Threads of Deliberation: A Textual Analysis of Online News Comments

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Science

Suzanne R. McMillen
August 2013

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This thesis titled
Threads of Deliberation: A Textual Analysis of Online News Comments

by
SUZANNE R. MCMILLEN

has been approved for
the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism
and the Scripps College of Communication by

Bill Reader
Associate Professor of Journalism

Scott Titsworth
Dean, Scripps College of Communication
ABSTRACT

MCMLLEN, SUZANNE R., M.S., August 2013, Journalism

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Director of Thesis: Bill Reader

This thesis is an exploratory study into the deliberative properties of social interaction in online comment threads. The sample for this study is online comment threads collected from three different online news sites (thehill.com, thenation.com, and thenationalreview.com). The study builds upon existing theoretical literature on public deliberation and applies it to the subject of online comments. It also employs a method of textual analysis to address a gap in empirical research of comments where comments are studied in relation to those around them rather than as separate units of analysis.

The comments analyzed show evidence of informal conversational style and show three common themes of social interaction: tolerance for hostility, encouraging quality debate, and a value of information exchanges.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Bill Reader, for his assistance with this project. I would also like to thank Bernhard Debatin and Hans Meyer for their guidance. My greatest thanks and appreciations go out to my family, who have provided a lifetime of support in all I do.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Theoretical literature suggests the importance of the social aspect of online comments; however, the current empirical research lacks supporting evidence for these claims. This textual analysis study attempts to fill that gap by providing a close look at the texts of online comment threads as they relate to each other from a social standpoint. Guided by the theory of public deliberation, I use McKee’s post-structuralist method of textual analysis to identify common themes of interactivity and intertextuality between users.

The emergence of the World Wide Web brought about significant changes in the ways people view and communicate with the world, specifically in the use and perception of news reporting. Online news’ potential for immediate global reach and interactivity with users—among other traits—has made the Internet a likely contender for the next dominant media outlet. Today, the news industry is experiencing a shift from the print to the online format in which the Internet has already surpassed newspapers and radio broadcasts as a source of news consumption with only television still exceeding it in popularity (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosentiel, & Olmstead, 2010). As access to the Internet becomes increasingly more widespread throughout the United States (International Telecommunication Union, 2012), more people are using it as not only a source of information, but also as a source of interaction and community.

Online news articles that include interactive comment features offer readers an opportunity to play an active role in the media. Like the print media’s “letters to the editor” section, comments offer readers a space to post reactions to articles in the form of opinions, narratives, additional facts, or any other written response.
Although comment sections were originally created as spaces for reactions to associated articles, they have evolved into spaces for debate and discussion between users as well. Commenters today not only respond to the articles, but also to the other commenters and the comments they post, creating a space for social (or to some, antisocial) interaction. A survey of more than 2,000 adults by Princeton Survey Research International published in 2010 showed that although an estimated one-fourth of U.S. Internet users had already participated in comment features on news articles or blogs, 72 percent of news consumers reported that they “follow the news because they enjoy talking to others about what is happening in the world” (Purcell et al., 2010, p. 4).

This study explored the potential for Internet comment threads to provide spaces for that sort of public discourse and deliberation. Using qualitative textual analysis, I analyzed the texts of online news comments from three websites, paying close attention to the interactivity between users. The textual and social themes found within the texts show that while there is a level of hostility and flaming behavior occurring in comments, common themes of deliberation such as inclusion, quality debate, and information exchanges are also present.

McKee’s (2003) post-structuralist approach to textual analysis, combined with Fairclough’s (2003) theme of “intertextuality” guide this study of online comments from the perspective of those who actively participate in the comment feature. Specifically, it focuses on the ways that participants utilize the “threading” feature to interact directly with other commenters in the forum.

Computer-mediated communication, hereafter referred to as CMC, is the use of language over computerized networks, and can include any mode of spoken or written
communication (Herring, 2001). Within the broad subject of CMC lies the more specific idea of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), or the communication between two or more people interacting over networked computers (Herring, 2001). In this study, aspects of deliberation in CMD are examined by analyzing the texts of discursive events. For the purpose of textual analysis, the term “discursive event” describes instances of language use, which involve production of text, interpretation of text, and participation in social practice (Fairclough, 1993). A “text” referred to in this study then, is “the written or spoken language produced in a discursive event” (Fairclough, 1993, pg. 138), and will refer to individual comments.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The gradual addition of online media to news outlets in the United States and around the globe has prompted journalists, editors, and researchers to debate the new medium’s benefits and drawbacks, particularly as a source of public discourse (Nagar, 2011). One generally undisputed positive outcome of the Internet is the interactive features that came with the emergence of Web 2.0, which “harnesses the Web in a more interactive and collaborative manner, emphasizing peers’ social interaction and collective intelligence” (Murugesan, 2007, p. 34). Web 2.0 introduced a new social and community aspect to the traditional static news style and with it valuable opportunities for the role of online journalism.

Although professional journalists and editors tend to be critical of the informal and often inflammatory nature of online comments, many researchers (Henrich & Holmes, 2001; Leung, 2009; Nagar, 2011) have looked into the positive attributes the feature may have both socially and democratically. Studies of the area have mainly focused on the Internet and its features themselves. However, others have analyzed the identities of Internet users (Leung, 2009; Nagar, 2011; Purcell et al., 2010); the motivations behind their participation (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Milioni, Vadratsikas, & Papa, 2011; Nagar, 2011), and the ability of the Internet to form public spheres (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Poor, 2005). Often applied to public opinion and communication studies, the concept of a public sphere has been referred to by Habermas as a “realm of our social life” involving conversations with others and the formation of public opinion where “private individuals assemble to form a public body” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). The
addition of participatory features such as comment sections to the Web has been followed by ensuing research into the potential of their use by people to form a public sphere, or multiple spheres, of communication and opinion formation. 

There has been a general disagreement over the value of the comment feature by researchers, journalists, and editors. Additionally, past studies of online comments have produced conflicting and ambiguous results. Some research suggests that conflict and ambiguity in results may be an effect of the tendency for studies to look closely at message content without considering the full social and technical contexts of its surroundings (O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003; Witschge, 2008). That criticism is one factor that led this study to analyze texts from the textual analysis perspective, which can better consider the social and situational frameworks of the texts.

Evolution of Media-based Discourse

The participatory concept of media-based discourse has been an important part of news consumption throughout history with variations of the practice dating back hundreds of years. Continuing from the already-established letters to the editor in 18th-century Europe, media discourse in the United States has, over the centuries, both made history and accompanied it, including its role in publicly addressing issues leading up to the Declaration of Independence (Burns, 2006).

Historical figures such as Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, for example, used letters to the editor to voice their opinions of current events and politics (Burns, 2006; Santana, 2011). It is notable that those famous and influential writers often used pen names to shield their identities, a practice that some journalists
today equate with anti-social behavior. Though those historic letters were often inflammatory and controversial, they both addressed important social issues and responded to each other, sparking ongoing dialogues in the public sphere (Burns, 2006; Santana, 2011). Today, media-based discourse can still be clearly seen in the letters to the editor sections of many newspapers. As the online medium of news reporting becomes more prevalent, however, so does the use of online comment sections for voicing one’s opinions and discussing issues with others.

