

Reader Comments to Online Opinion Journalism:

A Space of Public Deliberation

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The authors thank Kettering Foundation for their support of this project, Emily Haas for her diligent coding and insightful observations, and Eddie Roth for fruitful discussions that helped inspire this research.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 10th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX, April 17-18, 2009.

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Introduction

Increasingly, journalism scholars and practitioners are examining the potential of online journalism to employ interactive features in ways that may promote citizen participation and engagement. To date, surveys of the field document the extent to which such features have been incorporated online (Schultz, 1999; Roseberry, 2005; Nip, 2006; Zamith, 2008), reasons that explain the resistance to their incorporation (Hermida & Thurman, 2007), and the implications of online, interactive features on the changing role of media in democracy (Tumber, 2001). However, research has not examined the actual use of such features by readers, and the extent to which it may or may not promote a more participatory or engaged form of democratic discourse.

This paper proposes that looking specifically at one kind of interactive feature, the readers' comments section to online opinion journalism, provides a unique and constructive space for public discourse. Drawing primarily on Gastil's (2008) conceptual definition of deliberative public conversation, our work offers an operational definition of deliberation that can be applied to online reader comments. Using content analysis, we apply this operational definition to a sample of readers' comments posted within the opinion pages of two major regional American newspapers. The pilot analysis provides insight into how public deliberation may manifest itself within the context of readers' comments, the dimensions of deliberation that are more likely to be present in this context, and directions for further research.

Online Journalism and Democracy

Against the backdrop of the changing information environment, emerging communication technologies have altered the landscape of information production and distribution in significant ways (Shirky, 2008), straining and at times displacing the traditional role of journalism to inform the public (see, for example, Tumber, 2001). Mainstream news organizations, no longer having unique access to political information and the advantage of distribution, are experimenting with ways to exploit new technologies to reinvigorate journalism and address contemporary needs (Zamith, 2008). Interactive technologies have opened up new ways of incorporating user generated content within news context. Such media have been received with a good deal of caution (Hermida & Thurman, 2007, Tumber, 2001). While concerns as to the tone, accuracy or partisanship of much of the political information produced through emerging sites are warranted, we argue that interactive technologies can enable journalists to offer new avenues for citizen participation in the political process.

Indeed scholars have been inquiring about the potential of online journalism to employ interactive features in a way that may promote citizen participation and engagement (Schultz, 1999; Roseberry, 2005; Nip, 2006). These studies identified interactive features according to three dimensions of public journalism: connecting to the community; engaging individuals as citizens; and helping public deliberation in search of solutions (Nip, 2006). Looking at the third—the use of online features to help public deliberation and the public problem solving process—Nip (2006) argues that features which bear the potential for helping the community to deliberate

are rarely found, whereas those that connect the news organization to the community are the most common. Nip's conclusion is based on the analysis of two studies which surveyed large representative samples of U.S. daily newspapers (Scultz, 1999; Roseberry, 2005). Nip (2006) concludes "interactive journalism, despite harboring the potential, is not achieving the higher goals of public journalism to any great extent" (p. 220)

This conclusion should be qualified in two respects. First, these studies confined the potential of promoting online deliberation to two features found within online journalism—chats and message boards. However, news organizations have a whole variety of interactive features available to them that may promote public deliberation and focusing only on these two features is too limiting. In particular, we argue an important online feature is the invitation for readers' to comment on newspaper content. By offering the opportunity for lay citizens to think about and contribute their perspectives, opinions or expertise to journalistic content, the newspaper is opening up an opportunity for promoting public deliberation.

Second, while these studies are important in mapping the implementation of a variety of online features within the realm of online journalism, such previous research did not look in-depth at how such features were actually used. Indeed, much of the focus on online journalism and interactive media has focused on blogs (Barlow, 2008; Bloom, 2003; Kline, Burstein, De Keijzer, & Berger, 2005; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). Less research, however, has been conducted on the content of reader comments to newspaper sites themselves. Such a connection between public and journalistic commentary could have important implications for

democratic practice. Such connection could also have important implications for journalistic practice since these readers are actively engaging with the newspaper, its journalists, and the content it produces. This study begins to fill in some of the empirical detail as to the actual use of interactive public features to online journalism.

