

JOURNALISTS' USE OF NEWSPAPER COMMENT
SECTIONS IN THE NEWSGATHERING PROCESS

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SECTIONS IN THE NEWSGATHERING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

As computers and, increasingly, cell phones, are used by an ever growing percentage of the population, newspapers have turned to online comment sections accompanying articles as forums for readers to communicate. Journalists differ greatly in the extent to which they use comment sections for source development and newsgathering, however. Comment sections that allow for anonymous comments often include expletives, personal attacks and other vitriolic language, a turnoff for some. Some newspapers have sought to curb vitriolic language by requiring commenters to list their name or use some other form of name verification, such as using a Facebook account to make a post, since Facebook requires a first and last name. This research consisted of an online survey sent to reporters (N=100) at dozens of daily U.S. newspapers. The purpose of the research was to examine reporters' use of newspapers' online comment sections and to study differences in responses between reporters who worked at newspapers that allowed anonymous online comments and newspapers that required some form of name verification, such as Facebook, that includes a commenters' first and last name.

My research found that there was a statistically significant difference in frequency in which reporters at newspapers that allow

anonymous comments and newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments read their newspaper's online comments: reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments read them more often than reporters who work at newspapers that require commenters to include their name. There was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups in their responses to how they use the comments to find information for another story or find sources or attempts to contact commenters to find additional information for a story. There was not a statistically significant difference in the two groups' responses to whether they attempted to contact commenters for additional information for a story, reporters' feelings on how reading comments make their jobs more efficient, or reporters' feelings on whether reading comments was an efficient way to find story ideas.

Additionally, reporters were given the opportunity to give suggestions on how to make comment sections more useful for reporters.

Chapter I

Introduction

As more Americans get their news online, it's increased the availability for people to publicly comment about newspaper articles in a new way. How some newspapers' shift toward requiring a user's name in comment sections influences the way reporters use comment sections for reporting and how that influences reporters' and editors' traditional role as gatekeepers is the focus of this study. With social media, readers with a comment about a newspaper article no longer have to wait to see if the editor prints their letter to the editor. The reader can also visit the newspaper's website and use Twitter and Facebook and type his or her comments to be viewed publicly by anyone interested in the topic – a process that can take mere minutes rather than days or weeks. In her 2013 study, Nielsen wrote:

Newspapers have historically been a one-to-many information medium limiting interaction with local readers to personal phone calls, signed letters to the editor, or, more recently, emails to individual journalists. New technology has afforded unprecedented opportunities for reader participation, including enabling anonymous users' participation (p. 472).

This low barrier to reaching newspaper reporters, editors and others interested in a topic allows anyone with an Internet connection to have his or her perspectives heard. Readers' comments may also be included in a follow-up article on the topic, allowing their perspectives

to be seen by a large audience. This increased access to having their voices heard provides a new gateway for readers' comments to be included in news coverage.

It seems likely that anonymity and newspapers' shift toward requiring a user's name in online comment sections influences the way reporters use comment sections to identify story ideas and sources and cite quotes from the comment sections in their stories.

Gatekeeping theory is relevant because past mass communication research has focused on the working procedures of reporters and the routines they follow (Nahon 2009). Reporters' procedures and routines influence how the news is crafted. With online comment sections, readers can comment on stories and offer ideas for further reporting. Some researchers have suggested that the Internet has eliminated the gatekeeper role in journalism entirely (Quandt and Singer 2009). Quandt and Singer argue that the Internet creates an environment "for a truly participatory media culture that breaks the publication monopoly of institutionalized media" since writing and editing tools are inexpensive and easy to access by anyone (p.11).

This study explores these differing views on the changing gatekeeper role as it relates to newspapers and online comments from readers. I became interested in the topic as an area of research from my experiences as a reporter at a daily newspaper. One story I wrote

about a dispute involving a business elicited a comment from a member of the public in the comment section about another business practice by the company that was recently implemented. As a reporter, I was skeptical that the commenter's statement was true. A quick call to the business confirmed the commenters' statement, and the information turned into a story that ran on A1 of the newspaper the following day. That experience led to my interest in researching how reporters use comment sections. Combined with prior research on the topic, this research can be used to improve journalism by better understanding how journalists' use comment sections and whether comment sections can be improved to be more useful to reporters and newspapers.

My research method includes a survey of reporters about their views on online comment sections and how readers' online comments are incorporated into the reporting process. The survey includes questions about how their views on online comment sections differ with anonymous comments and comment sections that require a user's name such as through a Facebook account or some other name verification method. The survey also asks how online commenters' posts are presented, or "framed" in articles. Questions about how the online poster's quote or information is used in an article is included in the survey. The research focuses on the process of reporters accessing

online comment sections. The survey asks reporters to what degree they read and use online comment sections and compare the answers between reporters whose news outlets require Facebook accounts or some other name verification method to post comments and those whose outlets don't.

Even as adoption has increased for the use of social media as a reporting tool, there is a lack of research on how anonymity influences reporters' use of comment sections. This study examines if newspapers' requiring the use of a Facebook account that shows the commenter's name or some other name verification method has made journalists turn to comment sections more often for source development and other newsgathering purposes, thereby increasing a gateway for audience participation in the newsgathering process. By better understanding how reporters use comment sections, newspapers can increase reader engagement by structuring their comment sections in ways that enhance both reporters' and readers' use of the sites.

This research advances prior research in mass communication and other disciplines related to anonymity, reader participation and the newsgathering process. As changes in technology continue, the way people are using social media and the Internet is quickly evolving, however how comment sections on newspaper websites are structured

has remained relatively constant in recent years, so the research is timely. Researching how reporters' news gathering processes are changing sheds new light on how the newspapers adopt and adapt technology and help industry leaders use technology more effectively, particularly as newspapers are struggling to compete with an ever-widening array of competitors.

For the purposes of this study, a reporter is defined as someone who is employed by a newspaper who conducts research and writes articles that are available on a newspaper's website. Comment sections are those sites attached to a reporter's article on the newspaper's website that allow the public to post comments about the article's content. Anonymous newspaper comment sections are those that do not require a person to list a first and last name in order to post a comment and posters can use pseudonyms. Name-verified comment sections are those that require users to have a Facebook page that lists a person's name or some other name verification system that requires a person's name to be displayed with comments.

The next section includes a literature review that focuses on gatekeeping, reporters' newsgathering practices, social media and the influence anonymity has on human behavior. Following the literature review, I explain the methods I've selected for the research and

provide a conclusion that includes limitations of the study, and areas for future study.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping was first proposed by psychologist Kurt Lewin in reference to post-World War II research on social change, not the field of communication (Shoemaker, et al., 2001). Lewin focused on how information was passed through channels after a process of selection or rejection (Shoemaker, et al., 2001). Later extended to mass communication, the gatekeeping metaphor has been used to describe how reporters and editors make decisions on what to report (White, 1950). Historically, reporters and editors have been the decision makers in what information passes through the "gate" and into the newspaper (Reese & Ballinger, 2001).

Gatekeeping theory has also been used to more broadly refer to "the power to give or withhold access to different voices in society" (McQuail, 2010, p. 309). Gatekeeping as it relates to mass communication is the "overall process through which social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed, and is not just a series of 'in' and 'out' decisions" (Shoemaker, et al., 2001). My thesis will focus on this broader view of gatekeeping and how social media, and newspapers' online comment sections in particular, have allowed more gateways for more people to have their voices heard. As reporters

work on deadline, the quick access to online comments also may influence reporters' use of the comments in the newsgathering process. Shoemaker and Vos, in their 2009 examination of the gatekeeping theory, state: "Although gatekeepers can consider an unending stream of potential messages, most gatekeepers operate under strict deadlines that encourage an efficient decision-making process while they at the same time prize newness" (p. 116.)

Journalistic routines, including the need to meet deadlines, are a driver in the use of social media, including online comment sections, as an efficient way to gain information, particularly as newsroom staffs have decreased in recent years. According to Deuze's 2005 study on the professional identity of journalists:

According to journalists, their work is reporting the news. This lends the work of journalists an aura of instantaneity and immediatism, as 'news' stresses the novelty of information as its defining principle. The work of journalists therefore involves notions of speed, fast decision-making, hastiness, and working in accelerated real-time (p. 442).

