audiences.

In the next section, I examine some of the competing models that have emerged online, focusing on how the internet offers but also expands upon Thompson's definition of a "dialogical" conversation as one characterized by "a two-way flow of information and communication" (p. 83).. In particular, I focus on the affective social web and the relationship-driven community of interest as examples of ritual-driven communication spaces, where participants use participatory tools to share and create relationships as well as information. I expand upon Thompson's definition and introduce the term "multi-logical" to capture the ways that communication takes place in online conversational media, in the form of ongoing loops of conversation between multiple layers of producers and consumers whose roles are constantly shifting. I talk about how the presence of lurkers – people who read online fora but do not contribute their own comments – further complicates the notion of "dialogical" exchange and possibly renders it "multi-logical." I focus on the moderator as a peer, whose relationship to the community is one of membership, as an illustration of how ritual and sharing co-exist in these spaces, and work alongside multi-logical frameworks.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how teams at news organizations are operationalizing engagement, what is at stake, and how their decisions challenge old notions of audience and incorporate new ones.

1. The Old Model – Journalism and monological conversation

Around 1792, when United States legislators were debating the expansion of the US Mail system – which would soon become one of the most extensive distribution systems in the world – they spent a great deal of time on a particular question: should US newspapers, already a vibrant industry, be allowed into the country's official mail system? And if so, should they be admitted at favorable or subsidized mailing rates?

Some of the most vocal voices in this debate were printers and publishers themselves. Benjamin Franklin Bache, printer of the *General Advertiser*, argued that all newspapers should be admitted into the mail free of charge. In making his argument, he outlined a notion of civic purpose that continues in American journalism to the present day:

> The communication channel between the government and the citizenry that these newspapers would establish [would create] 'pores' through which individuals living at a distance from the seat of power could 'perspire' and in this way, he [Bache] contended – in a curious mixing of metaphors – transform the newspaper press into a 'kind of chimney to the federal edifice' (John, 1995, p. 36).

This quotation highlights the perceived and ideal relationship between subscribers and press in the establishing days of American newspapers. In Bache's model, the press was a purveyor of information, a vehicle. Its goal was to open not a conversation but rather a line of sight between citizens and their government. Bache's metaphors of a 'pore' and a 'chimney' are telling, because they suggest a restricted and one-way access. Bache's envisioned community was not necessarily one in which citizens would be talking back extensively to lawmakers, and indeed, Bache said nothing about providing similarly preferential mailing rates for responses that subscribers might have wanted to send back to publishers. In this model, publishers and congressmen would decide what information the citizenry needed to know. In defining early audiences by their civic needs, Bache and his fellow printers situated audiences within the second phase of audience as laid out by Livingstone in the introduction to this chapter:

> …the mass audience – lasting throughout modern history – aligned to the boundaries of the nation state and so most readily identified both with public service and with the needs of citizens (2005, p. 26).

Newspapers' target audience was people who qualified as "citizenry" but not as decision-makers, whose interactions with central government would take place though a restricted "pore" provided by newspapers. Editors up until today define themselves as people who provide a public service, and whose goal is to meet the needs of citizens.

There is a name for a conversation in which a producer of information distributes material without necessarily expecting a response. Thompson refers to this mode of communication as "monological." Monological interactions, according to Thompson, adhere to several distinguishing characteristics. The first is that "the flow of communication is predominantly one-way" (1995, p. 84). In the case of early newspapers, the flow of information was from news producers to news subscribers, and possibly (to exempt the press altogether) from the government to citizens, as enabled by newspapers.

The second criteria, elaborating on the first, is that the producer of a form of media "does not require (and generally does not receive) a direct and immediate response" (1995, p. 84). By and large, early newspapers conformed to this expectation also. The printers of early newspapers introduced limited means for reader response, for example, the Letter to the Editor. But Thompson writes that these occasional forms of interaction were "limited in character" and "quite different from the kind of dialogical exchange characteristic of face-to-face and mediated interaction" (p. 278). The essential detail here is that although Letters to the Editor existed, they were not necessary for newspapers to exist and perform their communicative function.

Finally, Thompson wrote that mass media, including newspapers, constitute a form of "mediated quasi-interaction," because producers (editors) are creating content for "an indefinite range of potential recipients" (1995, p. 84). This last part is possibly the most interesting, from an engagement perspective, because it suggests that the early news printer did not have relationships with his subscribers on an individual level. Indeed, for the early printer, the news public was the community of people to whom information should be served in order to continue to enable democracy. The audience – the citizenry – was both specific and vague. The publisher did not know exactly how people acted on the information they received, nor did he continue to participate in the conversations subscribers had once they received the news.

Although early journalism *did* contain conversations, these were not ongoing conversations between printers and citizens, and do not change the underlying monological nature of journalism's interaction with its audience. Thompson would say that the monological nature of conversation is built into the structure of mass media, because it requires a vague public in order to *be* mass media, but I would argue that in the case of journalism it is also a case of where conversation occurs, as I shall now explain.

In their book *The Elements of Journalism,* the journalists and press critics Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel diagram the evolution of newspapers, tracing the editors of today's newspapers back to the keepers of early American public houses:

> In America, journalism grew out of pubs, or publick houses. Here, the bar owners, called publicans, hosted spirited conversations about information from travelers who often recorded what they had seen and heard in logbooks kept at the end of the bar. The first newspapers evolved out of these coffeehouses when enterprising printers began to collect

> the shipping news, tales from abroad and more gossip, and political arguments from the coffeehouses and to print them on paper (2001, p. 16).

In this model, journalists conducted extensive conversations with travelers and newsmakers, a practice that continues to this day (but the travelers have been replaced by a variety of 'sources'). Subscribers, upon receiving newspapers, then discussed the news and events among themselves. But these two dialogical conversational loops were separated by the process of story production and transmission. Once a story was produced, it was transmitted to subscribers, and producers and the subscribers did not otherwise commucniate. The conversational structure looked something like this:

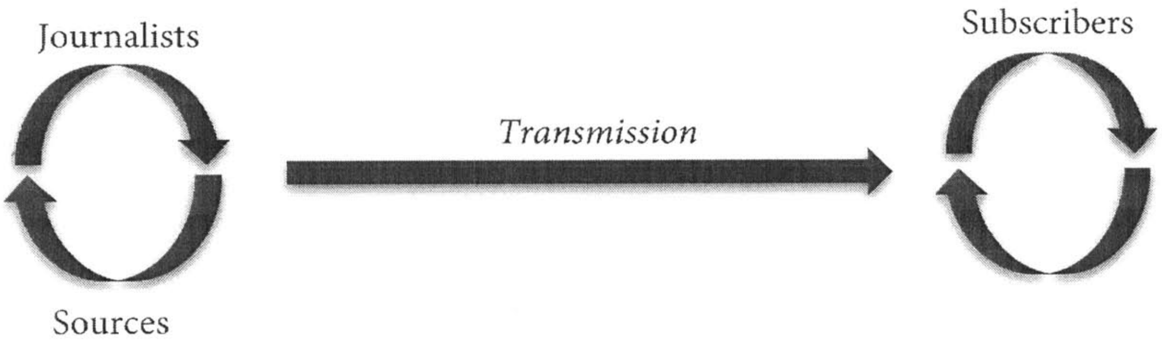


Figure 9. The Conversational Model of Early American Newspapers. Journalists and sources converse to produce the story, which is then transmitted to subscribers who discuss it among themselves. Journalists and subscribers do not have a dialogue.

Transmission was not just part of the process – it was the underlying purpose of journalism's structure. Journalists produced stories, but the transfer of these stories to a reading public is what constituted journalism. In 1989, communications scholar James Carey referred to the "transmission view," of communication, which he characterized as "defined by terms such as 'imparting,' 'sending,' 'transmitting,' or 'giving information to others.' It is formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation" (Carey, 1989, p. 15). These metaphors of transportation continue to animate journalism – the common industry term "source" for the people whom journalists interview for stories is one example. News organizations also defined themselves by their geographic reach. Legacy news organizations have names like *The Washington Post,* the *New York Times,* and the *LA Times.* Newer digital-only publications have chosen names like *BuzzFeed, Mic, Vocativ* and *Vox,* which are less pegged to notions of geography or travel.

Transmission was central even to more local publications. Media scholar Paul Starr demonstrates how even small-town papers often covered large geographic zones:

> Even small-town papers had many subscribers who lived at a distance. A study of the subscription books of two small-town Ohio papers in the 1820s, the *Ashtabula Sentinel* and the *Mansfield Gazette*, finds that a majority of subscribers to both papers lived out of town; indeed, 47 per cent of the *Sentinel's* subscribers and 34 percent of the *Gazette's* lived more than 20 miles away (Starr, 2004, p. 89).

By serving this geographically oriented, monological function, newspapers mapped neatly onto Carey's definition of a transmission-based method of communication, which relied upon the idea of centrally produced messages distributed outwards in the "hands of a messenger" (1989, p. 15). In the case of newspapers, these messengers were the postriders and later the stagecoaches of the US mail.

Newspapers were essential not just to serving geographic communities, but also to defining them. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Carey's definition of the transmission-based view of communication is the idea that messages are distributed "for the control of distance and people" (Carey, 1989, p. 15). In those days, news publishers' definition of community was one informed by both the hopes and the limitations of the early American postal system as well as the hopes and limitations of early American democratic ideals. These two systems worked together. This early democratic notion of citizenship, while extensive, had serious blind spots that were reflected in policy decisions. John explains: "postal policy marginalized a number of groups – in particular, women and blacks – and in this way identified the public sphere with free white men, the most privileged class of Americans at that time" (1995, p. 112).

For readers, belonging to the emerging fellowship of newspaper readers offered a way of envisioning their place in an emerging national community, one that held the newspaper as its medium of exchange and its source of priorities. In *Imagined Communities,* his hugely influential work on the rise of European nationalism, Benedict Anderson links the act of reading to the evolution of national communities: "These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (1991, p. 44). Under this system, publishers had a great deal of control – not just over what people read, but over who was considered a member of the citizenry, and how he envisioned himself in relation to other citizens. For audiences, reading the newspaper was framed as an act of citizenship.

Besides being an interesting historical diversion, what does all this mean for journalism today? For one, it stresses the long history of the press as a civic agent and the long history of thinking of audiences in relation to their civic interests. This idea that journalism's fundamental purpose is a civic one, that journalists exist to give people "the information they need to be free and self-governing" is one that appears in journalistic texts up to the present time (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 5). The opening line of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics defines journalists by whether or not they subscribe to the belief that "public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy" (SPJ, 2014). But as political ideals change and the notion of citizenship has grown more diverse, news organizations have also struggled to re-define who their stakeholders are. And as the idea of being a member of an audience has shifted, the members of these former audiences may expect entirely different types of relationships with the media they consume.

So what can these historical insights leverage for us today, with the very different affordances made available by the internet? By sweeping away geography as a defining factor of community, the internet has challenged newspapers' mode of defining themselves in relation to either a nation-state or where and how they transmit information. By enabling participation on news organizations' webpages but also in other public spaces like social media, the affordances of the internet challenge the monological nature of legacy conversation with audiences. Finally, by allowing audiences to participate more widely, and allowing members of the previously unfranchised public to open blogs and leave comments, online participation challenges the ways in which editors could control and define the sphere of their audience. Audience-ship today is diffuse. Journalists have little control over where their articles go and how widely their stories are distributed online. Negotiating this democratic, civic legacy – and finding authentic modes of participation and engagement that bridge the past and the present – is the work of today's "audience engagement" editors.

2. Dialogical Conversation and the internet

In contrast to the monological conversations that legacy mass media traditionally enjoyed with audiences, Thompson also defined a "dialogical" conversational mode. Dialogical conversations required two participations to exchange information on an ongoing basis: phone calls and letters are examples of mediated dialogical conversations, while the face-to-face conversation is an example of in-person dialogical conversation. In this section, I examine how the traditions of dialogical conversation play out in two online spaces: the reactive community of affect and the relationship-driven community of interest. I also introduce a new term, multi-logical, to capture the multi-layered and asynchronous nature of conversations in these emerging online spaces.

a. Reactions and the affective social web

In summer 2015, I met with a team at the new media company BuzzFeed at a company office in Manhattan. The walls were decorated with poster-size reproductions of the site's trademark reaction exclamations – the neon yellow-accented "omg", "fail" and other icons that appear on articles that run on BuzzFeed's site. Readers react to stories on BuzzFeed's site by clicking the buttons. BuzzFeed's "reactions" are one of the most visible ways in which the site sets itself apart from legacy news organizations and aligns itself with the social web, where emotionally-driven reactions prompt the clicking and sharing behavior that comprise measurable engagement.