Reader Comments, Opinion Journalism and Deliberation

Many are familiar with the comments section to online news. As implemented by most online newspapers, the feature is relatively straightforward, allowing readers to submit their voice—opinion, perspective, expertise—to content written by professional journalists. Generally, comments are submitted via a form available at the end of an article. The format may or may not require a reader to register with a news site and usually does not require the commenter to use their real name (Hermida & Thurman, 2007), though the individual’s user name is posted alongside their comment. Varying language is used to elicit comments, including “your turn” (TCPalm.com), “in your voice” (DesMoinesRegister.com), “talk back” (Haaretz.com), or “share your thoughts” (Nytimes.com). In addition to commenting on news stories, many newspapers also elicit comments to editorials and commentary.

The context of online opinion journalism is of particular interest due to its traditional function as a space for diverse reasoned perspectives on public issues. Though limited in space and scrutinized by the editorial board, the combination of the editorial page with its editorial rail, cartoonist’s art, and letters to the editor, along with the “op-ed” page, was aimed to balance the

paper's opinion with a range of perspectives from professional commentators, public figures, and ordinary citizens. Traditionally, letters to the editor have been conceived as a way to incorporate citizen voices within the public discussion. Yet issues of space and market considerations limited the potential of these letters to meet any standard of inclusive public deliberation (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; 2002a). The transition of opinion journalism into an online format accompanied by the introduction of space for reader comments provides a potential for diverse and authentic public deliberation within opinion journalism. The combined effects of immediate response, unlimited space, and minimal censorship, open up an opportunity for citizens to participate in public deliberation, and a direct link between the paper's voice and citizens' voices, thereby combining institutional and public voice (Rosenberry, 2005).

Reader comments to online opinion journalism have the potential to promote public deliberation in a number of ways. Readers may provide insight on aspects of the issue not considered in newspaper content. In particular such comments may elicit testimonies from personal experience or specify individual concerns and implications necessary for creating an effective solution (Ryfe, 2005; Sanders, 1997; Gastil, 2008). Readers may also provide a multiplicity of perspectives that are difficult to represent in a single editorial. Such diversity of opinion is a critical aspect of public deliberation (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Mutz, 2006) and public problem solving (Page, 2007). Finally, readers' comments are an interactive feature between journalists and the public. Such conversations could provide an important connection point—recognizing the potential of citizens to contribute to political issues rather than placing

readers in the position of audience or “eavesdroppers” to a “conversation between experts” (Campbell, 2000, p. 691).

At the same time, the inclusion of user generated content poses certain risks to newspapers. Anonymity, lack of moderation, and minimal censorship may lead to inappropriate use of language thereby impeding substantive and constructive discussion. Similar online platforms, in particular UseNet groups, have been shown to use flaming and invective (e.g. Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). Comments may also elicit uninformed opinion or inaccurate information that may mitigate upon productive problem solving process and at the extreme case may harm the newspaper’s reputation (Hermida & Thurman, 2009).

To date, studies have not explicitly examined comments to opinion pages¹, and more importantly studies have not taken a close look into the content of these comments and the extent to which they help or hinder the fulfillment of the opinion page mission to provide diversified reasoned opinion, and a stage for public deliberation. The goal of this research is to begin unraveling the potential of reader comments to opinion journalism to promote public deliberation. Thus the study’s research question:

RQ1: In what ways and to what extent do readers comments to online journalistic opinion content embody a space of public deliberation?

¹ An exception is work by Cohen and Neiger (2007) who conducted a rhetoric analysis of reader comments to an opinion column published in Haaretz, Israel’s elite newspaper in the wake of the evacuation of Jewish settlers from their homes in Gaza. The authors analyze the content of the comments according to three dimensions of discourse.

To this end, we first provide a conceptual definition of deliberation, followed by an operational definition designed for the context of reader comments. We then apply this definition in a content analysis of reader comments.