One criticism and challenge of letters to the editor in print newspapers is the limited amount of printing space for letters. Although some small weekly newspapers may be less affected by large amounts of feedback, most newspapers receive a greater number of letters than they have space on which to print them. That not only lowers the chances of writers to have their voices heard, but also often means some letters are completely filtered out. Many newspapers respond to the challenge of space limitations by excluding anonymous letters from publication, hoping the policy will help limit letters to those of higher quality (Kapoor, 1995). In 1995, before comment sections began to appear in online news sites, newspaper editors rejected, in some cases, more than half of the total letters and an estimated 93 percent of the anonymous letters they received for publication (Kapoor, 1995). Online comments, unlike letters to the editor, offer an unlimited amount of space for readers to present their feedback and respond to the news they receive.

Interpersonal communication via computer networks first originated from national defense programs of the 1960s and then spread to computer scientists and elite universities and businesses in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively (Herring, 2001). After
the rise of Internet service providers in the 1990s, use of the Internet for CMC became more widespread (Herring, 2001).

Online message boards, or forums, were some of the first public Web spaces for people to discuss current events and news. They provided virtual meeting places for people to start online conversations by posting messages and allowing others to respond. Slowly, online news sources began adding comment sections to the ends of their articles, which allowed users to post similar types of messages without having to leave the site. One of the first newspapers to introduce same-page comments was the now defunct *Rocky Mountain News* in 1998 on its movie and restaurant reviews (Santana, 2011). In June 2006, same-page comments started appearing in *The Washington Post*’s online articles, beginning in the Sports section (Hirschman, 2006). Between 2007 and 2008, the number of top 100 U.S. newspaper websites that included article comments more than doubled, jumping from 33 to 75 percent (Johnson, 2008).

Surveys of more than 2,000 adults show that the 71 percent of American adults who get news online are generally younger with higher income and education levels than the general population and Internet users overall (Purcell et al., 2010; Nagar, 2011). Of those users, the typical online news participator or commenter is a white, middle-aged, politically moderate, and independent college graduate making $50,000 or more (Purcell et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, those demographics are closely correlated with the findings of past studies regarding the identities of those who write letters to the editor (Cooper, Knotts, & Haspel, 2009; Reader, Stempel, & Daniel, 2004). Researchers conclude that those who engage in public opinion expression may not accurately represent the general population as a whole, but “they essentially represent a well-
informed community that is highly involved in the political process” (Nagar, 2011, p. 23).

Common motivational factors for online contributors include the desire to express personal opinions concerning public issues as well as the desire to share and exchange knowledge with others (Milioni et al., 2011; Nagar, 2011). That exchange of information implies a social function of CMD. Rather than seeking social support from online communities, however, commenters may actually be seeking a form of social status when they contribute (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2009). By finding other like-minded individuals, expressing opinions openly, and trying on different identities, users are not only participating in social interaction, but also engaging in personal development.

Leung (2009) studied people’s perceived psychological empowerment in relation to their participation in online content contribution. He found that the people he surveyed who create online content reported increased gratifications, including the opportunity to be recognized, publication of their expertise, greater respect, and more knowledge of the world, which were then found to be significantly linked to perceived empowerment, with even greater empowerment achieved as a person’s feelings of gratification increase (Leung 2009). That could help explain why some people contribute more frequently than others do.

That positive outcome of commenting, however, conflicts with recent data predicting a negative outcome of commenting, which is lower levels of happiness among Internet users overall (Mitchell, Lebow, Grathouse, & Shoger, 2011). Though small in sample size, Mitchel et al.’s (2011) study of Internet use among undergraduate students revealed a correlation in which higher levels of online participation (especially in gaming
and mischief activities) significantly predicted lower levels of happiness and social support while also predicting higher levels of introversion. While introversion can be argued as a positive or negative trait, it seems contradictory that low levels of happiness and social support, and an increased sense of empowerment would both be predicted outcomes of Internet use. Because of conflicts such as those studies, more detailed and in-depth research is needed to clarify constructive and destructive usage effects.

**Discourse Online: Anonymity, Disinhibition, and Quality**

Many researchers and journalists have been hesitant to praise the use of comments in online journalism, especially in the case of anonymous contributors (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Shepard, 2011). They suggest that the unstructured and unrestricted format encourages offensive and abusive discourse by commenters who know they will not be held accountable for their actions (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Nathan, 2008). That skepticism over anonymity has also been present in opinions and research surrounding anonymous newspaper call-in forums, which provide readers the opportunity to record a message rather than writing a letter to the editor. Unlike most letter policies (and more closely resembling online comments), call-in messages allow users to keep their identities anonymous, a practice that has been shown to expand public dialogue but has also received the criticism of resembling “verbal Nerf Balls” hurled at writers and editors (Aucoin, 1997, p. 123).

Some antisocial behavior in CMC, referred to as flaming, occurs as hostile remarks targeted at an individual exchanged between users. They typically contain inflammatory and aggressive speech and often profanity. Some reporters and editors
show concern that those abusive comments and personal attacks may even go as far as to
discourage potential sources from speaking on the record (Diakopoulos & Naaman,
2011).

The offensiveness of a few among the masses has prompted journalists to
strategize ways of moderating online commenters in order to promote quality discourse in
the unruly comment threads (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Nagar, 2011). Still in the
experimental phase, many sites are testing different methods of moderation including
paid on or off-site editors of content or self-monitoring crowd-based moderation systems.
These methods attempt to rule out comments deemed inappropriate without necessarily
limiting anonymity.

Moderation systems typically fall within one of the pre-moderation or post-
moderation methods (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Many publications–including
most of the newspapers of the Tribune Company and MediaNews Group–use established
editors or filtration systems to moderate comments before they are made public. Rather
than taking anonymity away with required registration processes, pre-moderation systems
manage comment quality by using content-filtering systems that all posts must pass
through. The filter then weeds out posts containing offensive language and “spam,” or
unsolicited abuse or advertising messages, before comments may be published (Saba,
2008).

Other sites’ editors contend that off-site moderators do not understand the context
of situational comments and that only those editors with an understanding of the
audience, the issue, the background, and the geographic area can fairly moderate posts
(Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). If moderators view those comments out of the context
of their social and situational norms, they argue, they may be more susceptible to false flags of flaming.

Some sites allow all comments to be posted online before going through either professional or crowd-based moderation. Professional moderators patrol forums in order to either steer discussions back on track or delete comments deemed inappropriate. Crowd-based moderation, which has been shown to be an effective method, allows the collective judgment of readers to rate the quality of comments and then allows individual readers to sort comments based on user ratings (Diakapoulos & Naaman, 2011; Lampe & Resnick, 2004). One popular rating system for comment forums is the “flagging” feature, which allows readers to flag a post deemed abusive or inappropriate to the forum. Another system, which rewards users for well-received posts, allows users to “like” a comment. Other systems involve simply voting a comment either up or down in quality.

Slashdot is one news and discussion site that has experimented with a crowd-based moderation system. Research of their website users found that among those who used custom filter settings, three times as many chose to filter the comments they saw by ratings than those who chose to ignore comment ratings (Lampe, Johnston & Resnick, 2007). That shows people are willing to use features that promote high-quality comments.