One of the characteristics of dialogical conversation, as envisioned by Thompson, were the "symbolic cues" like "winks and gestures, frowns and smiles, changes in intonation and so on" that participants in a dialogic conversation used to provide additional information to their conversational partner (p. 83). As dialogical conversations moved into mediated spaces like letter writing and phone calls, Thompson said, many of these symbolic cues were lost, resulting in more ambiguous communication.

These emotional reactions – BuzzFeed's 'wow' label, or the ubiquitous smiley face – serve the same function that symbolic cues once did in face-to-face interaction. They remove ambiguity and advance online discursive spaces as capable of multiple forms of expression. By inserting a well-chosen "winking face", a participant in a mediated online conversation can provide emotional context, alleviate tension or induce familiarity. These online cues introduce a level of intimacy and even immediacy into conversations that might otherwise be devoid of emotional context. The existence of this emotional context – and the evolving expectation of it – pose serious challenges to monological conversational traditions. In these traditions, symbolic cues were neither necessary nor provided.

Publishers at the digital forefront have adopted the idea of the symbolic cue as organizing frameworks for their stories, using these emotional reactions as ways to structure audiences and stories. BuzzFeed's reaction bar, which appears at the bottom of many stories, looks like this:

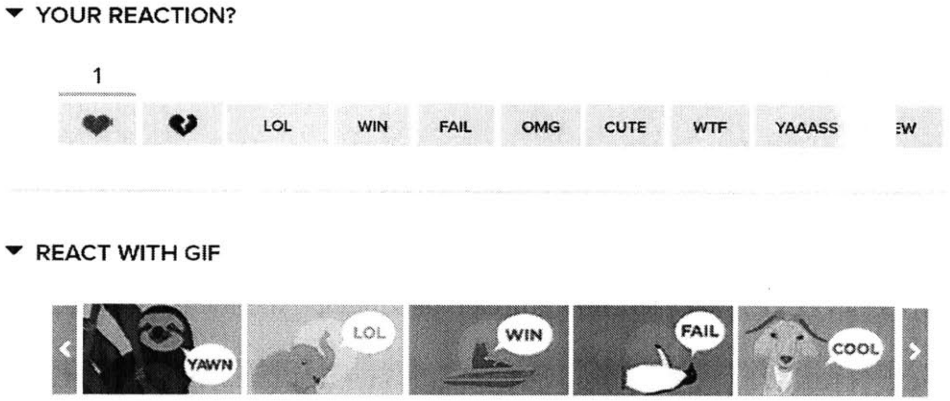


Figure 10. The reaction bars on a BuzzFeed story. Response options like "Lol" and "Omg" privilege immediate and emotional reactions.

Options like "Lol" and "Cute" privilege immediate responses, often ones flavored by feelings like amazement, shock or delight. The counter tracks how many people have clicked each response, and displays that information to visitors, creating a sense of an ongoing emotional connection among a community of readers. These reactions are symbolic cues, but updated for an environment where producers, moderators and commenters are constantly engaged in asynchronous, ongoing communication. Unlike actual facial expressions, these cues are visible to many participants, including participants who are distributed in space and time. These online conversations are often multi-layered, as producers and consumers interact with each other via text, emoticon, or simply "lurking" (reading without commenting). In fact, these online discussion spaces aren't just dialogical – they are multilogical. They permit multiple layers of interaction between different groups of producers, consumers, and lurkers. Because of their perceived universality, emotional reactions become an organizing feature in how people conduct relationships in these complex and multi-layered online spaces.

When participants use emotional reactions as a filter and response mechanism, they also set emotions as the boundaries of shared spaces and communities. By clicking on the "LOL" icon at the top of BuzzFeed's homepage, readers get taken to a "LOL feed", or a series of articles that share this particular emotional tinge. Should they so choose, readers on the site can interact only with content that makes them feel a particular way. For those of a darker mindset, there is also a "fail feed", and for those who want to feel cheered, a "cute feed" that hosts images of puppies and kittens. Although BuzzFeed has alienated some professional journalists with what has been referred to as an "LOL-WTF-OMG approach to content", the focus on whether or not BuzzFeed's approach constitutes 'real' news overlooks the fact that these types of articles, from the start, situate a content stream within a particular network's rituals of interaction (Sonderman, 2012).

In this explicitly affective world, where emotion has become a measurable metric, journalists are incentivized to pursue truth but also to consider feelings. In providing this consideration, they become part of an ongoing conversational cycle, one marked by checking in on other participants' reactions and feelings. Should they create content that makes people happy, like the brief video phenomenon "Upworthy" did when it began curating content that made people feel good? Upworthy's mission statement was directly opposed to that of traditional news. In contrast to informational news stories focused on factual accuracy, Upworthy became a social force to be reckoned with by curating videos that would inspire wonder, joy and awe

(Upworthy). Upworthy changed news by suggesting that the best way to adapt it for the social world was to frame it through an emotional lens, rather than situate it in a particular hobby, timeline or topic. Emotion – the desire to feel happiness – defined the community and became its way of relating to each other.

Emotional reactions may be a wave of the future, and the behavior of emerging digital publications is constantly influenced by that of powerful social networks, where a relationship-focused "sharing" culture reigns supreme. Emotions are a driver of this sharing culture. Facebook, the social platform that has increasingly become a site for information and affective exchange, recently introduced an expanded set of emotional reactions – including "love" and "wow" – alongside their signature "like" button.

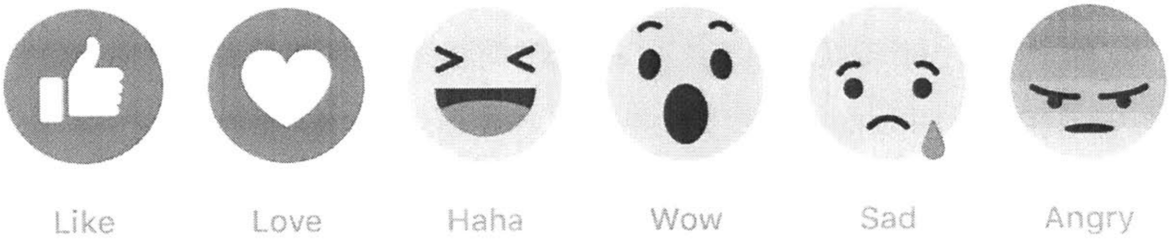


Figure 11. The reaction buttons that appear to users beneath Facebook posts. The five new ones – love, haha, wow, sad and angry – are meant to augment the platform's famous "Like." They were introduced worldwide in February 2016.

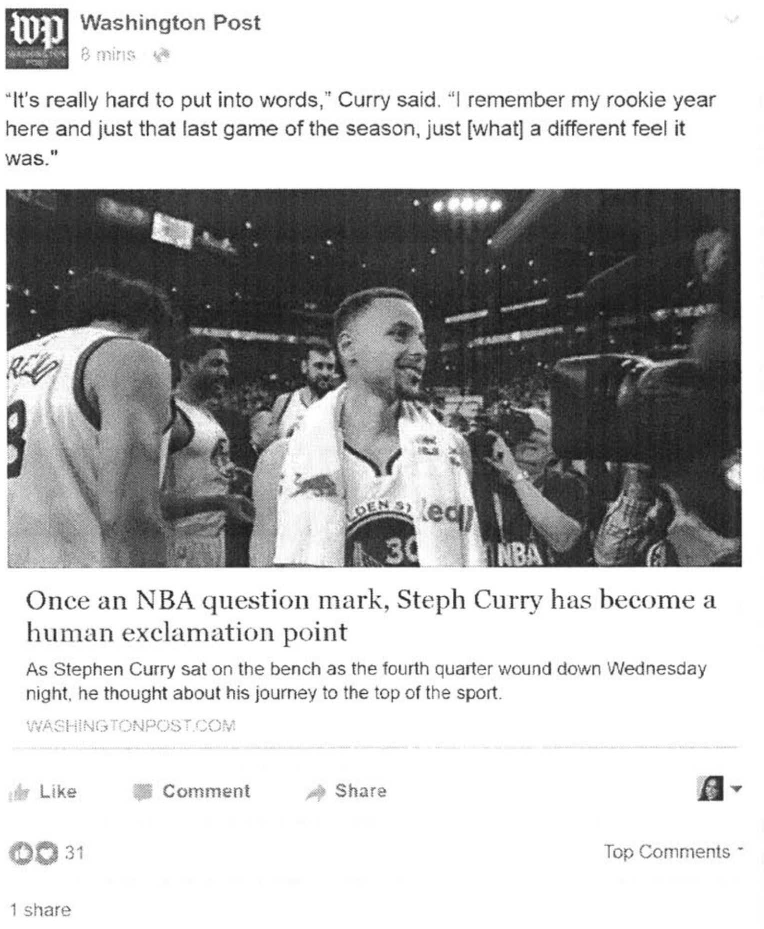
The company explained the decision to update the reaction set:

> News Feed is the central way you can get updates about your friends, family and anything else that matters to you, and the central place to have conversations with the people you care about. We've been listening to people and know that there should be more ways to easily and quickly express how something you see in News Feed makes you feel (Krug, 2016).

Exchanging emotions is a crucial part of the ritual of sharing on a platform like Facebook, and shared emotions are often how people define their relationships in space as well as the ways in which they decide what content to share with whom. As traditional news organizations increasingly rely on social platforms as the sole places to host discussions, groups and conversations around their journalism, they must build their expertise in these new modes of affect-driven communication (Ellis J. , 2015). Even news organizations that do not participate directly on Facebook will be affected by what is said there – their articles will still be shared, commented upon and reacted to on the platform. As Jamie Mottram, director of content development for USA Today's Sports Media Group, tells *Neiman Lab:*

> We also use SimpleReach, Chartbeat, and CrowdTangle, all of which are analytics tools that show us what's being said about our content on social platforms and other sites. We can then choose to engage in those conversations where they're happening, or not (Ellis J. , 2015).

In this emotional and reactive space, marked by constant ongoing communication, symbolic cues can alleviate tension and provide emotional context that words cannot. Facebook, as a platform, encourages news organizations to compress stories into this affective set. The site's layout encourages short headlines and punchy, brief descriptors. The position of the reaction bar underneath a very brief story description invites both commenters and news organizations to frame material in ways that capitalizes on Facebook's capacity for instant – and often, emotionally-driven – reaction. This framing also suggests that reactions are at least as important as the story itself:



Washington Post

8 mins

"It's really hard to put into words," Curry said. "I remember my rookie year here and just that last game of the season, just [what] a different feel it was."

Once an NBA question mark, Steph Curry has become a human exclamation point

As Stephen Curry sat on the bench as the fourth quarter wound down Wednesday night, he thought about his journey to the top of the sport.

WASHINGTONPOST.COM

Figure 12. A Washington Post story on Facebook. The standard format of a post allows for a headline, photo and short description, with reactions displayed immediately below the content. Captured April 4, 2016.

What does all this mean for news organizations today? It means that in order to engage in the types of conversations that occur at scale on social platforms, news organizations must take into account not just new modes of communication, but also the multi-faceted nature of the relationships between people who interact with each other as part of a multi-logical conversation. They must enter into the realm of affect, and speak *with* audiences rather than *to* them.

In the next section, we examine another mode of multi-logical conversation: the relationship-driven community of interest.

b. The relationship-driven community of interest

In addition to the online community of affect, the internet offers another compelling conversational mode: the relationship-driven community of interest. In defining and exploring the way these communities function, I draw on Carey again, and what he defines as a "ritual view" of communication:

> In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith.'…A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (1989, p. 18).

Among members of an interest-based online community, sharing information and expertise takes on a ritual form. A ritual view of communication is marked not just by the existence of ritual but by a particular mode of discourse, one that privileges sharing as the primary way of imparting or acquiring information. Sharing is an interpersonal act, and unlike transmission (which occurs between a news producer and a vague public) it also privileges a pre-existing interpersonal relationship between the sharer and sharee. In this sense, Carey's notion of "ritual" communication works with Thompson's notion of dialogical discourse, in which "producers are also recipients of messages addressed to them by the addressees of their own remarks" (Thompson, p. 83).

Online interest-based collaborative discussion sites like Slashdot, reddit and MetaFilter offer an interesting manifestation of ritual and dialogical conversation together. In some of these comment-oriented communities, sharing is not incompatible with being informed – rather, it is a method by which information and knowledge are built collaboratively, and where relationships among members are as important to communication as the spread of the information itself.

Moderation reflects these priorities, and is predicated both on pre-existing relationships with the community as well as shared interests.