Public Deliberation

Deliberation is broadly defined as a political process through which a group of people carefully examines a problem and arrives at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view (Gastil, 2008). Theoretical and empirical work has shown that deliberation can promote an informed citizenry, because it can enable citizens to deeply engage with issues, share information and weigh alternatives, all of which are necessary for constructing an informed public opinion that affects public policy (Fishkin, 1996, Gastil, 2000). On complex issues where options are not apparent and a solution needs to be created, public deliberation is regarded as a political process that produces better answers, since it helps develop solutions that account for conflicting values and interests (Mathews, 1999). Deliberation can also serve a legitimating function once policy is implemented, because the ability to demonstrate the consideration of alternative views and rationales helps justify a decision among those opposing it (Manin, 1987). But demonstrated positive effects do not end with the temporally bracketed “conversation.” The initial effects on political knowledge, political interest, and political efficacy brought about by deliberation can work to empower citizens for further political engagement (Almond & Verba, 1963; Abramson, 1983; Scheufele & Moy, 1999,

McClurg, 2006). Therefore, deliberation is regarded both as political engagement in itself, as well as an instigator for further engagement.

Scholars have been inquiring about the qualities or attributes that constitute a deliberative discussion. For example, in analyzing online deliberation in particular, research has measured the deliberativeness of online discourse against metrics such as argument quality (Albrecht, 2006; Min, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2007), representativeness (Albrecht, 2006), reflexivity (Dahlberg, 2001), knowledge gains (Min, 2007), opinion diversity (Stromer-Galley, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000), and civility (Benson, 1996; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004). In this research, we draw on the conceptual definition for deliberation as recently formulated by political communication scholar John Gastil.

Gastil (2008) draws on and combines Jurgen Habermas' notion of an "ideal speech situation" and Benjamin Barber's understanding of talk and conversation (Habermas, 1989; Barber, 1984). On the one hand, Habermas emphasizes rationality—the rigorous rational analysis of an issue as necessary for pursuing enlightened understanding. Barber, however, stresses the equal importance of an open-ended conversation that is "as much about mutual discovery as problem solving" (Gastil, 2008, p. 19). Gastil explains that Barber's notion of talk does not refer to the simple exchange and aggregation of individuals' predefined interests, but rather, "a more complex mix of imagining, wondering aloud, listening, and understanding" (p. 19). Merging these two notions, Gastil argues that there are two processes that occur simultaneously in an ideal deliberative discussion: the analytic process, or the substance of the deliberation as it pertains to

the issue; and the social process, or the norms of the conversation as reflected in the group interaction and group dynamic.

The *analytic process* refers to the substance of the exchange as it pertains to the issue at stake. This process involves the creation of a solid information base intended to ensure that participants understand the nature of the problem. Such information includes both known facts as well as personal and emotional experiences. Scholarship underscores the central role of personal experiences, or narratives (Ryfe, 2005), in public deliberation, since narratives tend to make issues amenable to human understanding by placing the complexities of public issues within the particulars of experience (Bruner, 1986; Ryfe, 2006). Sharing of personal experiences also helps strengthen the deliberative process because it helps validate claims, making individuals seem more sincere, trustworthy and open to their fellow participants (Eder, 1988; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Ryfe, 2005). Throughout the deliberative process, participants prioritize key values, identify a broad range of solutions, weigh their pros, cons, and trade-offs (Gastil, 2008). As McAfee (2004) explains “only by working through the various choices, grappling with what must be abandoned in order to proceed in a particular direction, only with this kind of struggle do deliberators begin to develop a public judgment as to what policy might be best” (p. 52). When deliberation takes place within a decision-making body the final component is the group’s decision. An effective deliberative discussion, Gastil (2008) argues, should yield the best decision possible under the given circumstances.

The social process of deliberation involves the extent to which the discourse has dimensions that go beyond self-expression of thoughts and ideas toward a public discussion in which a group of people is discussing an issue together. Gastil (2008) explains that in a deliberative process, individuals see themselves as part of a public discussion, and see each other as resources of information and reflection. He points out four key dimensions that a deliberative social process entails. First, the context must *ensure an adequate opportunity to speak* to all. Second, participants have the *obligation to consider* carefully the words that they hear. Third, deliberation requires *mutual comprehension* in which participants speak plainly and ask for clarification when needed. And finally, a deliberative process requires participants to maintain a degree of *respect* for themselves and their fellow participants. Here, too, this definition draws on both Habermas and Barber's concept of talk. Equal access, comprehension, and consideration of others' ideas, each has a rational side since it promotes the breadth and depth of the group's understanding of the matter at hand. But the "social process of deliberation also speaks directly to Barber's interest in mutual respect and the consideration of 'the other' as a whole person—more than just a source of ideas and information" (Gastil, 2008, 19-20).