The number of newsroom jobs fell from 54,000 in 2005 to 32,000 in 2015 (Edmonds, 2015). And, as news is increasingly breaking on social media sites, including Twitter, reporters are turning to social media to find information, including sources:

The internet has dramatically changed the way journalists do their work. It is therefore not surprising that about 40 percent of

U.S. journalists said that social media are very important to their work. The importance of these interactive media to the journalistic profession is underscored by the fact that one-third (34.6 percent) of U.S. journalists spent between 30 to 60 minutes every day on social networking sites (Willnat and Weaver, 2014).

Many journalists have long resisted direct audience input, based on notions of journalistic autonomy, however (Williams, et al., 2011). “This well-documented resistance to the audience is understandable given the fact that journalists’ professional status and sense of autonomy often rests on their perceived ability to make more valid decisions than consumers of the news” (Williams, et al., p. 2). In their 2011 study that included multi-site observations of BBC journalists’ use of audience material, Williams et al. found that reporters found comments and other user generated material from the public as just another news source, not as a form of collaboration with members of the public: “Audience content is viewed by most journalists working at the UGC Hub as material to be processed, rather than as an opportunity for the public to retain creative control over their output, or a chance for journalists to truly collaborate with the public (Williams et al, p. 6).

Newsgathering routines

In the current digital age, “readers expect to be able to become participants” through the use of online comment sections at the end of news stories (Meyer & Carey, 2014). By 2010, 92 percent of the top 150 newspapers in the United States accepted online comments; however a number of news outlets have done away with commenting sections (Santana, 2011). In addition to serving as a place for readers to post their views on an article, news outlets have increasingly turned to social media as part of their news coverage. Before social media, reporters had to rely on calling subjects to get a quote or refer to statements on press releases posted to companies’ websites or disseminated through fax or email.

In Paulussen’s 2014 study of the use of social media sites Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube as sources in newspaper articles in Belgium, the author found that YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have become indispensable for journalists, particularly in times of breaking news coverage of crises. In the quantitative analysis of two Flemish newspapers, the researchers found that social media is used as a source for both soft and hard news, but social media does not dominate newspaper content as a source of information (Paulussen, 2014).

Some social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter, have verified account status that gives news outlets confidence that the people posting tweets or updates actually are who they say they are. With this verification process established, news outlets have increasingly turned to social media to quickly obtain responses from public figures and corporations to news (Broersma, 2013). "Reporters can get in touch with relevant people, pose questions or simply take a statement from Twitter and include it in a news article" (Broersma, 2013, p. 2). Broersma's observation was anecdotal and not a systematic analysis.

In its 2016 Stylebook, The Associated Press gives some guidance to reporters about using social media for sourcing, and states, "Even routine stories can benefit from sources found through social media" (p. 486). The AP also notes the problems reporters may face in using user generated content found on social media due to the difficulty in verifying the person who made the post: "It is essential to hold (user generated content to the same standards as all other information taken in and reported by the AP," the AP Stylebook states (p. 490). The AP Stylebook does not address whether reporters should give more or less credence to verified social media accounts versus non-verified accounts. However the AP Stylebook does address the

approach journalists should take when handling photos, videos and audio posted by the public online:

There are a number of challenges that face journalists handling UGC, most notably the issue of verification. Most broadly, do we know exactly what we are seeing, and how have we determined this? We should seek to tell the story surrounding each piece of video and audio and every photo we acquire with the level of accuracy people expect from the AP. This means tapping into our considerable knowledge base, drawing on the expertise of AP staff around the world (p. 490).

Even as reporters have increasingly turned to social media feeds to look for quotes from high profile newsmakers with verified social media accounts, they remain wary of using comment sections as places to engage with readers (Nielsen, 2013). Nielsen surveyed newspapers journalists from across the U.S. and found most disliked the anonymity of online comments, but largely supported the ability for readers to post comments on newspaper websites. "Journalists indicated that they devote little time to reading comments because they do not feel reader comments have much to offer in terms of showing them new perspectives" (Nielsen, 2013). In an earlier study, Nielsen surveyed journalists at 36 newspapers and found that only 35 percent said they frequently or always read comments on their stories (Nielsen, 2012). The majority of journalists surveyed felt readers should have the ability to comment online, but the reporters also said they disliked personal attacks or "verbal free-for-alls" (Nielsen, 2012).

The personal attacks and other vitriol that can be found on online comment sections have made some newspaper reporters perceive the comment sections as too negative, to the extent that they don't read the comments, with some calling for the end of anonymous comments (Santana, 2014). In his research surveying online commenters, Rosenberry (2011) found most users of online comment sections recognized anonymity bred incivility but still supported newspapers keeping online comment sections anonymous.

Anonymity

With a goal of more civility in online comment sections, some newspapers have switched from anonymous comments to only allowing comments in online comment sections from those with a Facebook account, which requires a user to display his or her first and last name. In a note to readers after switching from anonymous comments to a system that required Facebook accounts on some online articles, Jimmy Orr, managing editor/online at The Los Angeles Times wrote on a 2011 blog: "By requiring a Facebook registration, it will cut down on the mean-spirited, profane and sometimes useless responses because one's friends will also see the comments in their newsfeeds." The LA Times later updated the blog post, noting it had switched nearly all of its online comment sections to require Facebook accounts, even after some readers complained they wouldn't

participate because they didn't want to use or didn't have Facebook accounts (Orr, 2011). The LA Times' reader engagement editor Martin Beck noted that the switch may alienate some readers who don't have Facebook accounts, but Beck stated:

Anonymity isn't necessarily a bad thing, but if you've spent much time reading comments online, you'll understand that sometimes commenters take advantage of it to post rude, profane or otherwise inappropriate comments they likely wouldn't using their real identity. So far, we believe that the pros of Facebook's commenting system outweigh the cons (Orr 2011).

Arthur Santana researched user comments at 11 newspapers that previously allowed anonymous comments but switched to requiring posters to register their names by using a Facebook account. Santana examined the content of comments on newspaper websites that allow anonymity and those that don't using a paired sample, and his findings showed "commenting forums of newspapers that disallow anonymity show more civility than those that allow it" (Santana, 2014).

In her research on two local British newspapers' comment sections, Lily Canter (2013) conducted a content analysis of online comments over a 10-day period. The research examined the top five most commented stories over 10 days in 2010. Canter also conducted interviews with journalists at the newspapers and newsroom observation to examine the influence comment sections had on the journalists' role as gatekeepers. Canter found that a gap existed

between the actual comment in the online posts and the journalists' perception of the content and tone in the posts: "Despite claims from some journalists during their interviews that reader comments tended to digress from the subject matter, most comments in the samples were relevant to the story and only a small amount, around 10 per cent at both of the case study sites, were deemed to have no relevance" (Canter, 2013, p. 607). Canter also found a common misconception among reporters that a small number of commenters made a bulk of the posts in the comment sections; however, her content analysis revealed that "in fact different people comment on different stories, depending on their interests" (Canter, 2013). My study would further Canter's research by showing the difference in value reporters put on comment sections at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and those that don't. My study would also show how readers' comments are used by reporters in the newsgathering process as sources of information and ideas for follow up articles.

While many journalists remain skeptical about the value of comments posted in online comment sections, research shows journalists believe great opportunities exist for social media to aid in the reporting process, according to Santana (2011). Santana has conducted numerous recent studies about social media, online comment sections and journalists' growing reliance on social media in

their reporting. Studies on the topic he authored or co-authored include: *Online Readers' Comments Represent New Opinion Pipeline, Newspaper Research Journal, in 2011*; *Virtuous or Vitriolic, Journalism Practice, in 2014*; *Tapping Into a New Stream of (Personal) Data, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 2016*; and *Controlling the Conversation, Journalism Studies, in 2016*. Santana conducted a national survey of newspaper reporters to examine reporters' views on online comment sections and to explore the role online posters' feedback plays in developing the media agenda at newspapers (Santana, 2011). In that study, Santana (2011) found that more than 98 percent of reporters said they read the online comments at their newspapers at some level. His research found that newspapers' online comment sections have influenced some of the fundamental routines of journalists: "Nearly 70 percent (of respondents) said that reader comments changed their thinking on the newsworthiness of a topic at some level, though more than 44 percent said they 'rarely' have" (Santana, 2011). More than 23 percent of the reporters who responded to the survey said they contact or include more sources in their news stories as a direct result of reading newspapers' online comment sections, and nearly 23 percent said they included more facts in their stories, although examples of additional facts were not included in the study:

Commenters have spurred reporters to re-examine the newsworthiness of a topic and have also helped them think of new and different stories to tell while nudging them toward new and different ways to tell them. As such, the comment forums have risen to join other communication tools of the journalist and demonstrate the growing power of citizens to influence the mass communicator in their agenda-setting role in ways not previously seen (Santana, 2011, p. 12).