One moderator at the community site MetaFilter explains the importance of interpersonal relationships in the formation of early online communities:

> I sound like a grandma but back in the day bloggers all knew each other. If you had a blog you probably knew or knew of the other 500 people who had a blog. And so as a result when you got online if you were interacting with blog content you recognized a lot of the faces (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015).

The goal of communication, for her, was not just to transmit information but also to create an online space where people who already knew each other could gather and share opinions and information on topics of mutual interest. This type of gathering creates an ongoing conversational space, one where people come to check in with people whom they know as much as to learn. At the same time, shared interests are also paramount, and one of the characteristics upon which the community's relationships with each other are predicated. This moderator says one of her primary motivations for joining MetaFilter was that it allowed her to meet other people who were "interested in the same nerdy, geeky stuff." For her, her online community offered a way of preserving and sharing values, and of nurturing interpersonal relationships around these topics.

Shared interests, along with relationship-building, inspired Rob Malda to start the early online aggregator-comment community *Slashdot.* As he explained to me:

> I was building [Slashdot] for the people I hung out with, for me, the first users were people who hung around in my IRC chatrooms, and were Linux developers, they were

> open source hacker types, I use hacker in the good sense, not the bad sense. We would talk about science fiction, etc, what we were chatting about in IRC (Malda, 2015).

The long-term nature of the connections that members formed in these communities, the focus on context-based relationships as well as interests, and the ability to discuss an evolving number of topics, differentiate these communities from a community of interest that forms around a single topic and later disbands. Unlike newspapers, which were built specifically for the education of people whom editors had often never met, these social sites were built for the sharing of views among people who often knew each other or had something specific in common with each other. Because of this shared interest, interaction became key to spreading information on these sites.

While early newspapers were intended to spread a particular set of ideals – the ideals of participatory democracy – to a chosen subset of the population, these online communities focus less on evangelism and more on preservation of ideals among people who already share an ideology. In this sense, interest-based online communities are formed more around a definition of a "community", where different members take turns playing the role of "audience."

This common shared set of interests helped these communities to scale past the point of their founders' in-person social networks, while still maintaining a shared conversational atmosphere. When asked what it was that people were coming for, once *Slashdot* grew to several thousand users per day, Malda offered a suggestion built around much of the same language that Carey puts forward in his ritual explanation of communication: "what you are building is a meaningful corpus of information, you're building a discussion and sharing an idea." What Malda puts forward is a powerful hypothesis for journalists, as well, because it suggests that the informative process of journalism and the relationship-driven collaboration of ritual community co-exist.

Carey's idea of "possession of a common faith" extends to the way hiring decisions are made at ritual-based communication sites. At news organizations, several of the community and audience engagement editors I spoke with had studied journalism. Many had entered the field before comment moderation became widespread, and had not anticipated taking on audience engagement roles. This background makes sense from a newsroom's perspective, but it also means that journalists do not necessarily have the same set of expectations that commenters do within comment sections. In online communities of interest, being chosen as a moderator comes about as a result of belonging to the community and being part of it. Another moderator at MetaFilter, who has helped recruit and train other moderators, talked about the selection process:

> We exclusively hire from within the user base, we can't get someone up to speed fast enough (Moderator C. , MetaFilter, 2016).

Part of the rituals of the community are the ways in which people take on moderator roles, and knowing these rituals is part of what moderators are expected to do. The idea of hiring as a ritual rooted in shared interests becomes more clear when another moderator explains why a new hire might struggle with the moderator role: "He doesn't know these users, this isn't his community, this isn't where he would hang out to socialize" (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015). A pre-existing relationship with the site's community is just as important as any other set of hard skills, because that relationship suggests an awareness of the community's rituals of sharing and exchange.

In general, most legacy news organizations are not hiring moderators who would choose to hangout and socialize in comment sections. This is because the purpose of the news organization comment section – at least at many of the organizations I spoke to – is fundamentally different: comment sections on news websites, historically, provide value around news article content. The article still serves as the main attraction, while the bonds between commenters are less frequently emphasized. Practices like pre-moderation make it even harder for commenters to engage with and form relationships with each other, by making them wait until their comments are reviewed and published by an external authority. In terms of values and shared faith, moderators at news organizations often align with editorial staff more than with commenters. (Again, these practices are in flux.) The editorial staff at a publication are less likely to have a "shared faith" than they are to co-exist in the professionalized space of journalism, which contains very specific ethics and processes that commenters do not necessarily know and have not necessarily studied.

This is not to suggest that the moderators and community members at a site like *MetaFilter* are homogeneous in their values. When I spoke to people from the *Slashdot,* reddit and *MetaFilter* communities, I formed the impression that moderators and commenters participate together in a constantly moving conversational loop, one in which authority shifts depending on the topic under discussion. At *MetaFilter,* moderators have the option to participate in discussions in either an official moderator role or under their pre-existing usernames, emphasizing the communal elements of shared knowledge-building. Although hierarchy exists, and moderators exert tremendous control over the communities they work within, they are still answerable to users, and users can step into the role of admins or moderators. Interestingly, the idea that moderators come from within the community seemed to hold across both paid and unpaid forms of moderation. Unlike at news organizations, moderation work at sites like *Slashdot* and reddit is often unpaid (MetaFilter pays moderators as a matter of policy). On sites like *Slashdot,* the responsibility for moderation shifts among a set of community members.

Those who aren't chosen to moderate can still have the ability to rate moderators' decisions as fair or unfair. This complex system of feedback creates multiple layers of responsibility, rather than just a one-way flow. Users, collectively, are responsible for setting and enforcing the site's priorities.

If transmission-modeled communication relies upon a one-way flow of information, then ritual-modeled communication relies upon virtual co-presence, or the impression that many people are participating, talking and listening all at once. As opposed to the style of the journalistic page (whether in print or online) which favors a single story, online conversations in collaborative spaces are heavily annotated, threaded or otherwise marked to indicate the presence of multiple authors and narratives. These subtle design cues give the sense of a page or story being populated, and of a conversation occurring. One moderator described the early days of their site to me: "people would post to the mainpage. Anyone could post which is what made it really different from a newspaper" (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015). Other readers could then respond. Thompson refers to these types of conversations as "dialogical," because they involve "a two-way flow of information" (p. 83). Discussions on popular subreddits or in comment threads could also be referred to as multi-logical, as the medium allows multiple layers of producers and recipients to interact with and respond to each other on the same discussion page. The conversational flow is not just two-way, but multi-way, as a commenter responds to the original post as well as to the commenters who came before him. The term multi-logical also addresses the ways that these roles can shift among users within the same community or site, as users take on the role of listener or speaker at different moments in an online conversation. The term multi-logical also acknowledges the fact that there are many modes of online participation, including things like pressing an "upvote" or a "downvote" button, instead of leaving a comment. The presence of lurkers – or audience members who do not necessarily leave comments of their own – lend these discursive online spaces an element of theatre. Comments are not just for an editor or an audience but also for a shifting audience, further nuancing clean definitions of who constitutes a "producer" or a "consumer" in these online spaces.

3. Operationalizing engagement

In the previous sections, I examined different modes of communication, with a focus on a spectrum of conversational behaviors that ranged from monological transmission to multi-logical discussion. The choice of spaces to examine was not random. Each of the spaces and traditions I mentioned is important in the debate over how news organizations relate to and communicate with their audiences moving forward. In the final section of this chapter, I return to my interview results to provide a series of examples of how a few news organizations are operationalizing engagement, and how they are attempting to access these different modes of conversations and types of stakeholders.

a. Engagement as a commercial framework

Before I can move onto communication, I must begin by talking about how the term "engagement" entered newsrooms, and that is largely as a commercial metric. In a book on the evolution of media audiences, journalism and media studies scholar Philip M. Napoli refers to the term "engagement" as something that remains "persistently ambiguous", despite the many emerging metrics that aim to measure audience engagement with media artifacts (2011, p. 90). Napoli points out that the concept of engagement goes back to "an effort [by print media] to convince advertisers of the unique value of their readers" (2011, p. 95). That focus on advertising persists. Engagement has moved into a more central role in today's news organizations partly because of new technology that has made it possible to quantify – and therefore, explain to potential advertisers – exactly how audiences are reacting to a particular piece of media content. Napoli explains:

> The concept of engagement has moved from the periphery to the center of how media organizations and advertisers are thinking about audiences, thanks in part to technology's undermining of the exposure model documented in chapter 2, but also to its facilitation of new audience information systems (2011, p. 95).

The new "audience information systems" that Napoli is referring to include systems that measure readers' responses to media content in granular detail, tracking how long viewers look at particular content, whether or not they share it, how they access it, and other information. An engagement team's success can be measured against these metrics. One journalist told me about a job she held, where the goal was to garner as many measures of "engagement" as possible: "one of the metrics that our stories were measured on across the [news] organization was how many responses did you get" (Moderator C. , 2015). This drive towards engagement also reflects the realities of the news business, where many organizations struggle to find ways to monetize online audiences. A 2015 Pew report describes the situation:

> For the past five years, newspaper ad revenue has maintained a consistent trajectory: Print ads have produced less revenue (down 5%), while digital ads have produced more revenue (up 3%) – but not enough to make up for the fall in print revenue (Barthel, 2015).

The internet and social media offer easily recognizable advertising metrics – discrete moments of audience interaction like "Retweets" and "Likes." As a result, even senior editors sometimes measure a story's success partly by the "likes" it gets on Facebook, as Kara Swisher, executive editor of technology news site Re/code, demonstrated when she told *Nieman Lab* about one of their successful articles: "our Elizabeth Warren interview got a million views and likes on Facebook" (Ellis J. , 2015).

But achieving these metrics is not easy. On a practical level, engagement means operationalizing "a multidimensional concept, comprised of elements such as attention, dialogue, interaction, emotions and activation" – the dimensions along with people react to content once they are exposed to it (Napoli, 2014, pp. 18-19).

The idea of "engagement" also reflects the "the increasingly central role that audience tastes, preferences, feedback – and even content production – play in the creation of news" (Napoli, 2014, p. 22). But where are people engaging, and what are some of the models that come to bear on news practice? This is where ideas of monological and multi-logical conversation come into play.

b. *Within comments*

When news organizations first went online, the comment box may have seemed like sufficient avenue for audience participation. (Although the comments section, as a design choice, is not something that news organizations invented.) At the time, opening even a few articles for comments represented a dramatic shift from previous tradition. The editors responsible for moderating early comments sections bore an enormous responsibility: not only were they monitoring comments, but they were negotiating the transition from monological to dialogical modes of conversation. This meant navigating differing sets of priorities, often with a focus on the newsroom's preferences. One moderator explains how his early responsibilities included checking online comments for "culture" and "spelling":

> Back then…it was more like OK we have 2 stories open for comments…we're going to watch them like a hawk and read through every entry and carefully consider if this can be published (Editor1, 2015).

The editorial judgment exercised over comments is holdover of the day when conversations were monological and news organizations defined themselves by the judgment they exercised over what was fit to appear in print. As news organizations move into dialogical spaces, though, they must reconsider and even relinquish this control. One editor describes the uncertainty as well as the individual autonomy that she exercises as part of this ongoing process of negotiation:

> The way that I moderate comments is very different from how other people do it. It becomes an idiosyncratic judgment call and it's something that I'm figuring out on the fly (Moderator2, 2015).

The term "on the fly" might suggest a casual attitude towards moderation, but in fact, the reverse is true: because her role was so new and online traditions are not widely understood, this editor often finds herself making important decisions independently, based upon her own expectations of what a dialogical news space should look like. She describes her response to the common practice of closing a comments thread after a certain time period – 24 hours to a week – has passed:

> I have never closed a [comments] section, because I like, the idea that this can be a parallel conversation with commenters, and it actually becomes a site of discussion (Moderator2, 2015).

In this quote, we see a new (at least, new for a newspaper) type of relationship emerge: the ongoing discussion. This new type of conversation doesn't just challenge workflow, it challenges the ways that news organizations historically focused on time-bound events. By creating an ongoing open conversation, a news organization puts itself in contention with other comment based sites like social media, where dialogical conversations are the norm.

Sometimes, the notion of participatory engagement involves directly challenging the hierarchies of traditional news production, and inviting the audience into spaces that have been traditionally reserved for journalists. When news organizations are willing to bring in their audience as experts, they dip into the territory occupied by online communities of interest:

> As much as journalists like to think we're experts, we're not, there's often someone who knows more than you. If you want to be digital you need to be not just on the internet but part of it, looking out for other sources but aggregating as well, representing that this is something that audiences are talking about. For me as well it was about the fact that audiences increasingly expected to be able to participate. The behavior that people had started to expect [was to] not just consume, but be able to question and comment, share with a friend (Editor A. , 2015).

