USES & GRATIFICATIONS THEORY IN ONLINE COMMENTER CULTURE

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

JODI McFARLAND FRIEDMAN

Dr. Esther L. Thorson, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2013

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the

thesis entitled

USES & GRATIFICATIONS THEORY IN ONLINE COMMENTER CULTURE

presented by Jodi McFarland Friedman,

a candidate for the degree Master of Arts

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Esther L. Thorson

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Professor Margaret Duffy

_____

Professor Mitchell S. McKinney

_____

Professor Stephanie L. Craft

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the person who sees me for who I am and who I am becoming, asks the kinds of questions that would do any journalist proud, listens to the answers and then asks the questions again.

For always supporting the late study sessions that meant tucking the kids in solo, for never questioning my latte consumption, for the highlighter stain on the couch from when I fell asleep, book in hand; for a presence that both inspires and steadies, I thank my husband. If our two advanced degrees in five years with three young children doesn't underscore and evoke a lifelong love of learning, well, we did our best.

Eric Friedman, your humor slays me, your conversation elevates me, your intellect amazes me. You make me want to be the best version of myself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jodi McFarland Friedman

Dr. Esther Thorson, thesis chairwoman

ABSTRACT

While other research has focused on the effect that online commenting can have on news sites, little has addressed the reasons that online commenters participate, the needs that online commenting behavior meets and the emotions that commenters experience. Understanding online commenters is key to unlocking the reasons for their engagement. As news sites seek deeper connections with their audience, knowledge of those who contribute commenters to the site is useful in understanding how to build loyalty. Uses & Gratifications Theory applied to online commenting culture provides key insights into the how, why and who of online news commenters. This qualitative research explores those questions among a selection of online commenters who agreed, anonymously, to answer online questionnaires. The commenters in this study were driven by the need for information/surveillance, with more than half requiring the news every day, as well as a desire for social interaction, exploration of personal identity and a desire for diversion. They have a high need for information. They feel informed and connected, along with powerful and angry, more than any other emotions when commenting. They feel more positive emotions than negative emotions. The act of commenting and engaging on the site feeds their sense of connectedness to the world.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What is news, and what makes news, in the continuously shifting online landscape is a puzzle and a prize for modern journalists and journalism. Get the right pieces in place, it is assumed, and the news sites of the present will play a part in the media environment of the future. Get it wrong, and competitors will win the prize of audience and relevance. But to the consumer, the product is much more than a one-way communication model. Trained journalists, citizen journalists, bloggers and online commenters, peers and strangers create the news and entertainment that readers online share and consume.

In the world of Web 2.0, the Internet is an interactive affair in which content consumers also are content creators, where interaction and connection are part of the experience of making meaning. The interactivity of online news means that readers have "influential discoursal roles and active speaking rights" in the "communication cycle" (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011, p. 195). It's a departure from the one-directional model of traditional news. Users complement, compliment and critique the content and the content creators. They can and do attack the journalist and other commenters in this forum (Neurauter-Kessels).

Among those in the hunt for audience, co-crafting the news product alongside professional journalists, are online commenters, those who frequent news sites and comment on news articles using their own names or pseudonyms. The online commenter is distinct from a blogger, who crafts a product intended to be consumed in and of itself.

The online commenter, in contrast, opines in the context of news or opinion presented on the news site, reacting to particular topics raised in news stories or opinion pieces. The content provided and conversation created alongside the Web journalism becomes a part of the whole, a cohesive package of content that other site users encounter.

As a part of the digital news product built outside the Fourth Estate, by citizens either anonymous or identifiable, comments reflect on the news sites that host them. The tenor and topics of commentary may be managed through self-policing, approval of comments by a monitor or moderator before they appear online, keyword filters or some combination of these strategies. Yet even with such controls, the commenter is a free and unpredictable agent in the co-creation of the complete news product that other site users encounter. Who are the people, generally speaking, who frequently offer feedback to news articles online? The first research question that this study sets out to answer is how do online commenters perceive their responsibilities, their roles and their rights as parties to the journalism product?

In many cases, online comments are published before the news professional sees and evaluates the content, with the commentary often coming from within an active, frequently posting commenter community. Trolls — characterized by aggression, deception, disruption and success, qualities that are not considered of value to civil civic discourse or a constructive contribution to the public debate (Hardaker, 2010) — can have the effect of shutting down discussion. Flaming, going on typed attack, derails constructive communication.

Meantime, many writers of letters to the editor, in discourse, describe themselves as having "written for the paper," while their contribution does not meet the standards of

traditional journalism. Do writers of online comments consider themselves a sort of journalist or commentator? Do they think their role is a more formal part of the process of news dissemination than is perhaps the view of their comments from those inside the news organization?

There is hope that free-flowing and asynchronous discussion in chat rooms, discussion forums and associated with news articles will lead to unfettered discourse, an unfiltered exchange of ideas (Gsell, 2009b). Certainly, anonymous speech has been crucial to history, such as the contributions of Thomas Payne (Crawford, 2008). Could the virtual town hall induce more freedom of expression than the real thing? But news and online editors interviewed by Gsell said news websites with anonymous commenters don't want to become "an unruly playground where the bullies take over and make it hard for anybody new to come into the conversation," where some posters have created the effect of unsavory online neighborhoods (Gsell, 2009b, p. 17). This research aims to answer its second of three research questions, which is how do online commenters seek to represent themselves.

Anonymity is one of two game-changers for the civic dialog forums that are associated with online news companies. The second is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Branch, 2010). This 1996 federal law was intended to encourage Internet service providers to create filtering software to screen or reject unsavory communication on their sites without fear that they would become liable for said content. It turned newspaper publishers into content providers (Branch). The Communication Decency Act provides a legal shield to websites for the inflammatory or defamatory comments that third parties post on their sites. Such a departure from print

liability has given rise to "online initiative … driven by what's legal instead of what's ethical" (Scholz, 2007, p. 39). A third research question addressed in this work is to explore what satisfaction the act of computer-aided, asynchronous community conversation yields for online commenters.

Uses & Gratifications Theory examines the way that media use can meet the social and psychological needs of the user (Ruggiero, 2000). The theory turned the dialog from how media affects the audience to how the audience actively chooses media to satisfy its own needs (Littau, 2009). Uses & Gratifications Theory has experienced a surge in popularity as new media researchers attempt to understand the motivations, patterns of use and satisfactions or gratifications that online consumers experience with the media they elect to employ. According to the theory, if a medium provides a satisfactory outcome for the user, the user will return to it again and again. If it does not meet those expectations, the user will move on in search of another means to experience the satisfaction of met needs.

Online, the news product is much more than a one-way communication model, with trained journalists, citizen journalists, bloggers and online commenters, peers and strangers creating the news and entertainment content that readers online share and consume. One can derive gratification in simply encountering and consuming this content, and there also is gratification in contributing to it through online commenting. The latter is the focus of this research.

Uses & Gratifications Theory assumes an active audience. The online commenter, who provides feedback, analysis, criticism and praise after reading an online story, is more than an audience member. That person's commentary becomes content that is

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consumed by other users of the news site, making the commenter both audience/consumer and reporter/creator. McQuail established four typologies that are part Uses & Gratifications Theory: surveillance, personal identity, diversion and social interaction/integration (McQuail, 1994). Which of these, or combination of these, is most prevalent among a small sample of frequent online commenters? Interviews with subjects to probe these answers could elucidate for future researchers and practicing media professionals the reasons that some commenters represent themselves in the manner and with the frequency that they do, what they hope to gain from it and what they feel they actually gain. Is a news commenter seeking information while commenting, or does the person more likely seek the information from the article itself and comment to share a reaction to it, in a reflection of personal identity? The way the commenter represents him or herself, from choice of user name to selection of avatar, is an important piece of a commenter's online reputation and brand. What is the integration that the user might be seeking? Or is the posting of commentary a hobby, the way many utilize social networking sites, intended to provoke, titillate, entertain or otherwise connect with an audience of other news consumers? Do the most persistent of online commenters identify themselves with labels like "troll," or do they view their behaviors in another light, as champions of truth, or as curators of conversation?

Little research on the blogosphere addresses comments spaces, Ellcessor reported in 2009. Ellcessor defined trolls and the trolling phenomenon as a game of identity deception. In a feminist blog space, the online community struggled with maintaining a welcoming attitude with a troublemaker in its midst. The asynchronicity of online comment streams makes it difficult for the online community to self-regulate and to agree

on standards of communication or to disbar a communicant from a forum, blog or comments space (Ellcessor, 2009). Understanding those who frequent online comments spaces is critical for journalists to unlock what motivates engagement and site loyalty. Those who participate in the online space offer insight into the why, the how and the who of online engagement.

Research that explores online commenters is helpful to news professionals and other communications professionals as they seek to understand the reasons that commenters choose to engage online, how they comport themselves, what they hope to gain from their participation and the emotional return they experience. It is useful to communications researchers who seek a greater understanding of how consumer has become creator, attempting to satisfy wholly different needs than those that simple news consumption may have been shown to satisfy in past research.

Where the theory doesn't come in

This research uses qualitative interviews about the uses and gratifications of online commenters, guided by the theory that their gratification, or lack thereof, dictates the way they behave and use media. It provides a context for more questions and future research. Uses & Gratifications Theory tells us that when a medium no longer satisfies its user's needs, the user will move on to another medium. This study and this theory can seek to understand that behavior, but in no way can it predict what the next big thing will be, the Web 3.0 shift heretofore unimagined that again could change the paradigm of news consumption, production and distribution.

This study seeks to understand the motivations behind online commenting on news sites. It is not an effort to predict behavior, but rather to better understand it. Future

research from the quantitative perspective could look at the frequency of comments by commenter type, seeking insight into why some commenters participate online more heavily than others.

Understanding those who frequent and dominate the online comments spaces is critical for journalists to unlock what motivates engagement and site loyalty. Research that explores online commenters is helpful to news professionals and other communications professionals as they seek to understand the reasons that commenters choose to engage online, how they comport themselves, what they hope to gain from their participation and the actual emotional returns they experience.

The purpose of this research is to provide insight into and greater understanding of online news commenters, those who post statements, questions, observations, attacks, diatribes and more in association with news content on news sites. How does Uses & Gratifications Theory apply to these content consumer/creators, and why do they participate in news dialog digitally? Helping to develop an understanding of these communicators will provide insight into the way online news has become a multidirectional endeavor for news companies and news consumers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature related to online engagement and commenters reveals three strands of study: the effects of anonymity on online behavior (Holmes, 2009; Gsell, 2009a and 2009b; Scott and Bonito, 2006; Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong et al., 2010; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011; Hlavach and Freivogel, 2011; Phillips, 2011); ethical considerations for the double-standard of signed letters to the editor and unsigned online comments (McKay, 2009; Scholz, 2007); and methods and means of online engagement (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012). While a portion of the literature addresses online commenters — notably, Phillips' qualitative research over three years follows self-described trolls — far more of the writing is focused on the effects of online behaviors of new media commenters on the culture of the Web. Little literature seeks to understand why online commenters behave as they do.

This research will provide insight in the gaps between these strands by exploring the interior motives, emotions and expectations of the online commenter, whereas other research has focused on external, worldly reactions to their actions. This is not an effects study, but rather an effort to gain insight and understanding as to personal motives that drive online commenting and user feelings that are produced via online commenting. Previous research has focused on the commenter's and commentary's outcomes, such as debates about incivility online, the legal implications of online attacks and considerations of the fairness of news companies in allowing anonymity in one realm while historically rejecting it in another. Primarily, the existing body of research has not sought to explore why commenters act as they do, nor how they view themselves and their actions. In-depth

interviewing could shed light on a small group of commenters not from the point of view of those encountering their product on the news sites, but from the point of view of the commenters themselves and how they see their discoursal roles, and why they have taken up the mantle of those roles. Previous research has addressed online commenters' effects on others. This will consider online commenters' impulses and effects on themselves and their new media use. Anonymity, the practice of posting commentary under an assumed name, is part of how online commenters consciously create their identities. Research questions 1 and 2 point to those realities.

RQ1: How do online commenters perceive their responsibilities, their roles and their rights as parties to the journalism product?

The first, about how commenters perceive their responsibilities, roles and rights, explores why commenters act as they do and what obligations or goals they are seeking to satisfy through those actions.

No names, please

Truthfulness in self-depiction varies online, with some proposing that anonymity allows for greater honesty and others suggesting that the cloak of anonymity encourages incivility. As MediaWeek notes about a New Yorker cartoon, "No one knows you're a dog on the Internet" (Anonymous, 2009, p. 1). Yet as Kozan explored, online blogs are the one place where middle-class courtesans can share their thoughts without pretense. "Anonymously, it is possible to be anyone on the Internet, even one's real self," the article states (Kozan, 2011, p. 276).

Anonymity increases the stakes when journalists come under fire, as they are named but face attack by the "the anonymous mob," as described in a German newspaper

that moved to limit the anonymity of commenters (Neurauter-Kessels, p. 196). Some news sites have moved in the direction of requiring registration while still allowing pseudonyms, as there isn't a certainty that the efforts to secure identities actually are the posters' true identities. A journalist may choose to not engage with an attacker, but the journalist loses face before the audience nonetheless (Neurauter-Kessels). Other sites are turning to Facebook Connect, requiring use of a valid Facebook.com account to sign in before a user can post online comments. Even in this realm, there is no certainty that a Facebook account is a person's true name. Participation levels and standards of civility in light of that change are an area ripe for research.

As accountability becomes all the more vague, civil discourse is diluted and social rectitude is diminished (Holmes, 2009). "This new Invisible Man attacks, vandalizes, and perverts with such impunity, that it is changing the very structure of civic discourse" (Holmes, 2009, p. 1). Gsell (2009a) describes the online comments sections of news sites as "unsavory neighborhoods" of racism and worse (p. 16). Requiring registration for commenters while allowing use of pseudonyms does little to elevate the standards of discussion, even with filters to catch keywords considered widely offensive (Gsell, 2009a). There is a double-standard of news sites that allow online commentary to remain anonymous while their corresponding newspapers will not published an unsigned letter to the editor. This remains a sore spot for news consumers who have an affinity for the old model of print journalism and a modern appetite to consume news electronically.

Double standard

Anonymity allows hurled insults to replace reasoned debate, while reverse publishing "sprouts" or transcripts of chat forums is seen as progressive (Scholz, p. 39).

Scholz instead argues it debases the debate and lowers the standard of civility across both platforms, published in print and online. The double-standard of signatures on printed letters to the editor, where journalists apply rules that preclude defamation and harassment, contrast with no such standards for online commentary, drawing fire and ire (McKay, 2009).

Beyond the double-standard, readers close to those under digital attack — in the case of a news article examined by Hlavach and Freivogel (2011), relatives and friends of victims in a triple homicide — were offended by the tone of comments and attacks on the reputations of the victims, posting comments themselves to plead for civility and sympathy. The Society for Professional Journalists Code of Ethics calls for journalists to "minimize harm" and "be accountable." There are practical reasons news sites have allowed anonymous commenting, not the least of which is the way the number of comments and number of hits are means to judge the sites' successes (Hlavach and Freivogel, 2011). Yet the argument is strong that such laissez-faire policies are a violation of the craft's own ethical code.

RQ2: How do online commenters seek to represent themselves?

The question how they seek to represent themselves targets the twin commenter hallmarks of anonymity, including avatar, and demeanor, from use of an authoritative voice in the comments streams to adopting the role of enforcer or educator of other commenters or even for the journalist.

How commenters act

Blogging as a form of computer-mediated communication has no time limit, allowing blog commenters to weigh in on items in the archives of a blog without regard

to when they were first posted (Boicu, 2011). This is a quality that blogs share with online news articles and news sites that allow reader comments. Bloggers, like the companies that operate news sites, have asymmetrical communication rights in that they control what is on their sites (Boicu), whereas their commenters have less control over content, save that which they create themselves.

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2012) explored three forms of interactivity with online news: clicking on stories, commenting on stories and emailing stories, during a routine period and during election season, a period of heightened political news coverage and interest. Their quantitative analysis showed that citizens are monitors of news, poised to act more often during periods of heightened political activity, but they are likelier to comment on political stories during those periods than they are to email them to their close social circle (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012). As people are wont to do in polite conversation in society, they avoid socially sensitive topics locally but not globally on the Internet. Such a feature is an interesting insight into one possible motivation of the online commenter, who regularly broadcasts views about socially third-rail topics digitally and anonymously, when those discussions might not be welcome at the dinner table.

This reality, that what one says online may ease the desire to be heard while diminishing fears of being judged in one's real-world relationships, could be a factor that partly answers the third research question. For some, it may provide the satisfaction of sharing one's opinion without real-world social repercussions.

RQ3: What satisfaction does the act of computer-aided, asynchronous community conversation yield for online commenters?

While online commenters are asked to follow norms of behavior or a site's posted community rules, Boicu posits in one blog under review that the norms weren't created to be followed, but rather to serve as a convenient cudgel in dispute resolution. The rules in the blog included no blatting (the posting of privately sent information in a public forum), no chatting (back-and-forth, tit-for-tat communication between a small cohort of commenters with disregard for the larger conversation), no deviating from the original topic and no use of impolite language (Boicu).

Chatting, the one-to-one communication that makes a public forum into a private conversation, happens frequently in news sites, particularly where frequent posters have developed a reputation that they defend against an aggressor with his or her own brand to uphold. Further research of online commenters should address the community rules of sites and how commenters follow or deviate from them. Such questions connect with Uses & Gratifications Theory in that the choices of comportment a commenter makes are a reflection of his or her objectives in engagement.

Those using computer-mediated communication use ingratiation, confirmation, agreement and convergence when they feel affinity toward their reader and want a connection with that person or persons (Walther et. al, 2010). They use denigration, disagreement and communication divergence to reflect disliking.
Visual persistence — the way one's writing lingers on the screen before one's eyes — further could affect the writer in that it could reinforce "disaffinity behaviors" (Walther et. al. p. 342).