In a 2016 study of 2,100 stories from 50 U.S. newspapers, Santana examined the availability of comment forums at newspapers and found more controversial stories tend to have comment sections versus non-controversial news stories. Santana wrote that by varying the availability of comment sections, “the gatekeeping power newspapers have to control the conversation for newsreaders in their decision to allow or disallow a commenting forum following a particular news story represents a new dimension to their ability to set the public agenda” (Santana, 2016, p. 3).

Even as many newspapers have switched to requiring people to post on comment sections using a Facebook account, Santana and Hopp’s 2016 research showed most journalists surveyed place more value in Twitter versus Facebook, the two most popular social media sites for adults in the U.S. In their 2016 study, Santana and Hopp examined journalists’ different uses of social media to access personal data. Their survey showed that only 22.7 percent of journalists indicated

Facebook was either important or a very important tool in the production of news, while 51.7 percent of journalists said Twitter was either important or very important (Santana & Hopp, 2016). They concluded:

Our evaluation of journalists' value perceptions suggests that Facebook's value is tied to its use for querying friends and conducting research. Twitter's value was significantly tied to the platform's use for querying followers, conducting research and activities associated with contacting sources. (Santana & Hopp, 2016, p. 400).

Santana and Hopp's research suggests many journalists remain wary of social media, and Facebook in particular, as it relates to the ability to aid in their reporting.

Evolving usage of online comment sections

Some journalists have opted not to read comments due in part to their negativity, or other reasons such as time constraints. A search of the phrase "don't read the comments" on Twitter, for example, shows numerous journalists from around the country stating they don't read online comments, often in response to another journalists' Tweet about a negative comment they read in the comments.

U.S. newspapers that had online comment sections that ended them include the Chicago Sun Times in 2014 and the Chicago Tribune, which suspended reader comments on its website in May 2018. After the Chicago Tribune announced its comment section suspension, the

Chicago Tonight TV program on PBS aired a segment on May 15, 2018 titled: "Are Online Comment Sections Still Valuable?" Chicago Tonight quoted, Chicago Tribune's Mary Wisniewski as saying "As a reporter and a columnist at the paper, it is my hope that this is a permanent decision. The problem with unmediated comments is that's it's like a bar without a staff, without a bouncer. ... The point of view from many people who are reporters is that they don't even want to look at the comments, because there's no reasoned discussion in there. It's like a barroom brawl."

According to Chicago Tonight, Wisniewski also said that the discussions she had on social media were generally far more valuable than on online comment sections. "Obviously, there are some trolls and some non-thoughtful people too, but you're seeing more thoughtful conversations about stories," she said. "You can often get stories from them. You might contact a Twitter user saying, 'Hey, I saw what you said, can I quote you?' And then start a dialogue that way."

USA Today also shut off comments for its "For the Win" sports blogs in December 2013. In an interview with the Nieman Lab in 2015, USA Today's Sports Media Group's director of content development Jamie Mottram said: "We want FTW to be part of the

conversation around the subjects it covers, but we're fine with those communities organizing off-site, which is what they're going to do anyway, whether we have comments or not."

Improving comment sections

While some news outlets have gotten rid of comments, some newspapers are making attempts to improve online comment sections for the benefit of both the public and reporters. One such effort is the Coral Project, a collaboration between the *Mozilla Foundation*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, which makes open source tools that can be applied to newspapers' online comment sections (Lichterman 2014). The Washington Post was the first to test the Coral Project's Talk commenting platform in 2017 and plans to make its primary commenting platform (Lichterman 2014). The Talk uses prompts within comment sections to guide the discussion and keep the conversation on-topic, and the Coral Project's Andrew Losowsky told the Nieman Lab in 2014:

But what news organizations can do is create a space which gives direct access to the journalists, that has the ability to bring the community into the process and be part of the process, manage interaction on the news organizations' terms rather than Facebook's terms about what is visible, what moderation tools you have, about the ability to focus and highlight on different conversations and so on (Lichterman, 2014).

In summary, there are efforts under way to tackle a problem area in journalism: how to increase engagement between newspapers and the public to create better conversations when many journalists view comment sections negatively due to some commenters posting attacks, off-topic conversations or other bad behavior. The RQs posed in this study will seek to answer whether journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments use comment sections less often than journalists who use newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments.

Chapter III

Research Questions (RQs)

Based on the literature review, these research questions still merit attention:

RQ1: Do reporters at newspapers with non-anonymous commenting sections (a) more frequently read readers' comments, (b) , make greater use of comments in reporting routines, such as using the comment sections to identify story ideas or update an existing article,(c) find sources or (d) find comment sections beneficial to their reporting process than reporters at newspapers with anonymous commenting sections?

RQ2: Do reporters at newspapers with non-anonymous commenting sections (a) more frequently attempt to contact someone who has commented on their newspapers' comment section to obtain additional information for their story (b) more frequently read online comment sections to make their news gathering more efficient or (c) find that reading comments is an efficient way to find story ideas?

RQ3: What suggestions do reporters have to improve comment sections?

Methodology

The research problem my thesis addresses is what impact the absence or presence of verified user accounts, through Facebook or other means, has on reporters' reporting processes. Using a survey provides "a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (Creswell, p. 155). My research includes analyzing reporters' self-reported practices and attitudes at sample newspapers throughout the United States. For my research, I use a stratified sample and focused on U.S. newspapers with daily circulations of 50,000 or higher, according to the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM), a group that verifies daily newspapers' circulation figures. Focusing on a range of small and larger newspapers offers a good mix of different geographies and some variation in newspaper sizes. This list of 29 newspapers with reporters who consented to participate in the survey are: USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Detroit Free Press, Washington Post, Star Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Boston Globe, Dallas Morning News, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Denver Post, Arizona Republic, the Orlando Sentinel, San Francisco Chronicle, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Oregonian, San Diego Union Tribune, Seattle Times, Arkansas Democrat Gazette, Austin American Statesman, Salt Lake Tribune, the Mercury News (San Jose), Colorado Springs Gazette,

San Antonio Express News, Indianapolis Star, Des Moines Register, Tennessean, Baton Rouge Advocate and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

To build my sample, I identified newspapers that had anonymous comment sections and those that have some form of name verification, including Facebook or some other means. I did not seek to contact all reporters at each newspaper, but rather a sampling of reporters from the newsroom. I surveyed reporters through an online questionnaire about their views on comment sections and reporting habits related to comment sections. For each newspaper, I randomly selected reporters primarily from metro and business sections. To randomly select the reporters, I visited the newspaper's websites and found reporters' names and email addresses on staff contact lists or from searching for bylines on stories. This process ensured that the reporters I selected were currently working as a reporter for the newspaper. Additionally, one of my survey questions asked the reporters if they were actively working as a reporter at their newspaper and wrote at least one article per month that appeared on their newspaper's website. Reporters who indicated in the survey that they did not write at least one article per month for their newspaper's website were not included in the study.

For each of the newspapers, from Feb. 26, 2018 until October 10 2018, I emailed 10 to 30 reporters at each publication with a request

to participate in the research, totaling 560 email queries sent. From those 560 queries, I received responses back from 100 reporters indicating they consented to the survey and would like to participate, giving the survey a response rate of 18 percent. Next, I sent those 100 reporters a link to the survey that was created by Qualtrics. The 100 responses from reporters aged 21 to 72 came from 29 newspapers: 56 respondents were male, 43 were female and one respondent indicated 'other' for gender.

Reporters I surveyed were put into two groups: those who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and newspapers that require Facebook accounts with names displayed or some other name verification system. Of the 100 respondents, 35 of the journalists worked at newspapers that required a person's name to accompany an online comment and 65 of the journalists worked at newspapers that allowed people to post anonymously. All 100 of the survey participants responded that they posted at least one article per month that was posted on their newspapers' website.

Reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments were asked in survey whether their newspaper or manager required them to read the comments for the stories they write that appear on their newspapers' website. Of 65 reporters, 2 said yes, 61 said no and 2 said they weren't sure. For the 35 reporters who work at

newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments, 1 said yes, 33 said no and 1 said they weren't sure.

Asked whether their newspaper had a corporate policy on social media use, 54 reporters at newspapers that allow anonymous comments said yes, 1 said no and 10 said they weren't sure. Twenty eight reporters at newspapers that do not allow anonymous comments said yes, 4 said no and 3 said they weren't sure.

Data Analysis

Through a quantitative analysis, the collected data were used to answer the research questions. The thesis looks at "difference" research questions, which is defined as comparing "two or more different groups, each of which is composed of individuals with one of the values or levels of the independent variable" (Morgan, et al. p. 5). This analysis seeks to demonstrate whether the two groups – reporters whose newspapers have anonymous comments and those who don't – are the same. Reporters' responses to the questions were coded and put into a statistical program, and the collected data were analyzed to determine statistical significance, using a T-test test comparing two groups, with p value < .05 as the measure of significance.

A sampling of reporters offers insights from reporters in a variety of geographic locations. The sampling design for the population is a

stratified sample in two stages, newspapers and reporters, in which access to reporters' names, beats and contact information is readily available on newspapers' websites.

The online survey program used in this research was Qualtrics. The survey included 13 questions, and reporters were able to complete the survey in less than 10 minutes. The timeline for administering the survey was Feb. 26 to October 10, 2018. If a reporter did not respond to the survey after several days, a follow-up email was sent to solicit his or her participation in the questionnaire. Prior to conducting the research, I secured IRB approval of the Study Consent Form (See Appendix) that includes a statement on why validity and reliability have been maximized.

Using surveys as the measurement instrument, the following variables were studied:

Age: Those surveyed were asked to list their age.

Gender: Those surveyed were asked whether they identify as male, female or other.

Additionally, survey respondents were asked to answer questions related to each of the RQs with the following possible responses:

Never, rarely. Sometimes, often and always.

Explanation of Terms

Read: Reporters were asked how often they read the comment sections. Read is defined as clicking on a link to a separate web page where comments are listed and reading at least one comment or scrolling down the web page where comments are listed and reading at least one comment.

Newsgathering process: Reporters were asked about actions they take while they are actively working on a story. The newsgathering process is defined as the time beginning from brainstorming and story development to interviewing and writing.

Sources: Reporters were asked about cultivation of sources, which is defined as people who provide some level of input on a story from identifying a topic to providing their perspective on a topic, with or without attribution.

Chapter IV

Results: Overview of Findings on RQ1

The first research question I sought to answer through my survey was: Do reporters at newspapers with non-anonymous commenting sections (a) more frequently read readers' comments, (b) make greater use of comments in reporting routines, such as using the comment sections to identify story ideas or updating existing an existing article; (c) find sources and (d) find comment sections beneficial to their reporting process than reporters at newspapers with anonymous commenting sections?

In response to survey question, on average, how often do you read your newspaper's online comments, 60 percent of respondents answered sometimes, often or always and only 40 percent responded never or rarely. Despite not being directed by their bosses to read online comments, most of the newspaper reporters who responded to this survey do read the comments.

When separated into groups by newspapers that require a first and last name to make a comment and newspapers that allow anonymous commenters, reporters (N=65) who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments are more likely to read comments than reporters who work at newspapers (N=35) that require a first and

last name (Table 1). For the newspapers that allow anonymous comments, only 22 reporters surveyed, or 34 percent, said they rarely or never read the comments and 43 reporters, or 66 percent, said they sometimes, often or always read the comments. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 2.02 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always). For newspapers that do not allow anonymous comments, 18 reporters, or 28 percent, said they never or rarely read the comments and only 17 reporters, or 49 percent, said they sometimes, often or always read the comments. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 1.51 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed to answer RQ1a. The results show a statistically significant difference between the group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments ($M=2.02$, $SD=1.01$) and those who don't ($M=1.51$, $SD=.88$); $t(98)=2.47$, $p=0.015$.

TABLE 1 Difference in how reporters read and use newspapers' online comments.

Variable	Response	Anonymous comments allowed (%) (n=65)	Name required (%) (n=35) (N=100)
How often do you read your newspaper's online comments?	Never	4	4
	Rarely	18	14
	Sometimes	21	12
	Often	19	5
	Always	3	0
How often have you found info used for another article or to update an article	Never	12	6
	Rarely	38	21
	Sometimes	14	8
	Often	1	0
	Always	0	0
How often have you found sources used for another article?	Never	24	17
	Rarely	33	13
	Sometimes	7	5
	Often	1	1
	Always	0	0
Readers' comments are beneficial to my reporting process.	Strongly agree	2	0
	Agree	10	3
	Neutral	21	11
	Disagree	22	13
	Strongly disagree	10	8

To address RQ1b, about whether reporters use comment sections to get ideas for more coverage, respondents were asked, how often when you read comments on your newspaper's online comment section have you found information that you have used for another article or to update an existing article? Seventy-seven percent of respondents said never or rarely, 22 percent said sometimes, 1 said often and 0 said always. Of those who said never or rarely, 50 reporters worked at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 27 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments. Of those who said sometimes, 14 work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 8 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments; Of those who said often, 1 works at a newspaper that allow anonymous comments and 0 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 1.08 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 1.06 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always) (Table 1).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the

group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments ($M=1.08$, $SD=0.714$) and those who don't ($M=1.06$, $SD=.639$); $t(98)=0.137$, $p=.891$.

To address RQ1 (c) about whether reporters use comments to find sources, the survey asked: How often when you read comments on your newspaper's online comment section have you found sources that you have used for another article? Forty-one percent said never, 46 percent said rarely and only 12 percent said sometimes. Of those who said never, 24 work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 17 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments (Table 1). Of those who said rarely, 33 work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 13 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments. Of those who said they sometimes use comment sections to find sources work for newspapers who allow anonymous comments, 7 work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 5 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments. Of those who said they often use comment sections to find sources work for newspapers who allow anonymous comments, 1 works at a newspaper that allows anonymous comments and 0 work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 0.77 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 =

sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 0.63 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always) (Table 1).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments (M=0.77, SD=0.702) and those who don't (M=0.63, SD=.0.731); $t(98)=0.942$, $p=0.349$.

While reporters are taking the time to read comments, most say they don't find doing so beneficial to their reporting process. To address RQ1 (d), reporters were asked to rate their feelings toward the following statement: Readers' comments in newspapers' online comment sections are beneficial to my reporting process, only 15 percent said they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments were more likely to say reading comment sections were beneficial to their reporting process: 12 reporters, or 19 percent, who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments said they strongly agree or agreed and only 3 reporters, or 8.6 percent, who work at

newspapers that don't allow anonymous comment said they strongly agreed or agreed.

Thirty two percent of survey respondents said they were neutral (21 reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 11 of those who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments.) Fifty three reporters surveyed said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Twenty two survey respondents, or 34 percent, who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments said they disagreed and 10 reporters, or 16 percent, said they strongly disagreed. At newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments, 13 reporters, or 37 percent, said they disagreed and 8 reporters, or 23 percent, said they strongly disagreed. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 2.43 (on a scale where 0 = strongly agree, 1 = agree, 2 = neutral, 3 = disagree and 4 = strongly agree). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 2.74 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous

comments ($M=2.43$, $SD=1.03$) and those who don't ($M=2.74$, $SD=.919$); $t(98)=-1.499$, $p=0.137$.

Summary of RQ1 Results

The survey results show that reporters are reading comment sections, although to a varying degree. Even as newsroom reporter ranks are shrinking as a result of changes in the industry, and reporters are asked to take on additional responsibilities, the majority of respondents to the survey indicated they do take time out of their day to click on the icon near a newspaper article online in order to read what people have to say about the article's contents. According to the data, only 8 percent of reporters surveyed said they never read the comments. Sixty-one percent said they sometimes, often or always read comments. Even though they report they read the comments, they don't report that doing so is beneficial to their reporting. Only 15 percent respondents indicated reading the comments is beneficial, and the majority of respondents, 53 percent, said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that reading comments is beneficial to their reporting. Most reporters surveyed, 87 percent, said they never or rarely found sources in the comments, while 13 percent of reporters said they sometimes or often do. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said they never or rarely

find information in comment sections they use for another article or to update an existing article, and 28 percent of respondents said they sometimes or often do.