The notion of being *part* of the internet is characterized, in this editor's view, by behaviors like sharing and participating, behaviors that originated in online spaces outside of journalism. The term "part of" suggests the internet comprises not just a space or a series of websites but something broader – a network of relationships or series of conversations that interact with each other in multi-logical fashion. It also means exchanging roles with the audience, and allowing their expertise to shine, another characteristic of multi-logical conversation. This sort of exchange of roles is described as a direct response to audience's expectations.

A greater awareness of users' expectations – as manifested in what audiences click on, what they share, and what comments they leave – has become a driving force within journalism. A community editor at the *New York Times* describes how their approach to comments has evolved due to changing reader expectations:

> It's possible that like ten years ago if you were commenting on the Times and you were waiting for many hours for your comment to be published, that was more like sure, it's like a Letter to the Editor. But now things are expected a little bit more intimately so you have to react fast (Editor C. , 2015).

Speed is a proxy for intimacy, and intimacy is one of the affective forms of multi-logical discussion. Speed becomes a reflection of the closeness of a relationship, rather than the efficiency of a particular transmission, further suggesting the shift to a multi-logical mode. This quote perfectly encapsulates the history of engagement, as well as the forces operating towards its future. The tradition of the Letter to the Editor is no longer satisfactory, but this particular editor at a legacy news organization must reconcile both his awareness of that history and the emerging affordances of the internet. This delicate balancing act – between news tradition and audience expectations – animates many of the decisions made around how comments are structured. As audiences have become more aware of alternatives, the organization has changed its practices in direct response to behaviors elsewhere on the internet. This quote demonstrates more than just a shift in methodology, it represents a massive shift in outlook, a movement from insularity towards looking out. If earlier debates about news organizations' comments were framed around what journalists and news organizations perceived as valuable, these emerging conversations are informed by concerns over what audiences want and what audiences have in common with each other. The power dynamic has shifted from a few news organizations to the wider crowd, and that shift raises a fundamental question in terms of what newspapers offer their audiences. Suddenly, communication is less about access to information, but about access to relationships.

If early comment moderation focused on news organizations' internal expectations of quality and professionalism, in line with the belief that news organizations offered authoritative information, then the current multi-logical mentality has shifted towards questions of shared experiences for consumers. Even the term "participate" – which appears repeatedly in these conversations – suggests a shift towards a shared project, a common set of goals, and a multi-logical exchange in which people want to be present and seen.

Some of these priorities – much like the online comments section – come from outside the news organization, suggesting the further changes in the dynamic of information exchange.

c. *Beyond the comments box*

One of the side effects of the increasing access to alternative avenues for engagement, as well as more granular metrics for measuring participation, has been a move away from the on-site comments section. Several news organizations have decided to suspend or shut down their on-site comments. Technology news site Re/code made the decision in November 2014, and in explaining the decision, editors Walt Mossberg and Kara Swisher wrote:

> We have decided to remove the commenting function from the site. We thought about this decision long and hard, since we do value reader opinion. But we concluded that, as social media has continued its robust growth, the bulk of discussion of our stories is increasingly taking place there, making onsite comments less and less used and less and less useful (Mossberg & Swisher, 2014).

Mossberg and Swisher's statement traces the end of comments to the rise of social media, and the increasing adoption of those platforms by readers as sites of discussion. Social media, notably, has been deeply discursive and multi-logical from the start. If the earlier section documented the appearance of multi-logical priorities in comments sections, this section documents the move onto explicitly multi-logical external platforms, and this move is not limited to digital-only publications. A few weeks before Mossberg and Swisher's statement, business newswire Reuters chose to discontinue reader comments on stories, and explained the decision in a note that read, "Much of the well-informed and articulate discussion around news, as well as criticism or praise for stories, has moved to social media and online forums" (Colarusso, 2014). The decision by news organizations to discontinue comments might partly stem from the risks and challenges of moderating comments sections. The task is still gruelingly human, emotionally demanding, and requires significant financial commitment – the *New York Times* is often cited as an outlier because of the number of staffers it has devoted to the task. Other news organizations negotiate the need for resources by contracting part of the work to vendors, but this is still an expensive process.

For those who work in engagement, however, the task is far from over just because the news organization has shifted away from comments. Mossberg and Swisher mention that Re/code's new policy will be to feature email and Twitter handles for writers more prominently on stories, thus distributing the responsibilities of engagement across the rest of the news staff. The Reuters note includes links to the organization's social media. The move away from commenting is significant because it allows news organizations to remove the unpleasantness and the risk of discussion from their owned pages, but it also means that they must negotiate with platforms in order to determine the outlines of reader discussion. As mentioned above in the section above on Facebook, the ways in which platforms display stories are no more innately adapted for journalistic purposes than the comment box was, and the shift from one to the other follows readers but does not necessarily establish new paradigms specific to the journalism industry. And because the discussions on this platforms are layered and reactive in such new ways, they also offer more avenues for potential abuse and less potential for journalistic control.

Engagement teams are caught in this shift of power away from news organizations and towards the distributors and sites of online discussion. One editor describes how her news organization decided to establish a community editor post after seeing the ways that participants interacted in non-news forums. Much of the early inspiration for structured interaction came from observing non-news spaces, especially those that permitted more multi-logical participation:

> The emergence of forums, talk boards, people launching their own website, blogs, and places to comment not just on news but on personal points of interest. People wanting to tap their own space, and that leading into and emerging more forcefully when you come to social networks, very much seeing that [our] journalism is still shared in those spaces. I think just all those kinds of things stitched together user behavior in other sectors and industries, whether it's TripAdvisor, Amazon, eBay, product reviews, people leaving that feedback and having that desire to share and interact with what they were doing or reading (Editor A. , 2015).

At the same time that the focus has shifted towards users' experiences, news organizations are increasingly envisioning news as an entity that exists on mobile devices and on services like Facebook. The Facebook algorithm, the organizer of the social networking program's popular NewsFeed feature, is informed – albeit invisibly – by users' individual preferences. This shift in mentality reflects the growing awareness of news organizations that online platforms thrive by allowing users to communicate with each other rapidly and set their own agenda. As demonstration in the discussion above around speed of moderation, it is not just speed that matters, but also, what speed indicates about the moderation process and the hierarchies that exist within it. News organizations cannot control social media. When they shut down a comment section, they shut down that discussion on their pages alone. But because anyone can post a link to a social media account and initiate a discussion, news organizations have no choice over whether or not discussion take place in these spaces. And because so many players can see and interact with material on these sites, it can be very difficult to stop or control a message once it has begun to spread. So multi-logical spaces have their risks: the messages that appear on them can be incredibly difficult to control. This conflict illustrates the difference between a transmissions-modeled flow of communication and a ritual one: when sharing is invoked, transmission cannot be controlled.

Because the contours of engagement are shifting so rapidly, many engagement editors exist in blended roles, where their daily workflow combines elements of social media, comment moderation, research and writing, depending on what the organization needs. A task like research or writing might speak to a monological tradition, while social media requires delving into the multi-logical. One comment moderator who works for a legacy news organization blog describes her daily workflow:

> My main responsibilities are comment moderation, monitoring the inbox and mail. Then whenever [the blog has] a post, I produce [the] post and set that in motion. And then…I will do a bit more research [for print columns]. So this is my primary concern (Moderator2, 2015).

At the same time that news organizations move away from the comment box, they also place pressure on their teams to learn new skills and adapt to new media, often with their own differing modes of conversation and their own risks. But a move away from comments does not mean a move away from the risks of engagement. These platforms, because they were created by non-journalists, can often entail greater learning and negotiation for members of these teams as they try to map journalistic ideals and objectives to multi-logical expectations and informational flows.

d. Inviting the audience onto the media site

When it comes to embracing the wider potentiality of online community, BuzzFeed is one of the most prominent examples of new approaches to journalism. Started in 2006, BuzzFeed initially focused on content that could have wide social distribution, especially stories and lists that proved popular on social media. Some of this content was created by staff writers, but some was created by community members, who produced content for free. Starting in 2011, the company hired political journalist Ben Smith as its editor-in-chief. Smith's arrival saw the hiring of journalists from more traditional news backgrounds, with the goal of providing more coverage of topics like politics and culture. At the same time, BuzzFeed's Community team has maintained a focus on socially-driven storytelling.

Of the Community editors and moderators whom I interviewed at BuzzFeed, none came from a journalism background, and most said they were unlikely to seek journalism jobs in the future. At the same time, they handled the types of jobs that were done by self-identified journalists at other news organizations: moderating comments, interacting with readers on social media, and, in the case of BuzzFeed, encouraging community members to submit original material through the site. This user-generated content forms a good chunk of the site's material. If a member of the Community teams likes one of these audience-created posts, it might get a link from BuzzFeed's homepage and a corresponding burst in traffic.

The content created by staff writers and Community members often looks quite similar on the site, with only a small byline tag to indicate the difference, further eroding a hierarchy or difference in practice between staff and non-staff writers and borrowing an affordance from other multi-logical spaces like the online relationship-based community of interest. I spoke with a full-time staffer on the Community team who had begun her career as an unpaid Community contributor, after she noticed that anyone could write a post. She mentioned that she had been struck by the similarity in staff and non-staff bylines: "[it's] cool there is this uniformity to it" (Editor3, 2015). The uniformity sends a signal to potential contributors, as well as to commenters and readers.

When describing the types of community that the site serves, the editors also outlined different ways in which community members engage with content and with each other, privileging the role that relationships play:

> If you think about Facebook, there are the people who use FB to never post and they just go down the timeline and see what their friend Olivia from high school is up to but they never do anything. Then there's the people who jump into conversations all the time on other people's posts, and then there are broadcasters who put up statuses. That's how community works too. There's the people who like to get into it in the comments section whether in a good or bad way, that don't just necessarily post, and then there's the people who just create accounts and just watch. They look at the posts, they look at the comments and how different people engage on the site (Member, 2015).

This was one of the few conversations I had – at that time – that focused on the different roles played by members of the same community. The dialogical definition of communication favors those who speak, but the multi-logical view allows for those who only observe. The multi-logical mediated mode of conversation allows for participants whose role as a producer, consumer or observer may shift within the same conversation. The fact that the community includes members who merely observe how other members react – further rarefying the notion of shared interest – demonstrates the extent to which this particular editor was interested in the relationships among his community members as motivators of participation.

But at the same time, BuzzFeed does not just share the bottom or the side of the page with audience members – it shares the story space as well. The ways in which readers' and producers' roles are fluid on the site and among the staff suggests that the attitude of social media, where journalists and readers interact as both producers and creators of comments, extends throughout the site. As news organizations continue to look to blogs, social media and online forums (among others) as models and sites of reader behavior, more of them might begin inviting audience members into the story space on their own sites. This evolving workflow will fall to engagement teams to negotiate and guide.

As journalism continues to evolve, the ways in which audiences and journalists communicate with each other will continue to be complicated by the evolution of new and complex types of interaction (enabled by evolving interfaces), as well as by the further erosion of distinct roles like recipient and producer. These transitions have already begun, and engagement teams at news organizations are in the midst of deciding what the future of participation on their sites will look like. In some cases, this future includes comments, sometimes it does not. In cases where it does not include comments, however, it still includes migration to other platforms. In their editorial note explaining their decision to shut down on-site comments, the team at Reuters wrote "Those communities [social media] offer vibrant conversation and, importantly, are self-policed by participants to keep on the fringes those who would abuse the privilege of commenting" (Colarusso, 2014). But the perception that social media are wholly or perfectly self-policing is mistaken. In the next chapter, I turn to an ongoing and expanding problem: what happens when engagement turns toxic, and what the people doing engagement work within news organizations do when they find themselves on the receiving end of abuse.

CHAPTER THREE: WHEN GOOD THREADS GO BAD

In the previous section, I looked briefly at the ways in which engagement is unfolding at news organizations, with a focus on how audience engagement teams are guiding a transition from monological to multi-logical conversational modes. I spent a brief time looking at some of the general outlines of how news organizations and their engagement teams are moving towards users, with a focus on user experience and a drive for greater engagement on social platforms where audiences already conduct discussions. But one of the challenges of multi-logical spaces is that they are more reactive, more widely participatory, and in some cases, affectively driven. In this section, I examine one of the most troubling elements of the evolving multi-logical online landscape, but through the eyes of moderators and engagement editors: online abuse. One of the key findings of this section is that although engagement teams may interact with abusive comments and material the most, the existence and awareness of online abuse and targeted harassment campaigns affects journalists at every level of today's news organization, and that in this era of increased engagement, online abuse requires a comprehensive response by institutions. I suggest that the work of comments moderation – and engagement more broadly – contains several of the characteristics of emotional labor, as framed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her landmark 1979 study of the work of flight attendants. By understanding the work that happens in news organizations' engagement teams through the lens of emotional labor, organizations will be able to implement better policies for supporting and motivating employees in these emerging spaces.