Critics of that method, however, point out that there are often time delays before comments receive a high or low quality rating and that comments judged incorrectly are sometimes left uncorrected by busy moderators (Lampe & Resnick, 2004). New moderation policies, however, may be able to solve issues such as that. Diakapoulos and Naaman (2011) suggested a method of controlling incorrect or abusive crowd ratings by
tracking each user’s moderation behavior. Users suspected of “bogus flagging” or inappropriate ratings would receive warnings and possibly lose the privilege of having their moderation behavior recorded in the future (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011, p. 141).

In response to flaming, the long-time dispute over the acceptance of anonymity in print media discussions is now being applied to online comment sections as well. Many online news sites have considered revising their moderation policies so that users are required to provide personal information before commenting (Perez-Pena, 2010). Other newspapers, that support their readers’ anonymity, have gone as far as using shield laws—designed to protect confidential sources—in an attempt to safeguard commenters’ identities (Fargo, 2011).

Despite negative criticisms, anonymous comments are still seen by many readers as important to online opinion expression. In one survey of nearly 400 respondents, a significant 39.3 percent of users not only rated anonymity as an important aspect of commenting but also reported that they would cease to use the feature if they were required to provide their real names (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Additionally, Pedersen (1997) described both catharsis and autonomy as functions of privacy provided by anonymity. Defined as involving “one’s ability to exert boundary control upon others’ access to one’s self” (p. 3040), privacy has been shown to have positive effects on people’s well-being, with inadequate levels of privacy being linked to aggression and anti-social behavior (Christopherson, 2007).

Researchers have also been looking into other effects that anonymity may have on online commenting, especially in the formation of discourse. One thing they do tend to agree on is the tendency for individuals to feel less inhibited to speak their minds when
they communicate online (Christopherson, 2007; Joinson, 2001; Ruggiero, 2000; Suler, 2004). That could be a result of several possible elements of the online comment feature, including dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and minimization of status and authority (Suler, 2004). Another way of describing the phenomenon is through changing levels of self-awareness. When communicating anonymously online, a person’s reduced concern over personal accountability for expressing their views leads them to report lower levels of public self-awareness (Joinson, 2011). To add to that, visual and personal anonymity in CMC also increases reported levels of private self-awareness and, in turn, substantially increases self-disclosure online (Joinson, 2011).

Joinson (2001) labeled the disinhibition phenomenon that occurs in commenters whose identities remain anonymous as either “benign” or “toxic” (p. 321). Toxic disinhibition leads users to engage in antisocial behavior such as disrespectful language, aggressive criticism, and threats (Joinson, 2001). On the contrary, benign disinhibition can result in a liberating experience in which users are able to voice their personal opinions, emotions, and concerns without risking any social judgment about their character. In that way, online discourse with others has the potential to support interpersonal growth or the exploration and development of one’s identity (Joinson, 2001). In some situations, anonymity may result in toxic disinhibition; however, it can also provide an empowering opportunity for public opinion expression and debate.

The occurrence of benign disinhibition may also lead to a decrease in the social phenomenon researchers refer to as the “spiral of silence,” although studies of that optimistic prediction in CMD effects have not fully supported it. Proposed by Noelle-Neumann in 1974, the spiral of silence theory describes the tendency for people whose
opinions differ from the opinion of the public or a group to stay silent, from fear that speaking out will result in isolation from that group (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). One study comparing and contrasting online and offline spiral of silence behaviors surveyed 503 people on their likelihood to speak out (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). The study showed that in the online environment, the use of the Internet reduces the experience of fear of isolation in users. That may be attributed to the increased availability of social groups that fit with individual opinions or beliefs. The ease with which Internet users can withdraw or leave an online social situation relatively unnoticed could also decrease the fear of social isolation in users. If a user states an opinion against the norms of a group online, that person can always just leave, rather than experiencing isolating behavior from the group. Although the personal anonymity and opinion-specific social groups available on the Internet may relieve the fear of isolation, Liu & Fahmy’s (2011) study showed that users were still unlikely to voice their opinion against the group norm unless there was at least one other voice willing to speak up for them.

One of the biggest concerns of some editors, journalists, and researchers in online communication is the occurrence of flaming and its suspected tendency to discourage quality commenting. Although flaming does occur in CMC, it may not be as prevalent as previously thought. A contextual look into the culture of toxic disinhibition, or flaming, reveals that the phenomenon may not be a result of the computer medium itself, but instead results from the existing social contexts within comment threads and websites (Kayany, 1998). That could cause flaming to vary in intensity from site to site based on present group norms. Those differing social norms may also exaggerate the appearance of flaming and have the ability to make supposed flaming messages actually seem more
appropriate when reviewed in context than when judged on their own (O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003). As contextual research continues to challenge the definition of and methods used to determine flaming (Joinson, 2001; Kayany, 1998; O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003), new studies are needed to discover the true discursive quality of online commenting.

Theoretical Framework

The textual analysis employed in this study will be guided by various interpretations of the public deliberation theory. Discursive interaction between citizens has been an integral part of social and democratic society throughout history. As a result, researchers have emphasized both the importance of understanding its process and the theoretical possibilities of its success and failure. Past research into the quality of public discourse has long used interpretations of Habermas’ (1991, 1996) model of the public sphere as an example of ideal political debate. The popularization of the Internet as a communication tool and the growing research into online CMC has since led to ongoing disputes of the public sphere theory’s applicability to the online medium. However, with the conflicting results and theoretical opinions in public sphere research, a different, more deliberative, theory of communication was chosen for this study of CMD and the social interaction of its participants.

Internet Research and the Public Sphere

Defined most simply as “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, 1996, p. 360), Habermas’ ideas about the “public sphere” have been
evolved and adapted to fit with the changing surroundings of researchers. Most researchers identify the inclusion of people from various backgrounds and the formation of public opinion as essential components to a true public sphere (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Zhou, Chan & Peng, 2008). Others assert that democratic and politically based discussions are critical (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). The application of the theory to CMD has furthermore led to a variety of studies with conflicting results.

Although public sphere theory is not directly employed in this study’s analysis, the theory has been the basis of analysis for past studies regarding online comments. An understanding of the theory and those studies, therefore, is important to the literature building up to this study.

Poor (2005) used Habermas’s original model to create his own criteria for a public sphere, which he then used to study the online website Slashdot. He focused on the website’s moderation feature and its ability to draw in new users as important factors to fulfilling a public sphere’s requirements. According to Poor (2005), the ability to provide a discussion space for individuals who had previously been excluded from political discourse, is one of three elements needed to form a public sphere. The second component he described is that it should be formed through mediated discussion. Finally, the discussion and mediation should consider ideas presented based on merit without regarding the social standing of the speaker (Poor, 2005).

Slashdot is a website that serves people with similar interests in technology and is a small sphere within the greater public sphere of the Internet as a whole. Because it brings a group of people into political (and technical) discussions that were not there
before and has a moderation system to judge the quality of comments, it fulfills all of Poor’s requirements as a public sphere (Poor, 2005).

Those conclusions are noteworthy because they provide the framework for most online public websites to be studied the same way. The traits Poor identified that make Slashdot a public sphere — moderation and inclusion — are common to most news sites on the Internet in that the sites usually provide some sort of control over participation and they are open to new users who wish to join (even if joining requires some sort of registration or login).