Neurater-Kessels explored the "Have Your Say" sections of three online British newspapers. Attacks made against journalists and their credibility, skill and

professionalism were effective as an instrument of damage against the journalists. Her quantitative review of comments did not address impoliteness by commenters aimed at one another.

The Web creates the impression that all are equals, minimizing authority and emboldening rudeness (Neurauter-Kessels). Suler posits that in person, the power differential between reader and journalist is notable, but online, those lines blur and lead to a greater willingness to speak out or to misbehave (Suler, 2004). Being impolite is a signature of one who wants to show disrespect or disdain for another, a device for using and gaining power (Neurauter-Kessels). The way a user of media perceives his audience to be affects his way of behaving and evaluations of media content. He will believe, as the theory of third-person effect shows, that others are far more susceptible to believe negative things, particularly the less he believes that other readers are like himself, as he thinks he is better able to sift truth from the reporting (Hartmann and Dohle, 2007).

Media users imagine the social characteristics of the perceived audience and how those people might perceive news items. In hostile media effect, the tendency to view the media as biased against your view, a user of media has a mental picture of the perceived co-audience and breaks that picture into social categories (Hartmann and Dohle). The perception of the co-audience as more like himself extends to a positive perception of the product; the opposite is true when the audience is perceived as dissimilar from the user of the media (Hartmann and Dohle). Further research should address how commenters perceive their audience, as like or dissimilar to themselves, and how that mental image of audience affects the way they phrase their commentary and the way they evaluate the value of the news site itself.

State of incivility

The state of civility in online discussion receives a good deal of researchers' and media professionals' attention. Faced with a flurry of critical commentary about an advertising executive that followed an article about his departure, executives at MediaWeek wondered if allowing "vitriol" was not akin to sanctioning it (Anonymous, 2009, p. 1). Technology removes and depersonalizes, allowing for "shockingly frank" and "divisive" communication (Holmes, 2009, p. 2). Meanwhile, slipshod enforcement of standards of civility in online news forums has undermined the ideals of free speech, Holmes asserts.

Calls to clean up the online dialog have been met with various responses by media companies. MediaWeek arrived at a conclusion of better policing and a plea for civility rather than a repeal of anonymous commenting, for as "much as we might wish for the good old days of print accountability, electronic media has imposed its own norms" (p. 1).

Phillips developed an excellent working definition of trolls borne of three years of online study, interviews and research. The troll is described as smart, playful, mischievous and "wildly antagonistic," derailing online conversation by baiting other commenters with racist, homophobic, sexist posts, "grotesque distortions" of the position of others and shocking images such as pornography or gore (Phillips, 2011, p. 68 and 69). Trolls prize anonymity as akin to freedom of speech and view attempts at greater Web transparency as tyrannical (Phillips). While trolling is protected under the First Amendment in the United States, moves to describe the behavior as legally actionable "fighting words" could move into the realm of censorship (Phillips, p. 69).

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The research article makes no reference to communication or other theories, but Phillips' line of questioning broaches Uses & Gratifications Theory in that Phillips asks an interview subject who self-identifies as a troll how he determines frequency, when to engage and where. The work — particularly Phillips' interview transcript and questions — provides a jumping off point for interpersonal interviews with other online commenters.

Previous research relating to online commenters has maintained an external focus on the climate that such commentary has created. From "wildly antagonistic" (Phillips, p. 68) to hopes of revealing the next Thomas Payne, commenters have introduced a new dynamic in the presentation, reception and reaction to news online. Interviews with frequent commenters will allow the exploration of this phenomenon from their point of view. Researching, through qualitative interviews, the uses and gratifications of online commenters as guided by the theory that their gratification, or lack thereof, dictates the way they behave and use media, would provide a context for more questions and future research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this research, online "commenters" are defined as those who submit comments on websites, usually attached to or following news articles or other content. They are distinct from bloggers in that they are not posting their commentary on a private Web page but are using a third-party site to host their posts and inspire them. Some sites allow online submissions without any sort of registration; others require a user to create a username and password, and to submit at minimum a working email address. Still others use a third-party registration system such as Facebook Connect, linking the users' Facebook profiles and avatars to their online comments.

This research addresses commenters on Michigan's largest news website, MLive.com, which requires commenters to register to comment under a name of their choosing and to sign up using a valid email address. MLive Media Group operates MLive.com, a website "powered by" eight Michigan newspapers — AnnArbor.com, The Bay City Times, The Flint Journal, The Jackson Citizen-Patriot, Kalamazoo Gazette, The Grand Rapids Press, The Muskegon Chronicle and The Saginaw News — plus newsgathering hubs in Lansing, the state's capital, and Detroit, its most populous city (MLive.com, 2012). MLive's statewide director of community engagement has access to email addresses for all registered users, i.e., commenters, and connected the researcher and the commenters who agreed to participate. She used email to initiate contact with some of MLive.com's commenters to invite them to take part in a questionnaire related to online engagement for academic research. The site's user agreement makes it clear to users that they an expect to hear from MLive, so the invitation delivered by the director

of community engagement did not violate the users' expectations of privacy nor MLive's terms of use.

The research includes qualitative interviewing with site users who took part in the comments sections of an article in each of the following categories: public safety, politics, education, entertainment and business. Online commenters in Web 2.0 are an immeasurable whole not bounded by space, time or international boundaries. Therefore, emailed question-and-answer communication bridged distance and matched the comfort level of participants accustomed to on-screen communication.

While qualitative research doesn't provide simple answers, it can lead researchers on a journey of exploration that yields surprising discoveries (Brennan 2013.) There exists a societal favoritism toward statistics-laden quantitative research as being somehow more scientific; however, qualitative research uses an interdisciplinary understanding of language to develop a greater awareness of and appreciation for our social reality (Brennen). The use of qualitative research methods to explore online commenter culture is appropriate, in part because this approach can allow the research to "showcase a variety meanings and truths" (Brennen, 6).

In the case of research into online commenters, the field is relatively new, and the body of research is small. Choosing concise language to use in a questionnaire or survey of online commenters is made more challenging because a researcher, through her own bias or ignorance, may fail to use language that best captures the emotions or motives of the online commenter. It is difficult to preconceive the responses and offer the variety of measureable outcomes to the questions that would advance understanding of this group and its culture. The use of open-ended questions, however, allows the commenters

themselves to contribute to the body of knowledge about themselves as a new breed of communicator and news consumer. Through their own responses to the questions, they provide a vocabulary and a framework for future qualitative and quantitative research. A quantitative survey at this stage could fail to accurately allow the commenters to express themselves in terms they recognize and internalize. The use of the qualitative method is an ideal foundational approach to better and more fully understand this group and explore its use of commenting under the umbrella of Uses & Gratifications Theory.

MLive.com uses registration for commenters, who choose their usernames and, sometimes, avatars, such a photograph to appear on the site alongside their name and the comments the post. Because online content can be updated and because it would be an ever-shifting based upon commenter habits at that moment, citation is especially important (Oliver, 2004). Copies of the articles from which commenter invitations were sent provided a dated look at who was participating in the comments sections at the moment of invitation.

An initial invitation to participate went to 52 commenters who had posted on five selected articles, one each in the genres of public safety, politics, education, entertainment and business. Of the 52 commenters, some had been banned by the site, while other emails bounced, or failed to reach other commenters. The invitation reached 35 commenters. Of those, seven participated, for a response rate of 20 percent. Commenters received their invitations to participate from MLive and indicated their willingness to participate by emailing the researcher directly; the questionnaire was then sent to those who responded.

A second invitation went to 52 commenters who participated in five more articles of the same genres: public safety, politics, education, entertainment and business. Information about emails that bounced or users who were no longer allowed to comment on the site was not available this time from MLive. Five agreed to take part in the research, for a response rate of 9.6 percent.

In an effort to attract more participants, an incentive was added for the third and fourth batches of invitations, a random drawing for a $50 Barnes & Noble gift card. Again, five articles from each of the genres were chosen and commenters on those articles received invitations. Out of 87 invitations, 10 commenters accepted and nine completed the questionnaires in the third round, a response rate of 10.3 percent. While only slightly elevated when compared to the first and second rounds of requests, the speed of returns increased noticeably upon adding the incentive. On the fourth round, 5 out of 119 participated, for a rate of 4.2 percent. The total number of respondents to the questionnaire was 27.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEMOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT

Given the site's anonymous commenting culture, the researcher allowed the subjects to remain anonymous and sought demographic information from them. Demographic information includes gender, age, educational attainment, income bracket, occupation and ethnicity. Table 1 shows an example of the demographic questioning.

TABLE 1
Demographic information

Please answer the following:
Name and/or avatar (links welcome)_____
Gender:_____
Year of birth:_____
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
      Some high school __
      High school __
      Some college __
      Associate's degree __
      Bachelor's degree __
      Some post-graduate courses __
      Master's degree __
      Doctoral degree __
      Trade certification __
Occupation:_____
Income: _____
Race:_____

Of 27 respondents, 10 did not supply demographic information. After the first batch of questionnaires was returned, however, one respondent indicated that he could not respond to the demographic table because of technical difficulties. The format of the table was adjusted for all subsequent questionnaires sent.

Of the 17 who provided demographic information, the average year of birth was 1959. To preserve the promised privacy of the commenters, their names or avatars were changed to names pulled from the top names given to children born in 1959. Of the 27 commenters, five identified themselves as female, 20 were male and the gender for two of them was not provided nor could it be deduced from their commenter profiles on the website. The changed names are attached to the returned questionnaires that are included in the appendix.

See Table 2 below.

Name	Gender	Year of birth	Highest educational level	Occupation	Income	Race
Michael	male	1955	master's	editor/writer	mid-5 figures	white
Mary	female	1959	bachelor's	retired social work	$50K	white
David	male	1956	master's	psychologist	$75K	white
James	male	1970	master's	IT manager	$90K	white
John	male	1956	some postgraduate	print sales	sufficient	white
Robert	male	1944	some college	retired police	$60K	white
William	male	1953	bachelor's	retired	$50K	white
Richard	male	1967	master's	teacher	$65K	white
Thomas	male	"over 50"	associate's, some college	retired management	n/a	Native American
Steven	male	1952	some postgraduate	electronic communications technician	$40K	white
Charles	male	1969	associate's	mechanical design and troubleshooting	$76K	white
Susan	female	1967	master's	educator/writer	$70K	white
Timothy	male	1966	some postgraduate	entrepreneur	above median	white
Joseph	male	1970	master's	librarian	$62K	white
Kenneth	male	1946	bachelor's	retired	n/a	white
Jeffrey	male	1982	bachelor's, trade	student	$0	white
Karen	female	1940	high school	homemaker	social security	white

Seventeen respondents provided information about the highest educational level they had achieved. Those with educations up to but not including a bachelor's degree totaled four: Karen's highest level of academic completion was high school; Charles had an associate's degree, and Thomas had his associate's degree and some college education beyond that. Robert indicated he had attended some college. Three respondents had bachelor's degrees, one a bachelor's plus trade education, five had master's degrees and three had postdoctoral educations. Respondents who had only bachelor's degrees were Mary, William and Kenneth. Jeffrey had his bachelor's degree and was educated in a

trade. Those with master's degrees were Michael, David, James, Richard and Susan. The three with postgraduate educations were John, Steven and Timothy.

The U.S. Census of 2010 shows that nearly 58 percent of Michigan residents had completed at least some college, while 28.2 percent had a bachelor's degree (Michigan State, 2011). Of the respondents, 70 percent had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, showing that this sample was more highly educated than the average Michigan citizen. Statistics for the state of Michigan were compared to the sample, given that MLive is a Michigan-based website specializing in local and state news. However, one should acknowledge that users of the website potentially could hail from anywhere.

Seventeen commenters shared their occupations. They were as follows: editor/writer, psychologist, information technology manager, print sales, teacher, electronic communications technician, mechanical design and troubleshooting, educator/writer, entrepreneur, librarian, student and homemaker. Retirees described their former occupations as social worker, police and management. Two did not state their previous occupations.

Ten respondents provided dollar figures for their annual income, with a low of $0 per year, listed by the student, Jeffrey, and a high of $90,000 listed by information technology manager James. The average for the 10 respondents was an annual income of $63,800. In addition, Karen described her income as "social security," Timothy said his was "above median," John described it as "sufficient" and Michael described his pay as "mid five figures." The U.S. Census Bureau reported the median household income in Michigan for the years 2007 to 2011 was $48,669, compared to the national average of

$52,762 and the sample's average of $63,800 (2013). As with education, the voluntary participants were wealthier than the norm for Michigan.

Fifteen respondents provided racial information, with 14 identifying themselves as white or Caucasian, for a total of 93 percent of the sample. One respondent identified himself as Native American, equaling 6.7 percent of the sample. In comparison, the state of Michigan's demographics show that it was 80.2 percent white and 0.7 percent American Indian in 2011 (U.S. Census). The sample was whiter than the state average.

One should exercise caution with the demographic data and should not extrapolate that information to the broader commenter population. Because these commenters voluntarily participated in the study, there is no way to know if they are a representation of all MLive commenters, or if the process of participating in academic research disproportionately attracted the male, wealthier, whiter and older population among commenters.

Among the 27 participants, the majority of commenters had commented on business articles. Eleven of 27 commenters took part in online discussion that followed business stories. It is hard to speculate the reason more readers/commenters of business articles chose to take part than any other article category. Next in popularity were politics stories, with six respondents posting comments on the four political articles that were used to generate a list of invitees. The rest in order of frequency were education, with five participants; entertainment, with two; crime, with one participant and two commenters whose usernames could not be determined, hence it could not be ascertained where they had posted their comments or the tenor of those comments.

Accounting for those two commenters, plus four more whose comments could not be later retrieved, the tone of 21 of the 27 commenters were assessed for length, strong language, attacks on other commenters and attacks on the articles' authors. The majority of commenters posted neutral or affirmative commentary, rather than comments that attacked other site users, exhibited mockery or attacked each other. Three commenters used sarcasm or name-calling, while others went on the attack against the website itself or the writer of the news article.

Commentary that was neutral or positive toward other commenters and the reporters was posted by 15 of the 21 analyzed respondents. Mark, Donna, Kevin, Linda, Joseph, Gary, Robert, William, Richard, Thomas, Timothy, Daniel, Donald, Ronald and Gregory. Among positive or neutral comments, Mark said, "I'd like to see a rooftop garden put in to support the restaurants contained within the B.O.B.", Donna gave a lengthy treatise about the management of a chain of stores that showed greater integrity toward employees when its founder was living and in charge rather than his sons; Kevin posted two neutral comments on a business story before taking a swing at the Obama Administration's "thuggery" in the third, not an attack on fellow commenter or the reporter, but not a neutral or positive tone, either. Linda disapproved of public money spent to build a new airport and said so, but without making personal attacks.

> "This new terminal is the biggest waste of money!! It is NOT going to increase traffic through the airport, it is not going to bring an increase in revenue, and it is not going to make life better for more than a few people! It should never have been dumped on taxpayers!?"

Joseph was passionate about the issue of food trucks in downtown Grand Rapids, and his comments toward a public official named "Greg" show that. "Greg is scared of

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food trucks," he commented in one post, and "More space for artprize artists? So Greg can throw out even more art he doesn't approve of? He is a one man censor."

Gary showed passion that standardized test scores don't reflect the quality of public education, but he retained his manners while expressing his points. Robert too on an education article makes his points without taking a jab at anyone. In a series of four comments on an education article, including dialog in the comments space with the reporter, William keeps his cool. He even has kind words for the writer of the article: "Dave, thank you for your link as well as your insight on the issue." Richard too commented on an education article passionately without derisive commentary. Thomas and Timothy supply neutral comments about an entertainment article.

Daniel's comment on a politics post was not attacking while providing a statement of opinion ("I'm not so bothered by the time of the call as his message: anti labor, pro deregulation, defunding of public schools and government intervention in the womb.") Donald too, who said he believes everyone has bad days and may become a bully on the site without even knowing it, posted a neutral question to clarify a politics story. Ronald and Gregory also posted short and neutral comments on a politics story.

There were comments that could not be viewed as neutral. Among the most polarizing of the comments in the sample came from Steven, who said in response to a question about how others comments make him feel, "I blow the negative stuff off and then hit right back, if I'm in the mood for banter." He also confessed that he sometimes posts misinformation just to force the opponents in this bantering to do more research, a power move that does not show respect for civil debate. Posted Steven:

> "Oh hell, (the governor) will just up the deficits and the state debt. He and his buddies will run away with the loot (after locking in some solid state contracts

with their cohorts). Michigan voters will elect a women Democrat to clean up the mess. The righties will attack her immediately and call her a failure... And eventually we'll be right back here some 10 years from now rehashing the same ol', same ol'."

"Oakey dokay Koch-ey head..."

"Is that why the mugs of teabaggers on TV are a sea of white trash faces?"

Steven's commentary likely would be the most trolling of the behaviors exhibited by the participating commenters. Susan uses sarcasm and labels it as such in an education article. "Whoo! We're number 15! (being facetious here, but really – how is this supposed to be good news no matter how you look at it?)" Comments that attacked other commenters came from Charles on a business article, who told another commenter he was "thinking like a sprig of parsley."

Comments that attacked the reporter came from Jeffrey on a business story (why didn't you get any quotes from higher-ups at Mlive/GR Press about the alleged "tiptoeing" in regard to the Acme Township controversy?); Kenneth took aim at MLive.com on a business story:

> "While the Press covered the story, for the most part the coverage was superficial and as I recall many times heavy on the Meijer PR spin which at times made it sound like the problem was just some low level clerical error. … I'm not sure why that is, maybe it's just because things are usually so upright in the Grand Rapids business and political community that the Press (and now Mlive) has never thought it was necessary to learn how to do investigative reporting."