For news organizations, online abuse has become one of the most persistently-cited problems of on-site comments sections, and one of the most oft-mentioned reasons for shutting these sections down. In the introduction to this paper, I cited Nilay Patel, editor of *The Verge*, who mentioned the "aggressive and negative" tone of comments as one of the reasons that the organization decided to suspend comments. In explaining the decision to permanently shut down their on-site comments in favor of social media, *Reuters* executive editor Dan Colarusso said social platforms "are self-policed by participants to keep on the fringes those who would abuse the privilege of commenting" (Colarusso, 2014). (These platforms are not actually self-policed, as I will explain later.) The perceived problem of abuse cuts across publications, whether legacy or digital.

The problem of abuse cuts across subject areas, but there is an emerging consensus that certain topics attract more abuse than others, and the ways in which news organizations respond to these selective problems has big implications for national debate and open discussion. One community editor at a legacy news organization told me that stories featuring race, immigration, and crime often attracted the most "vitriol and hate" and that the organization often shut down comments on these stories before publication (Editor C. , 2015). The practice of shutting down comments selectively on stories – especially related to race, immigration or crime – is not new, nor is it restricted to just a few publications. As far back as 2009, an editor at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis told research outlet Poynter that the site did not allow comment on stories related to "crime, Muslims, fatalities/suicides, gays, distressed local companies, racially sensitive issues, local homes and C.J. (a local entertainment columnist)" (Thornton, 2009).

Like "engagement", online abuse has no single definition. There are gradations and variations within it. In a survey of journalists from 36 news organizations, researcher Carolyn Nielsen found that bigotry was the most common reason that journalists reported wanting to remove a comment, followed by personal attacks (2012, p. 95). In general, journalists perceived racism as a significant problem in online comment sections, with Nielsen finding that "ten percent of the 650 narrative responses to the survey cited racism in online comments as an extreme problem" (p. 98).

Personal attacks – against journalists or the people who appear in stories – is another area of common concern. In their 2015 study, Graham and Wright defined a "degrading comment" as one that aimed to "lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank via ad hominem attacks" (2015, p. 327). But they also found that degrading material appeared in only 12 per cent of the comments they studied. Although their study was restricted to comments posted on two articles on the *Guardian*'s website, taken together with Nielsen's finding that journalists perceive bigotry to be a major problem in comment sections, these results do suggest that negative comments might have an outsize impact on debate relative to the frequency with which they appear. It also suggests how disruptive and damaging these types of comments are to those who work at news organizations. Among readers, the cliché "don't read the comments" has become a catchphrase as well as a coping strategy. But what about those who can't afford to not read the comments, because reading the comments is part of their job?

1. Abusive comments and traditional journalistic practice

The fear of abusive comments has actually changed journalistic practice, in ways that have been documented by researchers. In a study by Jaime Loke, "eleven journalists reported having actually lost sources because individuals refused to be quoted in the paper to avoid being, as one journalist said, 'vilified in the comments'" (2012, p. 239). Nielsen also found that the potential for unflattering comments factored into how stories are written, in particular, that "journalists have included extra information in order to proactively discourage certain types of comments" (p. 97). Nielsen cites an example of a journalist who has changed the way she writes about certain subjects in order to stave off potential racist comments.

These generally good-faith attempts to stave off potentially abusive comments might not have a huge impact. In a study of racist discourse in online comments, Summer Harlow found that "reader comments included racial terms, even when the article did not" and that many of these racial terms included "negative, reiterating stereotypes" (2015, p. 21).

In reviewing the literature, I found evidence that constant exposure to negative comments – especially racist or degrading comments – can change how journalists view themselves and the wider society within which they operate. Nielsen cites one journalist who expressed the impact of racist commentary on his self-perception:

> Unfortunately, our newspaper has provided a platform for the worst kind of hate and rhetoric. As a Hispanic, I find it insulting and demeaning toward myself, my family, my parents, my children and my friends. I weep for what was once a proud newspaper, and one day, this platform we have provided will explode into real violence (p. 98).

For the journalist quoted above, exposure to racist comments affected how he viewed himself, his family and his safety in society. Clearly, online abuse is an emerging and serious problem for journalists. It impacts how stories are conceived, how they are written, and how they are presented to audiences. In the next section I examine how the reality or expectation of abuse manifests for those in emerging journalistic roles like audience engagement, and explore the mechanisms that some journalists say they have developed for coping with the problem.

2. Online abuse and emerging journalistic practice

News stories have always inflamed passions, and journalists have always had to consider the emotional impact of their work on themselves, sources and readers. The differences now are twofold: the multiplicity of social platforms and sites of online exchange mean that journalists are often exposed to more feedback, both positive and negative, than in the past, and this feedback can start arriving within seconds of a story's publication. It can be vociferous, and because of its multifaceted means of arrival (hundreds of commenters responding at once to an article, for example) it can be very difficult to respond to, shut down, or erase. And two: the rise of special "audience engagement" and "community" teams within news organizations means that there are entire groups of people within news teams whose sole function is to manage relationships with, and the reactions of, audiences.

The section above detailed how journalists – those who write and edit stories, mainly – confront abuse in comment sections. But within that broader context, I also wanted to specifically understand how members of these emerging teams experience abuse, and how it impacts their perceptions of themselves, their work, and their status within the journalism industry.

a. *Self-perception and emotional distancing*

Among moderators that I spoke to, I found that the superficial nomenclature of online metrics such as "likes" can obscure the deep and ongoing emotional work that audience engagement teams do. The more fully that an organization embraces participation, the more likely that there are people on its payroll who must deal with audience members' feelings, including frustration and anger.

One of the critiques of comment sections is that journalists rarely participate in them, possibly leading some observers to conclude that journalists do not care what happens there (Graham & Wright, 2015, p. 324)[4]. Although some journalists may find comment sections

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4 In their 2015 study, Graham and Wright demonstrated that even in two civil comment threads on the *Guardian* newspaper's website, journalists rarely participated. The suggestion that journalists do not care about what happens in the comment sections is best encapsulated by this Tweet from the February 2016 #beyondcomments conference, an event around news comments that took place at the MIT Media Lab. Robin (@caulkthewagon) said: "I'm so glad to be learning that media orgs *care* about what goes on in their comments. I honestly didn't realize this." But Robin's viewpoint is not unique. Anil Dash, entrepreneur, wrote, "lots of publishers think *any*

unnecessary and audience engagement offensive, many do engage. Both Loke and Nielsen found that journalists were in favor of readers' right to comment, but that they felt unprepared to deal with the discourses that then emerged in those comments. For journalists who identify with minority groups – women, ethnic minorities – the amount of abuse received can be especially high, and the impact can spill over into non-professional areas of life. That is because these groups are more likely to be in the receiving end of harassment and abuse.

These risks can are heightened for those who daily work requires that they engage in comment sections. I present the case of one moderator who moderated comments at a large legacy news organization. During our discussion, she began to talk about how she kept seeing negative comments on articles about women:

> I started to notice that if I was banning or deleting comments that were vulgar or sexist, that they were usually on an article about a woman. We had one article about [a female] scientist. I think the article had to do with her retirement – we ran it with a picture of her. She's an older lady, probably in her 50s, she looks smart as a whip, and all the comments were about – it was almost universally from men – and they were all about how incredibly "unfuckable" she was (Moderator C. , 2015).

This particular moderator – a woman – went on to say that "When I think about that time it was just painful" (Moderator C. , 2015). The constant frustration over abuse led to a sense of powerlessness, she said, especially because tools like banning abusive users by IP address turned out not to be permanent. In order to deal with the negative emotions conjured up by sexist comments and continue to do her job, she began to distance herself from the work as a coping mechanism. She said, "On some levels I think we actually consciously disengaged" (Moderator C. , 2015).

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conversation is good if it boosts traffic stats."

Based on my conversation with her, I formed the impression that the organization neither encouraged this disengagement nor considered the emotional toll of moderation work. Comment policies and guidelines focused on defining "bad words" that audiences should refrain from, but there were no internal guidelines that dealt with moderators' feelings or frustrations. This moderator said,

> It would have been really effective and felt nice – from a straight up feelings perspective – if the organization had been like "this is yours, you are fully within your rights to act as a human being" (Moderator C. , 2015).

This quotation reveals both the ways in which constant exposure to abuse can spill over into self-perception, as well as the ways in which it can interact in a toxic way with a lack of institutional support for the unique emotional toll of having to view harassing online material.

For this particular journalist, emotional distancing was also framed around a discourse of serving the audience. When I asked her about her motivations for continuing to moderate, she said "I didn't want people to come onto [the blog] and see the comments and see horribleness, I wanted it to be positive. Because I loved it" (Moderator C. , 2015). The moderator focused on other people's reactions to the blog, which represents an interesting moment of attempting to downplay her own emotions as less important than the needs of the wider community she served. In describing the ideal community on her blog as a "positive" space, she placed the work she performed as a moderator within the purview of the work that a host performs at a party: ensuring that guests see a positive I. By placing this entire exercise within the context of "love", she cast it in the same light as the work a person does for family or friends, within the context of social relationships.

This emotional eclipsing – focusing on the community's needs ahead of one's own – is not a side effect but often a requirement for deep, engaged moderation work. As is casting the work within the framework of other, interpersonal relationship-building. In order to gain insight into how moderation operates on an emotional scale, I spoke with a moderator who has worked extensively as a professional moderator for the comment-based discussion site MetaFilter. This person described the job's requirements, including the ways in which moderators have to manage their own emotions in order to be successful professionally:

> Even though we all participated as users, you have to be able to dispassionately relate to [a thread] in order to effectively moderate it. That was difficult for me because I have strong political leanings (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015).

She also described the accompanying emotional result, framing it not as a consequence but rather as an inevitable function of the moderation job:

> I would get burned out. That's a moderator's job – you attract the negative energy of the site so people aren't using it against other people (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015).

Engaged moderation – in which the moderator forms relationships with audience members – entails a significant amount of emotional commitment, even before factoring in the risk of abuse. The news moderator whom I spoke to eventually moved on not just from comment moderation but from the journalism industry. But perhaps most troublingly, her fraught experiences as a moderator had changed her perception of the way that news sites can engage the public in reasonable online debate:

> I would love to think that I could go onto a news site and actually have a conversation. There's a part of me that doesn't think that's possible (Moderator C., 2015).

For this particular moderator, a lack of institutional support and clarity, as well as the repeated frustration of engaging with sexist and offensive material, resulted in a phenomenon known as burn out. It also called upon emotional coping mechanisms, in particular, the need to "distance" herself from the work being performed and the feelings that it might have evoked in a social setting. Rather than assume a near-endless supply of moderators, news organizations might better consider what types of interactions lead to these experiences, and craft specific guidelines that focus on internal workflows to address emotional burnout and the effects of long-term exposure to commenters' potentially negative feelings. At organizations that have outsourced moderation work to vendors, the challenges of looking at abusive comment then fall upon the unseen faces of contractors. These people are often not acknowledged for the work they do, but their decisions have a big impact on how the community exists and the conversations it has. Other organizations have shut down comments, possibly because they do not want to ask their employees to deal with offensive material. That goal is laudable, but the process is insufficient. When organizations shut down comments and move onto social platforms, they do not necessarily remove the emotional commitments of moderation work, which I will explore later in this chapter.

Finally, the intersection between a moderator's professional work and their personal identity – particularly as a minority – can be a site of enhanced challenge. Empirical reviews of abuse in comment sections have found that attacks on minorities – especially Hispanics – are among the most prevalent forms of abuse (Harlow, 2015, p. 33). To the extent that news organizations shape policies around engagement teams, a reasonable policy might want to account for these statistical differences and provide additional resources for staffers who might need them.

b. Online abuse affects in-person relationships

I found that because moderation work involves relationship-building, particular challenges arise when audience relationships clash with how a moderator defines herself in relation to friends or colleagues. One moderator described a conflict that he faced when negative comments were posted on articles written by his friends:

> I think when I was moderating comments the hardest thing for me was when I got to know a writer and then I would see someone be like 'someone should tell that fatty to shut the hell up' [in the comments on that writer's article]. I'd be like 'yo she's a great person. How dare you say that about my friend?' (Manager1, 2015).