In summary, the only statistically significant difference among the two groups was their frequency in which reporters said they read comments. There was not a statistically significant difference among the two groups in how they use comments for finding information to use for another article or to update an existing article, finding sources and their attempt to contact commenters to obtain additional information for a story.

Chapter V

Results: Overview of Findings on RQ2

The second question I sought to answer through my research was: Do reporters at newspapers with non-anonymous commenting sections (a) more frequently make contact with commenters, and are they more likely to (b) believe reading comments makes their reporting more efficient, or (c) makes for a more efficient way to get story ideas than reporters at newspapers with anonymous commenting sections?

In the study, I sought to determine how often reporters attempted to contact someone who posted in the comment sections (RQ2a). The survey asked: How often have you attempted to contact someone who has commented in your newspaper's online comment section to obtain additional information for a story? Only 16 percent of reporters said they sometimes contact commenters for more information for a story. Eighty-four percent said they never or rarely do. At newspapers that allow anonymous comments, 22 reporters, or 34 percent, said they never do so and 33 reporters, or 51 percent, said they rarely do so; at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments, 13 reporters, or 37 percent, said they never contact commenters for more information for a story and 16 reporters, or 46

percent, said they rarely do so. The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 0.915 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 0.80 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always) (Table 2).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments ($M=0.78$, $SD=0.673$) and those who don't ($M=0.80$, $SD=.719$); $t(98)=-0.106$, $p=0.915$.

The survey also asked reporters: On average, how often do you read online comment sections to make your newsgathering process more efficient. Reporters' days are filled with a variety of tasks beyond writing, including brainstorming for future stories and research for current stories they're working on. RQ2b sought to ask reporters about the frequency with which they turned to online comment sections to make their jobs more efficient. According to the survey results, reporters do occasionally turn to comment sections to make their jobs more efficient. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said they

sometimes or often read comment sections to make their jobs more efficient and 73 percent said they never or rarely do. Of newspapers that allow anonymous comments, 12 reporters, or 19 percent, said they sometimes read online comments to make their jobs more efficient and 5 reporters, or 8 percent said they often do. Sixteen reporters, or 25 percent of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments said they never read comments to make their jobs more efficient and 32 reporters, or 49 percent, said they rarely do. At newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments, 10 reporters, or 29 percent, said they never read comments to make their jobs more efficient, 15 reporters, or 43 percent said they rarely do, 9 reporters, or 26 percent, said they sometimes do and 1 reporter, or 3 percent, said they often do (Table 2).

The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 1.09 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 1.06 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous

comments (M=1.09, SD=0.861) and those who don't (M=1.06, SD=.919); $t(98)=0.197$, $p=0.845$.

TABLE 2 Difference in how reporters read and use newspapers' online comments.

Variable	Response	Anonymous comments allowed (%) (n=65)	Name required (%) (n=35) (N=100)
How often have you attempted to contact someone who has commented to obtain info for a story?	Never	22	13
	Rarely	33	16
	Sometimes	9	6
	Often	0	0
	Always	0	0
How often do you read comments to make news gathering more efficient.	Never	16	10
	Rarely	32	15
	Sometimes	12	9
	Often	5	1
Reading comments is an efficient way to find ideas for a story.	Always	0	0
	Strongly agree	0	0
	Agree	4	0
	Neutral	14	7
	Disagree	28	20
	Strongly disagree	19	8

Next, reporters were asked to rate their feelings about the efficiency of using story comments for finding story ideas (RQ2c): Please rate your feelings toward the following statement: Readers comments in newspapers' online comments sections is an efficient way to find story ideas for a story. Four percent of reporters said they agreed with the statement. Twenty-one percent of reporters said they neutral – 14 reporters at newspapers that allow comment sections and 7 reporters who work at newspapers that don't. Forty-eight percent of reporters said they disagree -- 28 reporters at newspapers that allow anonymous comments and 20 reporters at newspapers that don't. No reporters at newspapers that allow anonymous comments said they strongly agree with the statement and no reporters at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comment sections said reading comment sections is an efficient way to find story ideas for a story.

The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments was 2.94 (on a scale where 0 = strongly agree, 1 = agree, 2 = neutral, 3 = disagree and 4 = strongly agree). The mean for the group of reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments was 3.03 (on a scale where 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often and 4 = always).

An Independent Samples T-test in SPSS was performed. The results do not show a statistically significant difference between the

group of journalists who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments ($M=2.94$, $SD=0.916$) and those who don't ($M=3.03$, $SD=.664$); $t(98)=-5.13$, $p=0.609$.

Summary of RQ2 results

This survey shows that only a small percentage of reporters find online comment sections efficient in newsgathering. Eighty-four percent of respondents said they've never or rarely attempted to contact someone who posted in the online comment section as part of the newsgathering process and 15 percent said they sometimes do. When asked how often they read the comments to make newsgathering more efficient, 73 percent of respondents said they never or rarely do, 21 percent said they sometimes do and 6 percent said they often do. Seventy-five reporters said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that reading comments is an efficient way to find story ideas; 48 percent said they disagreed with the statement and 28 percent said they strongly disagreed.

There were no statistically significant differences among the two groups related to the second research questions. There was not a statistically significant difference among the two groups in the frequency in which they attempt to contact commenters, how frequently they read comments to make their newsgathering more

efficient or whether they find reading comments an efficient way to find story ideas.

Chapter VI

Results: Overview of Findings on RQ3

The research is worthwhile because more people are turning to their smartphones and laptops to access their news. To survive in this changing landscape, newspapers may need to gain better understanding in how to engage readers and to help reporters use comment sections for newsgathering in a way that enhances their reporting.

For RQ3, responses to a question that asked reporters how could comment sections be changed to make them more useful to reporters, provide additional insights that could be useful to newspapers. The responses to this question show some reporters are using comment sections in the newsgathering process and they want the comment sections to be structured better to yield more useful information. (A complete list of responses is found in Appendix C.) As one reporter wrote: "I mostly use comment sections to find people who are connected to the issue I'm writing about ... I read the comments to see if there's anyone else I should talk to. I also look to see if people generally think the article got it right or not. I think using real names also cuts down on the trollish comments." This reporter, however, notes that finding useful information means wading through many

comments that aren't useful: "Most comments are pretty useless because most people just spout off or lob insults."

Not every reporter said they believe the comment sections' role is to be useful to reporters and, rather, the comment sections' role is solely for readers. "They are not intended for that," one reporter responded to the question asking how comment sections could be changed to make them more useful for reporters. "They exist for engagement, not news-gathering," he continued.

Some reporters said they found comments to stories posted on their newspaper's Facebook page or Twitter feeds more useful than the comments on the newspaper's website. "You get more thoughtful debate on Twitter or Facebook, which seem like they've displaced the comments section," one reporter said. "I wish we could fix the comments to produce a more thoughtful discussion, but I don't think anyone has cracked that code. The only solution is a full time moderator, which is just not an efficient use of resources." Another reporter said: "I think it's pretty common now for readers to have to create an account or sign in with Facebook or Twitter. That improves the quality of the comments some. But we don't find our reader comments helpful. People are more active with comments on our stories posted on Facebook."

Removing anonymous comments was suggested by several reporters. "I think requiring commenters to use their real names would make them more helpful – for example, I find comments on links to Facebook articles from my news organization's page generally more helpful, less inflammatory and more on-topic than the ones on the website itself, because the website allows people to make up usernames rather than use real names," one reporter said. "I also think it could be helpful to notify reporters about comments on their articles." One reporter wrote: "Remove the anonymity. I cannot reach out to online commenters because they use pseudonyms, which allow them to be argumentative and aggressive but not to have dialogue." One reporter went a step further and said in addition to requiring commenters' names, newspapers should also "require people to use their real identities with pictures and locations."

