

What do users have to say about online news comments? Readers' accounts and expectations of public debate and online moderation: a case study

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Abstract:

This article discusses readers' accounts on online news comments, through an analysis of comments threads on an article published in the online version of Portuguese newspaper *Público* in November 2013, focused on online news comments. As a case study on users' perceptions towards comments sections while using them, I concluded that the discussion not only highlighted the negative perception that readers may have of the forum, but also the intensified power relationships among users themselves that can arise from a collaborative model of moderation.

Keywords: Online news comments, public debate, online moderation, news organizations, journalism

Introduction

Due to digital technologies, audiences are becoming more and more active participants in public communication, in a way that means that media producers can no longer expect to operate within an exclusive professionalized enclave (Gurevitch *et al.*, 2009: 168-169). The interest in audience participation is certainly not a new trend or phenomenon, but the rise of new modes of participation enabled by new technologies has provided a leap forward in the inclusion of the audience in public communication mediated by conventional media outlets. This tendency goes along with the notions of a democratic role and public service inherent to the journalistic activity.

Among the many genres of audience participation generated by the incorporation of Internet into traditional media, readers' comments in news are the most widely used in

online news sites (Reich, 2011: 97; Noci, 2012: 86; Zamith & Lewis, 2014: 2). At the same time, they are one of most common forms of citizen engagement online, with great potential for public discourse (Weber, 2014: 941), giving the public a medium for expressing their perspectives on current issues (Henrich & Holmes, 2013: 1) and on matters of public concern. Readers' comments can be therefore understood as civic forums, where citizens exchange ideas and where civic talk can take place. Thus, user comments are an interesting subject for investigation in the context of audience participation in journalism (Hille & Bakker, 2014: 564).

Between deliberative ideals, quality concerns and website traffic

In this light, readers' comments might be seen as a desirable contribution to journalism and to a healthy democratization of discourse (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 13). In fact, research not only has shown that online news comments are a dynamic space of ideas and arguments exchange (Silva, 2013: 186) but also that journalists themselves recognize their potential to fulfill deliberative ideals when engaging their audience in the discussion of public issues (Reich, 2011).

Despite this recognition, in practice, several studies have showed that readers' comments might pose several challenges to journalists and newsrooms, due to an array of aspects: quality concerns related to the presence of inappropriate speech, such as hate speech, racism, defamation, abusive comment, incivility, or linguistic errors (Reich, 2011: 103; Olsson & Viscovi, 2013: 286); the anonymity of the online users, mainly understood as a factor in the uncivil tone of online discourse (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 16), which may affect a news organization's reputation (Nielsen, 2014: 479); the devaluation of the moderation of readers' comments and related editing tasks as extra-routine work, with a lower professional status than more demanding and qualified tasks like news stories or investigative work (Olsson & Viscovi, 2013: 290); or the cost-increasing effect and the additional resources required for managing audience participation (Nyirõ *et al.*, 2011: 132). However, in respect to economic considerations within news outlets, readers' comments may bring concrete benefits such as brand-building, user-loyalty and boosting website traffic (Vujnovic, 2011: 145), thus possibly attracting advertisers.

The challenges identified by news organisations correspond to a certain extent to much the same challenges which have been pointed out by scholars when analysing online political forums, drawing attention to some aspects that make them particularly vulnerable to disruption: for instance, the monopolization of discourse by particular individuals and groups (Dahlberg, 2001: 13); or verbal attacks and other forms of incivility (Ferreira, 2010: 110).

Online comments and moderation policies – will there ever be a solution?

Although newsrooms encourage users' participation, in part due to the possibility of financial revenues that can be generated by fostering loyalty and audience ratings (Noci *et*

al., 2010: 8), the degree of control or freedom that can be allowed is an ongoing debate (Trygg, 2012: 6). Despite the fact that the great majority of online publications seek to control user contributions, to protect the newsroom reputation and prevent themselves from legal liabilities through legal and ethical guidelines (Singer, 2014: 60; Braun & Gillespie, 2010: 4), the diversity of management options adopted by news organizations reflects the absence of a core strategy when dealing with readers' comments.

"There's no magic recipe for moderating news comments, and news websites have explored different moderation strategies over time, mostly by trial and error" (Domingo, 2015: 164). More recently, some newsrooms are deciding to move online comments from their websites to Facebook-commenting (Hille & Bakker, 2014: 563) – like the *Los Angeles Times* early in 2011, or *Reuters.com* in 2014¹ –, giving reasons such as the loss of anonymity, the improvement of the quality of the debate, or the increase of traffic to news sites. Other news organizations are outsourcing comments or even *in extremis* abandoning them.