In this case, the negative atmosphere in a comments section caused friction over how to relate to and show respect for his co-workers, a situation in which he had no clear guidelines about whose feelings he should consider, and how. His decision to do moderation work led him into a situation of emotional conflict, but as he pointed out, it would have been an even greater risk to the author herself. In discussions over whether journalists should be asked or required to moderate comments on their own articles, examples like these are often raised as proof that they should not. At the same time, moderating comments can call up conflicts between co-workers and friends, and between the obligation to foster participation and the obligation to respect personal loyalties. When moderators build long-term relationships with commenters, as several told me that they did over the course of months or years, the relationships that come to exist within online spaces can significantly nuance or change offline relationships. Most organizations do not have clear guidelines about how these situations should be handled.

As news organizations move away from anonymous commenting, they might also encounter more situations where the personal and the professional merge, or where offline and online identities conflict. A comment moderator at the community MetaFilter mentioned one such case in her life to me:

> I've had to ban my friends occasionally, real life neighbor friends because they were acting up and they wouldn't stop. And I had to be like "sorry this is super awkward but you gotta have the night off because you're not being cool" (Moderator, MetaFilter, 2015).

Journalism may actually be in a uniquely excellent position to address these challenges. Traditional journalists build relationships with sources throughout the course of writing stories, and the extent of closeness in these relationships as well as the risk of exposure to sources who become friends can cause journalists a significant amount of tension. Although many organizations do not permit journalists to write stories about topics where their personal relationships might cause a conflict of interest, I have seen no attempt to write such rules for those who work in audience engagement. In fact, audience engagement offers a unique site of challenge because building those types of relationships – authentic and focused ones – is the main goal of the work. How do organizations resolve these conflicts? What happens when being "part of the internet" involves personal or professional loyalties that conflict with an organization's values and goals? As engagement becomes more in-depth and expands its reach across journalistic workflows, these questions will become more important.

c. *Abuse affects professional standing*

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, abuse is a problem that cuts across types of publication. The most serious problems seem to occur when a drive for greater engagement coincides with a lack of institutional support or care for those who do moderation work. One of the most well-known disasters in engagement occurred at the feminist news blog *Jezebel,* when parent company *Gawker* created an easy-to-use commenting platform called Kinja that some users used to post violent pornography in *Jezebel's* comments section, which *Jezebel* journalists were required to moderate. Although *Jezebel* was not a news organization, it is a well-known blog that features aggregated and original stories, with a focus on engagement and reader participation. A story on *Business Insider* describes how Kinja arose out of a desire to create easy-to-use tools for participation:

> The problem lies with Kinja, Gawker's publishing platform that's designed to make it very easy for people to comment on stories and set up their own blogs within the Gawker landscape. The flexibility of Kinja has allowed for anonymous posters to submit tips and comments that can sometimes result into high-traffic stories. Limiting Kinja by banning Ips, blocking commenters, and discriminating against content could, in turn, limit Gawker's potential (Moss, 2014).

The situation at *Gawker* stalled, until finally, in August 2014, the editors at *Jezebel* wrote an open letter to their management in which they criticized executives for not taking swifter action against the pornography problem. Their letter calls explicit attention to the work involved in moderating a vibrant comments section:

> This practice is profoundly upsetting…especially to the staff, who are the only ones capable of removing the comments and are thus, by default, now required to view and interact with violent pornography and gore as part of our jobs… This has been going on for months, and it's impacting our ability to do our jobs. In refusing to address the problem, Gawker's leadership is prioritizing theoretical anonymous tipsters over a very real and immediate threat to the mental health of Jezebel's staff and readers (Jezebel staff, 2014).

Jezebel, as a feminist-leaning site run by many self-described journalists, captures one of the key problems that arises when journalists set up and operate communities of their own interests online, and how those challenges escalate when organizations either do not understand or deliberately do not provide support for the emotional fallout of moderation. It also suggests how being called upon to moderate can challenge writers' perceptions of their professional standing, as reflected in the portion of the quote above where the staff says they are required to view violent pornography "as part of our jobs." Making moderation part of these editors' jobs also invited in forced viewing of emotionally disturbing material, and it became impossible for these editors to separate their professional work from the abuse they found themselves suffering. The *Jezebel* case also illustrates the ways in which those who post abusive messages online target people whom they know will be especially vulnerable.

Although other members of the community also face emotional risks from viewing objectionable material, moderators are often in a unique position as authorities and institutional representatives within the communities that they serve. They are often navigating multiple and competing objectives. For journalists, these objectives may include a professional openness and a desire to foster debate and discussion. When it comes to topics like feminism, journalists who cover the topic are sometimes the most visible examples of the marginalized community whose stories they are attempting to voice. This means that journalists not only participate in the community, they are a part of it and they feel responsible for it. (Hearkening back to our section on "operationalizing engagement" in the previous chapter, when one editor defined "engagement" as being "part of" the internet.) A focus on engagement foregrounds participation and an audience-first mentality, but not always the emotional toll of the work. These risks are often heightened when moderators feel a strong emotional and personal tie to the community they've created.

3. Abuse and social platforms

Thus far, I have examined how abuse in comments sections can affect and influence personal and professional attitudes among those who moderate comments. Organizations that have shut down comment sections have sometimes suggested that a wider expansion to social platforms might be the solution. Among the moderators whom I spoke with, the shift in platform sometimes brought about some relief. The same editor who struggled with sexism mentioned that Twitter was "more fun" and had a "higher barrier to entry" for comments. The adoption of on-site Facebook comments also means that anonymity is no longer possible, with interesting consequences for abusive comments. A comment moderator describes how the introduction of Facebook comments allowed commenters to find more information about each other, especially when debates turned to controversial topics:

> You actually see that sometimes in the Facebook comments where it's a controversial post and they're getting into a really heavy political debate. Someone will say something really controversial and awful and then someone in the comments will be like 'oh that's a weird thing for an HR manager at blabla to say'. Because they can just go to their Facebook (Manager1, 2015).

At the same time, the suggestion that platforms like Twitter are "self-policed," as Reuters' executive editor suggested above, is overly optimistic. Rather, these platforms are *newer* than comment sections. But they are also capable of becoming vehicles for racist, sexist and even threatening language. In his piece about *The Verge's* comment suspension, Nilay Patel mentions "GamerGate" as one of the instigating negative instances that prompted them to shut down comments. But the movement – whose members sent violent and threatening messages to several prominent women who worked in the games industry – was not limited to comment sections:

> …A vocal minority of videogame fans who tend to congregate at sites like 4chan and Reddit, who blanket twitter and comment sections with hate and anger, and who adopt the exclusionary identity of "gamer" have united to intimidate and silence videogame fans, developers and writers who aren't like them or don't think like them (Martin, 2014).

The fact that sites like Twitter and Facebook exercise limited institutional moderation over posts is one of the reasons that attacks can flourish there. When these platforms *do* implement some measure of response against a particular form of abuse, the abuse migrates to other less-regulated spaces, as some scholars have suggested:

> GG demonstrated how complex game culture is. It is a child of the internet, and gamers cannot be distinguished from the users of other social media. GG'ers were channers, tumblerinas, and redditors. They produced endless videos and live streams. They used Facebook and wrote blogs. Twitter was full of them, and they used tools that enhance Twitter: TwitLonger for when you need more than 140 signs and Storify when tweets need to be organized and structured. Through this variety and very visible exploitation of weaknesses in the different systems, GG taught us how technology designed for increased openness can be utilized to create echo chambers and to silence opposing voices (Mortensen, 2016, p. 13).

The quote above demonstrates how online community sites can be instrumental in attracting and magnifying abusive campaigns. From this perspective, Facebook and Twitter are not separate from comment sections so much as they are different types of comment sections. And unlike the comments section on news websites, they enjoy limited institutional moderation or protections.

Should individuals on Twitter on Facebook choose to mount a campaign against a particular journalist – as has happened in the instance mentioned by Martin, above – then shutting down the attacks involves navigating the platform company's mechanisms for reporting abuse, rather than internally checking a template box that turns on-site comments off. This is a set of circumstances that should be causing news organizations significant concern.

Although news organizations are not liable for what happens on external platforms, they are still responsible for staff whose work requires maintaining a presence on those platforms. Increasingly, that means not just engagement editors but everyone within a news organization. Although engagement is emerging as a specialized skill set, an increasing number of news organizations now ask all writers to be available to audiences on Twitter or via email. These journalists – many of whom maintain an online presence in addition to their demanding and full-time work producing stories – also face significant risks of abuse on online platforms, and deserve protection and clear institutional guidelines for how to proceed in the case of unpleasant comments or full-scale attacks.

4. Moderation work as emotional labor

Moderators – regular, engaged ones, anyway – often find that much of their work depends on them being able to create a particular emotional state in others. One moderator at a new media company described to me the goal of his daily interactions with users:

> giving them [our top users] tips or incentivizing them to write more. Getting to know them beyond an email sense. I follow a lot of them on Twitter and they have this casual contact to reach out to whom they feel like they know (Member, 2015).

Clearly, the goal of his work is partly emotional – to make community members feel known, appreciated and welcomed. These feelings, in turn, map onto organizational objectives: the desire to solicit more content and more responses from members of the community. One moderator – from MetaFilter – described the ways in which the work of moderators mimics the work of a host or a family, comparing it to "household management":

> It involves a lot of mind-reading, paying attention to what the people around you want or need or like. The most remarkable thing that happens in community management is we can sit down and have an hour long conversation about 40-50 people and [about how] so-and-so became a raging asshole because he had twins and wasn't sleeping and this other person was problematic in certain subjects and they're also a war vet with PTSD, and if you tell them [to] they should back down. It's keeping track of everybody's wants and needs, and it's that skill set (Moderator C. , MetaFilter, 2016).

There is a name for this type of work, and it might be useful for news organizations to consider it – emotional labor. In 1979, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild defined emotional labor as having the following characteristics:

> This labor requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality (1983, p. 7).

Hochschild suggested that elements of emotional labor were present in nearly one third of American jobs. In order for a particular form of emotional work to qualify as emotional labor, Hochschild said it had to fit three criteria:

> First, they require face to face or voice to voice contact with the public. Second, they required the worker to produce an emotional state in another person – gratitude or fear,

for example. Third, they allowed the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees (1983, p. 147). Moderation, as performed today, does not exactly fit all these criteria, but it can and has been argued that it still constitutes a form of emotional labor. Although moderators do not have "face to face" or "voice to voice" contact with the public, they interact through a medium that was likely far less widespread in 1979, when Hochschild published her work, and it is unlikely that her goal was to exclude people working over the internet[5]. Moderators do interact with a multitude of "voices" and these voices are capable of displaying the same negative emotions and angry behavior that people are capable of showing in offline conversations, even if these negative expressions take the form of emoticons and deliberately offensive words rather than raised voices or frowns.

From the perspective of news organizations, some moderators at news organizations are clearly already engaged in consistent acts of emotional labor, while others might only encounter it occasionally. Even a limited task – getting users to click a "like" button, for example – is an attempt to solicit and manage an emotional reaction in someone else. When a worker is getting a large group of people to join or like a Facebook community as part of their job, then that task takes on elements of emotional management and therefore emotional labor. Building a community on Twitter, for example, means managing reactions – as well as information – on an ongoing basis. In this sense, the workflow of today's engagement editors has much in common with what happens in a comment community like MetaFilter. Even those who do not define their work as emotional labor consider audience emotions as a key driver of their daily workflow, like one moderator at a news organization, who told me part of her work was to determine which commenters carried negative emotions, because "they don't drive a conversation, they create animosity" (Editor C. , 2015). As a moderator, her job involved finding and identifying these negative emotions, and then trying to keep them from impacting the news organization's broader online community.

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[5] The bulk of *The Managed Heart* turns on Hochschild's extensive study of airline flight attendants. She situates their work within the context of marketing, sales and customer service roles more generally, many of which now take place mediated through online means like video calls or chat.

Hochschild's third criterion is the one most difficult to apply to journalism today. Many community managers have learned largely on the job, partly because their work is either new or unusual. However, that trend is rapidly changing. Journalism schools now regularly offer courses in social media and audience engagement, and some universities have begun to offer "social journalism" as a specialty. On an ideological level, even when news organizations do not seek to explicitly control or commercialize moderators' feelings in the ways that were demonstrated in Hochschild's work, organizations can model an aggressively reader-focused mentality (engagement) or a set of journalistic ethics that still privileges the audience's right to know over journalists' feelings. Sometimes, these emotional outcomes can become mingled with perceptions of journalistic ethics. One moderator whom I spoke with – a self-described journalist - typified that mingling:

> The ethics of journalism is something I really respect and I think there's something – a responsibility to readers – always. So I feel like audience engagement is actually really an innate part of what we do. We write to inform people and readers, and we offer spaces for them to interact with each other and with us (Editor C. , 2015).