Several reporters had suggestions to make comment sections more useful to reporters: One reporter wrote: "An option for users to include contact information in case a reporter wants to follow up on a comment." Another reporter said he used online comment sections as a gauge to determine if his reporting was balanced: "Comments to me are most useful as a gauge on whether I've reported a controversial story appropriately. If there's both criticism and praise from people rooting on both sides, then I've done my job." One reporter suggested

a mechanism for commenters to contact a reporter if they have more information to share: "Invite readers to contact the journalist when they have constructive information or points of view." Another reporter suggested a ranking system: "Longer, more substantive comments up top, shorter comments at the bottom," he wrote. Another reporter said a curated comment system that forwarded comments to reporters would be beneficial: "If an online editor curated the comments and sent the useful ones to reporters, it would make them more likely to be read," he wrote. Another reporter also stressed the need for a moderator: "They could be monitored more closely to delete comments from Internet trolls and keep only constructive comments," she wrote.

These comments and the results of the study indicate that reporters see opportunities for improving newspapers' comment sections. Even though newspapers' comment sections are often viewed negatively by reporters, the study showed that reporters still see value in taking the time to read them: a majority of reporters at newspapers that both allow anonymous comments and those that don't sometimes read the comments. The results of the study also show that some reporters use the comment sections to use for future articles, locate sources and contacting potential sources for stories, offering a forum to increase engagement between reporters and the public.

Chapter VII

Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to address whether newspapers' requirement that commenters use Facebook accounts or some other name verification method results in journalists using the comment sections more to find sources and story ideas. Studying these results can add to gatekeeping theory by providing insights about how reporters use comment sections and allow the public a larger role in shaping news content.

Other research has shown that journalists value the use of social media, including Facebook, for conducting research (Santana & Hopp, 2016). Having a forum attached to their story to offer others the ability to add their perspectives and information to a specific topic the reporter is interested in holds great opportunity for reporters (Santana 2016). Additionally, readers who suggest story ideas in comment sections can have their perspectives included in follow-up stories.

However, prior research show reporters are wary of using comment sections in their news gathering process because of they don't think they'll find the comments add anything new they didn't already know (Nielsen, 2013). Prior research has also shown that

many reporters find comment sections filled with vitriol and hateful language so they stay away (Santana, 2014).

Journalists serve a role as 'gatekeeper' in determining what information gets into a newspaper (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). The survey results show that online comment sections play a role in engaging with members of the public to have a say in what news, information and sources make it into the newspaper. Most of the reporters surveyed said they take the time to read the comments, and many also said they use information in the comments to identify sources, find story ideas and as a way to contact commenters for more information for stories. Traditionally, the public could reach out to reporters through phone, letters, email and other ways. The survey results show that online comment sections provide another way for newspapers to engage with the public.

The survey results show that reporters' routines include using comment sections to identify story ideas and sources for stories. Even though many newspapers' staffs have been cut due to economic pressures, many reporters surveyed said part of their work routine includes reading comment sections, and in some cases, using the information they find there to aid in their reporting and news gathering.

As the use of social media grows, many members of the public use their social media accounts, usually Facebook, to comment on newspapers' online comment sections. Even though comment sections are viewed by some as too negative, people continue to use them to comment on stories. There are efforts under way to improve comment sections, including the Coral Project, an open source *project* that seeks to help publishers create improved comment sections to enhance journalism (Lichterman 2014).

Regarding anonymity, many newspapers now require a Facebook account in order to post a comment on their newspaper's website. Shifting to the use of Facebook came in the wake of research that showed reporters disliked anonymous comment sections because they contain too much negativity (Nielsen, 2013). However, the survey results show that at newspapers requiring a Facebook account to post comments, which is not anonymous, fewer reporters read the comment sections than at newspapers that allow anonymous comments. The results of this survey did not show a statistically significant difference in the two groups (newspapers that allow anonymous comments and newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments) in how they use the comments sections for identifying sources, story ideas or making their jobs more efficient.

The results from the study showed that reporters who worked at

newspapers that allowed anonymous comments read the comment sections more frequently. It's possible that newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments have fewer comments or commenters don't post information as frequently that could be deemed useful to reporters. People who have to show their names before they comment may feel less comfortable about commenting about their employer, for example, for fear of retribution. Additionally, by posting on Facebook, a person's comments could be visible to their Facebook friends and family members, and therefore they may feel less inclined to post a comment that their friends and family may find objectionable.

The practical implication of this research is a fuller understanding of how reporters use the comment sections for newsgathering and how they can be improved for the benefit of the newspaper, reporters and the public. Knowing how anonymity affects how often reporters read the comment section is important. If newspapers are trying to improve their comment sections and make them more useful for reporters, a shift toward requiring name verification through Facebook may actually result in reporters reading the comment sections less, which may be an unintended consequence.

It is my recommendation that the journalism profession seek to better understand the way the public uses comment sections in order

to improve engagement with readers. By knowing how to provide a comment section that is useful to both readers and reporters, all groups stand to benefit. Newspapers can benefit by providing a comment section that readers want to visit, thereby increasing time spent on their website and strengthening their product over competitors.' Reporters can benefit by having another tool in their news gathering process to find story ideas and sources. Readers can benefit by having a place they can go to read comments by others on a topic they're interested, thereby broadening their knowledge, and by having a place where their voices are heard by other readers and reporters who may find the information useful for a story.

The survey results could contribute to the journalism profession by showing that reporters who work at newspapers that don't allow anonymous comments read the comments less than reporters who work at newspapers that allow anonymous comments. Reading the comments less could indicate that reporters find less value in the comment sections, and publications could make changes to their comment sections that would be more beneficial for reporters.

Limitations

This study was limited by a small sample size. A larger sample size may yield additional insights about journalists' newsgathering

practices. The study was also limited by focusing on daily newspapers. A broader look at varying newspapers and other kinds of news outlets, including television and radio, would likely yield additional insights about journalists' views on comment sections. Other limitations include a relatively small list of survey questions with a narrow scope. Asking journalists more questions about their newsgathering processes would be beneficial to furthering knowledge about journalists' practices. A qualitative analysis, asking journalists' views about the use of online comment section, could also expand understanding on this topic. The study did not ask journalists to detail their work practices throughout the day. It is possible that journalists do check comment sections more than what they recalled in their answers in the survey, and asking them to track their actual movements through a work day may yield additional insights on their usage of comment sections.

Future directions for research on this topic

Further study on other media, including TV and radio comment sections, in addition to studying newspapers with smaller circulations, would be beneficial. The survey does not observe reporters while working, and therefore does not measure the amount of time a reporter spends accessing online comment sections. Further research observing reporters' as they work would provide additional insight.

Further study of readers' practices, including studying their use of online comment sections and their interaction with reporters would shed additional light on how comment sections serve to widen the gates for those outside the newsroom to have an impact on coverage.

Additionally, the tone and content of what the public posts on Facebook, which could be visible to their friends and family members, could be different than what they post on newspapers' comments sections that use some other form of name verification rather than Facebook. An analysis of these differences could yield additional insights on the topic.

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Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1 Do you write at least one article for a newspaper per month that appears on your newspaper's website?

- Yes
- No

Q2

Does your newspaper or your manager require you to read the comments for the stories you write that appear on your newspaper's website?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Q3

Does your newspaper have a corporate policy on social media use?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Q4

On average, how often do you read your newspaper's online comments?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Q5

How often when you read comments on your newspaper's online comment section have you found information that you have used for another article or to update an existing article?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Q6

How often when you read comments on your newspaper's online comment section have you found sources that you have used for another article?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Q7

Please rate your feelings toward the following statement: Readers' comments in newspapers' online comment sections are beneficial to my reporting process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q8

How often have you attempted to contact someone who has commented in your newspaper's online comment section to obtain additional information for a story?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Q9

On average, how often do you read online comment sections to make your news gathering process more efficient?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Q10

Please rate your feelings toward the following statement: Readers' comments in newspapers' online comment sections is an efficient way to find story ideas for a story.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q11

How could online comment sections be changed to make them more useful for reporters?

A text input field with a scroll bar on the right and navigation arrows at the bottom.

Q12

What gender do you identify yourself as?

- Male
- Female
- Other

Q13

What is your age?