Operational Definition for Deliberation in the Context of Reader Comments

Using Gastil's conceptual definition, this study develops an operational definition of deliberation as a way to examine the deliberative quality of discourse found within the context of

readers' comments. Both analytic and social processes of deliberation were operationalized and coded using a pilot data set.

A. The analytic process of deliberation:

The *analytic process* of deliberation refers to the substance of the issue being discussed and involves the creation of an information base intended to ensure that participants understand the nature of the problem. Such an information base includes factual information associated with the issue, such as actions taken and their effects, as well as testimonies of personal experience. In the context of online discourse, information could be provided within the content of the comment, or if the reader provides a URL link to other content. To capture the two types of information, factual and experiential, six indicators were used to assess the extent to which readers' comments contribute to the creation of an analytic process of deliberation:

1. *Narrative*: Comments that include testimony of a personal experience associated with the issue under discussion—narratives were coded if that experience or first-hand knowledge was by the writer, a family member or a close acquaintance. For example, the following comments from three different editorials were coded as narrative:

As a parent of a special education student I must say that the author of this editorial needs some remedial education. To not understand why it would be more expensive to educate a special ed child is laughable...[Gifted #4]

Subsidies to farmers usually are in the form of price supports if the price is too low, not the case here. I own 1400 acres that was in wheat production. It is now in the Conservation Reserve Program. The USDA pays us to grow prairie grass for habitat and to keep the land in reserve for a rainy day. ... Normally under the CRP program we would have to bid every ten years to stay in the program. The USDA wrote us and asked us to extend for 5 to 10 years to lock us in... [Ethanol #6]

My son takes tenth grade Science but will have to take an eight grade FCAT in that subject. Of what value will that be to me or him? [Gifted #14]

2. *Facts*: Comments which included factual information associated with the issue, such as data, laws, formal procedures, actions taken, or details about events were coded using the measurement “facts.” The following examples indicate where facts were provided:

The school board is working to share the cost of the road and bridge improvements.” [School]

... The gifted is a funded mandate for grades k-12. The gifted supplement, above and beyond basic student funding, is included in the ESE guaranteed allocation and legally able to be used for other ESE students with particular matrix totals. [Gifted]

Medicare provides universal hospital insurance coverage (Part A) to everyone entitled to social security. Medicare Part B (coverage for doctors' services, etc.) and Part D (prescription drugs) are optional. (#54)

3. *Sources*: Comments coded for “sources” provide sources of information about the issue, including links to online content regarding the issue, cites of discourse about the issue by public figures, or the provision of contact information or details about relevant events related to the issue. For example:

... I was very glad to see the subsidies mentioned. Some of those farmers were able to pay off the costs of the refinery in one year due to them and should really be able to rake it in next year. here's a link to an interesting article for more info. http://www.ucsusa.org/clean_vehicles/veh.

... I've always said that I wasn't so against drilling the oil- just burning it, but after reading this in Sunday's Parade, I'm rethinking my position. [http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/...](http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/)

According to the transcript of the May 2007 SDIRC Workshop on Gifted Student Education, our Gifted program is financially upside down. ...Interestingly, the following comments from the minutes of the workshop, seem to dispute the editorial authors claims about funding: "Mr. Degutis said that basic weights for ESE Programs #111, #112, and #113 were the same weights as those for basic programs #101,#102, and #103. In other words, there was no extra funding for these categories. (Non-gifted and gifted students receive the same funding.)"

4. *Values*: Comments coded for values explicitly mention or discuss a value/s related to the issue. For example,

Funding for scientific research is an investment in our future.. (#110) value = investing in the future.