The goals of traditional journalism and emotional moderation are cited as the same. Both traditional journalistic ethics – "a responsibility to readers" and a new focus on engagement "offer spaces for them to interact" are visible in this statement. Neither of these sets of values encourages journalists to consider their own emotions, or acknowledge their own subject position. This is not direct control, but rather an indirect neglect that nonetheless becomes a norm. Unfortunately, neglect is rarely benign, and often motivated. If moderators are operating in a space where they must daily encounter the wide diversity of human nature, and deal with large and real emotional threats, then it makes sense to address both the positive and the negative potential outcomes of that work.

5. Emotional labor and inclusivity

I am not the first person to suggest a re-examination of how engagement operates at an individual level, or to use the term "emotional labor". In an article for Medium, former engagement editor Alana Hope Levinson draws a link between the emotional labor required in social media roles and the ways in which social media work is cordoned off from other journalistic functions:

> Social media is seen as easier, "fluffy," and not on par with other editorial roles (Levinson, 2015).

Levinson links the undervaluing of emotional work to gendered norms, including the fact that social media teams in newsrooms often feature more female employees than newsroom staffs overall. Levinson quotes Jennifer Pan, who describes public relations as another field dominated by women who are often criticized because they are "performing emotional work for money" (Levinson, 2015). The de-valuing of emotional work may lead to a readiness to shut down comment sections, rather than a more profound debate over how to make these spaces safer for moderators. The exclusion of women and minorities is a serious challenge – that members of these groups feel unsafe on comment threads is an important point for inclusivity, both in terms of the debates that news organizations create and in terms of the ways in which they promote greater diversity within their own ranks.

The shutdown of comment sections would also be less problematic if news organizations were eager to build support structures for staffers in other parts of the organization, or on other platforms. These support structures could include giving moderators time and space to discuss how to deal with negative experiences in comment sections. One moderator who has worked extensively as an unpaid moderator on popular and controversial subreddits talked to me about what those systems could look like in practice:

> One of the mods' jobs is to deal with people calling you very insensitive slurs a good amount of the time and that's not really for everyone, and that's not something you can do without taking care of yourself. It's something we try to do now with our mod teams, to make it clear 'this is a very difficult space to mod'. Cycle in and out, take breaks...self care is difficult to get right (Moderator, 2016).

One question for news organizations is whether they want their moderation teams to be this engaged. MetaFilter and reddit are built around comments, participation and relationships to a greater extent that news organizations are. But as news organizations increasingly look to create moderated communities of interest around particular topics or campaigns, they will have to grapple with how far they want their moderators' commitments to extend, and what workflows exist to protect those in those spaces. Much like news organizations currently contend with how to provide training and support to writers whose reporting takes them into physically dangerous environments, organizations might also consider developing training and protocols for moderation and engagement work around particularly fraught topics.

In keeping with this notion of entering difficult environments, greater support for the emotional work of comments moderation might also make it feasible for journalists to engage a wider set of viewpoints, and thereby stimulate better and more informed debate. In a 2013 study, Loke makes a passionate case that journalists are beholden even to their racist commenters: "it is the journalists' responsibility to understand the roots of these conversations and begin engaging their public in a meaningful conversation" (p. 194). But in order for journalists to be able to spend time among problematic discourses, they must first have the support of their organizations for their own emotional commitments. Data indicate that neglecting comment sections, far from resulting in inclusivity, has made these sections more exclusive and more dominated by those who have less fear of reprisal. In a study of comments left over an eight month period on the *New York Times,* Emma Pierson found that only 24.8 per cent of gender-identifiable comments appeared to have been authored by women (2015, p. 1203). Pierson also found that female commenters are "more likely to remain anonymous" (p. 1201).

One of the common critiques that I've heard of these evolving approaches to online community is that excluding abusive actors from online discussions makes these spaces more, rather than less, exclusionary. I challenge on this notion of several fronts – the statistical, by drawing on Pierson's research above – but also the ideological. The notion of the public sphere has been significantly contested in recent years, and the notion that comment sections should include – if not abusive actors, then at least abusive *behaviors* – is not a prerequisite for them to constitute valued places of public discourse. In a paper on audiences and publics, Sonia Livingstone suggests:

> Undoubtedly, the now-familiar critique of the public sphere is fair, for through its rigorous, perhaps even rigid, norms of access, discourse, topic, and consensus-seeking,

> the Bourgeois public sphere legitimates only a narrow portion of the population as 'the public', excluding others...Surely there can be mediated spaces, which invite and valorize participation from more diverse publics? And surely these can not only encompass debate on minority or alternative topics but also contest the very norms of rational-critical debate or consensus politics themselves? (2005, p. 36)

Livingstone draws on others, most notably Nancy Fraser, in critiquing Habermas' public sphere as an idealized space that – by its very structure – already excluded a wide portion of the public. In many ways, Livingstone's critique could also be applied to early American newspapers whose distribution structures favored a narrowed definition of the public. Today, the dominance of male voices excludes or at least overshadows female participants online, as Pierson's research shows. As news organizations move into the online realm, where discussions are mediated and citizenship is a wider net, more publics become visible. The question is not whether everyone belongs to the same public, but rather, how to build sites for discussion that allow for challenging debate while *still* including the viewpoints of "more diverse publics." News organizations – and in particular, the audience engagement teams within news organizations – are now in the position of having to figure out what this type of discussion might look like: how it will be mediated, what constitutes an acceptable form of address within this space, and what barriers will exist to entry. These are not easy questions. Defining "inclusivity" for this new age will certainly involve accepting a lot of "diversity," but it does not mean blanket inclusion of all behaviors. It never has, and the public sphere has never existed as a single and entirely inclusive space. The fact that affective and emotional labor is involved in governing online spaces is a function of our increasingly mediated environment, and the types of places where we now go to discuss news.

In conclusion, even if the emotional work done by moderators at news organizations is not a perfect match for Hochschild's definition of emotional labor, engagement work still presents an interesting digital correlate to the emotional labor that Hochschild identified. Although engagement teams may encounter the most online abuse, workers at all levels of a journalistic organization are impacted by it, and the presence and awareness of online abuse and targeted harassment campaigns is changing how journalists do their jobs as well as who participates in online fora and discussions. By understanding the dimensions of engagement work that map onto emotional labor, news organizations and media companies might be able to better understand and implement policies around this type of work, and these policies will hopefully also help craft more productive spaces for online news dialogue.

I have not answered the question: *should* people at news organizations be called upon to perform emotional labor in this manner at all? Is the emotional distancing and management that is required of good moderators really a perquisite for doing good journalism? This is a difficult set of questions. If I have stayed away from it, it is because I have focused on messy realities and likely outcomes. Every news organization I spoke to – a selected sample, admittedly – has increased the profile of engagement as an internal and external workflow. Even organizations that shut down comments sections suggested other ways of enabling online engagement, moving towards a fuller embrace of participation and ritual sharing as frameworks for communication. But there is room for disengagement as well, and there are limits to the engagement that people can and should be asked to perform as a part of their jobs. The notion that vulnerable writers should be tasked with moderating their own psychologically hurtful comments – as in the *Jezebel* case – is a clear example of an instance in which no amount of policy would have made the act of moderation any more doable. Part of respecting emotional labor is understanding when and where it should *not* be demanded. A large part of adapting to the participatory web and to more participatory journalism will involve internal workflows and policies that specifically address the challenges of moderation work for those who perform it, as well as offering them tools to stimulate a debate that includes a wider array of voices.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to map audience engagement at a key moment for news organizations. The participatory mechanisms that news organizations adopted when they first came online – comment sections – face increasing challenges from other participatory online spaces. As news organizations struggle to define and operationalize engagement, they must decide what behaviors they want to adopt from this broader universe of participation, which includes blogs, product reviews, social media and online comment communities. At the same time, as news organizations become more participatory, their internal workflows and policies will have to adapt to the new skills and risks of audience engagement tasks like moderation.

When I set out on this project, I expected to discover that shutting down comments sections was a careful dodge, a way for news organizations to limit the resources they spend managing fractious debate especially since this debate had an uncertain commercial value. What I found was significantly more complex: that in some (but not all) cases, comment sections as they existed served neither audiences nor journalists as well as they could. For audiences, comment sections sometimes allowed a vocal minority to railroad the opinions of the many, and too often hosted discussion that was ill-informed or that made other participants feel unsafe. For journalists, comment sections challenged existing journalistic practice and opened up staffers to the possibilities of damaging abuse. Some of the positive functions possible in comment sections – identifying leads, exchanging views with and among readers, and soliciting additional information about articles – are now just as possible on social media and in other venues, further reducing the incentive to wade through negative comments in search of gems.

Unlike Derek Mead, whom I quoted in the introduction to this paper, I do *not* believe that the problems of news organizations' comments are inherent in the comment medium. Although news stories appear to be a special case, the problems visible in some comment sections are partly the result of the ways in which those news organizations chose to manage – or not manage – their comment sections. In particular, the decisions they made around how these sections would be moderated, how often, and what resources and tools would be made available to those doing the moderation.

One of the key findings of this project was the crucial role that moderation plays in shaping online comment communities. Jessamyn West, a former moderator at MetaFilter who has spent a great deal of time studying and thinking about online community management, is one of the most passionate proponents of the belief that people who run online forums can and should exercise control over how that community evolves. She told me: "In an internet community, you - the person who run that community - have absolute control over what [members] are allowed to say. Free speech online is an abstraction because there are people who hold the keys to the page and can make decisions and in a lot of cases we see them abdicate" (West, 2016). This abdication, West said, can lead to negative stereotypes about all commenting and all commenters that are damaging because they are untrue. Although West is motivated to come down on the side of moderation, one of my key findings in this study is that moderation is a critical – and often under-examined – part of why online communities operate as they do. Moderators set norms, enforce guidelines, build relationships and soothe tension. The work requires both inclination and experience, and pretty much every attempt to create an entirely non-human moderation process has failed. The challenges of finding and recruiting talented moderators, as well as a lack of understanding over how best to motivate them, can result in burn out for both the moderators and the organization that employs them.

But I do agree with West that, to an extent, news organizations have abdicated their positions as leaders when it comes to responding to online abuse. Too often, the response is to shut down comments, which feels less like a victory for inclusive dialogue and more like a concession to those who post abusive comments. The fact that these are the only options – either shutting down comments or requiring moderators to wade through abuse – says less about commenting as a medium than it does about the lack of interest or investment in building better tools for these spaces.

Looking to the Future

But that lack of interest and investment is changing. At the same time that some news organizations have shut down comments, others have increased their commitment to improving them, and hopefully online debate more broadly. The *New York Times,* as previously mentioned, is unique among news organizations for the number of staff it devotes to the task of comment moderation, and the *Times* has also steadily increased comments' profile over the past few years. Whether or not these design and protocol changes – moving comments from the side of the page to the center, introducing verified commenters whose comments publish without prior moderation – will yield increased engagement or increased comment delight remains to be seen, but the *Times* is one pole, an organization that has moved towards comments rather than away from them. This movement has represented a significant investment of human and technical resources.

For smaller publishers, those with more limited resources, other groups are now looking to build tools that will enable participation while filtering out the serially occurring problem of abuse. Many of these solutions hinge on providing moderators with better tools. Civil Comments, a year-old startup based out of Oregon, has released a new product for newsrooms that aims to limit abuse by asking commenters to participate piecemeal in moderation. Civil's software introduces a step wherein everyone who leaves a comment on a news site must first rank their own comment as well as three randomly-chosen comments for civility and other virtues. Comments do not publish to the main comments page until they have achieved a certain aggregate score. Aja Bogdanoff, one of the founders, explained to me how she came to the idea after trying and failing to build entirely tech-based tools that would moderate comments without human intervention: "we have to get humans [to moderate] and the only ones available are the ones who are there participating" (Bogdanoff, 2016). For their first trial runs, Civil partnered with smaller and mid-size news organizations. Civil's tool allows for news organizations to exercise some control over comments, while at the same time inviting greater participation by allowing commenters to set some of the rules for a forum. The project is still in its early stages, but it represents a potential advance that combines the positive potential of online participation and the editorial priorities that newsrooms have long embraced.

