

Comments or Community?

More than four in 10 readers writing online comments are just talking to each other, research shows

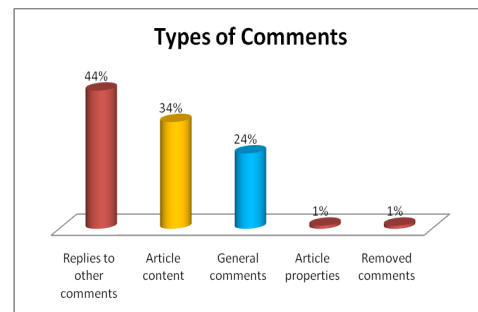
As journalists ramp up the debate on the value of online comments to their stories, a new study from American University's School of Communication suggests that the opportunity to comment on articles may be playing an important role -- for a small but vocal number of readers.

Researchers found that people writing comments, in this case behind a wall of anonymity, want to respond to one another sometimes more than comment on the article at hand.

In a study of nearly 3,000 comments made across 24 articles and two online news operations, student researchers at American University's School of Communication have found that only about a third of the comments actually address the article content.

The research, conducted by students and supervised by professors Amy Eisman and Maria Ivancin, tracked articles on the Web sites of the Tallahassee Democrat (Tallahassee.com) and The Cincinnati Enquirer (Cincinnati.com). The study focused on articles drawn from the "most-commented" list (as defined by each Web site) and included a variety of articles from local news to sports to business.

"Comment pages become chat rooms more frequently than not," wrote one of the student researchers. The data clearly indicate that while some articles may attract interest in the subject matter, much of the volume comes from multiple comments by a handful of readers usually addressing each other. More than four comments out of 10 (44 percent) addressed other comments or commenters.



The average number of comments per commenter was 2.35, but there were a handful of participants who were ubiquitous. It was clear from the comments that some of these mega-commenters had established their own online community with other commenters.

While the study was small scale, it begins to quantify the role that comments may play for a news operation. The full report, written by students, is attached and includes suggestions for further research.

Meanwhile, student researchers also walked away surprised by the degree of vitriol that comment boards can draw. Multiple researchers noticed that users comment to voice frustration or to talk about their community. Comments are "either a wasteland or a brilliant therapeutic tool," one student wrote.

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Maria Ivancin, Amy Eisman and students from *Writing for Convergent Media*, Spring 2009

The Value of Article Comments: How Key?

Based on research by an
American University School of Communication class,
Writing for Convergent Media, Spring 2009

This report was written by Nick Perretti, Caroline Stetler and James Robertson, based on data entry and tabulation by Kendra Garstka and on research and commentary by all the students in COMM. 522.001, whose names are listed at end of the presentation. SOC Professor Maria Ivancin developed the data worksheets and analyzed the results; SOC Professor Amy Eisman edited the report and coordinated the class project.

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Gannett Comments Project

I. Overview

Many news organizations allow users to comment on their articles published online. But even today, the organizations struggle to quantify the value of such comments. In order to better understand the nature of user comments, American University and Gannett Co., Inc. executives collaborated on a unique research effort. The findings of this study come at a time when the debate over anonymous, unmoderated comments is intensifying, particularly when dwindling resources are involved.

On April 9, former washingtonpost.com executive editor Doug Feaver made the case for user comments in an Op-Ed piece published in The Washington Post. Feaver, who writes a blog about comments, argued for their overall value even when, as he wrote, they're "appallingly inaccurate, sometimes profane, frequently off point and occasionally racist." Feaver wrote in the article that he wasn't always of that mind. He also wrote that unmoderated comments are not held to the same standards as Letters to the Editor, and that the anonymity gives "cover to racists and sexists." However, Feaver concludes "journalists need to take them seriously" and "be reminded bluntly that the dark forces are out there" as opposed to "forgetting the truth by imposing rules that obscure it." Unlike The New

York Times and the Los Angeles Times, washingtonpost.com staffers do not review comments before posting them. (In an Opinion L.A. blog item published April 15, 2009, a Los Angeles Times staffer writes that resources mean that comments can't be monitored around the clock. He wrote, "We typically approve 98% of the stuff that comes in, rejecting only things that are profane, threatening or hate speech.")

Some writers paid attention to Feaver's column. Another Washington Post columnist, Dana Milbank, who often writes about politics, admitted it prompted him to read the comments posted to his column for the first time ever. Milbank wrote that he learned that people are angry, regardless of their party, even after the 2008 election. Milbank leaves the reader to guess whether he'll read his comments again. Some would argue he should, otherwise he's not taking advantage of the two-way conversation the Web provides. (Readers of washingtonpost.com grappled with the issue themselves when they posted comments to Feaver's Op-Ed about comments. For a revealing conversation, see <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/dot.comments/2009/04/comments.html#more>.)

Our study seeks to explore the real conversations users engaged in two cities and attempts to quantify what value that conversation provides to the community and news organizations.

II. Background

This collaboration grew out of a series of meetings in late 2008 between Gannett and the AU School of Communication. It was one of two such collaborations coordinated by Sharon Metcalf, SOC senior director of strategic partnerships and programming. To design the project for the Spring 2009 semester, Professor Maria Ivancin, a strategic communication expert in the Public Communication Division and Professor Amy Eisman, director of writing programs, met with key Gannett executives to review available data and research goals. Afterwards, they spent several hours studying reader comments on select Gannett news sites to develop the framework for the research.