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT

PROJECT TITLE: JOURNALISTS' USE OF NEWSPAPER COMMENT SECTIONS IN THE NEWSGATHERING PROCESS

PARTICIPATION: Emailed consent; survey conducted online

Study Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how newspaper journalists value and use newspaper online comment sections. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn how newspaper reporters use comment sections in the newsgathering process. You must be working at least 10 hours a week for pay to take part in this study.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to participate in this study, you will complete an online survey. The survey will include questions about how you do your job and how you value online comment sections. The survey will take about 5 minutes to complete.

Risks and benefits:

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

There are no benefits to you other than the satisfaction in participating in research that may be beneficial to the newspaper industry.

Compensation: There is no monetary compensation for this study.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. The data will be kept for seven years after the completion of the study.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this is Lisa Brown, who can be reached at (314) 322-5187 or at lrbx8c@mail.missouri.edu; or the advisor on the project: Dr. Tim Vos, (573) 882-0665 or vost@missouri.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or access its website at <https://research.missouri.edu/irb/participants>.

You will be given a link to this consent form to keep for your records.

Appendix C

Reporters' suggestions: In the survey, reporters were given a blank field to answer the following question:

Q11 - How could online comment sections be changed to make them more useful for reporters?

- 1.) My email address and phone number are listed in my byline and closer; therefore readers can send me an email or call me.
- 2.) By requiring some kind of identity verification, like through Facebook or Google.
- 3.) I don't know, I've never thought about comment sections as being useful to reporters.
- 4.) Not sure. So many comments are factually wrong, or racist, or slanted to one point of view, that I pretty much ignore them all together. Here (perhaps everywhere?) no matter what the subject of the story, the comments usually end up having to do with illegal immigration. It's crazy.
- 5.) Verified users, no anonymity
- 6.) I don't know

7.) Enforcing basic standards of decency and civility. While comments are sometimes useful in providing sources to contact or new angles to consider, they often are ugly, dismissive or ill-informed. I've had sources say they don't want to be included in a story for fear of exposing themselves to vicious comments online.

8.) Would be useful to be able to search comments by key words; sometimes when a story gets a slew of comments its hard to find useful or specific information because the comments sections are generally poorly laid out and don't load well. Could be useful to have commentator's emails available to reporters, with the understanding that those commenting were warned that their email would be available to reporters and they could be contacted.

9.) I read the comment sections primarily to see what critiques of my work people may have, or if there's a detail or facet in a story that they are particularly interested in. I also read comments on social media for the same purpose.

10.) I read comments mostly on national and local political issues almost as a source of entertainment as people are so starkly on one side or other. Comments on trend stories (such as a major brand going under) show generational gaps. Once in a while there may be a comment on one of my own stories that becomes a

contact for a follow-up. That said, they need to be more accessible to readers and have a clearly stated vetting process.

11.) Transparency and authenticity would be great strides in the value of online comments.

12.) Require people to use their real name and provide contact information

13.) Make people use their real names.

14.) Provide accountability, maybe by forcing commenters to comment using their social media pages, or some other way that forces them to give their real names. That might make the conversation more civil. Currently most of the comments are angry rants, and many are racist.

15.) Better requirements for commenters providing their names and IDs

16.) I'm not sure, but often it's a lot of ignorance. If someone was sorting through the comments for me, I would look at the useful ones, but often it's overwhelmingly not helpful comments.

17.) We've pretty much gone toward comments on our Facebook page. I also post stories on other pages when they're relevant. ... I don't often look at the comments on my stories on the main Facebook page, but I probably would look more if our social-media team tagged me. But with what I cover ... I'm generally a step

ahead of commenters. I DO find information via Facebook groups and restaurant pages not affiliated with (my newspaper). Social media is a good tool for info -- I'm just not sure the comments are that good at supplying it.

18.) They could/ should be better moderated to reduce the amount of hate, vitriol and things stated as facts that are not true.

19.) Perhaps allow the reader to "tag" the reporter in some way

20.) I find comments on Facebook and social media to be far more helpful than comments in my newspaper's actual website comment section.

The people who comment on our website seem to be the same 15 or so people, over and over again, complaining about coverage they dislike or making vile and hateful comments about people who we report on rather than supplying any real information of journalistic value.

21.) I use Facebook a lot to find sources, especially surrounding crime and breaking news stories, but I am often hesitant to read the Facebook comments on my own stories. I previously covered some very controversial protests, and the comments were personal and insulting. I had to stay away from them to maintain my sanity. Sometimes, I would ask colleagues or friends to check the comments on my behalf for useful info or tips.

22.) Removing anonymous accounts is a positive step. I find it more useful to read the Facebook comments under the newspaper's FB post of a story rather than the comments under the story itself.

23.) Get rid of them. I just think there are too many angry, racist cranks who post in the online comments section to really make it worthwhile for news gathering.

24.) Unlikely. Our reader comments allow readers to vent. Also, relatively people comment on lots of stories.

25.) Not sure changes are needed really. I find that most comments on our site, unless it is a really big issue, have migrated to social media, as when a story is shared either by me, others or our paper, on Facebook in particular. I think that's a function of social media sites being the central frames through which people read news online.

I think a lot of people don't go to the website any more and click through for stuff. They just read their feed and comment as it suits them. Also, some comments point out small typos that get addressed. Maybe one change would be to find a way to funnel/scrap comments from a number of social media sites and then have them show up on our website. Not sure if that is even possible ...

26.) Only be allowed for subscribers.

27.) I don't know that they can or should be changed, especially for the benefit of reporters. It's a chance for the public to respond. The

best move we've made as far as news gathering or news tips has been Crowdtangle on Facebook. It has allowed us great access to information about our communities through Facebook.

28.) Encourage readers to provide additional information about the topic instead of opining

29.) I really don't know.

30.) Better moderation. A lot of the time it's just spam. Better ability to reach commenters (in the past, we had difficulty even getting contact info for commenters).

31.) Online commenters should not be able to remain anonymous when commenting on a news article. I think most publications have shifted to requiring a Facebook or email sign on, but I have found that anonymous commenting makes for useless content for future reporting. I also think it's helpful when news sites pull Facebook comments into the comments on the article itself. I often don't attempt to read comments on multiple platforms.

32.) Make people use their real names

33.) I don't know a good solution to this.. Hire a part-time social media to flag comments that are inappropriate maybe.

34.) Not sure any changes could be made that would make it more helpful. The comment section is a way for readers to spout off - and in the recent political comment, the extremes on both sides of the

political aisle, regardless of the subject, use the comment section as their soapbox.

35.) Require them to be signed. Anonymous commenting is irresponsible commenting. I'm not sure they can. Online comments were far more frequent several years ago, and I would read them carefully. Today, comments and commentary about a story are on FaceBook and Twitter - where I do read them and occasionally find them useful for information, sourcing and at times pointing out corrections that need to be done.

36.) Make them not anonymous. Also in the past couple of years our paper has put up a new paywall on our premium site where my stories appear, so the only commenters are subscribers, which keeps the audience very limited. There are usually the same handful of men commenting on my stories so I rarely read them.

37.) N/A. I never read them. I have a keychain that says "Never read the comments" and I abide by it.

38.) Allow for names and contact information, voluntarily.

39.) If users could flag comments by the type of feedback they're leaving. For instance, they could flag a tip as a "tip," and commentary as commentary, etc. That way I wouldn't have to wade through the cesspool of name-calling and general off topic ignorance to find something useful. Of course, that only works if commenters follow the

rules.

40.) I don't think comment sections are necessarily the best representation of who my readers are. Most of the people we see in the comment section are angry and extreme. While the comment section can occasionally yield helpful results, this seems representative of human nature and I'm not sure what we could do to change it. Also I'm not sure if this is relevant to your research, but it's worth noting how terrible the commenters can be toward female reporters. I wouldn't blame any woman who chose to ignore the comment section altogether, though I keep searching it in the vain hope that something fruitful will come out of it.

41.) Honestly, it might be useful if I automatically got emails with reader comments, perhaps one email 24 hours after publication. That might make me more likely to read them. Would be even better if there was some programmatic way to bundle comments that are very similar and/or are of little substance. I can see the comment section being a useful tool, I just haven't made use of it. I rely on readers emailing me directly for follow-up ideas.