Were commenters who chose to take part in the research, on the whole, just better behaved than the average online news commenter? A thorough content analysis of the website's commenters could show where on the spectrum these commenters fall. One can surmise, from reading their posts, however, that they tend to fall on the more civil side of

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the discourse, and their comments about how they view decency as one of their responsibilities online support that.

Questionnaire responses were analyzed to assess thematic commonalities across participants, such as their reasons for engaging in online commentary, how they view their roles on the news sites, any responsibilities they feel for how they conduct their online behavior and what they consider to be their rights. The following sample of the interview questions builds upon some of the interviewing questions established by Phillips related to trolls (2008). RQ3 asks what satisfaction the act of computer-aided, asynchronous community conversation yields for online commenters.

The first set of questions aimed get at the background and the behaviors or rituals related to the online commenter:

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree)
   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9
2. How did you get involved in commenting?
3. Do you comment online anywhere other than MLive.com?
4. On what device or devices do you comment online?
5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you?
6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information?
7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to.
8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.

The questions below sought to understand identity, anonymity and self-image, connected to RQ2, how do online commenters seek to represent themselves?

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not?
10. Is it necessary to be anonymous?
11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset?

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it?

The following questions aimed to unlock answers about motives for online commenting. They pertained to RQ1, how do online commenters perceive their responsibilities, their roles and their rights as parties to the journalism product? Responses can be assessed for the way they fit McQuail's motives under Uses & Gratifications Theory, based on seeking information, revealing personal identity, integration and social interaction/entertainment.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online?
14. What do you feel you actually gain?
15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?
16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting?
17. What are your responsibilities online?
18. What else would you like to share about online commenting?

Another means of reviewing the questions in the questionnaire is to view them as they fall under different Uses & Gratifications Theory typologies. Grouped by typology, the following questions hone in on the information/surveillance strand of Uses & Gratifications Theory:

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree)
   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9
6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information?
7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to.

The next group of questionnaire items are key to the personal identity typology:

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.
10. Is it necessary to be anonymous?
12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it?

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting?
17. What are your responsibilities online?

And the final grouping of questions posed to the commenters fall into the

typology of social integration. They are as follows:

2. How did you get involved in commenting?
3. Do you comment online anywhere other than MLive.com?
4. On what device or devices do you comment online?
5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you?
9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not?
11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset?
13. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset?1
14. What do you feel you actually gain?
15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In an analysis of responses to the questionnaire that 27 online commenters submitted, questions were divided among the four typologies, or common strains, of Uses & Gratifications Theory. Katz and McQuail, among others, describe the typologies as surveillance, the gathering of information; diversion, such as seeking emotional release or distraction from daily cares; personal relationships, which includes in-person and virtual relationships; and personal identity, including the reinforcing of values. (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973-1974).

Surveillance typology

The questions that fell under the umbrella of information-seeking or surveillance were No. 1, asking commenters to rate their need to get news every day, No. 6, "Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information?" No. 13, "What do you hope to gain?"; and No. 14: "What do you feel you actually gain?"

Out of 27 respondents, more than half of them, 14, rated their need to get the news every day as a 1 or 2, the highest scores possible on a Likert-like Scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the greatest need and 10 being the least. This speaks to these online commenters having high needs for information, a common typology for media use, seeking "relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society and the world," "satisfying curiosity and general interest," "learning, self-education" and "gaining a sense of security through knowledge." (Chandler, 1994). This parallels the way the words "informed" and "connected" were the second and third most common adjectives respondents used to

describe their feelings about commenting. Business articles drew the most participants, while crime stories drew the fewest.

Respondents were asked: Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information (No. 6 in the questionnaire)? Overwhelmingly, they said it has — 19 participants said yes, while eight indicated that online commenting has not changed how they view online news and information, though it has perhaps affected their views of other commenters. For those who said commenting has changed the way they see online news, the reason that was most frequently indicated is that their habit of commenting has led them to seek out others' insights in the comment threads, to understand differing points of view and to come to new viewpoints of their own. Five of 26 commenters expressed variations on this theme.

> "It is interesting to see what other people think of a news story. Sometimes it feels like we didn't even read the same article," offered Joseph. "I skim through the comments after reading an article. I try to discern the more intelligent ones and absorb any insights that they might have," said Steven. For John, "it adds perspective. It lets me know others feel like I do."

Meanwhile, Donald said his online commenting feeds his sense of self, explaining that he learns "a lot of information or perspectives from others. I think it helps strengthen my core values and beliefs, and at the same time, it helps me understand different forms of collective thought and attitudes found in conservative/liberal circles." Linda said comment-allowed sites like MLive let "me see what others think about a situation." For four commenters, seeing the authors of articles post queries and answer questions in the comments section is a draw — positive for some, negative for others. "Some sites are perfectly willing to pay attention to their readers (and their opinions) and I tend to put more faith in those sites," said Donna. Jeffrey has a more cynical view of the writers' presence in the comments sections: "People who rely on Booth/MLive for news get less

hard news and more fluff, more reposted 'content' and more writers shamelessly begging for comments." Both Charles and Joseph appreciate the interplay with the reporters. "The fact that the article's author often monitors and comments as well makes the news seem a bit more accessible," said Charles. "Interacting with the reporters who wrote the article has been very enlightening," said Joseph. "You see why something was not clear, or they link you to post articles to help your understanding of the situation. News in the past was all one way — from the reporter to the person. Now (it's) more of a conversation."

Three commenters said they read certain kinds of stories — mostly political articles for Ronald, for example — or they read things they might not choose to read otherwise for the purpose of opposition research. Gregory said, "I am probably more prone to read stories that are slanted opposite of my own views, because I am reading them only in order to offer a counter-opinion. …. if online commenting was not available, I might skip the article." Timothy reads articles that "receive higher volume commenting — even if the subject matter is not one that would attract me otherwise."

Among participants who said they do not view news differently thanks to their online commenting habits, some still expressed a feeling about the online community. "It just seems that most people who comment are trying to hurt someone or start an argument," observed Susan. "Then there are the alarming number of crazy nutwings out there that seem to have nothing else to do but be crass or hurtful." For David, "it puts a new spin on how people think and just who my commenting peers are." Michael reported, "I've realized that there are a lot more right-wing nutcases out there than I ever thought possible."

What they hope to gain

When asked, "What do you hope to gain from commenting online," the desire to educate others, or variations on that theme, were expressed eight times. Next in popularity, with six respondents citing it, was a desire to be heard, followed by five who want to gain other points of view, four who would cure bias found in articles or commentary, and three who wanted to inject civility into the online conversation. Four more expressed that they had no expectations that they would gain anything. Commenters in their answers sometimes expressed more than one of these common threads.

Educate others

The educators among the commenters followed the line of thinking of Bruce Mortans:

> "Some of my comments are in reply to other posters who I feel are misinformed or have faulty reasoning in their argument, or who I just don't agree with. I suppose ideally what I'd like is to convert those posters to my enlightened views. I don't think I change many minds. Mostly what I gain by posting is the knowledge that I'm standing up to some blatant nonsense. Of course there is so much nonsense posted it's hopeless to try to respond to all of it."

He went on to explain that some of his comments are "an addition to the story or to something another poster wrote. The article or poster has reminded me of something, either some random fact or reminiscence that I think adds to the story. When I post a comment like this I could flatter myself to think that I'm making others smarter by sharing some of my wisdom, but what I really think I gain is a little shot of dopamine from going through the mental process of thinking through the story."

Michael said, "I'd like to get some of my ideas across and perhaps entertain people sometimes as well, along with practicing some of my rhetorical skills in writing."

The desire to entertain others is a motive echoed among those in the Twitter community. John wants to "make people aware of how some people feel about an issue," while Brian acknowledges, "you're not going to change the mind of someone that has a rabid opinion, but there are readers looking for facts and alternative thoughts on topics that the commenters group can possibly provide some varied input to." Donna is looking to reach those readers who rarely post comments themselves. "My point in commenting is to reach the lurkers, those who rarely if ever comment and those who don't have as much time as I do to be thoroughly informed." Such a sentiment demonstrates a high level of personal identity as an expert, self-educated and self-annointed. Charles wants others to know, "I am not a raving nutcase, that the stereotypes that follow a group (I'm a conservative white male) are not always accurate." Said William, "I used to believe that if even one person reads something I wrote and actually considers it as an alternative to the opposing view, I have provided something of worth to the conversation."

Be heard

What else do readers who comment hope to gain? They want to be heard. For Ronald, this behavior gratifies an important social need, one of connection under the social interaction typology, with online interaction standing in for interpersonal relations that involve physical contact. "It makes me feel good that I can express my opinion," he said. "I am retired and do not get the opportunity that I once did to give my opinion." Stated Daniel, simply: "I want to be heard." Added Gregory, "self-expression and participating in contemporary dialogs." The "simple art of debate" and his desire to share his view of "reality in education" drives Richard. And for Jeffrey and for Steven, the

desire to counter other opinions motivates them. Said Jeffrey: "I want right-wing types to

know that liberals are out there."

> Said Steven: "I like injecting comment and viewpoints that rebut the more hard-line views of some of the other commenters. There seems to be such a smugness in some who think that they are so 100 percent 'right' and everyone else is so 'stupid.' Most often they cannot be reasoned with, so I like harassing them a little — just for fun."

Donald is hoping to "inject opinions that may not always be mainstream or

popular, especially if it diffuses hyperbole or sensationalism in an article, call out

relevancy when necessary, etc."

See new light

Five of the answers to the query "what do you hope to gain?" touched on the

concepts of learning other points of view, another social interaction typology of Uses &

Gratifications Theory. Commenters with this aspiration included James, who wants "a

pulse for what people think," and Karen's desire for "others' opinions on how they feel

about a subject." "Some users bring very useful insight to the comments," she said.

Timothy alike wants the "insight of others. I know I have a preconceived notion of

everything — pure human. I hope my comments draw out ideas." And for Kevin, "it

helps me get a different perspective on things." Mark doesn't mind seeing other

viewpoints, "even if it's negative against my comment."

Inject civility

Where Steven liked to harass in a spirit of fun (for him, at least), Linda said, "a lot

of times, I try to make the conversation a little more civil, or call out someone who is

mean and nasty." Thomas hopes he can "allow everyone to view themselves through the

eyes of the whole community…rather than their personal social bubble." And Robert said

he gets a thrill when "once in a very great while someone will concede they were wrong."

Three of the commenters sought to improve upon bias and reporting. "There is a

real problem with education reporting," Gary wrote, "and I was hoping that maybe I

could influence (the reporter) to at least consider his biases. I don't think that is going to

happen, however." Jeffrey was no fan of the MLive Media Group company, writing, "I

want MLive/Booth to know how far they have sunk." Kenneth pitied the writers who lack

a copy editor.

> "Some of my comments are criticism of how an article is written or corrections to factual errors and are directed at the writer. In those cases what I want to gain is for MLive to be better. MLive in my opinion contains a lot of sloppy writing. Considering the turmoil in journalism I'm in sympathy with what's going on and I understand why the product is what it is. I think MLive must have downsized all their old crusty copy editors. So even though I can hardly ever write a sentence without a type or without a questionable grammatical structure, I've taken it upon myself to point it out when something isn't up to my standards."

Commenters were more brief in their responses to the question "what do you feel

you actually gain" than they were in the question phrased "what do you hope to gain,"

perhaps noting a redundancy to the questions. Their answers to what the actually gain do

not fit neatly under any one of the four typologies of Uses & Gratifications Theory,

though they tend to group under entertainment and social interaction. The most common

variant among responses touched on feelings of satisfaction at the act of self-expression,

with nine of the responses hitting this theme that falls under the typology of

entertainment in the form of emotional release. "I probably gain a therapeutic benefit

from expressing my beliefs, which is better than holding them in," said Gregory, while

Brian said he gains "a stroke," a reference to stress. "Mostly just the shots of dopamine,"

said Kenneth. "I feel better sometimes," said Jeffrey. Ronald, Donna and David said they

gain "satisfaction," while for Charles, "it is a form of stress relief." Said Robert, "I consider it excellent mental (exersize.)"

Meanwhile, five commenters cited "insight" when asked what the actually gain from commenting, which falls more into the social interaction typology's need to acquire social empathy. For James, the "insight...helps to discuss issues face to face with people." For Timothy, he sometimes felt he gains "a 'nugget' of that insight that I crave." And Joseph said he has "gained insight into reporting." Comments themselves provided "good information and good insight" for Steven, while Karen gains "a better understanding of other opinions and why maybe I should think about changing mine."

Personal identity typology

Participants were asked to list up to five words that described the way online commenting makes them feel. In total, they provided 61 words or phrases describing their feelings. Sorting the lists of words revealed the word with greatest repetition was "informed," cited six times out of 61 words and phrases. How one groups the words can affect their ranking, however. Expanding "empowered" to include the words and phrases "my little bit of power" and "powerful" brought expressions of power, cited six times, to a tie with "informed" for first place among the sentiments.

Grouping the words "angry," "mad" and "enraged" brought the total references to those feelings to five citations. Cited three times was "connected." Listed twice each were the following: challenged, entertained, frustrated, helpful, involved, knowledgeable, opinionated, sad, satisfied, scared and validated.

The most common feelings among commenters were those of power and anger. The second and third most common sentiments, feeling "informed" and "connected," fall

on the positive emotional spectrum, and positive associations that were cited twice apiece — entertained, helpful, involved, knowledgeable, opinionated, satisfied and validated — outnumbered the negative associations that were cited twice each — challenged, frustrated, sad, scared.

Positive feelings outweigh the negative when these commenters engage in online conversation on the news site. Among all the words that participants listed, expressions that could be coded as positive feelings far outnumber those with negative connotations. All of the positive words were as follows: addictive, ageless, aggressive, assertive, balanced, clarifying, comfortable, confident, connected, contributing, convincing, correcting, empowered, entertained, "feel good about sharing information," fun, grateful, knowledgeable, heard, helpful, hopeful, immediate, important, in touch, inclusive, informed, insightful, interactive, involved, "my little bit of power," opinionated, participant, participating, powerful, respected, smart, smarter, snarky, subversive, satisfied, thoughtful, uplifted, validated and voice.

The negative emotions were the following: aggressive, alarmed, angry, bored, challenged, cheap, confused, depressed, enraged, exasperated, frustrated, hopeless, lazy, mad, sad, scared, useless and vulnerable.

The adjectives that commenters supplied speak to the aspect of personal identity that is part of Uses & Gratifications Theory. Their adjective word choices show that they seem to gain insight into themselves and reinforce their personal values by commenting. It can be concluded that these commenters on the whole feel more positively than negatively about their emotions when commenting on news articles, though it is notable that along with euphoric emotions such as uplifted, respected, ageless and knowledgeable

came the lows of anger, fear, depression and vulnerability.

Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online?

Participants by far prefer anonymity to using a true identity on the site. Of the 27 participants, two used their true names on the website. The rest created pen names, some incorporating variations of their true names. The site allows users to choose their names and avatars, the pictorial representation that appears alongside their names, so long as it falls within the bounds of what the site's monitors deem good taste. Commenters' primary reasons for supporting anonymous commenting fell into the broad categories of nutjobs, jobs and enhanced free expression.

Nutwings

By far the greatest explanation for a need for anonymity was fear of other commenters. That is perhaps unsurprising, given the most common adjectives cited in relation to how commenting made these commenters feel were variations on the themes of power and anger. Eight of the commenters expressed concerns about possible retaliation or retribution for expressing opinions that run counter to those who would "resort to harassment as a response," as commenter Daniel said.

Said Timothy, "I do feel it necessary for protection from those that may use ones involvement (regardless of the content) on a site as a conduit to predatory behavior." Richard said, "probably due to safety concerns." Said Brian, "There is always the element of retaliatory action. There are some crazies out there, and a LOT of them are online. Given the violence in this country, identifying yourself could certainly lead to a visit from some gun nut or mentally unstable person."

Said commenter Donald, "Anonymity … breaks some of the more likely-to-happen barriers of retribution among peers." Commenter Donna described how she became victim of an online smear campaign, leading him to believe anonymity was the best choice. "A few years ago, I got trolled by someone who knew who I was and my name ended being mud across the internet. Googling my name brought up some nasty lies," she wrote. Said Charles, "It also soothes the fear (rational or not) of real-world consequences for comments that are unpopular." Commenter James expressed a common refrain among respondents who do not trust their peers to behave rationally, asking, "Can you completely trust the mental state of those in which you verbally joust?"

Jobs

While fear of attack by other commenters was the most often cited reason that anonymity is needed, fear of workplace consequences ranked second. Five of 27 respondents expressed concern that their online comments could harm them in the workplace or other social venues. Commenter Robert said anonymity "allows honest opinion that might create problems for someone at their job, family, church, etc." Commenter Joseph said he'd say half of what he now expresses online if he had to affix his true name to it. "The other half could offend my employer, or friends, or family," he said. "I deal with customers who hold divergent political views," explained Steven. " My employer also has strong political views. My identity could affect my relationship with these people." Donald said he can "sleep a little better at night with the trust that if my comments are too controversial it would make any prospective employer or members of the community's job difficult of finding out my identity." Meanwhile, Donna offered a

real-world example of non-tenured professor whose blogging could cost him his job.

More honesty

Several commenters indicated that concealing their identities frees them to be more honest in their commentary. Seven of 27 commenters cited reasons of more free expression, greater candor in comments and a boldness that using their true names would mitigate. Two commenters, however, also noted that anonymity is, as Timothy expressed, "a double-edged sword. On one side, it may help someone to speak their mind more freely. On the other hand (it) may also allow someone to be more devious — for no other reason than being devious." Agreed Gregory, "anonymity can produce more honesty as well as more destructive comments."

Also falling under the typology of personal identity was the question, "Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset?" The majority of respondents said that they have felt uncomfortable or upset because of the way others have responded to their online comments.