Professor Eisman dedicated five sessions of her Writing for Mass Communication class to gathering data. Professor Ivancin designed the worksheet students used. Initially the instructors were going to focus just on the Tallahassee Democrat, but added the Cincinnati Enquirer when it became clear the project needed to cast a wider net with a larger circulation area. The additional city also provided the ability to gain additional findings by comparing the two regions.

Finally, we should note that most students in the class said they do not normally read comments nor make comments on stories.

III. Methodology

Students in the Writing for Convergent Media class conducted research to ascertain the impact of user comments on two Gannett Web sites, the Tallahassee Democrat and the Cincinnati Enquirer. They analyzed a sample of 24 articles during five class sessions between February and April of this year. The sample articles were always among the “most commented” on the two news sites at the time we reviewed the stories (but to provide variety, sometimes we did not study all of the top-commented articles). Students filled in coding sheets created by Professor Ivancin for each article they analyzed. Students recorded the name of each commenter, the number of times he or she commented, and categorized the nature of the comment. Students noted whether the comment was in reply to another comment, and whether the comment pertained to the story’s properties, its content or just the general topic of the story covered. In addition, students noted whether the comment was removed and if any other general observations were warranted. For each article, students totaled the number of comments recorded in each category. Kendra Garstka input the data into a statistical analysis program, which generated totals, percentages and averages.

IV. Top line Results

- Of the 24 articles analyzed and published by both newspapers, 1,255 users left 2,950 comments.
- 44 percent of comments, or 1,291, were replies to others’ comments.
- 34 percent of comments pertained to the story content, while 24 percent of all comments addressed only the article’s general topic.
- The data gathered by students indicates the local business section attracted the most user comments, but this is only because of the sample chosen.
- The average number of comments per commenter: 2.35
- The average number of comments per “most-commented” articles: 123
- Articles pertaining to government, local news, crime and courts, breaking news and opinion all drew between 20 and 54 commenters; between 43 and 141 comments in each section respectively.
- 41 comments were deleted because they violated the Web sites’ terms of service.

In addition, an impressive number of commenters elected to comment at least three times.

In comparing the two Web sites, differences emerged:

- Cincinnati’s Web site received an average of 142 comments, or about one-third more comments than the Tallahassee Web site over the same period.
- The Cincinnati site removed on average 3 comments per article, compared to Tallahassee’s .09. However, researchers can’t derive a conclusion regarding this because it is unknown if the type of filtration software used for both sites differs.

IV. Researcher impressions of comments

Researchers included their overall impressions about how Cincinnati and Tallahassee residents were using the comments section. These notes do not necessarily reflect the data, but are observations about the content and nature of the discussions.

- Several researchers noticed the sense of community present on the comment boards. According to one researcher, "the same few people like to comment to each other and argue." Others made the observation that people use the comment boards as a forum for socialization with the other members of the comment communities.
- Multiple researchers also noticed that users comment to voice frustrations and discuss the problems of their communities. Comments are "either a wasteland or a brilliant therapeutic tool," wrote one.
- One researcher noticed that out of the comments removed for terms of service violations, the majority were made by the same set of users. "Of the 10 or so comments that were removed, it was probably 3 or 4 people who made the comments," the researcher said.
- According to one researcher: "Though Tallahassee commenters made multiple references to racism, the people of Cincinnati raised great concern about issues not only of racism but crime and corrupt government officials. In that sense, comments could be useful to understand what's really going on in the city -- from an outsider I would have to assume that Cincinnati is facing huge problems and its citizens are for the most part unhappy with where they live."

One team's observations (those of Arlene Penn and Frankie Solomon) were particularly succinct:

Comment pages become chat rooms more frequently than not. In stories discussing the death of a community member, comments expressed sympathy and grief, and were often filled with religious beliefs. They also expressed deep concern.

In stories about a possible rape suspect, comments were often off subject and included a lot of unfounded speculation. Commenters seemed to be very familiar with each other, exchanging greetings and verbal battles. It moved from a crime discussion to an entertainment chat room.

In an article about renaming banks, most comments were sarcastic, with some offering suggestions.

In a story about cutting state employee wages, there were general back-and-forths between users, with major arguments mostly surrounding the story topic, but also generally bashing one another.

In all story comments, users frequently end up voicing similar opinions and engaging in predictable arguments that were very repetitive. People don't seem to mind echoing what has already been written. They just want to write *something*.

IV. Areas for future research

Even though the data illuminates many trends, further research and analysis is needed. It would be helpful to know how many people commented across different sections of the news Web site. In addition, the data compilation does not factor time in as a variable. Students recorded the length of time each article was posted, however, the process needs to be standardized. For example, certain stories generated the most comments, but they were posted for a longer period on the site. Furthermore, a study of the commenters – perhaps through follow-up interviews – could be helpful to learn more about their online habits. It is necessary to understand what makes the commenter visit a site and how the interaction between audience and content develops into a community that may or may not police itself. Terms of service e-mail addresses should allow Web site employees to get in touch with commenters. In addition, both communities used the stories as a starting point for discussions involving serious challenges they face, from race relations to crime and political corruption. In order to determine whether it is the majority or the minority expressing its views online, the data should be compared to a city-wide survey gauging public dissatisfaction. Finally, it would be worth surveying reporters about how they use or do not use comments on their articles.

Students contributing to the research of this report include: Jeremy Diamond, Kendra Garstka, Alex Grabowski, Caitlin Hillyard, Jill Holbrook, Kate Matthews, Michael Ono, Arlene Penn, Nick Perretti, James Robertson, Michaela Ruane-Gonzales, Frankie Solomon, Caroline Stetter, Kelly Toves, Kristi Warren and Laura Wolz.