Other interpretations of the public sphere leave the inclusion of the Internet up to debate. In a study of the Al Arabiya news website in Dubai, examinations of user comments showed mixed results (Al-Saggaf, 2006). Although there were diverse opinions and interactions among readers, the author concluded that there did not appear to be “rational, critical debates” facilitated by the comment feature, which he considered vital to Habermas’s model of a public sphere (Al-Saggaf, 2006). However, even without full debates, users were able to transform from a passive audience to active authors of media content (Al-Saggaf, 2006).

Although conversation online may or may not meet researchers’ interpretations of the Habermasian public sphere, it could still be capable of fostering quality political discussions in the form of public deliberation (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Nip, 2006). Such informal public discourse is necessary for democracy, and Habermas agreed that informal political discussions could encourage active citizens to create a public sphere (Nagar, 2001).
Debatin (2008) describes that form of online communication, which resembles the speech acts of everyday encounters, as the first of three levels of internet-based public discourse as interpreted from Habermasian theory. Although the “virtual episodic public encounters” do not directly create political action, they do form a “structural background” for the higher levels of online communication including forms of public assembly and media-based communication (Debatin, 2008, p. 66).

The social, or discursive, aspect of CMC is leading researchers to investigate how texts in CMD relate to one another and what affect that has on their meaning. Both Wodak and Fairclough discuss the relevance of intertextuality and interdiscursivity in their work regarding discourse analysis. Intertextuality refers to the associations and connections that all texts have in relation to other texts. Similar but slightly different in meaning, interdiscursivity is the relationships of topics, or genres, in texts to the genres of other texts. “Discourses are always related to those produced before, simultaneously and subsequently, and are only intelligible in terms of the underlying conventions and rules” (Tischer, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 148). This study refers mainly to the “interactivity” between commenters. Interactivity, in this case, refers to both the interdiscursivity and intertextuality between comments and also the social interactions between users.

A more defined concept within the broad notion of discourse is the idea of public deliberation, which strives for more productive (and often democratic) social interactions and is a focus of analysis in this study.
Public deliberation, which stems from democratic deliberative theory, is a concept that differs in meaning between researchers. Lacking a precise definition, the term’s explication in research may range from purely formal or hypothetical contexts to more realistic, specific assessments (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Formal interpretations of the term highlight information and opinion-seeking aspects as well as possible solutions to problems. Gastil (2008) proposed that people deliberate when “they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view” (p. 8). Chambers (2003) offered his explanation of deliberation as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (p. 309). Those definitions, however, may be more useful in examining formal occasions of discourse such as small discussion groups or one-on-one political conversations than more casual media-based groups of online comment forums made up of many different anonymous users.

Dutwin (2002) addressed conflicting expectations for deliberation in his study of a public initiative carried out in the city of Philadelphia. Focused on political deliberation between local citizens, he described his concern that there is a divide between what he calls the “rational/instrumental” framework of public deliberation imagined by theorists and the more alternative “communal/conversational” framework that actually occurs during public deliberation in action (Dutwin, 2002, p. 13). He proposed that the sophisticated political and policy expectations set by theorists do not
reflect what actually occurs when people talk about politics and reasoned that a new framework for deliberation should be established. His framework, which leans closer to the side of the communal/conversational framework, “views deliberation as a performance of citizenship rather than an instrument of political learning and policy decision-making” (Dutwin, 2002, p. 4). His analysis of citizen discussion forums leading up to a mayoral election found that citizen deliberation uses a balance of rational/instrumental and communal/conversational frameworks in deliberating about political topics. He also found that even though deliberation may not appear to foster reasonable arguments at an individual level, the collective discussion as a whole showed evidence of rational and reasonable deliberation, which was, in most cases, a “group effort” (p. 182). Blong (2008), who used Dutwin’s findings to do her own assessment of deliberation in National Issues Forums, described that as a difference between “citizen talk” and “expert talk” where “normative principles that privilege abstract and highly rational forms of argumentation fail to appreciate the way groups deal with complex social issues by talking about them in terms of their lives and their communities” (p. 6).

Other conversational assessments of the concept also suggest that agreement over resolutions to problems is not critical, and that deliberation mainly focuses on the discourse that occurs between citizens. Fishkin (1995) attempted to negotiate a more realistic assessment of deliberation in real-world settings by introducing his concept of “incompleteness”:

We can put the ideal speech situation at one extreme of an imaginary continuum and then imagine various forms of incompleteness—compared to this ideal—as we think about more realistic forms of deliberation.
When arguments offered by some participants go unanswered by others, when information that would be required to understand the force of a claim is absent, or when some citizens are unwilling or unable to weigh some of the arguments in the debate, then the process is less deliberative because it is incomplete in the manner specified. In practical contexts a great deal of incompleteness must be tolerated. (p. 41)

That idea of a continuum allows researchers to assess a setting’s degree of deliberation rather than labeling it simply as deliberative or non-deliberative. This also suggests, however, that speech acts in reality are somehow deficient. While the idea of a continuum for measuring deliberation is useful, it may be more accurate to describe theoretical “ideal speech acts” as deficient, as they lack real-world context and detail. It also, however, defines “ideal speech” as Like Delli Carpini et al. (2004), this thesis draws from multiple frameworks in its interpretation and analysis of deliberation, and accepts that varying levels of sophistication in deliberation should be considered.

Although there are many theoretical interpretations of public deliberation in communication studies, there is a lack of empirical research into the actual interactivity and discussion occurring among the comments to online news sites. One exception is Manosevitch and Walker’s (2009) content analysis study of online comments based on Gastil’s conceptual definition of public deliberation. Recognizing both the analytic and social processes of deliberation, the authors identified nine criteria for examining the deliberative quality of comments.

The analytic criteria described in that study include narratives, facts, sources, values, positions, and reasons stated by commenters (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). It
directly involves the issue under discussion and includes both factual information as well as personal experience testimonies. The analytic aspect of deliberation can include many types of content shared in comments such as stories or experiences; religious, spiritual, or cultural values; verifiable data or legal documents; links to relevant online content; and statements of personal opinions. It is an integral aspect to deliberation because it provides an “information base” for participants to understand the problem (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 12).

The social process of deliberation was described as a collective dimension of discourse in which people discuss an issue together. Its criteria consist of addressing other users or other comments, posing questions, and addressing article content. It makes up a more interactive and intertextual aspect of deliberation in which participants refer to other texts as a source of “information and reflection” (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 11).

Manosevitch & Walker (2009) concluded that the comments they studied not only provided factual information in their content, but they also showed evidence of weighing alternative views, which is valuable to the deliberative process.

Possibly the most unexpected but important finding of their study of online comments was the amount of interaction between commenters. Despite the fact that the websites under consideration contained no features that would intentionally encourage interaction (such as quoting or threading), commenters were still able to respond to each other by referring to user-names, answering questions, and clarifying information. Results showed that at least some commenters were staying involved with the discussion as it progressed and suggests that further research should be done on the level of
engagement between users. This study attempts to address that area of study concerning extended involvement and interaction among online commenters.

One specific aspect of deliberation that has not received much attention from online comment researchers is the presence of argumentation between users. Often, disagreements between commenters may be hastily labeled as flaming or uncivil behavior. However, a distinction should be made between users who attack other individuals and users who argue with other individuals. That distinction, guided by an understanding of argumentation theory, is one of the goals of this study.