Seventeen said they had been made to feel bad, while nine of 27 said they were unfazed by others' comments. Seventeen of 27 commenters have felt uncomfortable or upset because of the way others have responded to their online comments. Participant Thomas explained the pitfalls of virtual communication:

> "It is natural to be upset with a comment or reply from time to time. I'm sure the media writers feel the same way. It happens whether in conversation or in text. The big difference with online comments is you can't see the person's face to read facial expression. Things can be taken out of context of the persons meaning. Humor and sarcasm often don't come through well in text, so it's best not to take every comment at face value and let it bother you. The person may have trouble expressing themselves, or they may be VERY good at it and are just a jerk."

Others also expressed irritation with commenters who seem to be trying to injure the feelings of others on the site. "Comments that address my character rather than my statements are sometimes hurtful," said Daniel. Karen, too, said name-calling makes her uncomfortable. William said he is made to feel upset or uncomfortable "every single day," as did Brian. "There are some very immature contributors passing off what I reference as 'partisan tripe.' The level of arrogance is running off the charts, and civility is at an all-time low," William said. It's the "passive-aggressive personalities" that upset Donna, while "ideological arguments are upsetting sometimes" for Gregory. "When someone clearly has an agenda, and everything in their comments points to it like a neon sign, even though they deny it, I get annoyed," said Charles. Ronald said the feelings of discomfort are par for the course with online communication.

> "Sometimes people can push your buttons whether via stupidity, ignorance, repeated trolling or parroting the same lines over and over, or just downright cruelty, whether in a violation of a site's commenting policies or not. But, it's the internet. Sometimes you have bad days, sometimes they have bad days. You either learn something about how you present yourself or how others respond to rhetoric. Everyone has bad days and sometimes you become the subject of a bully as much as you become the bully and may not even realize it. I think every person should have the right to edit or delete their comments."

Nine of 27 commenters said they were not made uncomfortable by other commenters. For Kevin, the reason he was unbothered was the other commenters' predictability, while Richard explained, "Debate encourages me. When it becomes an 'attack' personally I don't reply." Similarly, Steven said he could "blow the negative stuff off and then hit right back, if I'm in the mood for banter." Joseph said he is "annoyed more than anything," while David said he is sometimes "frustrated with the

responses others make to the topic." James said he is not uncomfortable except "if you feel you have hurt someone's feelings … which is never the intent."

Avatar

Question No. 12 was "Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it?" Avatars were not the norm for the participants, who for the most part allowed the default silhouette of a person serve as the picture that appears beside their name. When it came to choosing a username, variations on their true names and references to their communities tied as most common. Examining the name choices of the four women also was instructive as to their cognizance of gender and age discrimination on the site.

Seven commenters use their actual names, either with initials or the complete first and last name. Seven more used names that included geographic references to their regions, hometowns and even in one case house number. Four created names from pop culture or literary references, and four others used nicknames from their high-school days. Three others didn't fit neatly into a category, choosing readily available monikers to reflect their feelings at the moment they chose their usernames.

Of the five women, four chose gender-neutral monikers and one uses her true name. Mary didn't explain her choice of username, which includes a geographic reference. Donna's username is a gender-neutral string of letters and numerals. Susan uses her true first and last name. Linda and Karen said they had reasons to cloak their age and gender. Linda chose a gender-neutral name because in posting on articles about Major League Baseball's Detroit Tigers, "I felt I needed a name that did not let other posters know I was a female because it was plain female posters got no respect. After a

time it was also plain to see that most of the posters were wasting my times with their coarse discussions or insults to each other and their idiotic posts." Karen changed her name to a non-descriptive acronym. "I used to have a username with the word grandma in it but received some nasty comments from the younger generation who have no respect for others."

Social interaction and integration typology

While some consumers turn to forms of media to meet their needs for integration and social interaction, it can't be said that most MLive users who took part in the surveys are going to the website because they find a sense of community there. Thirteen of 27 commenters said they do not see themselves belonging to an online community. While 14 said they do feel a part of an online community, half were careful to clarify that the community of which they are a part is not the MLive community but instead some other online community. It is clear that these commenters, at least, do not come to MLive and engage in the comment streams because they feel they meet their friends there, or because the participants there substitute for real-life companionship, a descriptor of the social interaction and integration typology.

One interesting note is that among the 13 commenters for whom there was no feeling of community and belonging on online, participation was not markedly less than among those who did identify themselves as belonging to an online community at MLive. Among those who didn't feel a part of an MLive community, unpleasant behavior is one reason that Linda cited in her response: "People have become very vicious and insulting with the ability to hide behind anonymity." She described her commenting as an "occasional thing." Echoed Brian, who said posts comments in the evenings,

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"Commenting is purely an individual sport." Donald said he is "simply a lone guest on any website I visit," and he comes to he commenting sections of MLive "whenever I have time."

The most visceral among the no's came from Kenneth, who said, "Especially not part of a MLive community. Frankly I think many, maybe most, of the frequent commenters on MLive have serious personality disorders. I don't think I want to be part of their community. At least I hope I'm not part of their community." Yet although he is repelled by the online community, he said he visits the site at least three times a day and comments weekly. While these individuals may not want to be identified with the online commenting community at MLive, they were committed to the habit of engaging in it. Among the seven respondents who ascribed themselves to an online community and did not rule out the MLive community as their own, commenting was a daily or weekly habit. William both connected with the MLive community and bemoaned the incivility he found there. In answer to another question, he revealed he checks the site daily, morning, afternoon and late at night. He said:

> "Absolutely it's a community. The sad fact in my view is what once was an enjoyable experience of the sharing of opinions and a healthy spirited exchange of ideas has become an exercise in futility. The trolls that frequent the site have overrun the discussions with immature juvenile banter that often has nothing to do with the issue under discussion. As of late it has become much more obvious that there are those with multiple personas offering and reinforcing their own opinions, regardless of the merits of their detractors' contributions.
> They are more interested in flinging ad hominem attacks than furthering the discussion in a positive light. I am well aware this comes with the territory, yet I do not appreciate what the forum has evolved into.
> Even as I make the observation it is not lost upon me that my critics would most likely say the very same things about me. Whether they are correct depends upon one's political ideology. Especially considering the present political climate in Michigan. Passions run high on both sides of the aisle."

For Joseph, who said he commented during work breaks, the community sense came from familiarity with the habits of other commenters. "I'm not deeply engaged with them, but I know their traits, and they know some of mine," he said, going on to identify the themes and familiar saws of other commenters, using their online handles. "And there are at least five others I recognize and can predict their comments. They know I live in the city, don't mind paying taxes, and support all positive changes to (Grand Rapids.)" James, who called commenting a "daily pleasure," picked up that theme, explaining, "you have (your) allies and your adversaries." Said Charles, for whom commenting was a "daily unwind," "On MLive, there seems to be a group of commenters who gravitate to certain topics, and the back-and-forth can be on a very familiar level, both positive and negative." "It's semi-casual or somewhat informal at time," said Steven, who commented on evenings and weekends, "if exchanges are more than once with a particular person(s)."

Another seven commenters agreed that they do find community online, but not on MLive. Four of the seven cited their Facebook communities, while another noted he is part of a Twitter community. Explained Michael, who said he commented one to two times per week, "...for news, I don't repeatedly interact with the same people, so it really doesn't feel like a community." Said Gregory, "If Facebook is considered an online community, then I certainly belong to that one. … I also belong to a message board that is fairly edgy." He may not identify with the MLive community, but Gregory was logged in during work breaks, evenings and weekends, he reported. Said Gary, "I already am on Facebook. I don't know if I have time for anything else." Even so, he said that he logged onto MLive every day upon awaking at 5:30 a.m. with his children. Interestingly, three of

the seven described having daily commenting habits, logging in each morning or each

evening. Another said she spends "a lot of time online" and has "time to comment often."

It is an interesting juxtaposition that these commenters don't identify with an MLive

community yet spend a significant routinized amount of the time engaging on the site.

How comment fits into a typical day

Thirteen of 27 commenters said that commenting online was a daily activity, with

10 more who were nonspecific about their frequency of commenting, three who said they

comment weekly and one who comments about once per month. Of those who comment

daily, the number who indicated they comment multiple times throughout a day was

seven. William captured the sentiment that he will frequent the site more when he is in

the midst of a debate.

> "As a retiree, I have all kinds of time to peruse the numerous headlines across
> Michigan on MLive. There isn't a day that goes by where I don't at least check in
> and decide if there's any point in offering my opinions. … I generally check out
> MLive in the morning, again in the afternoon and again late night depending upon
> whether I have become involved in a spirited debate."

Gary, too, shared a routine ("Usually I do it when I get up at 5:30 with my kids")

but said he engaged more heavily when "someone writes about something I said." For the

two of them and Charles, MLive is meeting their social needs. "If I find something worth

commenting on, it becomes a form (of) entertainment, particularly if it becomes a back-

and-forth discussion," Charles said. "It's part of my daily unwind after work."

Another tier of daily commenters, three of them work commenting into their

workdays. They included Gregory, who commented "during workbreaks, and in the

evenings and weekends," and Joseph, who said he used commenting "if I need a

distraction for a couple minutes or a break from a project I check MLive. I never

comment during evenings or weekends. Just 8-5 Monday-Friday." Steven said he would

comment "during slow time at work, but mostly when off work (evenings and

weekends.)" Thomas, a retiree, described how MLive provided a sort of job structure. "I

have always got up early (3:45 a.m.) to read/study before work, so now I just go online

when I get up in the morning. I may be online for a few hours, or all day if something

major is going on in the news," he wrote.

Both Brian and Richard used MLive in the evenings, while Daniel made it a part

of his breakfast routine. James called commenting a "daily pleasure," while Ronald

aimed for restraint: "I try not to spend more than one hour per day reading and

commenting," he said. Kevin said, "I look at articles 3-4 times per day."

A second group of commenters said they took part one to two times per week.

They were Michael, Kenneth and John. While he may comment less often, reading

MLive articles is very much a part of Kenneth's day:

> "While my commenting goes in streaks, I only comment on average about once a
> week, so commenting doesn't really fit anywhere in a typical day. Depending on
> what I'm doing and when I'm home, I usually read MLive three times a day, once
> after breakfast, then around noon or in the afternoon, then again in the
> evening. Since when I do comment, it is (in) response to something I've read, my
> commenting would fall into that somewhat."

For all the commenters, posting commentary has become a routine, whether daily,

weekly or less often still. Their participation matches Uses & Gratifications' typology of

integration and social interaction. Their habit of using online commenting to connect with

others indicates that the habit gives them a sense of belonging and identification with

others. It provides social interaction and perhaps serves as a substitute for or supplement

to real-life companionship.

What commenters contribute

Answers to the question, "What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?" parallel the themes that arise from the answers to what commenters hope to get from commenting and what they feel they actually gain. Primarily, commenters indicated that they contribute their knowledge, cited by nine of 27 respondents. The concept that the commenters supply a different viewpoint to the website landed a close second with eight citations. In four responses apiece, commenters said they hope they inject civility and get a laugh. In last place, with three citations, were assertions from commenters who felt their contribution to the site was truth. The desire to provide truth to the site is related to commenters who said they contribute knowledge, with an added edge of egotism.

Three of four themes that participants shared about what their comments contribute to the website were heard before: sharing knowledge, the most commonly cited contribution, was echoed in the answers to what commenters gain and hope to gain under the categories of being heard and educating others. Offering a different viewpoint, which was the second-most-common contribution that commenters cited, follows the same concept as that of being heard. The desire to bring civility was cited both as what commenters hoped to gain and what commenters contributed.

For a group of eight commenters, offering a distinct point of view is their greatest contribution to the website. Reflecting liberal views moves Jeffrey — "I refute right-wing nonsense and other dumb ideas," he said — and William, who has "a voice of over 30+ years of experience working on the inside of Organized Labor." Gary said he was

motivated to provide another view of education. "I don't want the education debate to be one-sided because there are people who already think they are powerless," he said. When it comes to cleaning up the conversation, Karen said she brought "my common sense of decency," and Linda brought "a touch of civility." Robert promised that he "will not let an incorrect statement or observation go unchallenged (depending on the circumstances.) I like to think I do so in a nonconfrontational way." Kevin had a wise-guy approach: "I try to get people to realize they are not impressing anybody with their snide comments," he said.

One concept that appeared in answers to the question about contributions to the website was not previously raised: Some commenters hoped they got a laugh. This speaks to the social need of Uses & Gratifications Theory, with commenters hoping to meet their own entertainment needs and also to entertain others. Michael said he thought he provided "truth, wisdom and humor for the unwashed." James' contribution: "Hopefully some smiles... I don't get (too) deep with my insights...I tend more for wit." For Charles, injecting humor made the site better, and the site is where he found a community of valued others, as he explained it:

> "Besides making a point from time to time, I also try to be humorous about it. I find that reading a long string of parroted comments can get boring, and I assume others do, as well. If I can offer a witty comment or a pun, or get the author of the story to respond to something, then I feel like I've made it more interesting. There are commenters whose name I look for; I hope there are those who look for me."

Commenters' rights

Interestingly, the predominant response to the question, "What rights do you feel you have as a commenter," revolved around issues of censorship on MLive. Ten of 27 respondents talked about how their rights interface with having comments pulled or

deleted from the site, or the behavior of others who would see that happen to inappropriate comments. Those who used their answers as a place to take a stand against being censored were Michael, Gary, Gregory, Charles and Joseph.

Those who supported censoring comments that cross the guidelines established in MLive's community rules were Kevin, Karen, James, Susan and Richard. Joseph said he would prefer no comment moderation by the website, explaining, "I do not like it when MLive erases my posts. But if they feel they have to, I think they should 1. contact the poster about why the post was erased, and 2. put a message in the thread stating that a comment by X has (been) erased." Charles said he felt commenting is a right. "I am allowed to say whatever is on my mind, within the confines of what the moderators allow. I have had comments deleted occasionally; sometimes I know why, sometimes I don't." For commenter Michael, censoring came down to differences with his opinions. "I have the right to express myself in manner consistent with prevailing social norms and not be censored by bluenoses or due to the objection of those who don't get the joke, and not to have my opinions censored just because someone finds them objectionable." Yet censoring has a place for Kevin. "No need to use vile language or try to call someone out," he said. "I get really frustrated when things get (racist.)" James too saw a use for pulling some comments offline. "If they cross the lines of decency or sensitivity...pull them...no issues with that," he said. And Susan bemoaned the state of incivility online in general. "I have a right to my opinion. I don't have a right to belittle, threaten, or demean others. I wish others felt that way, but it seems that online commenting gives people permission to be assholes."

Next up in order of frequency cited were freedom of speech, self-expression and no expectation of rights on the privately owned website, each referenced seven times apiece.

First Amendment assertions were an interesting juxtaposition with commenters who acknowledged that on MLive's website, MLive makes the rules. As a private company, MLive Media Group has the right to assert any language policing it chooses. Still, First-Amendment commenters felt that constitutional guarantees to free expression should extend to the comments they post. "Freedom of speech is about it," said Steven. "Of course, there are rules about civility and no personal attacks, but I might push it a tad, if the individual deserves it." For David, the First Amendment right to free speech extended to online posting. "I have the right to comment. This is America, isn't it?" Contrast those assertions with those of commenters who felt MLive has all the cards. "No rights," responded Michael. "It's a pure privilege. It's not my site — I'm a guest." Said Thomas, "Their website, their rules." And agreed Donald, "on any privately held website, none."

Commenters' responsibilities

The largest cohort of respondents shared this view of their online responsibility: They should foster civility on the site. Twenty respondents of 27 cited this specifically, while three more cited civility and honesty as their responsibilities. David's response read like the rules on the cabin wall at sleepaway camp: "No swearing, put-downs, posting of inappropriate video or photos." Concurred Joseph, "do not make threats... do not be obscene," who added that the responsibilities in the comment streams are "less than they are walking down the street or in a classroom, or at a dinner party." Timothy wanted "to

remember I am a guest on someone else's site." Feelings figured into the answers of James ("don't hurt feelings") and Mark ("treat others as I would like to be treated.") Follow the website rules is the guiding principle for Robert and William. For Donald, part of good citizenship involves admitting "when you're wrong or misinformed." "I have a responsibility to keep the level of dialogue intelligent and civil in order for the forum to remain relevant and inviting," said Daniel. "I believe it is the responsibility of each individual participating in an online discussion to help create a culture where democracy thrives."

Honesty was a crucial responsibility cited by seven participants — three of whom also cited civility in their responses. Those to call for both honesty and civility were Gary, Charles and Donna. "Never lie to make a point," intoned Charles. "My responsibility is to be honest," Gary said. And for Donna, "I feel a responsibility to verify my sources when I post information and not spread rumors that are unsourced or sketchy," the commenter said. In a dose of honesty, Donna added, "I feel a responsibility to be polite but I sometimes fail at that."

Citing simply honesty were Ronald, Brian, Steven and Michael, who seem to value a comment stream that is truthful and want to play their part in keeping it so. "I have to be honest and accurate as I can be," Ronald said, while Brian described his responsibility as "not repeating falsehoods." Michael, too, said it's his responsibility "to avoid making unsupported claims and be able to back up what I'm saying with information from reliable sources." Meanwhile, Steven identified honesty as a responsibility yet confessed to providing misinformation to tweak his online adversaries.

"I am not perfect, but I do try to be accurate about the information I provide. I will double check my statements before posting, although if I am in a hurry to get something posted, I do not check it 100%. I do check it 95% however. But I admit that once in a while, when dealing with an individual or group who obviously do not care about the quality of information they are posting, I might dish something right back at them that is not quite valid. Since it takes up my time to double-check their misinformation, I like making them take time to try and prove that I gave them misinformation as well. They might prove me wrong, but I made them work. I like knowing that I forced them to do that."

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The commenters in this study are driven to MLive.com by the need for information/surveillance, with more than half requiring the news every day, as well as a desire for social interaction, exploration of personal identity and a desire for diversion, to amuse themselves and others. They have a high need for information. They feel informed and connected, along with powerful and angry, more than any other emotions when commenting. They feel more positive emotions than negative emotions. The act of commenting and engaging on the site feeds their sense of connectedness to the world.