It's all a matter of priorities. In the U.S. high schools, academics takes a weak third place to sports and cars. Athletics receives top emphasis from school administrators, teachers who coach, parents, boosters, and the media. (DMR, that includes you!) Of course, all students must have a car as soon as they turn 16. Schools provide ample parking and expect students to provide their own transportation to extra-curricular activities. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, parents make sure their 16-year-olds have wheels. Owning and operating a car is an expensive proposition, so the kids get after-school jobs to pay for gas. (#80) values: sports, cars, academics

5. *Position*: Comments in which the commenter made an explicit statement about their position on the issue were coded in this category.

We just might be better off burning the corn than eating it, even with the shortcomings.

School boards should take the initiative to tame the interschlastic monster: substantially reduce the number of contesxts, no games on school nights or during school days.

If you have children, it is YOUR responsibility to provide and care for them, not the taxpayers.

6. *Reasons*: Comments that included explicit statements about reasons in favor or against a position on an issue were coded in this category. For example:

I feel that gifted and special education still have a reason to be combined... Why? because as far as funding goes, these two groups will give us the greatest return on our education dollar. (Gifted)

When you make "science" dependent on government, you remove it from the realm of "pure science." The only authority the federal government has when it come sto science involves patents. It has no authority to fund research. (science)

B. The Social process of deliberation: Three indicators were operationalized to asses the extent to which readers' comments manifest a deliberative social process:

1. *Addressing other comments and commenters*. Mentioning other comments either to express agreement or disagreement, build on to make an argument, ask for clarification or

elaborate are all considered “obligation to consider” (Gastil, 2008), since they exemplify that participants in the discussion are considering other participant’s comments. Comments in this category include explicit references to another comment, either by explicitly mentioning another comment’s author by username, quoting previous text, or referring to a statement made by a previous commenter. For example:

“Thanks, Diane [user’s name]. I will visit ditd.org.” [Gifted #20]

“You hit it right on the head there amy1r [user’s name], MONEY.” (#124)

“The Federalist Papers are not a part of the Constitution.” (this comment came after the comment “...Borrowing money is [in the constitution]. Coining money is there. Establishing post offices and post roads is there. HEALTH CARE IS NOT. Read the Federalist Papers and you’ll have less trouble with this section of the Constitution.

2. Posing questions. Asking others for clarification or additional information is an implicit acknowledgement of the presence of others in the given (virtual) space, and therefore indicative that an individual sees herself a part of a discussion with others. This also suggests that one respects and values the other participants as resources for deepening her knowledge. Asking for clarification may also be indicative of one’s sincere effort to understand utterances of others in the conversation. Finally, this indicator may imply that one regards the purpose of the discussion to deepen knowledge and understanding of the issue—as opposed to a space for merely expressing opinions, ranting or critiquing. This approach is critical for deliberation as this is one of the key goals of public deliberation. Comments that pose a question associated with the issue, ask for clarification, further information, or raise conflicting evidence or values are coded in this category. For example:

Are taxpayers paying interest on that borrowed money that's sitting there? Is it in an interest bearing account? [School, #1]

Switch grass seems promising, but didn't this paper write an editorial a long time ago on it and that it may be invasive? That we may have problems if it gets let loose in the Everglades... " [Ethanol, #1]

.... These are things I ponder... any answers that make sense and show concern for the gifted appreciated!! [Gifted, #14]

3. Addressing the article content: Addressing the article, where participants in the discussion interrogate the information or the perspectives offered by the editorial writer, either for building upon them to deepen the group conversation or by contrasting them with competing information and/or positions, or simply to express appreciation or lack thereof of the article's content. This is coded within the social process because it is an indication of the relationship between the editorial/op-ed writer, who initiated the discussion and provided the space for discussion, and the readers. It may also reflect the obligation to consider others' ideas and perspectives. Comments that explicitly refer to the original article through quoting it, referring to the editorial writer or referring to the article's content are coded in this category. For example:

"Aside from the specific appropriated fiscal items mentioned in this editorial that have walloped the taxpayer, lets not forget..." [School, #4],

"As a parent of a special education student I must say that the author of this editorial needs some remedial education. To not understand why it would be more expensive to educate a special ed child is laughable..." [Gifted, #4];

"A good feature of Edwards' [article's author] proposal is the inclusion of a public insurance program, based on Medicare, as one of the options for health care coverage. Premiums for the public plan are likely to be significantly lower than private plans because of lower administrative costs.... (#49)