Defined as a “set of reasons or evidence in support of a conclusion” (Weston, 2009, p. xi), arguments can be used both to present information in support of a claim, and to negotiate differences in opinions or views between individuals in an attempt to prove one or the other as valid. Those occurrences take place frequently in online comment threads and can be more simply understood as either a stated argument as a product or an interacted argument as a process. Argumentation is also often understood as a product of three different aspects that either separately or jointly describe the phenomenon. Those underlying components of argumentation are logic (premise-conclusion or evidence-claim productions of argumentation, which can be judged valid or invalid), dialectic (the rules or procedures that govern argumentation), and rhetoric (the process of communication inherent in argumentation where claims are made and judged) (Tindale, 1999, p. 3-4). This study situates itself with recent literature in which those three components are all simultaneously present in argumentation.

The fundamental study of argumentation can be applied to fields ranging from mathematics to law and dates back to ancient Greek philosophy in which Aristotle’s
logical approach shaped the area of study for centuries to come (Bermejo Luque, 2011). This study, however, is concerned primarily with the study of conversational argumentation study, which did not gain ground as a discipline until more recently.

Research into and writings about argumentation theory generally focused on formal logic as a means of presenting information and identifying fallacies until the 1950s and 1960s when studies began to broaden in scope (Bermejo Luque, 2011). During that time writers such as Toulmin and Perelman developed the theory beyond formal logic (University of Twente, 2012). While Toulmin’s model focused on the structure of argumentation in everyday interaction settings, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s model recognized pattern formations in argument sequences previously thought to be unorganized (Meyers & Brashers, 2010).

Sociological research led by Harvey Sacks and his colleagues Jefferson and Schegloff followed similarly to argumentation theory with the foundation of conversational analysis as a discipline. Analysis of dialogues collected from a suicide hotline and further research revealed structural patterns in conversation such as turn-taking and speech-exchange systems (Sacks, 1992).

The study of conversational argumentation continued to develop into the early 1980s with the creation of a conversational argument coding scheme, which has continued to be modified by following researchers (Canary, Ratledge, & Seibold, 1982; Meyers & Brashers, 2010). Those coding schemes, along with civil discourse strategies, helped shape the speech acts inventory in the methods section of this study.

Conversational argumentation differs from formal argumentation in that there are no pre-determined speaking formats. Typically, turn-taking in speech is negotiated on a
turn-by-turn basis and is based on speech act norms such as adjacency pairs, or basic units for organizing conversation such as question-answer or request-grant/refusal (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980). That is especially the case in online comment forums where there are lower thresholds both in the preparation of writing posts and the editing of posts by moderators. It is the online comment section’s ability to immediately post content submitted by users that allows it to not only function as a board for lengthy edited posts (similar to the style of letters to the editor), but also more often as a space for spontaneous spur-of-the-moment reactions to content. In that way, they are very similar to conversational speech acts, which are also typically spur-of-the-moment spoken responses to something they have just heard or seen. For that reason, it is important to this study to incorporate an understanding of conversational argumentation in its analysis of online comments.

In addition to deliberation and argumentation, a definition of civil discourse is also necessary to the discussion of public deliberation. Civility in communication is often defined in one of two ways. The first, and perhaps the most “popular,” is in reference to politeness, manners, and even docility. Conflict, in that case, is discouraged. The second common interpretation of civility is that of being related to the public, or of a civic nature. Both meanings have their place in the English language; however, this study uses a different definition of civility that is more attuned to the analysis of public discourse.

Barber (1999) defines civility broadly as “civil society’s contribution to our political conversation” (p.40). He then elaborates on that definition and gives nine characteristics that make a public voice civil (Barber, 1999):
1. Commonalty: Groups should not just be an aggregate of voices but should also share common interests and a sense of community.

2. Deliberation: An ability for deliberative critical self-analysis and reflection is important for a civil voice.

3. Inclusiveness: A civil voice should be multivocal and inclusive to all, acknowledging and incorporating differences rather than excluding them.

4. Provisionality: There should be no finality or endpoint to civil discussion. Instead, it should be a constantly evolving and ongoing dialogue with only resting points for taking action before more discussion continues.

5. Listening: Civility in discussion implies that participants both speak and listen to others, taking into account others’ opinions and ideas.

6. Learning: Listening to others in public discourse gives people the ability to not only acknowledge others’ opinions and ideas but also to learn from them and question or adjust their own opinions or positions.

7. Lateral Communication: Dialogue should be lateral in that conversations form among people and not vertically between leaders or elites and followers.

8. Imagination: Imagination gives communicators the ability to see past themselves and take into account the needs and wants of others in relation to their own.

9. Empowerment: discourse that is civil should go beyond just talk and also provide the ability for taking action.

With those nine defining characteristics of civility, Barber (1999) shows that a civil voice cannot be defined simply as a public voice and also that it should not be
limited to polite or docile rhetoric. This study takes note of occurrences where comments, threads, or entire forums either exemplify or contradict those civil characteristics as defined by Barber.

Gaps in Literature and Summary

Many researchers concede that there is just not enough evidence to tell whether the Internet is, or has the potential to foster, a public sphere of rational debate (Albrecht, 2003; Al-Saggaf, 2006). Many theories on the subject seem to challenge and contradict opposing views, which could be a consequence of their tendency to study online news comments outside of their social contexts (Witschge, 2008). Although researchers acknowledge comments as a source of social interaction (Kayany, 1998; Manosevich & Walker, 2009; Witschge, 2008), there is a lack of empirical research that attempts to analyze that interactivity, especially in relation to the specific social norms of their host site or comment thread.

Current research into the quality and trends of CMC tends to approach the subject under the assumption that the online medium is the main determinant of the quality of message content (Kayany, 1998; O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003). That assumption, either stated or unstated, has led to content analysis studies that observe each comment as its own self-contained entity, or as one unit of analysis, without regard to the cultural context of comments surrounding it (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Milioni et al., 2011). Without considering each comment against the context of the entire forum, the message may be observed and coded according to characteristics or norms of appropriateness as determined by the researcher, rather than by the collective of forum participants. Also,
researchers may privilege more formal language, for example, that of journalistic writing or even spoken language in their analysis. In perspective, evaluating the texts of online news comments based on the standards of journalistic principles might be compared to evaluating the conversations of a group book club based on the standards of formal literary theory and critique, rather than the standards of normal group discussion. Evaluations in both of those instances would judge otherwise context-appropriate texts as being overly informal and even inappropriate according to the higher standards.

Other research, such as Kayany’s (1998) examination of flaming, suggests that discursive behavior in CMC is actually driven by the existing social contexts of online users and not by the computer medium itself, as previously thought. That indicates that CMD content would be more accurately evaluated for discursive trends by relating it, in context, to the social norms of the host site and its users rather than the social norms of independent, and often academic, contexts (O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003; Witschge, 2008).