The act of commenting also has heightened the participants' sense of responsibility for being informed, sharing information and understanding viewpoints other than their own. Having that broader understanding feeds their sense of responsibility to educate and inform others, to be heard and to see new points of view. Applying Uses & Gratifications Theory to this population and the behavior of online commenting, these individuals can and do choose to spend their time contributing to the conversation on the news website.

In answer to the research question, how do online commenters perceive their responsibilities, their roles and their rights, they feel they have a responsibility to educate, be honest and inject civility. They do not view themselves as journalists but do see themselves as teachers and watchdogs against bias, in the reporting or from other commenters. They consider their words their right and they want to control them and understand when there words are removed from the site.

The research question asking how commenters seek to represent themselves showed how and why they favor anonymity. Some use their true names out of the principle that one should stand behind what one says, but most prefer anonymity primarily because the comments climate is frightening and other commenters are viewed as potentially dangerous. Another reason is commenters' knowledge that their views might not fly at work, either with the boss or clients. Lastly comes the idea that they are more candid using assumed names. However, many choose usernames that were personal reflections incorporating totems of identity. Gender and age-based attacks led to depersonalization of usernames in a few cases.

As to the research question seeking to understand what satisfaction that asynchronous computer-aided community conversation yields for the commenters, they reported that they feel informed and empowered. Positive emotions outweigh negative ones, even as the commenters deplore trolls. They view themselves as teachers and as having been taught. They read a broader selection of stories to prepare their lesson plans. They feel informed, under the Uses & Gratifications umbrella of surveillance/information seeking typology; they feel connected, a part of the social interaction typology; and they choose meaningful names indicating a connection with personal identity typology.

The research did not ask commenters what means they had used to express views in the past. An area for future research is to understand if the act of commenting is an addition to website users' routines, rather than a replacement for some other activity. In the pre-digital news age, a reader's only clear recourse when spurred to share views or reactions about a news story would have been to write a letter to the editor or to telephone the reporter or the editor. Given the variety and frequency of online

commenting, it would seem that this population is larger and thus new compared to the letter-writers of yesteryear.

Uses & Gratifications Theory tells us that when a medium no longer satisfies its user's needs, the user will move on to another medium. There is no reason to assume this group of commenters will tire of the act of commenting and cease to use the news forums online, however. For this group, the act of posting online comments after news stories is satisfying in a range of ways, meeting their desires to educate others and the need to be heard. The positive feelings that come from commenting outweigh the negative ones, though most participants described an unruly environment in which other commenters have at times hurt their feelings. Despite that, they are drawn to connect and contribute in the comments.

The low response rate and small sample size is a drawback to this research. With a small and self-selected sample, it would be inappropriate for future researchers or news professionals to assume that these 27 respondents are an even representation of MLive.com's commenters. The information gleaned and analyzed here gives insight into the thought processes of these 27 commenters. There is danger in assuming that they speak for the greater whole of online commenting. In addition, the majority were posters of comments that could be viewed as thoughtful, neutral or positive, in contrast to their own stated views that the tenor of comments on the site was not civil or edifying. It could be that the kindest among commenters were interested in research about commenter culture, while trolls would rather troll than fill out questionnaires.

The study did not seem to attract peripheral commenters, but rather a majority of respondents, more than half of them, comment at least weekly. The idea that the

participants were light site users doesn't bear up under review. Thirteen of 27 commenters said that they comment online daily, and of those 13, seven of them said they comment multiple times daily. Ten more commenters did not specify how often they posted comments, three commented weekly and one said he comments about once per month.

Once a site user acted upon the email from MLive.com's engagement officer by sending an email to the researcher, the level of follow-through and return of a questionnaire was quite high. Once committed, the users almost always completed the process. While it is speculative to conclude the reasons for the diminutive response rate and sample size, future researchers could try for a better reaction and find greater value in soliciting participation of commenters in their natural habitat. That is to say, the invitation to participate in research could appear in the comments sections on the news articles on which users already had left comments. This would of course require the permission of the company that owns the website. The researcher did not attempt to seek permission to solicit participation in that way.

The users of the site agree, when they check the box that indicates acceptance of the site's terms of use, that MLive.com has the right to contact them. However, it is not a common occurrence that site users receive email from MLive.com, aside from those who have subscribed to e-newsletters or other services. To receive such a message in their in-boxes could be off-putting. Seeing the solicitation to participate in academic research in the same forum where the commenter already is at ease communicating could lead to a more natural and immediate response. It is hoped that it would also improve participation. Should MLive.com or other news sites seek to know their commenters

better, perhaps they would be best served reaching out to their commenters in the comments spaces rather than in their users' private, though freely supplied, email accounts.

No question, there is a community that commenters want to influence, despite the fact that most commenters don't view the MLive.com community as a friendly place and don't want to be considered members of it. Even so, most participants comment weekly, if not daily or multiple times daily. Some view it as their responsibility to add civility to the site. Others consider themselves truth-tellers, setting other commenters and news writers straight. One commenter admitted that while he recognized some of his own destructive, trolling behaviors, he viewed such actions as his responsibility to tweak users or reporters whom he viewed as deserving of teasing or punishment.

Perhaps it is because of the commenters' concerns about the mental state of other commenters that they prefer anonymity. The majority has been made to feel uncomfortable by the way other commenters treated them on the site. Incivility affects the site's users negatively. Using false names also frees them to say things that could negatively impact their personal or professional lives. In that vein, some felt that they could be more honest using a nom de plume.

Even so, commenters did not wish overly to divorce their selves from their comments. Variations on true names and monikers that show community connections were the most commonly chosen, with nicknames close behind. While a reader might not be able to identify the person behind the comments of motownsound, that user feels connected enough to Detroit and music to adopt that as an identifier. Plaidbadger incorporates a high school mascot with the patterned fabric from a bicycle racing flag.

Their identities, while concealed, are tightly woven into their assumed names. The commenters seem to want to recognize themselves in their usernames while remaining unidentifiable to others. Meantime, misogyny and age discrimination led some commenters to depersonalize their usernames to avoid those kinds of attacks. For these participants, the site and its rules of comportment did not do enough to protect them from bearing the brunt of typed attack. Their recourse was the self-defense of a less identifiable moniker. The website would do well to consider the climate its users have created with regard to gender and age discrimination.

Most commenters recognize their rights on a private website are limited by its terms of use, but themes of freedom of speech are popular. Researchers and news professionals can learn from these commenters that dedication is strong to the act of online commenting and expression even while it is sometimes hurtful emotionally for the commenter who comes under attack. An environment where anonymity is prized comes in part because it unfetters open discourse but perhaps in even larger part because bullies are present and incivility is frightening. These commenters come to the site often despite that feeling. That is a powerful tool that MLive.com can leverage, that despite commenter incivility, commenters who consider their own behavior to be civil are drawn to remain as participants because the satisfactions of power, being informed and being heard outweigh the negatives that can come with commenting; i.e., coming under attack.

It is left to news professionals to wonder if the level of engagement and the breadth of participation could be greater if commenters didn't feel the need to be protected by the shield of false names. The desire to incorporate personal touches to their

usernames and/or avatars is evidence that these commenters feel personal attachment and identity to their words that could be coaxed into the open in another atmosphere.

Implications of this study to the website itself include the consideration of changes to the comments spaces that these particular commenters indicated would be welcome. Among those desired changes: Commenter Ronald expressed a desire to be able to change what he said, or even to take it back. As the site now operates, a user cannot edit his or her own comments once posted. The card laid is the card played, as it were. The only way to clarify a point is to post another comment, or to "flag" the comment in hopes that a moderator would review it, deem it afoul of the site's terms of use and then delete it. On Facebook, a person can edit a comment for a brief period after posting it before the only options left are to leave it as-is or delete it. On MLive.com, that functionality is not present. Another implication of the research for the site is to consider the means of moderation in the comments spaces. User Joseph wishes as a poster he would receive contact explaining when and why one of his posts is taken down from the site. Users consider the comments spaces their spaces. They want to understand what happens there.

The satisfaction of computer-aided, asynchronous community conversation is manifold, allowing commenters to reveal sides of themselves behind the protective shield of anonymity, to teach and titillate others, to learn more about their world and to try to persuade others to adopt their views of it. They seek to represent themselves in ways that protect their privacy while revealing their views about the website, news stories and each other. They see their rights as limited and at the same time constitutionally enshrined,

their roles as watchdogs, educators, civilizing influences, and punishers of those they deem in need of comeuppance.

They consider it their responsibility on the site to maintain truth and order. No commenter seemed to adopt the view that he or she is a journalist, though they approach the commenting role with seriousness and dedication. When reporters engage in the comments and acknowledge the commenters, or when comments are elevated into other news posts, that validates the commenters and makes them feel valued as part of the online community.

The ability for readers of online news, sports and entertainment content to respond, in real time and in a public way, to what they read has created a dynamic, ever-changing presentation of online news. No longer is news communication a one-way street, with experts divining and presenting information the public should know, as determined by the trained professionals in newsrooms, while the public consumes the information and, at best, offers another view, a reaction or a critique through the stilted and plodding pace of the Letters to the Editor in subsequent editions of the printed paper.

Online commentary contributes to the whole news product and makes those who engage in it co-creators of that product. Understanding what prompts these behaviors and creates news site loyalties is key to researchers' grasp of how news and information has changed, and what role an engaged, active readership plays in it.

Respondent: Jeffrey

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I saw it after stories I read online.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Desktop PC

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Read stories in spare time, comment if I have strong feelings about story content or Mlive itself.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes, because Mlive/Booth wants to raise revenue by page views, they try to drum up comments instead of get actual news. People who rely on Booth/Mlive for news get less hard news and more fluff, more reposted "content", and more writers shamelessly begging for comments. It's cheaper to get people in comment wars than it is to get actual news, so the public gets less (and lower quality) news.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to.
I subscribe to print editions of the New York Times and Chicago Tribune. I watch 60 Minutes on CBS most every week. I watch TV network news and local TV news rarely. I do not subscribe to pay cable TV. I listen to NPR radio on WBEZ. I get some news from Internet sources including newspaper websites, items my Facebook friends post and the leftist press. I read Harper's magazine.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.
Angry. Cheap. Mad. Sad. Enraged.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Maybe Facebook, but I don't like Facebook. I like seeing what my friends post but Facebook's format has too much advertising and is too pedestrian.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? It shouldn't be. Probably necessary for sites like Mlive who think giving it away for free is a solid model. Then they can make "content" out of anonymous comments.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? No.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? Username reflects my feelings.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I want right-wing types to know that liberals are out there. I refute the arguments of others. I want Mlive/Booth to know how far they have sunk.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Little. I feel better sometimes.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I refute right-wing nonsense and other dumb ideas.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? None. It's Mlive/Booth's website.

17. What are your responsibilities online? I suppose being civil, but most of my responsibilities are similar to those in real-life.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? It is idiotic. I don't know why newspapers think it is ok for people to comment anonymously just because it's the internet.

Demographic information
Gender: male
Year of birth: 1982
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Bachelor's degree __X
        Trade certification _X_
Occupation: Student
Income: $0
Race: White

Respondent: Donna
1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree)
 1

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? Quite a few years ago, I started commenting on the eBay New to eBay discussion board helping new eBayers who had questions or concerns. I also used to comment during the "Wild West" days on Yahoo.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than MLive.com? Yes: Twitter, blogs, Yahoo

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? PC

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I spend a lot of time online. My husband is retired and I am self-employed so I work online and have the time to comment often.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Somewhat. I've found that some sites are perfectly willing to pay attention to their readers (and their opinions) and I tend to put more faith in those sites.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Almostly entirely, I get my news online. The variety is better than local media and I don't have cable. When news from one source seems iffy, the online world has many options for checking facts. Also, obviously, the digital world moves more quickly on news stories than local print or TV can or does. I no longer subscribe to any print media.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Helpful, knowledgeable, grateful, opinionated

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Sort of. I guess I consider myself a member of the Twitter community. As for other sites, in the past I have considered myself a member of their communities but most tend to get cliqueish and I don't care for that so I avoid getting too involved on any site these days.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? For me, it definitely is. A few years ago, I got trolled by someone who knew who I was and my name ended being mud across the internet. Googling my name brought up some nasty lies. Also, an example of why anonymity is best can be found in the current situation of Erik Loomis. He blogs and tweeted using his real name. He made a rhetorical comment that rightwing internet trolls pounced on and turned it into a so-called threat. They reported him to the police, who interviewed him. They also complained to the university where he teaches. His university didn't back him up but, instead, just said "he doesn't speak for us." And now Loomis, a professor who does not have tenure, may lose his job.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Yes. I deal with negative comments much better these days than I used to but I admit passive-aggressive personalities can upset me.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My user name on MLive came about because, when I registered, I tried multiple user names which all were already taken. Frustration had me saying OMG so I used that with a string of numbers. I do not use the

same ID on other sites. I have a different ID for every site. Where I do use an avatar, I find them on the free avatar sites. I just pick something that I won't get sick of looking at.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? When I comment, usually it is to inform. If I have more knowledge of the subject than is presented in the article I will post links to further reading. Also, commenting is generally either preaching to the choir or talking to others who have already made up their minds. So my point in commenting is often to reach the lurkers, those who rarely if ever comment and those who don't have as much time as I do to be thoroughly informed.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Sometimes satisfaction, sometimes frustration. And I gain a sense that at least I tried to inform and if even one person learns from it, for me it's a job well done.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Information, views and opinions. Recently, I had more current knowledge about something than MLive did so I told the journalist he should probably recheck his sources and update the wrong information.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? The only rights I have are the rights that any individual website gives me as a commenter.

17. What are your responsibilities online? I feel a responsibilty to verify my sources when I post information and not spread rumors that are unsourced or sketchy. I feel a responsibility to be polite but I sometimes fail at that.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Not really anything more about commenting but I would like to say that I would love to read your thesis when it's done. If that's not possible, I understand. Very interesting subject to me.

Respondent: Kevin

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 8

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? Simply by reading some of the responses, I felt compelled to have my opinion heard. I have strong opinions against the Obama administration. I really try to set people strait.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? No

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? Laptop

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I look at articles 3-4 times per day.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes, I took me quite a while to transition away from getting my news through the newspaper.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. G. R. Press, MLive, FOX news on my T.V., FOX online.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Comfortable, Assertive, knowledgeable,

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Not really.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online?No, I use my last name because I am not hiding from anything.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Not really. I can pretty much telegraph what other people are ging to say.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? Simply my first name initial and last name. No avatar pic.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? It helps me get a different perspective on things. Sometimes when I get comments back I realize that perhaps I was looking at thing wrong. I think it's healthy to debate.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? A forum to let my views be known and who knows I might actually give someone else a different perspective. I try not to be to aggressive. It has also helped my online communication skills that I utilize every day.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Perhaps a different view and I try to get people to realize they are not impressing anybody with their snide comments.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? You have to respect other opinions. No need to use vile language or try to call someone out. I really get frustrated when things get raciest.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Just try to be professional and kind to others.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? It appears to me that almost all of the reporters are liberal. I don't think it's professional of them to let their

political views contaminate an piece they are reporting on. Yes I am a FOX viewer but that does not mean I don't listen to what others say.

Respondent: John

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? That's hard to say. I guess once I had the ability to do so on the Internet.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes; Facebook, yahoo.com, CNN.com

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? Just desktop computers, home and work

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I do it once or twice a week.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes, it adds perspective. It lets me know others feel like I do.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. All of the above. Still get the printed Kalamazoo Gazette and Time Magazine.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. 1, involved, 2, helpful, 3, in touch, 4

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? If you're online then you belong, yes.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? I prefer not to be. Any opinion worth having is worth owning.

 11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? No, see #10.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I use my own name see #10

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Make people aware of how some people feel about an issue.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? See #13

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? See #13

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Same as First Amendment.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Same as First Amendment.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? By using my real name, I am more careful to protect other people's feelings the way you would in a face-to-face conversation.

Demographic information

Gender: male
Year of birth: 1956
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Some post-graduate courses __X
Occupation: print sales
Income: sufficient
Race: Anglo-American, also annual marathon!

Respondent: Joseph

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2. How did you get involved in commenting? This past year -2012 -I started reading all the MLIVE articles on ArtPrize, which was in September. At first I was reading them for content. But then I started reading the comments, and didn't agree. So I signed up and commented a lot. After ArtPrize was over, I was just in the habit of going to MLIVE so I kept going, and kept commenting.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? I did for a couple years at a movie news site, but then the comments got annoying so I stoped commenting there.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? A desktop PC.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I use it at work as a break. If I need a distrcation for a couple minutes or a break from a project I check MLIVE. I never comment during evenings or weekends. Just 8-5 Monday-Friday.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes it has. First, it is interesting to see what other people think of an news story. Sometimes it feels like we didn't even read the same article. Second, interacting with the reporters who wrote the article has been very enlightening. You see why something was not clear, or they link you to past articles that help your understanding of the situation. News in the past was all one way- from the reporter to the person. Now its more of a conversation.