Method

In order to explore the content of reader comments and their possible role and use as deliberative discourse, we undertook a pilot study. A content analysis of readers' comments was conducted. Data was collected from two online regional newspapers: *Des Moines Register* and *Scripps Treasure Coast*. These papers were selected to allow a comparison of two communities that differ in size, region and demographics². The sample consists of all readers' comments posted in the opinion pages of the newspaper sites in response to issue-based editorials and/or commentary during the first week of January, 2008 (Jan. 4-Jan. 11, 2008). The study did not include comments to editorials or commentary that did not discuss a concrete issue. For example, during the study's time frame, there were several opinion columns discussing the caucus that took place in Iowa. These were not included since they were not focused on a concrete public issue. Altogether 124 comments have been analyzed addressing 9 different editorials/commentary (see appendix 1 for more details regarding the articles).

² The broader context for selecting these newspapers is The Opinion Poll project implemented by the National Conference of Editorial Writers (NCEW) in 2007. The project aimed to "... help cultivate a new generation of citizen contributors empowered to use the new media to promote civic dialogue and community problem solving." As part of the broader project, NCEW conducted focus groups with citizens in three regions. Focus groups included questions about citizens' perceptions of readers' comments. *Des Moines Register* and *TCPalm* were selected, because focus groups were conducted in their corresponding regions, and both had the readers' comments feature in their opinion pages. We did not include the *Seattle* newspaper (the third focus group site) in this study, because it did not incorporate readers' comments during the time of the study. The authors' broader goal is to integrate findings from the focus groups research with content analysis presented here, to gain further insight on the research questions. For details on The Opinion Pool project see <http://ncew.blogspot.com/>.

The unit of analysis was one comment. To assess the deliberative quality of the discourse, each comment was coded according to the nine deliberation criteria³ detailed in the section above.

Results

Descriptives: A total of 61 readers⁴ posted comments to the nine editorials in the sample. Most readers posted between one to three comments within one issue thread, with the exception of three outliers that posted 5, 8 and 9 comments in one issue thread. Looking across issues, of the 61 readers, 13 readers posted comments in response to more than one article. To our knowledge, none of the editorial writers contributed comments to their respective discussion threads.

Deliberation criteria: Readers' comments demonstrated both an analytic process of deliberation as well as a social process of deliberation. Table 1 provides the mean scores of each deliberation criteria by issue and newspaper. The analytic process of deliberation was documented primarily by three indicators: contribution of factual information associated with the issue ($M = 0.5$), explicitly stating a position on the issue ($M = 0.5$), and providing reasons in

³ One coder coded the data. An additional coder coded 15% of the data. The agreement rate after correcting for chance using Scott's pi (Scott, 1955), was as follows. Stories 100%, factual information 92%; sources 100%, values 84%, pose question 92%; address other 100%; address article 100%.

For the items 'position,' and 'reasons,' two coders coded the entire sample. The agreement rate after correcting for chance using Scott's pi (Scott, 1955) was 95% for position, and 92% for reasons. For disputed cases the primary investigator's coding was selected. Prior to coding, both coders read and discussed the articles generating an analysis of each article by defining the issue, the positions raised by the article and the reasons raised for each position. This process, while time consuming, ensured that coders share a common issue definition, and can accordingly code for positions and reasons.

⁴ Comments were accompanied by a user name. For the purpose of this study we regard user names as "readers."

favor or against a particular position on the issue ($M = 0.5$). The weakest points of the analytic process were incorporating personal experiences and discussing values associated with the issue. Only 10% of the comments incorporated personal experience, all of which were within three discussion threads. Six discussion threads had no comments that shared experience associated with the issue. Similarly, only 10% of the comments included values that underlie the issue. Again this criterion was present in only three of the nine discussion threads.

The social process of deliberation was documented primarily by readers addressing other commenters ($M = 0.5$). Commenters were using each other's user name to build on their discussion. The criterion "raising questions" had lower means ($M = 0.1$), but it was present in all but two issues. Similarly "addressing the article" had lower means ($M = 0.1$), but appeared in all but one issue. In other words, reader commenters were behaving as though they were part of a conversation with others. Some merely acknowledged the presence of others, while others raised questions, and referred to the article content.