The lack of textual analysis available on user comments was a major consideration in planning and implementing my study. Although there is theoretical research into the importance and need for contextually driven studies of CMD (O’Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003; Witschge, 2008), there have been few empirical studies carried out and none applied specifically to the context of comments to online news articles. This study attempts to fill that gap by linking the theoretical literature on public deliberation with a textual analysis method to create an exploratory study into the actual quality of deliberative CMD as it exists and relates to its individual cultural contexts.
This study is valuable to the research of CMC in that it provides an introductory look at the deliberative quality of online news comments through the applications of a textual analysis method. In addition to providing valuable insight into how people actually interact through comments, it also gives online news editors and researchers a look into the potential for deliberation in comments and the circumstances under which it may exist. That could be valuable information to consider when exploring options for comment features, policies, and moderation techniques in the future.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The textual analysis in this study utilizes McKees’s post-structuralist view that educated guesses can be made about the most likely interpretations of texts based on “given cultural contexts” (McKee, 2003, p. 67). At a basic level, textual analysis involves gathering and critically evaluating the media messages that people and cultures use to make sense of the world. The post-structuralist approach uses interpretation with the acknowledgement that other cultures experience things in different ways. The method therefor suggests that texts can have a variety of likely interpretations based on different cultural contexts, rather than focusing on interpretations as simply right or wrong (McKee, 2003).

This study examines the texts and relevant intertexts of online news comments from the cultural context of those who actively participate in the feature. Currently available research on online comment quality tends to analyze individual texts separately and based on standards of more formal or journalistic communication, determining those that do not fit their standards to be poor quality. Instead of defining comments as either good or bad quality, this analysis acknowledges that there are many different ways of interpreting the texts and it attempts to examine them from the previously unstudied deliberative and conversational standpoint of the interactive user.

Converse to research that analyzes comment texts from an outsider’s perspective of discourse quality, this study attempts to examine the texts of online news comments from an insider perspective, or from the perspective of those who actively use the feature. It makes educated guesses about the likely interpretations that could be made by that culture of people by not only analyzing the comments themselves but also analyzing how
the commenters react and respond to each other, and analyzing how commenters both adhere to formal moderation policies and maintain group-created social norms. Instead of analyzing whether comments adhere to formal journalistic guidelines, I analyze whether comments contribute appropriately with regard to the expectations set by forum moderators and their fellow commenters.

This study also considers Fairclough’s theme of “intertextuality,” which refers to “how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize, and dialogue with other texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). Fairclough suggests that the intertextuality of a text may appear in a variety of different forms including the most obvious direct reporting of speech through quotes, or by less direct methods such as thoughts, summaries, or incorporations of other texts without attribution at all. That negotiation and interaction between texts helps contribute to Fairclough’s description of texts as “social events” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 21).

According to Fairclough, the presence of intertextuality in a text both accentuates dialogicality and increases the number of voices and, therefore, differences present. These differences, which are constantly being negotiated by people, make up a fundamental aspect to social interaction (Fairclough, 2003). This thesis will examine the intertextuality of texts contributed as comments to online news articles by specifically focusing on comment threads in order to identify themes of social interaction and public deliberation.

Although user comments are widely used in online news outlets, journalists are still experimenting with different formats or guidelines to apply to them that will encourage high-quality content (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). This exploratory study
compiles data from three online news sites that have made advanced efforts to maximize comment quality and to incorporate user comments into the content of their site. The three sites all include links to the top-commented articles on their homepages. They also all require contributors to either log in or state their usernames before publishing messages and give readers the option to flag any comments they feel are inappropriate. Moderators then review the comments to ensure content quality. The news sites selected for my study all incorporate comment-threading features, which allow users to reply directly to other posts creating separate “threads,” or groups of related texts within the forum. Comment-threading features encourage users to participate in dialog with each other.

The data needed for this study was compiled over a two-week period during early 2013 from the following three websites: thenation.com, thehill.com, and nationalreview.com. In addition to the fact that they encourage discussion through threading and links from the home page, the sites were chosen based on their political focuses and readership by politically engaged audiences. Each site refers to that type of audience focus in its site profile. The Nation’s website, in particular, describes its site as a “community for action-oriented thought leaders” and a space where readers “can interact with both The Nation's writers and with each other” (Bollinger, 2012).

The comments were collected from six of the top-commented articles published in January and February 2013. Only the first 200 comments were chosen to maintain a manageable sample size for textual analysis while also ensuring there was sufficient content for a meaningful analysis. The articles selected were allowed to continue collecting comments for a minimum of one full week before data collection in order to
allow sufficient time for users to read and respond, and also to accommodate discussions that may continue over several days.

The articles and their corresponding comments were then collected and archived as PDF files for offline analysis. They were then stored and analyzed based on their content and deliberative qualities.

Because the dialogic nature of public deliberation implies a series of interactions between participants (Delli Carpini et al., 2004), this study focuses mainly on the content contained in comment threads containing three or more comments. For the purpose of this study, the entire collection of comments contributed to an article is referred to as the “forum.” Within a forum, a group of comments that directly reply to each other and stem off from one comment (often referred to as the “original post”) is referred to as a “thread.” All singular comments are referred to as either a “comment” or ‘text’ within the larger method of textual analysis.

Although this study is not limited to seeking out specific behaviors or speech acts in its analysis, it is informed and guided by relevant theories of public discourse. Those theories served as a guide to help the author to interpret the comments and interactions among users. It is the combination deliberative theory, argumentation theory, and civil discourse that form the speech-act inventory used in this study. The inventory served as a guide to consistently interpret the data of the study.

The following speech acts were codified in advance of the analysis, with consideration toward different conversational argumentation styles, deliberative discourse criteria, and civil discourse characteristics:
• **Personal attacks**: Involve personal criticisms of individuals instead of ideas or opinions. May include behavior such as aggressive criticism, hate speech, or threats and are often referred to as flaming. For example, a comment that responds to a post by calling the writer a “stupid liberal fool” would be a personal attack; however, a comment stating that “your idea sounds like that of a stupid liberal fool” specifies the idea and is not a personal attack.

• **Trolling**: Often targeted at a specific individual or group, trolling may contain flaming, off-topic, nonsensical, or other harassing remarks in attempt to disrupt discussion and elicit an emotional response. While flaming can occur in a single aggressive message, trolling implies repeated harassing behavior.

• **Refusals/Dismissals**: Comments that attempt to exclude another user’s ideas or opinions from the discussion. Generally acted out of intolerance or prejudice, refusals/dismissals may be observed as an aggressive or excluding comment such as “Your conservative idiocy is not welcome here, go back to Fox News,” “None of you liberal fools make any sense,” or could simply be a refusal to respond to or acknowledge a certain individual’s posts.

• **Objections/Challenges**: Comments that oppose another user’s comment based on a specific factor that should be addressed for it to be true. It is not an outright refusal but may require additional information, sourcing, or corrections before being accepted.

• **Respectful disagreements**: Acknowledge another user’s argument or reasoning and respectfully disagree with them.
• **Constructive criticism:** Acknowledges another user’s argument or reasoning and gives suggestions on how to improve content, or communication style.

• **Elaborations:** Expand on another user’s comment by adding relevant information, which may include additional sources, points of view, opinions, or other related information.

• **Clarifications:** Attempts to clarify other users’ comments either by rewording or explaining aspects of them so that other users may understand them more clearly.

• **Corrections:** Respond to another comment by correcting a piece of information stated and often provide links to back up the information in question.