Bogdanoff used to work as a comment moderator, and she says she built Civil partly to solve the problem of the outsize amount of time she spent removing and limiting the effect of abusive comments. When moderators don't need to spend as much time policing bad actors, she said, they will have more time for the bigger and arguably more important tasks of structuring discussion and figuring out exactly how news organizations and audiences can best collaborate. The structures of these future collaborations are still in flux, in comment sections and in other participatory online spaces. As Bogdanoff put it, "if you're not worried about basic policing, then what do you want to do with your community?" (Bogdanoff, 2016) Another key finding of this project is that even the most well-equipped and resourced news organizations are still developing answers to this question. Compared to the long line of newspaper history, the internet – and later, the participatory web – are still relatively recent inventions.

I also spent time with the Coral Project, a nonprofit partnership between *The New York Times,* the Mozilla Foundation, and the *Washington Post.* Funded through June 2017 (after which their future is uncertain) the Coral Project's interdisciplinary team focuses on finding solutions for the problems that journalists and commenters face in community building. Project lead Andrew Losowsky told me that one of the things that attracted him to the project was "helping people feel safe and listened to and respected in online spaces" (2015). These concerns will likely only grow more pronounced as online participation expands its scope and its possibilities, and news organizations make bigger investments in the participatory web. The Coral Project team has conducted workshops across the country with journalists and commenters, with the goal of building products that newsrooms can install and use regardless of audience size. At the same time, these discussions over comment sections have led swiftly to broader questions around why news organizations engage audiences, why these relationships matter, and what the future of journalism looks like. These questions animate the evolving conversation over "engagement" in newsrooms. These are simple questions, said Losowsky, but they "have been hard to answer."

If engagement is more than metrics – more than how many comments, "likes" or "reTweets" a particular story gets, then what could it look like? Mary Hamilton, the *Guardian*'s executive editor for audience, told me about their recent US project, "The Counted." The goal of the project – which includes a Facebook group, online interactives and a series of stories – is to track every single instance of a person killed by police in the United States. The goal of the Facebook group, Hamilton told me, was to connect with people who care about police killings, regardless of whether or not these people already read the *Guardian* (Hamilton, 2015). The decision to separate the Facebook community from the paper's usual branding was deliberate and significant. In speaking with Hamilton about the project, I was struck by the ways in which she described engagement as a multi-dimensional workflow, spanning the news organization's online and offline practice. She referred to the online Facebook community, which people use to submit tips that are later verified by *Guardian* staff, and said "where we're seeing meaningful engagement has been with anonymous people who will send 2-3 tips a day sometimes" (Hamilton, 2015). At the same time, she also spoke about the in-person and traditional reporting that went into creating the journalistic articles and the online community, saying "Our reporters [talked] to their sources, they built up really close engagement with people in the Black Lives Matter community." In this description, I saw an attempt to stitch together the online and offline work of engagement, while tying it to both online metrics and, ideally, a wider journalistic agenda. The writers behind the series hosted a discussion on reddit in which they answered questions about the project and the ways in which they capture and clean their data. Although "The Counted" is a resource-intensive project that not every newsroom can emulate, it is also one where the divide between sources and subscribers has the potential to close, united by shared interest in the topic. This notion of engagement includes online behaviors and metrics, but hearkens back to journalism's role as an organizer of communities. At the same time, these communities are not limited by geography or even by subscription to the news organization's other products.

The *Guardian* has also adopted a position of thought leadership when it comes to online abuse. In a recent study of online harassment, the *Guardian* examined which members of their writing staff received the most abuse. The results:

> The 10 regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four non-white) and two black men. Two of the women and one of the men were gay. And of the eight women in the "top 10", one was Muslim and one Jewish. And the 10 regular writers who got the least abuse? All men (Gardiner, et al., 2016).

Gathering and sharing data like this is a key step in appreciating exactly what is at stake when it comes to online abuse. Considering the extent to which the existence of abusive comments – on journalistic websites as well as on external platforms - has already impacted journalistic practice, it is important for organizations to take a stand. Doing so sends a signal to readers, as well as to commenters. Using these data to guide policy sends a strong signal regarding an organization's commitment to both internal and external inclusivity. When I argue for better policies around the price of engagement, I also argue for a greater awareness of the ways in which negative comments have an outsize impact, especially on journalists and moderators who are members of historically less visible groups. These policies are part of respecting a commitment to a more diverse workforce.

Research Questions

In this section, I return specifically to the questions I asked at the start of this thesis.

Q1. What priorities and traditions do comment moderators at news organizations navigate in the decisions they make around comments? How do the decisions made at news organizations compare with practices in other spaces like social media?

In Chapter One, I laid out the ways in which community teams tackled the tension between journalistic legacy and participatory promise, with a focus on comments. In "The Spectrum of Comments," I provided a visualization of the decisions that comment platforms make, situating these decisions along a spectrum from more participatory to more controlled. I found that news organizations often tried to exert the most editorial control over comments, especially through means like exercising institutional moderation, hiring non-peer journalists as moderators, moderating comments in advance, and making comments available on only a selection of stories. By contrast, I highlighted the ways in which social media and online comment-based communities often allow for wider-ranging and less-moderated debate. At the same time, I identified points of tensions where these practices are coming together: BuzzFeed's Community team, which solicits user-generated content for the media organizations main pages, and Facebook's evolving Community Standards, in which the organization has become more explicit about the types and tone of the content they will not allow.

Q2. How has the rise of new platforms – especially social media – changed the way that people communicate? What new expectations have they led to, and how are news organizations addressing those expectations?

In this section, I examined how the rise of new online communities and modes of communication – in particular, the reactive community of affect found on social media and the relationship-driven community of interest found in collaborative forums – offer new and compelling ways to people to gather and share information online. I identified key behaviors and practices in these communities, including sharing and moderation, that reinforce relationships and emotions. I drew on Thompson's work around "monological" and "dialogical" communication, and suggested a new term – multi-logical – that aims to capture the ways in which online interfaces allow producers, consumers and lurkers to exchange information, perform and participate in multi-layered discussions. These discussions often exist asynchronously, and the symbolic cues of dialogical conversation take the form of emoticons.

I then traced how news organizations are adapting to these new forms of communication, focusing on the commercialization of audience attention metrics, the drive for faster and more intimate online communication, the wider embrace of user-generated content, and the increasing focus on user experience on non-news sites. The need to engage with readers and audiences has led to a confusion among journalists as to what exactly falls under the rubric of "engagement," even while the need to engage has led news organizations to hire more people specifically into "audience engagement" and "community" teams where the skills and talents necessary are often quite different from what was required in legacy journalism

Q3. How do the people working within comment moderation roles face abuse? On what dimensions and in what environments do they encounter negativity, and what impact does it have on them?

I defined online abuse by the types of comments that have been reported in initial literature to cause the most distress among journalists – in particular, degrading comments and bigotry. Through a careful examination of the workflows required to deal with online abuse, I arrived at the conclusion that online moderation work has a great deal in common with Hochschild's definition of "emotional labor" and that by viewing it through that lens, news organizations might be better equipped to create institutional frameworks and policies to support this kind of work.

I discovered that the possibility of abusive comments has transformed the ways that journalists seek out sources and present material, and also impacts how they engage around that material once it is published. In examining the specific ways in which moderators and engagement editors encounter abuse, I found that repetitive exposure to abusive comments affected well-being, personal and professional relationships, and professional standing, and that moderators attempted to cope with these impacts by distancing themselves emotionally from the material. Although switching to platforms like Twitter and Facebook may appear to be the solution, I offer an examination of past abusive campaigns on these platforms as evidence that news organizations cannot assume that social media are self-policing or carry no emotional risks for the journalists required to be on them.

I found that moderators' focus on emotional outcomes and their ongoing contact with the public brought their work into the realm of emotional labor, and that through this framing, it became possible to see both how to better frame policy around moderation as well as how it is crucial to the future of inclusion both within journalism and among journalism's audiences.

Q4. As news organizations – both legacy and digital – increasingly seek to carve out new participatory spaces, what do these spaces look like? What are some initiatives and ideas that define this still-evolving set of priorities?

As news organizations look to the future, they bring together practices that allow greater editorial control while fostering more participation. Each organization's decisions on this spectrum will be different, but emerging practices include embracing user-generated content and commenting, creating social media communities around news stories, and encouraging writers to engage on platforms like reddit.

In the conclusion, I identify some of the projects that I believe offer positive blueprints for the future. Projects like Civil Comments and the Coral Project focus on creating people-driven tools that can change the moderation game for smaller publishers. Time will tell whether these tools provide the needed interventions, but they are a promising step in an area where tools have long been unsophisticated and impermanent. Projects like "The Counted" at the *Guardian* provide a framework for thinking of engagement in terms that bring together both journalistic and participatory priorities. A startup like Hearken – also a new initiative – allows journalists to source story ideas from their community prior to the start of the reporting process, another promising avenue for increasing participation. On their website, the founders point to the traditional model of soliciting feedback and comment *after* a story publishes, and suggest replacing it with a model wherein a news organization's audience can offer input on what stories should actually be written. By soliciting participation at this early stage, Hearken claims news organizations can increase audiences' engagement and interest in a story throughout its life cycle. Sometimes, as part of the process, audience members are chosen to accompany journalists on their reporting, further eroding a boundary between community and journalist, between consumer and producer of news.

Finally, the *Guardian's* thought leadership on abuse – and their willingness to open their data regarding their own writers' experiences of abuse – offer a good starting point if journalism wants to reclaim a position of strength when it comes to shaping what could be, as the *Guardian* terms it, the "web we want."

Future Research

The goal of this project was to step back and try to understand an industry that is still in flux. Journalism has gone through seismic shifts in just the past decade. In this initial work, I set out to understand the emerging ideology of engagement, with a focus on the current conversation around comments through the experiences of people who work in audience engagement teams. I saw how engagement remains elusive and difficult to operationalize, as well as the profound and irreversible changes that have already been wrought within journalism by increased mechanisms for participation. I also observed how new digital media companies are changing the landscape of engagement, but how the challenges of the digital realm – particularly, limiting abuse and crafting meaningful relationships with audiences – unite new and legacy media.

Increased mechanisms for online participation have not just shifted the relationships between journalists and producers – they have challenged journalism's role in the public sphere and changed its traditional workflows. The experiences and expectations that users form in spaces as diverse as Amazon and Facebook now impact how news is created, developed and experienced. I found that there are no ready or easy answers in terms of how news organizations will deal with these changes, and that the future will look dramatically different from the present as little as five years from now.

This paper also identified several promising areas for future research. These include a focus on how moderation operates in news spaces, with specific attention paid to technical decisions and the challenges of diversity and inclusion. A few authors have begun to examine the ways in which online abuse shapes the comment public – in this area, Emma Pierson's recent work on gender and commenters at the *New York Times* stands out as an example. Pierson found that women made up 28 per cent of commenters on the *Times* website over an eight month period, and furthermore that:

> Female commenters are more likely to remain anonymous and anonymous commenters receive fewer recommendations. Male and female commenters differ in their choice of topics to emphasize, backgrounds, and language (2015, p. 1201).

This is worthy work, and it further nuances the decisions that news organizations must make around engagement if they want to continue their work in the civic tradition. The ways in which moderation work and decisions result in greater or lesser inclusivity is a fascinating and rich area of ongoing research, both at news organizations and in other online forums.

Specifically related to this project, I would love to expand these findings beyond large media organizations on the United States' East Coast. Studying these organizations has helped provide a framework for accessing some of the key questions around news organizations and participation on a national scale. At the same time, smaller and local news organizations – whose staffs have been hard hit by the changes in the global economy since 2008 – face the same erosion of their traditional role, but have fewer resources at their disposal. The ways in which they operationalize the national conversation around engagement – and the types of support they receive for their engagement efforts and engagement staff – are increasingly important questions from the perspective of the future of journalism.

Finally, moderation – as a stream of work that has certain similarities but also differs by organization and site – will only increase in visibility as online conversation continues to drive and shape our society. The specific decisions that moderators make, and the impact of these decisions on how we evolve speech online, cannot be over-emphasized. Studies and publications in this area will only increase as the field becomes more established and professionalized. In my fieldwork, I asked participants how they thought their job might be different in ten years. Comment moderators gave me a variety of answers: one said comment moderation would increasingly intersect with law, as legislators get more involved in governing online speech and organizations and platforms become more sensitive to what is said in their spaces. Another moderator said that comment moderation would disappear altogether. The wide spectrum of responses reflects, I think, both the extraordinary potential of moderation as well as its unique moment at a crossroads of identity and exposure. The future, I suspect, will be something none of us exactly envisioned. At the same time, hopefully some of the positive practices and thought leadership I have identified – within the journalism industry and outside of it – will play a role in shaping what the journalism of the future looks like.

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