Looking at the number of comments per participant, we see that many readers posted more than one comment, and that there was a back-and forth between participants. This was not captured by our operational definition and, thus, was not coded. However, this phenomenon became apparent in the process of analysis and we believe it is another indication a social deliberative process. We bring this point up again in the discussion section below.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Deliberation Items by Issue and Newspaper

Newspaper	Issue (n =)	Analytic Process of Deliberation						Social Process of Deliberation			Total deliberation score
		Narrative	Fact	Source	Values	Position	Reason	Pose questions	Addresses Other	Address Article	
TCPalm	Ethanol (11)	0.1	0.7	0.3	0	0.7	0.7	0.2	0.6	0.1	3.4
	School (8)	0	0.5	0.3	0	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.4	2.5
	Gifted (26)	0.1	0.6	0.3	0	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.2	3
Des Moines	Health Insurance (29)	0	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.6	0.1	1.7
	Math & Science (5)	0	0.6	0	0	1	0.6	0	0	0	2.2
	HS minutes (6)	0.2	0.6	0	0.2	0.8	0.8	0.2	0	0.2	3.4
	Insure Kids (24)	0	0.3	0	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.1	2.2
	Science (6)	0	0.7	0	0.3	0.7	0.7	0.2	0.3	0.2	3
	Caucus	0	0.7	0	0	0.4	0.4	0	0.4	0	1.8
Entire Sample		0.1	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.2	2.4

The outliers: To gain more insight on the nature of the results, and possible factors coming into play, we looked beyond the content analysis and into the data. Looking closely into the issues with the lowest overall means -- Health Insurance and Insure Kids -- the following pattern

appears. First, both discussion threads have a significantly higher total number of comments than other issues, and both include the same outlier that seems to divert the discussion from the specific topic to the broader question of capitalism vs. socialism. It was clear that this person is known to other readers. While on face value it appears that the outlier is pulling the conversation off the topic, more context needs to be given to understand the meaning of these data.

Discussion

This study proposes that the reader comments section in online opinion journalism has a potential to embody a space of public deliberation, thereby offering citizens new ways to participate in the public sphere within the context of journalism. Drawing on Gastil's (2008) conceptual definition for public deliberation, we developed an operational definition specifically designed for examining the deliberative quality of reader comments to news content.

Findings from a pilot study suggest that reader comments to opinion content can manifest both the analytic as well as the social processes necessary for public deliberation. Comments offered substantial amount of factual information, and demonstrated a public process of weighing alternatives via the expression of issue positions and supporting rationales. This was communicated through a social aspect, with readers addressing each other and the newspaper content, raising questions, and sharing additional sources of information.

While our primary unit of analysis was the comment, we also took account of the context of those comments; in particular the series of comments grouped together (e.g. the thread). When

viewed as a thread, our results also indicate that some commenters were engaged in the discussion at more than one point in its lifecycle. In all nine editorials, there was at least one commenter who posted more than one time. This is an indication that at least some commenters stayed involved in the discussion as it progressed over time. We also found that commenters interacted not only with the content of the editorial but with one another. Commenters responded to each other by direct reference to username or by responding to questions posed, clarifying positions, or following up with information.

Both this interactivity as well as a sustained interest in the conversation are not minor points. The comment sections in the sites we analyzed were not necessarily set up for prolonged interaction *among* commenters. During the time of our analysis, neither the *Des Moines Register*⁵ nor the *Scripps Treasure Coast* had any kind of technical affordances which would encourage interaction between readers. Neither of the comment sections easily allowed in commenters to respond directly to another reader's post, instead, the sites were designed for the reader respond to the editorial. Nor did either of the papers have any kind of quoting or threading features. While this needs to be researched further, there are indications in this pilot data that commenters did not simply "parachute" in and leave their opinion. Instead, they engaged with one another as well as the issue under discussion. A fruitful direction for further research is to combine similar

⁵ Since the time of our sample, the *Des Moines Register* has changed its comment section and now allows users to respond to other posters directly and to quote previous passages.

content analyses with interviews or survey data, to understand how this engagement is perceived by citizens, and how it affects attitudes towards the issue, journalism and democracy.