There is a back and forth. Several times I have suggested follow-up articles on topics, and the reporters have done them. (and no, I didn't get any compensation) Also, they have quoted my MLIVE comments in other online articles, and even in print.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Online I go to MLIVE, CNN, IMDB, Weather, Collider (movies) and Hitfix (pop culture.) I also go to Google News. I don't subscribe to any print publications anymore. In the past I had newspaper, wine spectator, Gourmet. But I haven't had those in 10 years. I do not have cable, and I don't watch TV. Sometimes at the Gym I'll watch a news show if nothing else good is on.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Involoved, connected, enlightened, annoyed

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Yes I do feel like I belong to an online community. I'm not deeply engaged with them, but I know their traits and they know some of mine. For example Profcourageous hates the Devos family. He is also very pessimistic, and complains about taxes all the time. Gadfly was GR to have a visitor's booth. And there are at least five others I recognize and can predict their comments. They know I live in the city, don't mind paying taxes, and support all positive changes to GR.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? If it was my real name being posted, I would probably post about 50% of what I currently do. Half the stuff I post about I would be fine people knowing it was me. The other half could offend my employer, or friends, or family.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Never uncomfortable. I don't know about upset either. I would say annoyed more then anything.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I picked Lurker2000 because I thought I would mostly just "lurke" most of the time. The 2000 part is just an old habit. We'd call everything "2000" growing up. Pro Thunder 2000! We thought it was cool. I have thought several times of changing it. However, it was still be anonymous. I would never use my real name. But just something more descriptive of my views.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I don't hope at all. I'm just doing it because so far its been interesting. I didn't seek it out to gain anything.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? I've gained insight into reporting. Also to the wide variety of opinions, beliefs, and stances people have on issues.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I think I contribute a libreral view of the world, which is not always popular in West Michigan. I try and create positive buzz about things I'm excited about, like ArtPrize, food trucks, Grand Rapids WhiteWater, museums, art, dinning. I try and be very positive about these things and give them positive support. On issues like abortion, legalizing marijuana, religion and other issues I try and prevent the liberal side. And if not convince them, at least try to persuade them we should be able to have these views ourselves.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I think comments should be unmoderated. I do not like it when MLIVE erases posts. But if they feel they have to, I think they should 1. contact the poster why the post was ereased, and 2. put a message in the thread stating that a comment by X has be ereased.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Less then they are walking down the street or in a classroom, or at a dinner party. I feel the only responsibilities that apply to everyone are: 1. do not make threats 2. do not be obscene. People can have their own personal beliefs of responsiblity, but I think those 2 are all that the online community should be held to.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I don't comment on sports stories, or financial stories or feel-good stories. I only comment on stories I have an interest in: GR improvement, the arts, and crime. I am fascinated with the crime stories, which surprises me. But I love them. And then the updates as the cases progresss, and how the cops catch them. Its great entertainment.

Demographic information
Gender: male
Year of birth: 1970
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Master's degree __X
Occupation: librarian
Income: 62,000
Race: white

Respondent: Kenneth

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2
That's a 2. Normally I'm a news junkie but several times a year I go out in remote areas where there are no cell phones, internet connections, or newspapers, and I don't miss the news or feel any withdrawal symptoms. Lately I don't even feel any need to catch up when I come back. Maybe it should be a 3.

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? Don't really remember. I probably just had an urge to respond to something I read. I've probably commented ever since there was a

comments option available on Mlive. I remember a couple of times sending comments to writers via e-mail before the comments option was available.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? As far as commercial news sites, only rarely. I think I might have commented on the Detroit Free Press site twice, I think they require Facebook now which I don't do so I guess if I have the urge to comment on one of their articles now I'm out of luck. I've commented once or twice on Crain's Detroit Business site, I don't remember what that was about anymore. I post on average about once a week (which is about how often I post on Mlive) on a non-commercial forum called urbanplanet which concerns itself with news about urban planning and developments and urban living in general. Urbanplanet isn't a news site but usually contains Grand Rapids development news before it hits the regular media. There are a few other forums I regularly read but almost never post to.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? Since I've retired I only use a desktop PC at home. Don't have a smartphone or a tablet, although I may breakdown and buy a tablet for traveling. Don't know if I'd use it for commenting though.

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? While my commenting goes in streaks, I only comment on average about once a week, so commenting doesn't really fit anywhere in a typical day. Depending on what I'm doing and when I'm home, I usually read Mlive three times a day, once after breakfast, then around noon or in the afternoon, then again in the evening. Since when I do comment, it is response to something I've read, my commenting would fall into that routine somewhat.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Not in any way I can think of, although I suppose all experiences change us in some way.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. At home I read the print versions daily of the Detroit Free Press and the Grand Rapids Press. I don't subscribe to them but buy them daily. At home I get basic cable only so I don't see cable news except in waiting rooms or in hotel rooms when I'm traveling. From what I've seen I think I'm healthier for not having cable news at home. I subscribe to the Economist. I think of it as a magazine but they call themselves a newspaper. I read it mostly for the business and international news and in order to get a non-American view of the news. International news, as I'm sure you are aware, is almost completely missing from US newspapers with maybe the exception of the NY Times and the Washington Post. I also subscribe to the New Yorker which of course isn't a newspaper but is a major source of news for me. I think they really do a good job with foreign and some political feature stories. Both of these have their biases. The Economist is written from a conservative Tory attitude that implies the world would be better off if the British Empire was still around. And the New Yorker can be full of itself and self-indulgent and it really does have coastal liberal biases. Hopefully the two of them balance out. I also subscribe to a few magazines that are important to me that are at

least in part news sources; Scientific American, MIT Technology Review, Natural History, and a few others.

As far as online – besides Mlive, I usually look at Google news and click down into what interests me in the headlines.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No I don't and especially not part of a Mlive community. Frankly I think many, maybe most, of the frequent commenters on Mlive have serious personality disorders. I don't think I want to be part of their community. At least I hope I'm not part of their community.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? It is for me, I'm a very private person. As I've got older I more and more do not want to see my name in print. I have no idea why that is. It would probably require expensive psychoanalysis sessions to discover why I feel this way. But since I feel this way I'm careful to try not to post anything that is abusive or personally critical of others. Strangely I've discovered there is a "top commenter" on USA Today forums that posts under my real name (I assume it is also his name – although from what I can tell there are only about three of us in the USA.) Luckily from what I've read of what he's posted, he's pretty reasonable and nothing he's posted would cause me trouble if someone thought it was me.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? No.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I don't entirely remember and since the index by user name in Mlive doesn't go back very far and seems to be broken, I can't go back to the beginning and refresh my memory by looking at my first post. But I think I was responding to something another commenter wrote who irritated me because I thought he was being irrational, so I had to use something so I came up with Mister Rational. I think in retrospect that the name is a little pompous, I think if I were to pick a name again it would be something else. On the other hand it's not so bad that I want to bother to go in and sign up again under a different name.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online?
    My comments usually come in three flavors. What I hope to gain is a little different for each.
    Some of my comments are criticisms of how an article is written or corrections to factual errors and are directed at the writer. In those cases what I want to gain is for Mlive to be better. Mlive in my opinion contains a lot of sloppy writing. Considering the turmoil in journalism I'm in sympathy with what's going on and I understand why the product is what it is. I think Mlive must have downsized all their old crusty copy editors. So even though I can hardly ever write a sentence without a typo or without a questionable

grammatical structure, I've taken it upon myself to point it out when something isn't up to my standards.

Some of my comments are in reply to other posters who I feel are misinformed or have faulty reasoning in their argument, or who I just don't agree with. I suppose ideally what I'd like is to convert those posters to my enlightened views. I don't think I change many minds. Mostly what I gain by posting is the knowledge that I'm standing up to some blatant nonsense. Of course there is so much nonsense posted it's hopeless to try to respond to all of it.

The third type is either a response that is an addition to the story or to something another poster wrote. The article or poster has reminded me of something, either some random fact or reminiscence that I think adds to the story. When I post a comment like this I could flatter myself to think that I'm making others smarter by sharing some of my wisdom, but what I really think I gain is a little shot of dopamine from going through the mental process of thinking through the story.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Not much, I'd say mostly just the shots of dopamine,

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Just to summarize what I wrote in #13: constructive criticism to mlive, constructive criticism to other posters, and I get to share my wisdom.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I don't think I have any rights. Perhaps I have a right to privacy.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Follow the rules and be particularly sensitive to others since I'm posting anonymously.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Nothing more. Sorry if these answers seem flippant but it's late and I'm tired and since I committed to this I wanted to get this done.

Thank you for your participation in this research. Your answers will help the researcher and others better understand the culture of online commenting.

Demographic information
Gender: male
Year of birth: 1946
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Bachelor's degree _X_
Occupation: RETIRED
Income: 100,000+ (but not in the 1 percent)
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: Richard

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 6

2. How did you get involved in commenting? Primarily because of the "ignorance" surrounding comments made regarding education (I am a teacher.)

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? no

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? IPad, Mac Pro

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? After work if time, weekend mornings.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Not really, although I enjoy the interaction online that MLive provides.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. CNN, Fox News, MLive. Freep.com (all these online), rarely T.V.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Not really, most times I simply read comments but topics of government, education usually pique my interest and comments.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Probably due to safety concerns.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Not really. Debate encourages me. When it becomes an "attack" personally, I don't reply.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? 'Feez' was a nickname given to me in high school. It's a shortened version of my last name.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online?
    It's an attempt to share what I view as reality in education and simple the art of debate.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Not much! ☺

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?
- intelligent conversation/debate
- greater understanding of topics I choose to be involved in.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? It's really just an issue of respect

17. What are your responsibilities online? To be respectful of different viewpoints

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? To me it's a harmless way of interacting and discussing topics.

Demographic information
Gender: male
Year of birth: 1967
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Master's degree _X_
Occupation: teacher
Income: 65K
Race: W

Respondent: James

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? compelled too after reading others

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? did the FREEP before they went Facebook

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? home computer

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? daily pleasure

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? yes

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Sunday Detroit news, MLIVE, Freep, Det News, Detroit Yes, CNN, too many sports sites to name.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. It is very addictive and fun.

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Yes, you feel you have you're allies and adversaries.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online?   Definitely...can you completely trust the mental state of those in which you verbally joust

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Not really...only if you feel you have hurt someone's feelings .. which is never the intent

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? cbaccawookie is fun...I've been called a dumb wookie and furry friend

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? information, a pulse for what people think...its fun.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? insight...helps to discuss issues face to face with people

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? hopefully some smiles...I don't get to deep with my insights...I tend more for wit

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? if they cross the lines of decency or sensitivity...pull them...no issues with that

17. What are your responsibilities online? don't hurt feelings

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? it is a joy

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) CBACCAWOOKIE
Gender: M
Year of birth: 1970
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Master's degree X
Occupation: IT Manager
Income: 90000
Race: white

Respondent: Michael

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2. How did you get involved in commenting? responding to articles I'd read - it's more immediate than a letter to the editor

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? yes

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Laptop

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? will get involved in a comment thread about 1-2 times a week

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? yeah, I've realized that there are a lot more right-wing nutcases out there than I ever thought possible

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. newspapers, magazines, news web sites, political opinion sites, cable news, Sunday network news programs. Print newspapers received - Detroit Free Press, New York Times, the New Yorker (at least, the wrapper always used to call it a newspaper)

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. entertained, satisfied, exasperated

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? not for news commenting. I sometimes comment on a site that's strictly humorous and that does feel like a community. But for news, I don't repeatedly interact with the same people, so it really doesn't feel like community.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Sometimes, particularly when expressing opinions that could get you in trouble with your employer.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Sometimes, but "appalled" is more likely.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My usual usernames are some variation on "Zeeba Neighba" which is from the comic strip Pearls Before Swine.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I'd like to get some of my ideas across and perhaps entertain people sometimes as well, along with practicing some of my rhetorical skills in writing.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? See #13

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Truth, wisdom and humor for the unwashed.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I think I have the right to express myself in manner consistent with prevailing social norms and not be censored by bluenoses or due to the objections of those who don't get the joke, and not to have my opinions censored just because someone finds them objectionable.

17. What are your responsibilities online? To avoid making unsupported claims and be able to back up what I'm saying with information from reliable sources.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? that's it

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) zeeba
Gender: M
Year of birth: 1955
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Master's degree _x
Occupation: editor/writer
Income: mid 5 figures
Race: w

Respondent: Donald

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2. How did you get involved in commenting? It's been on and off for 20 years, which started back in the days of Usenet and Bulletin Board Systems. I generally comment where the platform is tolerable. Mlive's platform probably has the best among all the local news outlets, in my opinion, although it could certainly use a delete/edit button, but, I digress....

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? No comment.

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Whenever I have time. I read (more like speed read) far, far more than I comment.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Sure -- I learn a lot of information or perspectives from others. I think it helps strengthen my core values and beliefs, and at the same time, it helps me understand different forms of collective thought and attitudes found in conservative/liberal circles.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. I have several hundreds of feeds and blogs (local, national and international) that I subscribe to with an average a thousand headlines per day (I often get behind and many of them are skimming headlines). They range from technology, science, religion, law, medicine, human rights, foreign policy, culture, environmental issues, economics. I read/skim all the local news sites in the greater West Michigan area. TV News I generally have dialed into WGVU's stations, WOOD TV or Fox 17.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Influential, fallible, informed, human, engaged

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No. I find myself aligning as much disagreeing with both liberals and conservatives alike depending on the issue at hand. I'm my own person, I don't have any alliances or agendas with anyone. I'm simply a lone guest on any website I visit.

10.   Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Anonymity in the context of media distribution and news is a phenomena that stretches back to the founding of this country. Two notable examples of this are a pamphlet distributed by Thomas Paine called "Common Sense" as well as the article "African Slavery in America" anonymously submitted to the Postscript to the Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser, the document one of the first ever to advocate the emancipation of the slaves. The reasons they were submitted back then anonymously are the same reason it should be today in the online world. Anonymity whether by pen names or aliases, or even adopting the name "anonymous" allows the free exchange of ideas that breaks some of the more likely-to-happen barriers of retribution among peers, so yes, I believe it is necessary. Sometimes you say things you wish you didn't - attach your name to that, it could follow you for a long time in unexpected ways. Likewise, our whole currency system through paper notes and coins are "free" exchanges via anonymous transactions. Anonymity minimizes the ego. I gain nothing personally from my comments, nor do I have any delusions that everyone is truly anonymous.
Harm minimization is the idea -- I certainly have no delusions that my identity could be revealed. There are people who know who I am, however, I sleep a little better at night with the trust that if my comments are too controversial that it would make any prospective employer or members of the community's job difficult of finding out my identity.

11.   Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Absolutely. Sometimes people can push your buttons whether via stupidity, ignorance, repeated trolling or parroting the same lines over and over, or just downright cruelty, whether in a violation of a site's commenting policies or not. But, it's the internet. Sometimes you have bad days, sometimes they have bad days. You either learn something about how you present yourself or how others respond to rhetoric. Everyone has bad days and sometimes you become the subject of a bully as much as you become the bully and may not even realize it. I think every person should have the right to edit or delete their comments.

12.   Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? The wisdom of Mark Twain (a pen name, by the way):
"Learning began with talk and is therefore older than books. Our opinions do not really blossom *into fruition* until we have expressed them to someone else."
Latin: in + tueor (observing something, which the word intuition is formed from) + Frui (enjoy, frution). it's a play on the phrase "into fruition". Intuition, references a

thought/realization that is coming to light from within through gut feelings. Fruition, bringing an idea into realization, fulfillment. The avatar (a tree shaped like a head) signifies the mind, maturing with age, a network of branches (much like the Internet) producing "fruits" of thoughts.

13.   What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Inject opinions that may not always be mainstream or popular, especially if it diffuses hyperbole or sensationalism in an article, call out relevancy when necessary, etc. It allows me to respond to individuals or groups that are the subject of an article to let them or their supporters know how I really feel, especially politicians. I have no intentions of attacking any individual on a personal level, but I do, admittedly debate ideas, records, and sometimes the individuals behind them if they have the public trust. I certainly don't make many friends in that regard. Most of all, if I can add information or history from my travels across the web to a current event to a story to expand upon what a reporter simply wasn't aware of, or neglected to mention (there are biases among professionals no matter how hard one tries to maintain neutrality) I hope I've done the readers a service. When political or societal issues are discussed, it's hard enough to get people to care enough attend forums and hearings on a subject, let alone VOTE, especially with being fully educated.

14.   What do you feel you actually gain? A society with minds stimulated, even better if they learn something.

15.   What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? To try and be a good observer, to correct any mistakes in articles that the reporters make in articles, whether factual or typos.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? On any privately owned website, none. Censorship is nothing new or unique, however, transparency should be encouraged. I'd like to think the practice of free expression is encouraged, even if unpopular, but I have no delusions that I have any rights. However, I believe in spirit of the constitutional right to the freedom of the press, by extension, that should not nullify the freedom of speech. Attacks to the person have no merit, but strongly worded debates on ideas I think can and should exist.

17.   What are your responsibilities online? Try to be a good netizen whenever possible. Flag/report inappropriate or illegal content. Avoid ad hominem attacks and logical fallacies whenever possible. Most of all, admit when you're wrong or misinformed.

18.   What else would you like to share about online commenting?

Demographic
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) Intufruition on mlive
Gender: M
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
          Some post-graduate courses X

Trade certification X
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: Robert

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 9

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I had written a few letters to the editor of various magazines and newspapers in the past and found the ability to do "real time" commentary to be more rewarding.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes, several other newspapers, political blogs, magazines and chat boards.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Nearly allways with a laptop from home or on the road. I may aquire a smartphone or tablet in the near term.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Depends on my schedule and the news of the day. In addition to commenting I send out a "fact of the day" to about 30 people. Mostly obscure pieces of trivia I discover. Started with just my grandchildren but has expanded geatly!

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? I have been struck by how often the taling points I hear from politicians will show up the

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. I subscribe to the Jackson Citizen Patriot. I read the New York Times, Detroit News, Detroit Free Press, Chicago Tribune and USA today online. Depending on what City I am in, I will purchase a local paper when travelling (I do so extensively).

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Empowered, connected, satisfied, ageless, participating.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? By virtue of the number of postings, I would considered part of the Mlive online community. As to others, I am not sure if there is a sense of belonging.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? It may not be necessary, but in many cases, it allows honest opinion that might create problems for someone at their job, family, church etc.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Only once, someone accused me of also posting under

another name. I was familar with the other persons work and was insulted that someone would compare my writing style to theirs.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? John is a first name, 214 is a street address. I am often thought to be making reference to a Bible passage. I am not that clever, if I were my screen name would have been: 1 John 2:14 - "I have written unto you, fathers".