• **Supportive comments:** Comments that agree and support another comment or user. They may include a simple agreement or an agreement with elaboration.

• **Mediations:** Attempts to subdue aggressive disagreements or flaming and return discourse back to civil discussions.

• **Information exchanges:** Include both requests for information, which may ask a direct question or request further information or sourcing, and responses to requests/questions, which could be a direct answer or source of information to answer a question or request.

• **Calls to action:** Request support from other users in taking a particular action. May include changing specific behaviors, voting habits, areas of study/research, requesting donations, etc.

• **Adjustments of views/opinions:** Evidence of a user or group of users altering their opinions or points of view by making changes, corrections, or alterations to their own ideas or opinions over multiple posts and often include self-reflection.
and consideration of alternate views. These differ from clarification posts in that they offer self-reflection of their own ideas after acknowledging alternative views while clarification posts simply try to restate another person’s post more clearly.

- **Reinforcements of views/opinions**: Include evidence of a user or group of users confirming or reinforcing their opinions or viewpoints during the course of the comment thread.

- **Unrelated comments**: Comments that contribute content that is unrelated to previous comments or the thread as a whole. This label could be expanded on considerably to describe more closely the different types of unrelated posts, but to do so is outside the scope of this study and could be the focus of a new study entirely.

The textual analysis in this study consisted of multiple stages of evaluation. First, an initial reading of the texts was executed in order to make note of the threads containing three or more comments and to gain a general understanding of the main social norms and grammatical moods present. That was important to further evaluations because it helped provide an understanding of the tone of the comments, which can be essential to evaluating such things as playfulness, the seriousness of critiques, the presence of sarcasm, and the intended offensiveness of profanity in some cases. Although only the comments contained in threads with three or more texts were be the focus of this study, all of the comments collected were left in the forums to maintain the contextual integrity of comments that were studied.

The next series of evaluations consisted of multiple readings and re-readings to focus more closely on the social and textual themes of texts posted in comment threads.
and their relation to the forum as a whole. In that process of evaluation, the comments were first read to identify themes or patterns of specific speech acts, which encompass concepts of conversational argumentation, civil discourse, and deliberative discourse. That was done with a consideration of the speech act inventory and with an eye for identifying any additional notable speech acts not already defined. A consideration was also maintained of any social norms or trends regarding the tone of commenters including playfulness or aggression already identified in the initial readings. Once general themes of interaction in speech acts were recognized, further readings were be done to identify specific examples of these instances. They included both individual user posts or groups of posts from multiple users.

The final stage of evaluation in this textual analysis continued to build upon the previous readings by providing a review of any themes identified and an overall analysis of the texts as a whole. That stage also provided an analysis of how the texts fit into the overarching theme of public deliberation.

Because textual analysis is a qualitative method for studying data, it does not provide results in terms of numbers or statistics that can be easily recreated (McKee, 2003). Without those traits, researchers who use quantitative, social-scientific methods tend to criticize the methodology for being “unscientific” (McKee, 2003, p. 118). While McKee (2003) acknowledges that textual analysis may not be a scientific mode of discovery, “this does not mean that it is less truthful, objective, or accurate – scientific knowledge is one way of representing the world, not the truth” (p. 137). Rather than providing numeric and statistical findings, textual analysis provides interpretations of texts based on cultural and social contexts that quantitative results do not. McKee
describes this process as identifying ways of “sense-making,” where “texts are the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making—the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, p. 15). By carefully examining groups of comments based on the expectations and social norms of the users themselves, this study provides a critical exploration of how commenters actually interact and deliberate with each other about political and social issues.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Sample

The six articles selected for this study were chosen based on the number of comments posted a week after publication. The articles with the highest comment count on each news site were collected and archived along with up to the first 200 comments posted. Those articles are “The Decline of Unions” and “Against Black History Month” published by a conservative political magazine, The National Review (posted on nationalreview.com on January 28, 2013, and February 4, 2013, respectively); “Hell Isle” and “Ten Things to End Rape Culture” published by a liberal magazine, The Nation (posted on thenation.com on January 28, 2013, and February 4, 2013, respectively); and “Landscape Shifts on Immigration” and “Obama Takes Gun Debate on the Road: ‘It’s Time to do Something’” from the nonpartisan newspaper The Hill (posted on thehill.com on January 28, 2013, and February 4, 2013, respectively). Four of the six articles selected had more than 200 comments, therefor only the first 200 were collected. Although one article’s comment forum exceeded 300 comments (318), the other three received between 200 and 300 comments. Two articles had fewer than 200 comments—one with 127 and one with 49—and, therefor, all comments posted to those articles were collected for analysis. Both articles with fewer than 200 comments were from the website of The Nation magazine, thenation.com, which seemed to have a lower rate of commenting sitewide as compared the other two—thehill.com and thenationalreviewonline.com.

Of the 976 total comments collected and archived for this study, 837 were part of comment threads containing three or more posts (and therefor analyzed for this study) and 82 of those comments were the initial posts (or original comment) of the thread in
which others responded. In order to maintain the original context of the comments, no spelling or grammatical errors were corrected in the following excerpts. A table showing an overview of the sample body is located in Appendix A of this study.

There were 240 unique writers in the comments of the six articles. That number takes into account 12 writers who posted on more than one article, only counting them one time. The average number of comments contributed by a writer is 3.5; however, more than half (121) of the users only commented once in the forums and more than one quarter of the comments studied were posted by only seven different users. In one article’s comment forum, over half of the analyzed posts were contributed by only two different commenters. Those repeat comments make up a large portion of the deliberative behavior observed in the results section as they are involved in extended back-and-forth exchanges both with each other and other individuals. In one article’s forum, for example, there is a single thread that contains nearly half of that forum’s comments. In another article’s forum, one thread contains more than 40% of that forum’s comments. The information exchanges and deliberative behavior contained in those threads and the sample as a whole are discussed more closely in the following sections.

Format

Comments observed in the forums of these six online news articles present a wide range of variation in length, complexity, language, and tone. Some are short one-or-two-word comments while others take up multiple paragraphs of extended argumentation and explanation. Some are elaborative and add relevant commentary or information to previous comments. Others agree, disagree, or argue with previous comments, adding
opinions, personal stories, or other additional information. Some add external information or sources to the comment forum for users to read and consider. There are many ways to categorize the content of the comments posted to online news articles. However, an analysis of the social trends and deliberative properties reveals several common themes.

The themes of deliberation observed in this study were analyzed based on the presence of speech acts defined in the methods section. Because that list of speech acts was created as a guide for what observers might expect to see in the sample and not as a defining code book for observation, it was left open to alterations throughout the process of analysis. In addition to those already defined, sarcasm, hostile disagreements, and personal stories are three additional acts that were identified throughout the sample as determiners of deliberative behavior. Those acts and the rest of the list of speech acts are incorporated throughout the following results and conclusions sections. A table showing incidents of speech acts and their associated themes is located in Appendix B of this study.