In a research project on comment management strategies in more than twenty European and North American online newspapers, Reich (2011: 108-109) identified two main attitudes: "pre-moderation" and "post-moderation". The "pre-moderation" strategy, in which the journalist retains a gatekeeping role when assessing every comment before its publication, entails more responsibility and investment from media outlets, as well as normative concerns about the quality of the debate. But mainly due to newsroom budgets and staff (Singer, 2014: 60), most news organizations use a "post-moderation" system, in which journalists would only intervene in case of complaints of users or violation of the terms of participation.

Similarly, the World Editors Forum's report on best practices when moderating online comments found that, from the 104 news organizations across 63 countries interviewed, 42 news organizations opted to moderate after publication, 38 before, with 16 operating a mixed strategy (2013: 21). This mixed strategy corresponds to a "collaborative moderation", embedding users in the process through prestige points that allows some users to share moderation duties with editors – a more unusual but more sophisticated way of involving users in moderation (Reich, 2011: 112).

It is interesting to refer, in this context, to a study based on the initiative launched by Knight-Mozilla Partnership, "Beyond Comments Threads", which called for innovative ideas to reinvent online news discussion: analyzing a total of 126 submissions, the authors found, among other things, moderation proposals such as crowd-sourced and reputation-based solutions containing rather sophisticated technological features, but also highlighted the notion that good moderation must be a manual editorial process (Zamith & Lewis, 2014: 566). These researchers also underline that reputation systems may lead to some commenters being privileged over others, which runs counter to the principle of discursive equality (*ibidem*: 568). Additionally, "engaging the participants in the moderation does not mean letting users delete what they consider inappropriate; that would open the door to ideological wars between commentators with different points of view" (Domingo, 2015: 166).

What about readers-turned-contributors?

In online forums at the end of news articles, readers “want to express personal opinions, interact with one another, act as entertainers, or express intense emotional reactions” (Meyer & Carey, 2014: 214). In fact, not only are newsrooms trying to cope with the tension between freedom of expression and protection from abusive comments, readers are also trying to develop their own perspectives on moderation strategies and, more generally speaking, on the role of journalism and free debate, as shown by Cook (2011: 26). When examining comments threads beneath the online version of The *Guardian*’s articles on its *Comment is Free* section, some users felt they have the right to publicly challenge moderation decisions, but at the same time many wrote in support of moderation, although appealing to know why certain decisions had been made. This perception of being unheard may lead to a vicious cycle where commenters become more belligerent, making writers wary of interacting with them (Trygg, 2012: 18). Indeed,

A sense of belonging or feeling an important member of a group is not created when one’s contributions are minimized. Participants will not stay in a group if the group’s moderator does not express confidence in their ability to determine what is important for other members or what other members will find educational. (Meyer & Carey, 2014: 224)

However, does the problem rely on moderation policies and decisions, or rather on the actual people that are posting comments? The authors of a representative survey of the Swedish population conducted in 2011 say that the results confirmed the presence of “wishful thinking”:

One likes the idea of reader comments, but the current quality is not good enough. As a consequence, it seems that the criticism is primarily directed towards the people posting comments, rather than towards the news media providing the opportunity to comment. (Bergstrom & Wadbring, 2014: 7)

Methodology and scope of the study

This article intends to critically analyze and discuss readers’ accounts of users comments sections provided by news organizations, within a close examination on comments threads on an article published in the online version of *Público* (one of the most prominent daily Portuguese newspapers) on November 16th, 2013.² I expected that the comments threads (90 valid³ posts in total) on the referred article would provide a relevant case study and an unique opportunity to examine readers’ viewpoints, perceptions and expectations towards the online comments section, while identifying the problems and challenges of the section, specifically in respect to moderation decisions. I justify the choice of only one article and its corresponding threads to do this analysis, due to the fact that in Portugal, in recent years,

this was the only time that a national newspaper specifically wrote an informative news piece dedicated to the subject of online news comments (apart from ombudsmen articles).

In this case study, we've analyzed the comments threads on the already mentioned article taking into consideration: 1) a thematic and content analysis, aiming to grasp users' expectations and perceptions regarding the online comments' section, as well as courses of action and suggestions made by readers concerning the regulation of the space; 2) a more formal analysis, focusing on: the discursive mode comments that explicitly or indirectly replied to other comments or commenters; the number of unique users who intervened in the discussion and their status within the "online community" of the newspaper.