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Once in a very great while someone will concede they were wrong.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? I consider is excellent mental excercise, I try an offer non-partisan citations to prove political points and feel I may have added some knowledge along the way.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I am by nature they type who will not let an incorrect statement or observation go unchallenged (depending on the circumstances). I like to think I do so in a non-confrentational way.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I consider the first amendment the only right I have or need.

17. What are your responsibilities online? To obide by the rules of the sponsoring organization.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I find it a form of jousting without the unwanted side effects.

Demographic information
Gender: Male
Year of birth: 1944
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Some college X
Occupation: Retired Police Officer currently self-employed
Income: 60,000
Race: 100% Irish (yes we consider ourselves a separate race)

Respondent: Daniel

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I used to take part in chat rooms when our family first "went on-line" back in the mid 1990's. I found that too time consuming and expensive. Later when I found that some news web sites contained public comment

sections, I took advantage of that, but mostly just read the comments of others. It wasn't until I retired a few years ago and became aware of the opportunity to comment on local stories and issues through Mlive that I spent any significant time commenting.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? rarely

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? my personal computer at home

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Every morning after breakfast I go on-line, look at my email and read some of the top news stories. I usually read Mlive last and if I have little or nothing on my agenda that morning, I will comment on a few stories.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? no

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. on-line, I mainly use msnbc and Mlive, although links will often take me to other news sites. On TV I will watch about an hour combined each day of talking heads and straight news - usually on msnbc. On the radio, I listen to Morning Edition and All Things Considered almost every day on NPR. The Muskegon Chronicle is the only newspaper (print edition) I have delivered. I pay for no other magazines or newspapers - neither print nor electronic, but I used to get Time or Newseek in print.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. connected. vulnerable. immediate.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? no. I feel like I belong to this geographic community and the community of folks who take an interest in a particular subject, but the fact that online communication is currently one of the most widely used holds no particular significance for me.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? yes. Some of the comments opposed to mine lead me to believe that there are people who would resort to harassment as a response to my opinions.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? yes. Comments that address my character rather than my statements are sometimes hurtful.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? WarER is both a misspelling of the name for my alma mater's sports teams (Warriors) but also intended to state that to wage <u>war</u> is in <u>err</u>.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I want to be heard.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Others learn not only where I stand, but why I believe what I believe.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? My comments are intended to induce people to think more about issues, events, facts involved and statements than to elicit a reaction to the character of the people involved in the news,

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Nothing more than what is spelled out in the first amendment to the constitution.

17. What are your responsibilities online? I have a responsibility to keep the level of dialogue intelligent and civil in order for the forum to remain relevant and inviting. I believe it is the responsibility of each individual participating in an online discussion to help create a culture where democracy thrives.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I appreciate the fact that recently, content contributors are now spending more time as moderators, attempting to elicit more meaningful comments from readers.

Demographic information

Name and/or avatar (links welcome) WarER
Gender: Male
Year of birth 1950
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Bachelor's degree X
Occupation: office supervisor (retired)
Income: retired in 2010 at $62,000 annually, currently living on a pension of $35,000
Race: white

Respondent: Karen

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I used to write letters to the Press years ago and want to give my opinion because I feel many people out there don't seem to have a very open mind.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Sometimes on NBCnews

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? My computer

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Just like giving my viewpoints to others who see things differently.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? No

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Grand Rapids Press

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Smarter,

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No, don't have time to do it.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Depends on the story, if it aggravates others to incite problems, then yes.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Sometimes uncomfortable by calling names that are warranted.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My username is CSGM, for common sense grandma. I used to have a username with the word grandma in it but received some nasty comments from the younger generation who have no respect for others. (I can pretty much tell how old some people are online by the way they write).

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Others opinions on how they feel about a subject.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? A better understanding of other opinions and why maybe I should think about changing mine.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? My common sense of decency and why.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Protected free speech within reasoning to show that what I learned in the past can be applied to the present.

17. What are your responsibilities online? To not be a bully to others and watch my language. To give my viewpoints without inciting aggravation to others.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Online commenting is good when you have something to share with others, it makes you aware there are other

viewpoints out there other than your own. You sit in the comfort of your own home to meet with others.

Demographic information:
Gender: female
Year of birth: 1940
Highest level of education attained:
    High school X
Occupation: homemaker
Income: social security
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: Linda

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? I've always freely shared my opinions! (lol)

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? none

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? It's an occasional thing for me, just depends on the topic.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? yes, I like to read the sites that allow comments. It lets me see what others think about a situation.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Online news sites. I used to be a "news junky" but don't have as much faith in main stream media as I used to.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. It is just a way for my opinion to be shared. I know that it doesn't make too much of a difference but it is my little bit of power.

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No, people have become very vicious and insulting with the ability to hide behind anonymity.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Only if you want to bully people and insult them.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Of course.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My username is kidder4. I got it when I first joined "Tigers mlive". I felt I needed a name that did not let other posters know I was a female because it was plain female posters got no respect. After a time it was also plain to see that most of the posters were wasting my times with their coarse discussions or insults to each other and their idiotic posts.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Just sharing what I think I know. A lot of times, I try to make the conversation a little more civil, or call out someone who is mean and nasty.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Probably not much, but I do what I feel is the right thing.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? A touch of civility

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Just to put my thoughts on paper.

17. What are your responsibilities online? To be civil, not attack someone, not to post offensive language.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I find that many comments on MLive are of less intelligent thought than a lot of the other sites that I visit.
It is a pleasant surprise that after several years with many people using shortened words for texting, that bad manner of expressing oneself has not crossed over to online commenting, for the most part. I have become a bit leery about sharing my thoughts because of the knowledge that the government is watching everything we do now.

Respondent: Timothy

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 3

2. How did you get involved in commenting? Just responded to a question posed in an editorial in the Wall Street Journal. I was given a response by the Editor a week later, and found that I enjoyed receiving a deeper insight. With the advent of journalism on the internet, the responses seem quicker – and I appreciate that. Unfortunately, there is no "screen" for intelligence on this format. I am required to qualify insight and intellect of the respondent. And, I have to 'dumb down' my communications – another shortcoming of the medium.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Lenovo ThinkPad and/or Motorola Xoom.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Sporadic. Usually as time filler between obligations at work. Occasionally in the evening – after the kids are in bed.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Most certainly. I find myself reading pieces that receive higher volume commenting – even if the subject matter is not one that would attract me otherwise.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Print newspapers and Trade Periodicals, on line news sites, and network television. The only printed newspaper I subscribe to is The Wall Street Journal.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Informed. Interactive. Challenged.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? I don't see myself as belonging to an online community. I don't participate in any one 'community' to level that would warrant myself being a 'member'.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Anonymity is a double edged sword. On one side, it may help someone to speak their mind more freely. On the other hand I may also allow someone to be more devious – for no other reason than being devious. I don't feel it necessary for commenting. I do feel it necessary for protection from those that may use ones involvement (regardless of the content) on a site as a conduit to predatory behavior.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Without a doubt.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? PlaidBadger. It comes from a 15 year old nickname (Badger) and a distinctive design feature of a bicycle racing team jersey I wore for a few years (Plaid). I've had a few people link it to a stereotype of a 'Scottish No-back-down fighting animal". I like that background story – it plays to the anonymity I wrote of above.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Insight of others. I know I have a preconceived notion of everything – pure human. I hope my comments draw out ideas.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? On occasion, a 'nugget' of that insight I crave. For the most part – I get a laugh. I'm reminded more often of the level of intellect of the general public.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I hope I spring one of those reciprocal 'nuggets' on another.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? No rights. It's a pure privilege. It's not my site – I'm a guest.

17. What are your responsibilities online? To remember I am a guest on someone else's site. To acknowledge civility. And to behave as a responsible member of society.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Even when it may be futile – it is almost always therapeutic. It's a useful tool in "trying out" something before dropping in a vis-à-vis situation.

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) PlaidBadger
Gender: Male
Year of birth: 1966
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Some post-graduate courses X_
Occupation: Entrepenuer
Income: Above median
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: Mary

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 5

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? hockey forum m.live

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? local paper

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? laptop

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? on break

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? no

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. fox news, local news

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. heard, validated, that's it

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? no

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? yes

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? I don't read their comments

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it?

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? nothing

14. What do you feel you actually gain? nothing

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? nothing

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? being respectful, non threatening

17. What are your responsibilities online? same as above

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? we still have freedom of speech and the right to disagree

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) motownsound
Gender: Female
Year of birth:1959
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Bachelor's degree X
Occupation: social worker/retired
Income: $50,000
Race: will leave blank

Respondent: Susan

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 5

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? I write an adoption column for MLive and respond to comments on my column. Otherwise, I've learned to refrain from commenting. There are a lot of bored crazy people online. :)

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? I sometimes comment on posts on Facebook.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? laptop computer, iphone

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Not quite sure what you mean by this question, but I don't go out of my way to post comments anywhere but my own column, and only if someone else has left a comment that I need to give a reply to or thank for some kind word. As for Facebook, if I feel compelled to comment, I will.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Commenting hasn't changed the way I view online news, but reading other people's comments has changed the way I feel about online communities. It just seems that most people who comment are trying to either hurt someone or start an argument. Then there are the alarming number of crazy nutwings out there that seem to have nothing else to do but be crass or hurtful.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. I look at MLive, obviously, but also MSNBC.com, and NPR.com. I don't subscribe to any printed newspapers.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Frustrated, alarmed, scared, mad, and sometimes uplifted (mostly the comments on my columns are very positive - most people say nice things about the kids I profile).

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? I guess I belong to an online community on Facebook. That's about it - people I already know, though.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? I wish you couldn't be anonymous when commenting. I think more people would refrain from being hurtful and vulgar.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? All the time!

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My username is a mash of my first and last name together. I don't have an avatar or picture. I chose what was simplest and wasn't already taken.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I have no idea. Sometimes it makes me feel better to 'get my two cents in' but I really don't do that anymore. I used to think that maybe I would help someone see something a different way, but it seems that

that only provokes people to be nasty. It's a waste of time. I comment on my own column when someone leaves a positive comment or has a question.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? I don't gain anything by commenting elsewhere. On Facebook, it's just a conversation between me and people I know. On my column, it's to give feedback or acknowledge feedback.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Maybe it's enough to let people know their not alone in their beliefs/values.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I have a right to my opinion. I don't have a right to belittle, threaten, or demean others. I wish others felt that way, but it seems that online commenting gives people permission to be assholes.

17. What are your responsibilities online? See answer for #16.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting?

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome)
Gender: Female
Year of birth 1967
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Master's degree X
Occupation: Editor, writer, producer
Income: $70,000/yr
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: William

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 3

2. How did you get involved in commenting? When I discovered Mlive on line, I noticed quite a bit of Partisan Content that didn't quite set very well with my ideological paradigm. I was compelled to respond with an alternative point of view.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? I occasionally contribute to the Daily Beast

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? My Laptop

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? As a retiree, I have all kinds of time to peruse the numerous headlines across Michigan on Mlive. There isn't a day that goes by where I don't at least check in and decide if there's any point in offering my opinions. That is unless I am traveling whereby I leave the Laptop at home.

I generally check out Mlive in the morning again in the afternoon and again late night depending upon whether I have become involved in a spirited debate .

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? I believe it has heightened my awareness of just how Politically Polarized the Mlive Community has become. Perhaps, it has always been such and I just realized it the more time I spent reading the varied contributions. By extension one could conclude it's a microcosm of the mindset of the entire nation, leading to a closer analysis of the causes for this distention.

Considering the dramatic impact Talk Radio has had in persuading listeners towards one or another side of the aisle I believe it to be in large part culpable of blame.
7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to.
 I subscribe to No Newspapers. Occasionally read the Wall Street Journal.
I listen to NPR...Talk of the Nation...All Things Considered...
Mlive...{All Papers involved}...Huffington Post...Drudge Report... Mail Online...
Daily Beast...The Raw Story...Lew Rockwell...Alternet...Coast to Coast...
Detroit FreePress...
And any other that strikes my fancy...

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.
 Angry...Frustrated...Embarrassed...Sad...
[Embarrassed for some contributors]

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not?
Absolutely it's a community. The sad fact in my view is, what once was an enjoyable experience of the sharing of opinions and a healthy spirited exchange of ideas has become an exercise in futility. The Trolls that frequent the site have overrun the discussions with Immature Juvenile Banter that often has nothing to do with the issue under discussion. As of late it has become much more obvious that there are those with multiple persona's offering and reinforcing their own opinions, regardless of the merits of their detractors contributions.
They are more interested in flinging ad hominem attacks than furthering the discussion in a positive light. I am well aware this comes with the territory yet I do not appreciate what the forum has evolved into.
Even as I make the observation it is not lost upon me that my critics would most likely say the very same things about me. Whether they are correct depends upon ones political ideology. Especially considering the present political climate in Michigan. Passions run high on both sides of the aisle.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online?
 I believe it's much easier to say something anonymously, and people are more apt to be a bit more candid with their opinions, than if their identity were known.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset?
Every single day! As I have already shared, there are some very immature contributors passing off what I reference as "Partisan Tripe".
The level of arrogance is running off the charts, and civility at an all time low.
There have been a couple of occasions where a particular contributor has made reference to things about me that only someone that knows me would be aware of, in an attempt to "Out" my anonymity. Fortunately Mlive has been helpful in that regard.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it?
 ableroone... A name of a character I remembered from a book I read in middle school many years ago. I couldn't tell you the name of the book, or even what it was about. For some reason the name stuck in my mind and I felt it was as good as any.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online?
 I used to believe that if even one person reads something I wrote and actually considers it as an alternative to the opposing view, I have provided something of worth to the conversation.
In the present climate on the Mlive Forum, it's actually questionable whether that's even possible anymore. However, I intend to keep trying for what it's worth.

14. What do you feel you actually gain?
On occasion, I feel I'm taken seriously. Especially when an Mlive Columnist uses a post or quote from a post I contributed, as the basis for a particular view of a given issue, that readers may comment on.
At any rate, I feel I'm keeping my writing skills at some standard.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?
In one respect...A Voice of over 30+ years of Experience working on the inside of Organized Labor.
I also feel that after 60+ years on this side of the dirt I have something to offer.
I have Opinions about my Opinions.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting?
"Rights"...I would guess all have the right to express their views as long as they respect the community rules Difficult Question ,as sometimes the rules vary depending upon just whose monitoring the discussion. At least that's the perception by some. I personally haven't had many posts deleted.

17. What are your responsibilities online?
 There's an old saying...
Whose Propaganda do you choose to believe" ?
As long as you adhere to the Community Rules of the Forum, anything goes if you actually believe the opinion you are sharing.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting?
I enjoy the opportunity to chime in online just as much as when I would write letters to the editor of the local newspaper.
Those days are surely numbered so online commenting will only grow in the years to come.
My only criticism would be the potential bias of any moderator that stifles social discourse based upon their own belief rather than the established community rules.

Demographic information

Name and/or avatar (links welcome) ableroone
Gender: male
Year of birth: 1953
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
        Bachelor's degree _X_
Occupation: Retired
Income: $50.000
Race: Caucasian

Respondent: Ronald

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 3

2. How did you get involved in commenting? By noticing a variety of opinions expressed on some articles. Many did not seem to be based on fact.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes, I comment on Yahoo News articles also.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? My home computer.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I try not to spend more than one hour per day reading and commenting.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes, I look for articles that are mostly political.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. I watch Network News, some cable News outlets, and the History Channel. At the present time, I read the Grand Rapids Press online.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Confident, Informed, Feel good about sharing information, It doesn't feel good when people criticize my comments,

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? I haven't thought about it. Now, I just comment when something hits me right.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? It is not necessary, but at times it is good to be anonymous. I do not make a living at it so I do not feel the need to let people know who I am and where I live.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Yes. When I respond to some people who have a very narrow mind-set. I know they will not like, or agree with what I say but it hurts when people call me names and accuse me of not thinking for myself. That is one thing I pride myself in.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I use my real name, Mark S, with Yahoo they used to list my location, Grand Rapids, but now they are leaving that off. I do not use a picture – I wouldn't mind if everyone had to post a photograph by their name. I don't like when people make up nonsense names. I also know some people just write comments to 'arouse' others. I try not to do that.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? It makes me feel good that I can express my opinion. I am retired and do not get the opportunity that I once did to give my opinion.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Just self-satisfaction

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I sometimes help people think a little bit more than they are used to.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? The right to state my opinion

17. What are your responsibilities online? I have to be honest and as accurate as I can be

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? It is a good way to see how people are thinking. When I read a newspaper article I sometimes wish I could express my thoughts about what I just read. On line, I can do that.

Respondent: Brian

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 2

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? Saw that it was an option.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Occasionally. But not often.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? PC.

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Evening while viewing news and my regular list of other websites.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Not really. It does offer other peoples perspectives, but a lot of them are just trolls that are there to bash the writer or anyone that doesn't agree with their point of view ... even if it's not based in reality.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Print media is going to die. I'm pretty much a CNN viewer with forays into other networks for a range of opinion. Don't spend much time on Fox News because their glaring bias makes me want to scream at the TV set. I listen to PBS for radio generally as well as a couple of the news broadcasts on XM Satellite radio including BBC and the POTUS channel.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel.

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No. Commenting is purely an individual sport.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? There is always the element of retaliatory action. There are some crazies out there, and a LOT of them are online. Given the violence in this country, identifying yourself could certainly lead to a visit from some gun nut or mentally unstable person. It would certainly limit the freedom of SOME posters to write what they think.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Daily ?

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? Just found one that wasn't already taken.

 13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Well you're not going to change the mind of someone that has a rabid opinion, but there are readers looking for facts and alternative thoughts on topics that the commenters group can possibly provide some varied input to.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? A stroke.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Additonal vantage points. Tho sometimes its just clarifying that another posters rant is based on faulty logic or "facts" that are simply not true.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Free, responsible expression.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Not shouting fire in a crowded theatre. Not repeating falsehoods. Challenging posts that are irresponsible or blatantly and intentionally misleading.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Some interesting characters out there. A few of them should be banned ... it would improve the quality of the reading. Those who only come in to call names and impart nothing other than negative energy serve no purpose. Do they ?