42.) To be quite honest, my paper's comment sections reflect most of the anonymous internet writ large, which is to say that they're a cesspool of aggressively uninformed vitriol. I believe strongly that people should have the ability to comment, and that, for all of their

shortcomings, comment sections serve that purpose generally. But to the question of how they can be made more useful to reporters, presumably in the service of newsgathering, I would say it's far better to set up, promote and rely on a "send us tips" email handle, Dropbox account, etc.

43.) I see online comments as a useful gauge of whether readers are understanding the story, of if they're offering information that I neglected to include. Sometimes reading the comments will make me realize I left out a piece of context or could add something to the story that clarifies anything that's confusing.

44.) I don't think reporters can police an online comment section. You could try to steer a conversation, maybe, but it seems like a lot of labor for little fruit.

45.) Our comments are polarized, sometimes hateful, postings from a small group of people who rarely seem to have bothered to read the story. Only occasionally does someone say something insightful. Rarely does someone with involvement or expertise contribute something useful that could be used in reporting.

I've given up on reading or using the comments section. We should seek to remove anonymous postings and more thoroughly moderate the comments section. We should incentivize thoughtful discourse. We should also know something about the demographic breakdown of our

commenters. Where do they live? How old are they? If the commenters are not representative of our community, we have a problem. My sources worry about what kind of hateful vitriol they will be subjected to in the comments section. That hurts my journalism. An open forum, with real names, real opinions and considerate discourse would yield more useful conversation and give reasonable people a reason to participate. Some of those reasonable people, I'm sure, could be useful sources.

46.) Requiring commenters to use their real names might be helpful.

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48.) Part of me thinks we shouldn't have comments. Partisans can weigh in, often in vitriol, without identifying themselves. I miss the old letters to the editor, where people had to give their real names and have them validated.

My publication doesn't use a verification system such as Facebook, so commenters are protected with anonymity and generally hide behind that to make hyper-partisan, or disparaging/ugly remarks. Our reporter contact information (both phone and email) is

displayed directly above the comments in all our stories, and I get plenty of one-on-one contact with readers, which sometimes does lead to good information for future reporting. The other potential issue with comments is volume -- I don't have time to sift through 100 or 500 comments on a story. That's a volume we may get on a high-interest political or breaking news story. Ironically, the comments I'd be most interested in reading are on state agency accountability stories -- but they often draw the least comments from readers, sometimes in the single digits.

49.) Remove them. Several potential sources, especially from vulnerable communities, have declined to participate in a story because they know the vitriolic, ad hominem nature of the comments that will appear online.

remove anonymity

50.) I don't see online comments as having a lot of utility for reporters/writers—I very, very rarely find new or useful information there. To my mind, it's a service to readers, to give them a place to share their responses and respond to each other—and it takes a lot of moderating time and care to keep it a nontoxic place for that. If anything, consistent and considerable moderation of comments

sections can make them places for more interesting exchanges that *might* occasionally lead to new thinking or a story idea. By consistent/considerable moderation, I mean taking down offensive/off-topic comments promptly; banning commenters who don't abide by the rules and trying to contact them to explain kindly why; that kind of thing. But that takes staff time, which equals money, and I don't see that getting spent on online comments sections when dialogue among the desired demographic is moving to social media platforms anyway.

51.) The only times I've found them useful have been to seek out sources to talk on various issues. In those cases, it's been helpful when their commenting account is linked to their Facebook page, so there's an easy way to send them a message. Even then, though, they often don't see the messages if they're not friends with you. Perhaps some built-in system of being able to message commentators would be helpful.

51.) Taking away anonymity; having a requirement to have the commenter's name and occupation.

52.) I don't think comment sections were ever created with a reporter in mind, so I don't think they could be changed -- I've

always thought comment sections were areas where readers can share their opinions on the story. Reporters, like myself, monitor comments for the off-chance there could be someone who is personally impacted by an event or suspect/individuals in a story. I think those of us who do happen to find sources in the comments sections of stories get use from hearing from people who are on the ground, but besides that, I can't think of how these sections can become more "useful" for reporters than they already are.

53.) More monitoring of comments (by REAL humans) could help clear away comments that are not relevant, hurtful, off topic, etc. I often find errors pointed out in the comment section that I (or other reporters) have missed in the actual story. This is VERY helpful in this age of little-to-no copy editing.

54.) Reader-comment sections are often a vile place where falsehoods thrive and accountability is nearly non-existent. Our paper -- as of just two week ago -- suspended all reader comments for a while. I think the accountability provided by linking comments to Facebook pages would HELP ... but not solve all problems.

55.) Comments on our website can be posted under a pseudonym,

limiting their utility for reporting. Comments posted under real names could be more useful. Stricter rules and more moderation could also increase their utility by eliminating off-topic comments.

56.) They could specifically ask for tips.

57.) I think we should require commenters to sign their names. Anonymous comments tend to cheapen the discussion. I'm much more likely to reply to emails from readers.

58.) Require commenters to post under their true names; have a moderator who filters out garbage

59.) The most important thing I get from the online comments is when they tell me I got something wrong. They are also helpful in finding sources, although way too many of them are little more than trolling or flame wars against each other. The best way to make the comments more helpful is to require people to sign in with their real names, which would promote the type of reasoned discussion that would make the comments more helpful for everyone. Not going to happen in this universe, though.

60.) Have a moderator cull the comments and delete ALL the racist and misogynist ones. deleting stupid ones would be nice, too, but that's too much work. also delete all comments that have nothing to do about the story they are posting on.

61.) They are not intended for that. They exist for engagement, not news-gathering.

62.) I think it's pretty common now for readers to have to create an account or sign in with Facebook or Twitter. That improves the quality of the comments some. But we don't find our reader comments helpful. People are more active with comments on our stories posted on Facebook.

63.) They could be monitored more closely to delete comments from Internet trolls and keep only constructive comments.

64.) I'm really not sure.

65.) I'm not sure. You get a more thoughtful debate on Twitter or FB, which seem like they've displaced the comments section. I wish we could fix the comments to produce a thoughtful discussion, but I

don't think anyone has cracked that code. The only solution is a full time moderator, which is just not an efficient use of resources.

66.) Delete them. I honestly see no value to having online comment sections on news websites.

Effective, constructive conversations about news reports are pretty rare, but when they do happen, they're almost always found on social media (which has drawbacks of its own). Social media is the only place I feel comfortable engaging with readers.

67.) An option for users to include contact information in case a reporter wants to follow up on a comment.

68.) If an online editor curated the comments and sent the useful ones to the reporters, it would make them more likely to be read.

69.) Longer, more substantive comments up top, shorter comments at the bottom.

70.) I think requiring commenters to use their real names would make them more helpful -- for example, I find comments on links to Facebook articles from my news organizations page generally more

helpful, less inflammatory and more on-topic than the ones on the website itself, because the website allows people to make up usernames rather than use their real names. I also think it could be helpful to notify reporters about comments on their articles.

71.) If people have to use their real names. I mostly use comment sections to find people who are connected to the issue I'm writing about (I cover crime, so often victims' loved ones show up in comments).

I read the comments to see if there's anyone else I should talk to. I also look to see if people generally think the article got it right or not. I think using real names also cuts down on the trollish comments. Most comments are pretty useless because most people just spout off or lob insults.

72.) Remove the anonymity. I cannot reach out to online commenters because they use pseudonyms, which allow them to be argumentative and aggressive but not to have dialogue.

73.) Require people to use their real identities with pictures and locations

74.) Use the reddit model with up-votes/gold stars. The civility/productivity in many of those conversations seems to rise to the top, as trolls get down-votes and strikes to their reputation. I don't anticipate usefulness in terms of story ideas so much as story approaches.

Comments to me are most useful as a gauge on whether I've reported a controversial story appropriately. If there's both criticism and praise from people rooting on both sides, then I've done my job.

75.) Honestly, I stopped reading our comment section years ago. It was all the worst things about the internet: angry, unfocused and filled with trolls just trying to stir something up.

I read all and answer most emails from readers, and have got ideas for stories from that communication. Also from interacting on social media. I got a few ideas when I read our comment pages, but they weren't worth the time and irritation.

76.) Invite readers to contact the journalist when they have constructive information or points of view.

77.) I don't know

78.) Require posters to verify names and email addresses.

79.) No anonymous posting.

80.) Comment sections should be avoided at all costs.