Concerning the thematic analysis (perspectives and expectations expressed by readers), the comments were coded according to variables such as:

- the section's affordances and potentialities to democracy and public debate;
- the problems and challenges identified in the comments' section;
- the proposals made towards moderation;
- the references made to the article (in terms of critique or affiliation);
- other comments (including off-topic and arbitrary posts).

Using Nvivo, the quantitative and qualitative data analysis software, the unit of analysis chosen for coding was the comment/message, and each one was coded into one or more categories/subcategories.

In respect to the discursive/formal analysis, I focused on the utterance position of comments that presented indicators of reciprocity (Graham & Witschge, 2003: 185), namely conversational response (replies to other comments). Bearing in mind that interactivity and exchange of ideas and arguments are key features of online forums (Silva, 2013: 188), I similarly found a relevant amount of posts (43 comments) which directly or implicitly made reference to, replied to or addressed other users. Taking into account several empirical researches centered in the discursive analysis of online political forums (Tsaliki, 2002; Ruiz *et al.*, 2010; Winkler, 2002; Silva, 2013), I incorporated variables such as:

- critique of the other (to provide counterarguments of other's positions);
- affiliation (to support and/or greet a user or argument);
- search for information (in the form of direct questions, for instance);
- complement information (to provide or add new information);
- elements of incivility (threats to democracy;
- threats to social groups and individuals) and non-politeness (personal attacks and other behaviors such as sarcasm).

Additionally, in order to verify the possible monopolization of attention within online discourse by particular individuals and groups (Dahlberg, 2001: 13; Zamith & Lewis, 2014: 562), I also counted the number of unique users who intervened in the discussion and their

respective positions within the statuses defined by the amount of prestige points.

Discussion – Thematic Analysis

The article published in the online and paper version of *Público* focused specifically on the failed expectations of enrichment of public debate and democracy within the readers' comments' section, when they turn into "combat areas" due to inappropriate and offensive speech, or even threats to democracy and other people's rights. The news piece also referred to issues such as anonymity and the moderation system adopted by *Público*. Diverse sources were used in this article signed by the community manager of the newspaper (also a journalist in the online section): the World Editors Forum report "Online comment moderation: emerging best practices"; two Portuguese academic researchers; a journal article; and 3 regular commenters of the newspaper.

The news piece was published underneath a series of articles that the newspaper promoted on the future of journalism, anticipating *Público's* decision in implementing a pay wall after a number of articles read per month. Also in 2013, the newspaper decided not to allow anonymous comments anymore.

Earlier in 2012, the newspaper had decided to move from pre-moderation to a "collaborative moderation". Depending on how many points they gain or lose, users can be "beginners", "influencer", "experienced" and ultimately "moderators", sharing moderation with the community manager of the newspaper. Although this moderation system relies on community members'/moderators' moderation judgments, the community manager of the newspaper works as the "hand of God" or the "father figure", as he explained in a previous piece of research (Silva, 2014), looking at comments from an upper level, coming down only if something's wrong – and this applies also to complaints towards community members.

Expectations, challenges and proposals to online news comments

Through the thematic analysis of the online comments to the referred news article, we can conclude that the discussion was somewhat placed between regarding the section as highly valuable to the expansion of public discourse, and at the same time as an "headache", particularly due to its participants.

Indeed, the majority of the comments threads mainly pointed out problems and challenges that can undermine a fruitful, democratic debate in this online forum (see **Table 1**). Although referring some possibilities and affordances of the space (namely: extension of opinion pluralism and public debate; availability and easy access; forum for the ordinary citizen; added value to journalism and learning possibilities beyond the news pieces; general interest of the section in this newspaper in particular), most users addressed the "darker side" of online comments, stressing the commenters themselves, the moderation made, and even the excessive freedom of the space as main problems. For example: "there is a clear need of being heard and seen – that's what bothers me the most, not the ignorance about a certain subject, but the absolute lack of politeness of users (...)."

Table 1: Thematic analysis of comments threads

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>References</i>
Perceptions and Expectations	87
Affordances and potentialities to democracy and public debate	14
Problems and challenges	55
Suggestions and proposals (moderation)	7
References to the article	11
Other comments (including arbitrary and off-topic posts)	15

In respect to identified problems in the online comments' section, the commenters themselves were pointed to more frequently as the main trouble, and several aspects were underlined within this scope – trolling and the desire to be in the limelight; non-politeness and aggressiveness, violation of publication norms; negativity; hidden agendas and interests; the need to vent personal frustrations; and the low quality of posts in general. The publication criteria established by the newspaper and the “excessive” freedom of the space were also mentioned as challenges but in a much lower degree (two comments).