Respondent: Mark

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 8

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I work for MLive.com and was interested in helping out a student. I know how it is as a college student and sympathized with her.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Sometimes

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? MacBook Pro Laptop

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I usually do it once a month. I doesn't fit daily.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Maybe, but it ads great commentary from the readers. Sparks new ideas and ways of viewing the news

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Important, Opinionated, Useless, Bored, Lazy

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? No

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? No, not necessary. Some like to hide behind the veil of the web though.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Yes

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I just use my facebook login which is my legal name.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Seeing the viewpoints of others, even if its negative agains my comment.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? Nothing really, the internet doesn't really have a soul. So I don't think I can gain much from it, except notoriety for my opinions and intelligence. If I am attempting to monetize off the internet, then that would be the only real gain.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments?

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Freedom of speech

17. What are your responsibilities online? Treat others the way I would like to be treated.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I don't do it enough to have a large opinion.

Respondent: Gary

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get

the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 8

2. How did you get involved in commenting? First through Facebook, then because of my interest in education issues I started to read Dave Murray's columns. I noticed pretty quickly that his views were somewhat biased so I started to comment.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Sometimes in the local papers if there is an issue concerning the local schools.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Computer.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? Usually I do it when I get up at 5:30 with my kids, unless someone writes about something I said.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? I realize now that it is nearly impossible to discuss anything like an adult, even with a reporter.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Mostly online. I hardly ever watch TV news or read a paper copy of a newspaper.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Depressed, scared, confused, hopeless and hopefull

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? I already am on Facebook. I don't know if I have time for anything else.

10.   Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? I'm not anonymous when I'm online. I use my real name. I think being anonymous just makes people say ridiculous things they wouldn't normally say. I don't worry about it too much, although there have been times my wife has.

11.   Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Just Dave Murray, and that's only because I don't expect the journalist to act like just another commentor. The others don't bother me at all.

12.   Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? My screenname is my name. I don't post a picture because I don't want to scare anyone.

13.   What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I think there is a real problem with education reporting and I was hoping that maybe I could influence Mr. Murray to at least consider his biases. I don't think that is going to happen, however.

14.   What do you feel you actually gain? I am starting to think I'm not gaining anything, but it does make me do some research, which is good.

15.   What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I think I provide some balance and hopefully links to other stories that people might be interested in. I don't want the education debate to be one-sided because there are people who already think they are powerless.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? The biggest "rights" problem I have had when it comes to commenting is that sometimes comments are deleted that may put the journalist in a bad light. Especially since the journalist is allowed to insult people

who comment.

17.   What are your responsibilities online? My responsibility is to be honest and not to say anything personal about someone unless it is germaine to the topic. I think being "civil" and the word "insult" have taken on new meanings and are usually in the eye of the beholder.

18.   What else would you like to share about online commenting? I wish they would let you edit comments or give you a bigger box to write in. It is hard to remember what you wrote at the top of a long comment.

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) _____
Gender: Male
Year of birth 1959
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
            Some post-graduate courses X
Occupation: Training
Income: $30,000
Race: White

Respondent: David

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 7

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? I use the internet. I also have a greater than average interest in craft beer. Our community is "exploding" with new microbrewery businesses, so like to comment on these.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Once in awhile I comment on a professional site or two.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? My laptop.

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? When I have free time and I'm surfing the net.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Not really. It puts a new spin on how people think and just who my commenting peers are.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you

subscribe to. Newspapers, magazines, TV news. I don't really use the internet much for news, outside of entertainment news.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Voice, balanced, contributing, correcting, clarifying.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Not really. I do not have a Facebook, am not on Linkedin, etc.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Sometimes. Most of my MLive comments are anonymous. I also have an "alter ego" Twitter account.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? No. I sometimes am frustrated with the responses others make to the topic, though.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I have different user names. The one associated with MLive is a shortened version of my email address. The picture I use on MLive is beer oriented, as I usually comment on these topics (Kalamabrew is the blog I follow)

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Never thought of it that way. Why, do you want to pay me?

14. What do you feel you actually gain? The satisfaction of expressing my point of view.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? This relates to the "5 words" question above. I believe I'm able to present a balanced and educated viewpoint.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I have the right to comment. This is America, isn't it?

17. What are your responsibilities online? This would be answered differently depending upon what the person's values and morals are. I'd say to be civil. No swearing, put downs, posting of inappropriate video or photos.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I like to write, which makes online commenting fun for me. As I pointed out in this survey, it also gives an opportunity to express oneself, and ideally to educate, inform, and keep comments productive, and on track.

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) Mike
Gender: male

Year of birth: 1956
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
　　　Master's degree _X_
Occupation: Psychologist
Income: 75000
Race: White

Respondent: Charles

1.　Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2.　How did you get involved in commenting? I read a story, then the comments that followed. One of the commenters seemed to have missed a detail in the story and was making a point that the missing detail refuted. I pointed it out to him/her.

3.　Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes.

4.　On what device or devices do you comment online?   Desktop computer, Android tablet, Android phone.

5.　How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? If I find something worth commenting on, it becomes a form of entertainment; particularly if it becomes a back-and-forth discussion. It's part of my daily unwind after work.

6.　Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Somewhat. The fact that the article's author often monitors and comments as well makes the news seem a bit more accessible. If you can ask a question that wasn't covered in the story, and get a response, it adds depth.

7.　What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Electronic media only: MLive, Drudge, CNET, BBC, local TV news (WOTV usually).

8.　List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Participant, informed, convincing.

9.　Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Yes, in a way. On MLive, there seems to be a group of commenters who gravitate to certain topics, and the back-and-forth can be on a very familiar level, both positive and negative.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? In some cases, yes. I have some opinions that run counter to what many people who know me would suspect. Anonymity gives me the opportunity to be a bit more bold about topics that I

ordinarily would not bring up. It also soothes the fear (rational or not) of real-world consequences for comments that are unpopular.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? When someone clearly has an agenda, and everything in their comments points to it like a neon sign, even though they deny it, I get annoyed.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I use the moniker "mikegrand"; it's an amalgam of my name, and the city. I believe I first used it in reference to a story about Grand Rapids, and, being a cheerleader for the city, I wanted to be associated with it in a positive way.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Maybe convince people that have opposing views to my own that I am not a raving nutcase, that the stereotypes that follow a group (I'm a conservative white male) are not always accurate. I've managed to do that a few times, and it felt great.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? In most cases, it is a form of stress relief, and I feel that if I make a point particularly well, others who read it may begin to agree, or at least respect me in disagreement.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Besides making a point from time to time, I also try to be humorous about it. I find that reading a long string of parroted comments can get boring, and I assume others do, as well. If I can offer a witty comment or a pun, or get the author of the story to respond to something, then I feel like I've made it more interesting. There are commenters whose name I look for; I hope there are those who look for me.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I am allowed to say whatever is on my mind, within the confines of what the moderators allow. I have had comments deleted occasionally; sometimes I know why, sometimes I don't.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Respecting the opinions of others, even if I disagree with them. That doesn't mean I don't try to engage them in a discussion, but I don't get personal about it. Be truthful. Never lie to make a point.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? I find that online comment threads have a longer life on forums that have a mechanism to alert you when a response has been made. On MLive, I have to check back to see if anyone has made a follow-up comment, and the opportunity to respond and keep the dialogue going is dampened by the amount of time that passes. If I got an email, or a text, letting me know that someone commented on my comment, I think I would be more inclined to stay involved.

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) mikegrand

Gender: male
Year of birth: 1969
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
Associate's degree X
Occupation: mechanical design and troubleshooting specialist
Income: $76k
Race: white

Respondent: Thomas

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I have always been a news/information/political junkie, so when everything started going online it just came naturally.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? Yes, on several other news groups, news forums, and interest topic websites.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? PC

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? I have always got up early (3:45 am) to read/study before work, so now I just go online when I get up in the morning. I may be online for a few hours, or all day if something major is going on in the news.

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes, media has always had a liberal slant, but now it shows up in the reaction from readers that comment on the articles. I think that helps both the media and their consumers. It is too easy for one to get trapped in a 'social bubble' of thought and opinion by those they interact with daily. Online comments allow the media writers and the readers to know when they have strayed too far from the true public center of opinion on a topic. The term 'What's the matter with Kansas' has been answered...nothing. Nothing is wrong with Kansas if one views it in the context of living there, and not in One's social bubble far removed from the reality of those that live there.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. Online news sites, all of them, news forums and news groups that allow comments, and SAT. TV news on all three of the majors, FOX, CNN, MSDNC. I never watch network TV since they went to the digital signal. Unless one has cable or sat service they can't even get network TV if they live very far from the big cities they broadcast from. I subscribe to no 'dead tree edition' newspapers, and don't miss them unless I'm cleaning fish.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Empowered, inclucive, informed, entertained, thoughtful.

9. Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Yes, news groups, news forums, and interest topic forums.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? Yes, I think so. When the comments can't be easily tied to the real person their true thought on the topic more often comes out. Also, many times even names that appear to be real are fake, and there is no easy way for a website to check without going door to door, so why bother?

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Sure, I think it is natural to be upset with a comment or reply from time to time. I'm sure the media writers feel the same way. It happens whether in conversation or in text. The big difference with online comments is you can't see the person's face to read facial expression. Things can be taken out of context of the persons meaning. Humor and sarcasm often don't come through well in text, so it's best not to take every comment at face value and let it bother you. The person may have trouble expressing themselves, or they may be VERY good at it and are just a jerk.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I like beagles and have lived in the south, so southbeagle was a easy choice. No avatar, but if I ever add one it will be a beagle puppy. There is nothing cuter on God's green earth than a beagle puppy. They brighten my day. (your mileage may vary, offer void in CA and NYC)

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Knowledge, information, feedback, The ability to share knowledge and inform the public and the media itself. Perhaps to allow everyone to view themselves through the eyes of the whole community, rather than their personal social bubble.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? The same as above, but I would add the ability to shape the way the news is delivered to consumers over time.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? Little of import (just kidding, kinda), Topic knowledge, humor, public feedback, information.

16. What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Those that comment online have few, in any, rights per say. You are allowed to comment as long as you follow the webite rules, which are a moving target that may change from day to day. Their website, their rules.

17. What are your responsibilities online? Try to be respectful and follow the rules as best you can. Try to add something to the conversation, be it knowledge, information, feedback, or humor. Be mindful of copywrite infringement, short excerpts only with a link if you use other's work. Try to keep it clean and 'family friendly'.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? It's the
greatest advancement in the media since the invention of the printing press. The ability
to interact with the media in realtime helps both the media and the reading
consumers. Try to think of it as talking back to the TV (admit it, you've done it), but
now those on TV can hear you! That is a powerful tool that will continue to shape how
news media is delievered to the public in the future. Take Mlive's weather man for
example, you can now coverse directly with him and ask questions about your local
weather, or the weather to expect on the trip you are planning to take, all in realtime!

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) southbeagle
Gender: male
Year of birth: over 50, but, they had cars back then.
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
    Some college _x_
    Associate's degree _x_
    Trade certification _x_
Occupation: retired professional, management
Income: noyb
Race: human (native american)

Respondent: Gregory

1.   Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get
the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree) 1

2.   How did you get involved in commenting? I joined some online message boards in
2004 or so and enjoyed Internet conversations. During the Bush-Kerry election, online
commenting seemed to be a more common thing so I decided to join in, as I had strong
opinions.

3.   Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? I comment on Yahoo
stories, Facebook, Midland Daily News, and on online message boards.

4.   On what device or devices do you comment online? Laptop and desktop computers
only.

5.   How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? During workbreaks, and in the
evenings and on weekends.

6.   Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? I
don't think it has changed what I read, as I still enjoy the same subjects -- politics, sports,
human interest stories, etc. Although, I am probably more prone to read stories that are
slanted opposite of my own views, because I am reading them only in order to offer a
counter-opinion. So I might read a story by a right-wing opinion columnist in order to

make a rebuttal comment; if online commenting was not available, I might skip the article.

7.   What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. I subscribe to the New Yorker magazine. All other media is online, such as newspapers, news magazines, websites. I watch some cable news, but not much.

8.   List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Snarky, powerful, smart, insightful, subversive.

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? If Facebook is considered an online community, then I certainly belong to that one. I like the sense that you can communicate with people all over the world. I also belong to a message board that is fairly edgy, and I enjoy that one as well.

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? No, my Facebook comments are not anonymous. I tend to say different things when I am anonymous. Anonymity can produce more honesty as well as more destructive comments.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? Yes. Ideological arguments are upsetting sometimes. It is also somewhat difficult to be a liberal-minded person when most of my social network is conservative.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? I use a version of my first name. For news sites, I have no avatar. For messageboards I use a cartoon character or a celebrity.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? Self-expression and participating in contemporary dialogues.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? I probably gain a therapeutic benefit from expressing my beliefs, which is better than holding them in.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? I think I offer smart and insightful comments.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? I feel that I have the right to expect my comment to be published without censorship if I've kept it clean and I don't attack someone.

17. What are your responsibilities online? I think all commenters should be responsible for basic decency like not directing profanity at another person, not engaging in personal attacks.

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? Online commenting is an interesting development, and one which encourages participation with stories. In the old days, the only way to have a voice was to write a letter to the editor, which produced a time lag and also meant your letter might not get published due to space constraints. Online commenting is instantaneous and incredibly democratic, as the vast majority of comments seem to get published.

Respondent: Steven

1. Circle/bold one of the following numbers in response to this question: I need to get the news every day. (1= strongly agree; 9=strongly disagree)   2

2. How did you get involved in commenting? I began commenting in 2002-2003 during the buildup to the Iraq War. I opposed the war from the very beginning, but noticed that there was a strong rightwing crusade underway on a site called "Vote.Com." I have participated in commenting off and on every since, depending on my available time.

3. Do you comment online anywhere other than Mlive.com? I participate once in a while on Huffington Post and more rarely on other news sites, if the article/topic interest me.

4. On what device or devices do you comment online? Desktop computers.

5. How does commenting fit into a typical day for you? During slow time at work, but mostly when off work (evenings and weekends).

6. Has commenting online changed the way you view online news and information? Yes. I skim through the comments after reading an article. I try to discern the more intelligent ones and absorb any insights that they might have. Periodically there is other information not available in the article itself. Other times, not, but I enjoy casual commenting (and bantering) in those cases.

7. What kind of media do you consume? Examples could include newspapers, online news sites, network and cable television news. Name any printed newspapers you subscribe to. My main source is television (satellite service). I watch MSNBC and Current TV mostly. I will look at C-Span and Free Speech TV as well. My next source is the Internet: MLive for state news. Huffington Post, Nation, NY Times, Daily Kos, Detroit Free Press (Freep). I do not read any newspapers. There is only one small newspaper in my area and that usually only repeats AP reports that I can read on the Internet.

8. List up to five words that describe the way online commenting makes you feel. Aggressive, validated, challenged, informed, respected

9.   Do you see yourself belonging to an online community? If so, how do you describe it? If not, why not? Somewhat. You learn a little about the others, even though they are hiding in anonymity behind monikers. It's semi-casual or somewhat informal at times, if exchanges are more than once with a particular person(s).

10. Is it necessary to be anonymous when commenting online? I maintain anonymity only because I deal with customers who hold divergent political views. My employer also has strong poltiical views. My identity could affect my relationship with these people.

11. Has there been a time when the way others responded to your comments online made you feel uncomfortable or upset? I am at an age where pretty much nothing bothers me. I blow the negative stuff off and then hit right back, if I'm in the mood for banter.

12. Tell me about your username and, if you have one, your avatar, the picture associated with your screen name. How did you choose it? Gremlin is a nickname given to me by family and friends. I call myself UPGremlin because I am in the Upper Peninsula.

13. What do you hope to gain from commenting online? I read comments for additional information. Some users bring very useful insight to the comments. Also, I like injecting comments and viewpoints that rebut the more hard-line views of some of the other commenters. There seems to be such a smugness in some who think that they are so 100% "right" and everyone else is so "stupid." Most often, they cannot be reasoned with, so I like harassing them a little--just for fun.

14. What do you feel you actually gain? The comments by some are very useful and provide good information and good insight. I like reading the comments on NY Times as well because the feedback is of higher quality. I also like to inject views and opinions that do not seem to find expression in the article or in other comments. Commenting provides two-way communication not only on the article itself, but also on other topics that the discourses lead to.

15. What do you feel you contribute to the website with your comments? My individual views and insights. A different standpoint for others to consider.

16.   What are your rights when it comes to commenting? Freedom of speech is about it. Of course, there are the rules about civility and no personal attacks, but I might push it a tad, if the individual deserves it.

17. What are your responsibilities online? I am not perfect, but I do try to be accurate about the information I provide. I will double check my statements before posting, although if I am in a hurry to get something posted, I do not check it 100%. I do check it 95% however. But I admit that once in a while, when dealing with an individual or group who obviously do not care about the quality of information they are posting, I might dish something right back at them that is not quite valid. Since it takes up my time to double-check their misinformation, I like making them take time to try and prove that I gave

them misinformation as well. They might prove me wrong, but I made them work. I like knowing that I forced them to do that. .

18. What else would you like to share about online commenting? If the group of regulars copmmenting are intelligent and responsible enough, you will achieve even better information. Those who are not as responsible give you some useful exercise in critical evaluation and critical thinking.   Thank you for your participation in this research. Your answers will help the researcher and others better understand the culture of online commenting.

Demographic information
Name and/or avatar (links welcome) UPGremlin
Gender: Male
Year of birth 1952
Check the highest level of educational attainment:
          Some post-graduate courses X
Occupation: Electronics Communications Technician
Income: $40,000/year
Race: Caucasian

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