These findings, albeit inconclusive, lend support to the argument that integrating reader comments within the context of opinion journalism may help enhance deliberative democracy. To our knowledge, at no point did the editorial writer ever enter back into the conversation via a comment or additional post. We argue that this is a potential opportunity to connect professional journalists with readers, thereby offering a unique context of public deliberation, that differs from community discussion boards or blogs. Our study demonstrates that opinion writers may serve as instigators of constructive public deliberation. Writers of comments had seized the opportunity to deliberate with fellow citizens on issues of the day, and lurkers most likely benefited from a greater scope of voices and information. Such reader comments can serve both the democratic mission and the economic interests of contemporary news organizations. Providing a platform for public deliberation, may also help draw in readers to journalism content. In this sense, the normative-economic justification for letters to the editor (Wahl-Jorgensen; 2002a), may apply to reader comments in the context of opinion journalism.

Interestingly, readers' personal experience had little presence in the data. Such personal narratives are an important part of public discourse because they can help overcome barriers to deliberation by helping people understand the complexities of an issue through a process of personal reflection (Ryfe, 2006). In the context of online journalism and editorials those narratives are also important because they provide a diversity of perspectives and nuance that is

impossible to represent in a single editorial. But such reflection is difficult, and entails a degree of personal exposure that most individuals are not naturally inclined to undertake in a public environment. In fact, organizations seeking to promote substantive discussions of issues have been training facilitators to explicitly direct participants to share stories on the relevance of the issue to their own lives (Ryfe, 2002, 2006). The design of a space is crucial for the quality of discourse that it produces. This has been shown in face-to-face deliberation as well as online deliberation (Ryfe, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007; Janssen & Kies, 2005). An important direction for future research is to further inquiry into design features that may elicit more deliberative content. In particular, experimentation is needed on design features that may be suitable for the context of opinion journalism.

We would like to conclude on a cautiously optimistic note. Surveys of the field show that readers comments are being adopted by newspapers with much caution and fear (Nip, 2006; Hermind & Thurman, 2007; Zamith, 2008). Editors feel that this is a trend they cannot resist, and at the same time they fear that broad inclusion of user generated content will damage the quality of newspaper and its role in journalism (Herminda & Thurman, 2007). While some newspapers are resisting the inclusion of user generated content, others are seeking ways to moderate the content. But moderation is both challenging and resource-intensive. Offering design features that promote deliberative content may help. It therefore is important to further inquire into the content of such user generated comments. This study has begun that investigation and has found that with very few design features or cues, there were indications of deliberative processes. By

seeing reader comments as a legitimate space of public discussion, worthy of empirical analysis, future research may find ways by which online journalism may promote and facilitate that public discussion—serving both the needs of democracy and those of journalism.

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Appendix 1: List of Sample Editorials and Commentary

Note: At the end of each headline, in parentheses, is the name by which each issue is identified in the manuscript. Italicized are the names given to each issue, as used in the manuscript.

TCPalm:

Editorial: Ethanol provides fuel for thought (*Ethanol*)

Florida can help nation meet energy challenges by using economic and environmental sense

Thursday, January 3, 2008

Editorial: Don't abuse the 'gifted' (*Gifted*)

Not all of our 'exceptional' students are equal; Florida's brightest are getting shortchanged

Friday, January 4, 2008

Editorial: Price isn't right for new campus (*School*)

\$45.6 million is too much for a middle school; district needs to go back to negotiating table

Sunday, January 6, 2008

Des Moines Register:

Look carefully at insurance mandate (*Health Insurance*)

Register's editorial, January 7, 2008

Iowans should lead renaissance in math and science (*Math & Science*)

Gregory Geoffroy, January 7, 2008

Fandel: Do U.S. students squander their high school minutes? (*HS minutes*)

Linda Lantor Fandel

January 7, 2008

Insure all kids? Illinois shows how it's done (*Insure kids*)

Register's editorial, January 10, 2008

Hauptman: Failure to invest in pure science puts U.S. at risk (*Science*)

John Hauptman, January 10, 2008

Yepsen: parties must probe caucus complaints, make fixes (*Caucus*)

David Yepsen, January 10, 2008