These results somewhat confirm the premise of “wishful thinking” mentioned by Bergstrom and Wadbring (2014), where the survey conducted on a sample of the Swedish population in 2011 showed that the problem relied more on the people posting comments, rather than on moderation decisions or policies, or even on the news organization. The authors also mentioned a “paradox” occurring within the public sample: “a majority consider reader comments to be of relatively high value and of making online news more interesting”, but a majority “also view reader comments as having low-quality content” (Bergstrom & Wadbring, 2014: 7). It is also interesting to notice here the similarity of some of the negative attributes referred to by journalists and newsrooms when discussing online news comments or audience participation in general, as shown by several studies on the subject (Reich, 2011; Olsson & Viscovi, 2013; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Silva, 2014).

Besides that, my analysis also showed that, more specifically, some readers used very strong words to characterize users that they see as an obstacle: “psychopaths”, “radical communists”, “nazis”, “fascists”, “trash”, “laundry tank” or “horrible and ignorant people”.

But not only the commenters were under fire: moderators (readers that accumulate enough prestige points in order to manage other users' comments) were also viewed as an issue in the section, due to, according to some users: hidden agendas and interests; dogmatic and arrogant behaviors; arbitrariness and/or bad interpretation of norms of publication. For example: “I find the moderators' ‘reputation’ odd: in a news article on education, messages that were explicitly violent were approved, while my post asking for

deletion of a comment was itself deleted ...”; “This is a forum moderated by interests and political agendas, and committed to humiliating the city of Oporto (...). This kind of activism is clearly organized and has clear purposes (...). It reflects the country we are.”

Ten comments ultimately labelled the moderators’ management as “censorship” (using this word or associated words, such as censor, dictatorship, nazi regime, blue pencil, etc.). This somewhat confirms the possibility of opening doors to “ideological wars” between commentators, as suggested by David Domingo (2015) when referring to post-moderation models, which rely on a system that allows that readers delete comments that they do not consider appropriate. Although this is a limited case study, we can infer that a collaborative moderation system may also entail “ideological wars”, especially between commenters and users-moderators.

Some users drew attention indeed to the existence of a moderators’ “lobby”, monopolizing and making the section “moderate”. The community manager of the newspaper, in an interview for another project (Silva, 2014), underlined the dominance of a “center and moderated” view of the section, undermining the presence of whatever idea or argument that is contrary to that “center” view, which, in some cases, can obliterate alternative, if not exactly radical or extremist, perspectives. In his opinion, this can be encouraged by what he called a “band behavior” among moderators: “if moderator y realizes that the moderator x, more influential in the community, won’t publish these kinds of comments, he won’t publish them as well, and so on”.

In terms of perceptions expressed by users in this particular discussion, a few readers also made suggestions and proposals in order to improve this readers’ forum and address the identified problems, namely: to limit the number of comments by user; a more effective and permanent action by the newspaper in verifying complaints and denounces; more flexible rules of publication. Two users were more radical in suggesting the expulsion of users who systematically violate publication rules or, as well, the expulsion of moderators who approve irregular or improper comments.

My thematic analysis also showed that there were specific references to the article itself, most of them showing a positive evaluation of the content and approach of the news piece (two of them were negative or critical).

There was also a rather expressive amount of arbitrary and off-topic references in comments (15). By off-topic, I mean posting something that is substantively unrelated to the original topic, a tendency found in studies related with online discourse (Silva, 2013: 185; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011: 137); in this particular discussion, the considerable proportion of off-topic references can be explained by the fact that some users engaged in a parallel discussion about the Darwin’s theory of evolution. On the other hand, by arbitrary comments, I mean posts that do not offer arguments or reasons for the stance taken – some examples: “I think that people should be themselves and not go with the wind”; “Israel and EUA do not like freedom and now we can deny many of their lies”.

Discussion – Discursive/formal analysis

As I said before, I found a considerable amount of comments that directly or implicitly replied to other users, which made me also focus on the analysis of the utterance position of these “conversational” or “interactive” posts. Here I found somewhat ambivalent results (see **Table 2**): while the presence of critique or even uncivil and impolite behaviors and language (name-calling, for instance) was dominant – which goes along with the some of the problems identified by readers in my thematic analysis – I also found a rather relevant amount of affiliation in conversational comments (greeting, approval expression, solidarity) and also posts that tried to provide new information to other users (for instance, when a moderator informed or made suggestions to other user). This may suggest that, despite the high level of confrontation and non-politeness in conversational comments, the online comments section can be a space of information exchange (Silva, 2013: 186).

Table 2: Discursive analysis: conversational response
(43 posts – out of 90)

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>References</i>
Critique of the other	14
Affiliation	10
Search for information	2
Complement information	15
Elements of incivility and non-politeness	14

Lincoln Dahlberg (2001: 13) underlines that, although theoretically all subscribers to a group have equal opportunity to post, in many groups a small number of participants are responsible for most posts, which leads to the monopolization of attention within online discourse by particular individuals and groups. In the thematic analysis of the comments threads of this article, I have already observed that some users referred to the existence of a moderators’ lobby and dominance as an issue to the section. For this reason, I decided to count the amount of unique users who entered in this particular discussion. I verified that 90 comments in total were posted by 38 unique users, which may confirm the dominance of certain readers. Some of them showed a peculiar regularity in their posting (for instance, a single user – a moderator – posted 16 comments; another one – also a moderator – posted 13 comments). In terms of their respective positions within the statuses defined by the amount of prestige points, I observed that moderators authored 48 comments, while beginners, influent and experienced users respectively posted 19, 2 and 6 posts.

Final remarks

My case study aimed to observe the grass-roots level of readers’ comments, focusing on their own perspectives and interactions towards the online comments section. We may

conclude that, although some posts made reference to the positive uptakes of the space, and despite the fact that a few conversational comments provided suggestions or information to other users, this particular discussion not only highlighted the negative perception that users may have of the forum (due to the problems and obstacles underlined by them) and a high degree of frustration and anger (Zimmerman, 2014: 19), but also may showed a kind of “tug-of-war” (Beyers, 2004: 13-14) between users and moderators, clearly marked by power relations.

Reviewing this discussion, we can also say something about the moderation strategy adopted by newspaper *Público* and what it may entail for the public debate that occurs in *fora* like online comments. It is to me clear that the current model allows the newspaper to share responsibilities with the readers and engaging them in the moderation task, while freeing the news organization of the “burden” of having a moderation team and the consequent requirement of human resources available (Silva, 2014). However, we might say that this model, despite its evident benefits (to the newspaper, to the engagement of readers, and to the possibility of a stronger and effective connection between journalists and readers), actually may enhance the combative side of the discourse and intensify power relations between readers, while shifting the control power and regulation from the newspaper (as in a strictly pre-moderation model) to users.

This case study may thus provide important clues to better understand not only the implications of a specific moderation model, but also the perceptions of the community of a news website about online news comments while using them – this may also help to identify the best possible strategies to promote their engage users in this participatory space. In this sense, it is crucial that news organizations and journalists are themselves engaged in these conversations: by “showing interest in the experiences of the commenters, and responding to their doubts and queries”, acknowledging “that the quality of the contributions tends to increase because the users feel their ideas are being heard and valued” (Domingo, 2015: 167). In my case study, I indeed noticed that a few users implicitly proposed a more active and engaged role for the newspaper, when suggesting more effective verification of complaints and denounces.

I believe that one should therefore rethink the relationship between newsrooms and commenters, as suggested by Michael Erald at the *New York Times* (2013) and Zamith & Lewis (2014: 570). Indeed, “as more and more of journalism’s core audience moves online for news, news professionals will have to move on with them” (Meyer & Carey, 2014: 224).

The conclusions of the World Editors Forum report on best practices when moderating online comments already pointed to that direction:

[to] make the best use of online comments also requires investment in resources in intelligence, which is particularly challenging at a time when many news outlets are struggling to establish sustainable digital businesses. More effective automated filters will undoubtedly be developed, but there will continue to be a need for human input in the moderation process and

consequently well-trained moderators and community managers (2013: 71).

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Notes:

¹ In a editor's note (November 7th 2014), Reuters.com states: "Reuters.com is ending user comments on news stories. Much of the well-informed and articulate discussion around news, as well as criticism or praise for stories, has moved to social media and online forums. Those communities offer vibrant conversation and, importantly, are self-policed by participants to keep on the fringes those who would abuse the privilege of commenting (...). We value conversations about the news, but the idea of comments in a website must give way to new realities of behavior in the marketplace. The best place for this conversation is where it is open to the largest number of participants possible." In <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/11/07/editors-note-reader-comments-in-the-age-of-social-media/> (visited 06/05/15).

² <http://www.publico.pt/portugal/noticia/se-me-permite-o-senhor-e-uma-besta-ou-nao-e-1612714> (in Portuguese) (visited 06/05/15).

³ There were 95 comments but 4 of them were denounced by users and deleted by the newspaper and another was repeated.