Researchers agree that online comments can provide an outlet of social interaction for news consumers (Kayany, 1998; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Witschge, 2008). This analysis of comments shows evidence of that interaction through the use of threading features. The texts contained in threads, which make up the majority of this study’s sample, display a unifying social aspect to the diversity of content. Social interactions between commenters and intertextuality between the texts in threads create an aspect of discourse in which deliberative themes can be observed. One overarching social theme observed in the comments of this study is a conversational style of writing.
More than three fourths of the comments were responses to other comments in the article forums. Response posts were calculated for only comments included in threads containing three or more posts (and not including original content comments as these are not submitted as a response), which is 755 of the initial 976 comments collected. The highest incidence of threaded comments in an article forum (up to the first 200 comments) can be seen in The National Review’s comment forum on January 28, 2013, for the article “The Decline of Unions.” Of the 200 comments collected from that article’s forum, 195 are part of a larger thread (three or more posts) and only eight of those are original content comments (creating only eight separate threads). That suggests that commenters are in fact reading other comments and responding to them in an ongoing conversational dialogue.

Evidence of conversational writing styles observed in this study can be seen in several ways. Structurally, the threads of comments show frequent patterns of back-and-forth exchanges of information, similar to those predicted by conversational argumentation theory and the information exchange speech act described in the methods section. It is common for comment writers to take turns providing information or opinions and asking questions of other users. The following example shows the back-and-forth pattern of dialogue between two commenters on thenation.com:

homosapiens: They have to live with each other before they can have sex with each other? Good lord, what kind of weird relationship policing is that?
Muser: There is no "policing" mentioned or implied. You can teach your sons to trick every girl they can find right into bed, or you can have better sense. It's always up to you.
homosapiens: How do men trick women into bed?
Muser: Alcohol and drugs (up to and including the "date rape" drug) are common. Then there is the "hot" guy seducing some not-quite-as-hot girls who are mistakenly flattered by (temporary) attention from a hunk. Then there is telling people you love them when you don't. Then there is running in
groups who are cool with orgies. Why are you asking for an explanation of what you already know?

homosapiens: Mostly because of your comments about living together. Just struck me as bizarre. Like you're protecting their tender hearts or something. That's not what the topic is about.

There are many hundreds of thousands of women that are sexually active these days. They *like* having sex. it feels good to them, all by itself regardless of love.

Many hundreds of thousands of women are sexually active *because they like sex* AND ALSO have been coerced at some time. It's not a virgin/whore dichotomy.

(homosapiens & Muser, 2013)

In that example the user “homosapiens” starts the dialogue by responding to a previous comment by the user “Muser” (the original comment was not included due to its long length and minimal importance to pattern comprehension). The two share a back-and-forth exchange in which both are able to ask questions and clarify meanings of opinions about a topic, in that case about the appropriateness of premarital sex. Conversational dialogues may occur between two individuals or a group of individuals who exchange information or opinions about a topic. Often, multiple short two-person dialogues such as the previous example may all be contained within a larger conversation that includes numerous different voices and topics, which come and go as the discussion progresses. A thread emerging from one original content comment, then, may vary in structure from a short two-person exchange to a long string of comments made up of multiple shorter or longer dialogues discussing various related topics. Extended arguments and information exchanges are elaborated on further in the following sections.

The conversational format can also be observed in the informal writing style of the commenters and their frequent reference to others. Commenters often use informal first person pronouns when referring to themselves in writing, especially when sharing personal stories. It is also common for writers to directly address another user by name.
when speaking. Since comments in all of the analyzed forums automatically “tag,” or label the user names of, any user they reply to, the use of an additional reference to a user’s name (or user name) goes beyond the function of clarification and provides a more personal and social aspect to the exchange. That can be seen in the writing of one commenter who wrote: “Look around you Leonard,” (fionamacknz, 2013) and then continued to respond to “Leonard’s” comment. That personalization of users can be seen further in the following comment by a user who has become familiar with the posts of another: “Never thought I’d read something like that from you but I have to respect the fact that you’re sticking to your principles” (S., David, 2013).

Abbreviations and informal colloquial phrases are additional examples of the conversational writing style in online comments. Although the demographics of participants in online comment forums has been shown to be similar to those who write letters to the editor (Cooper, Knotts, & Haspel, 2009; Reader, Stempel, & Daniel, 2004; Purcell et al., 2010), the writing style of online comments tends to be much more informal than what is often seen in the letters section of a newspaper, which is edited and often filtered for quality before publication. Though some comments show evidence of proper language use, many seem to be written more casually. Often comments are left completely unedited for basic spelling and grammar mistakes and bear resemblance to spontaneous stream-of-consciousness writing and the sort of interaction that takes place in casual spoken conversations. The following comments display colloquial phrases that would not be used in formal writing:

NathanNV: If only then, they would split into two factions ,and kill each other off. We could finally all spark one and have some fun!
Joseph Sacramento: Fire that bitch up !!!!!!!!!!
(Joseph Sacramento & NathanNV, 2013)
In a different forum, the writer “Jeff” responds colloquially to another user with the following comment:

Yes Ron, ALL corporations - every single one - have thousands of times more dollars than any union, and they have no restrictions on how they spend it either - you know, on such things as wages and benefits for their employees, unemployment insurance, workers comp, and other forms of insurance they are required to carry, stockholder dividends, building rents and maintenance, local, state and federal taxes, reinvestment to improve the company, meeting state, federal, and other regulations, etc, etc. All those evil corporations do is kick back and rake in the profits they get just for existing! It's pure greed! Sheesh, it must be nice, that simplistic little world in which you live! Have you ever actually held any private sector job? If so, it was certainly not in accounting or management! (Jeff, 2013).

The phrases “you know,” “kick back and rake in,” and “Sheesh” in the text show clear examples of informal conversational writing styles in the thread.

One major aspect of spoken language that plays a large role in communicating emotion and emphasis is the use of physical nonverbal expressions. Because physical interaction is impossible through comment sections, the facial and hand expressions that would normally make up a large part of face-to-face conversations are absent. Commenters, like writers in other places of online social interaction, have worked around that limitation by forming, in their writing, their own written emotional cues, which attempt to fill that physical absence. Emoticons, or representations of facial expressions made by keyboard characters, are common in online emotion expression. They can be used to represent facial expressions such as smiles, frowns, or winks and can also be used as a social cue to designate a comment as sarcastic or joking in order to avoid confusion when read. The following comment utilizes a smiley face emoticon and the abbreviation “lol,” or “laugh out loud,” to signal a joking statement:
Lou: Hell I wouldn't mind having someone else paying into my 
SS...lolol...hopefully between the two of us I'll have a nicer lil monthly 
pile waitng :-D lol
(Lou, 2013)

The abbreviation “lol” represents the description of a physical reaction, but it can also be 
used as a symbol of humorous intent. In that way it can also replace nonverbal cues such 
as facial expression and tone of voice that would be used in face-to-face interaction as a 
cue for the same intended meaning. Those types of physical or emotional cues are also 
incorporated into comments by referencing actions in side notes or other distinguishing 
keyboard characters as in the following example:

WhiteSquare: I can hear the fake outrage now: "OMG! NRO wants to get rid of 
Black History Month! Racists! All of them! Racists!"
*facepalm*
(WhiteSquare, 2013)

That comment also utilizes the informal abbreviation “omg” for the phrase “oh my God.”

Some users even go as far as incorporating descriptions of their physical reactions into 
the content of their message such as in the following excerpt from the end of one user’s 
post that describes a “chuckle:”

miasopapia: …Now, before I start writing another essay, I'm just gonna pick out 
"Women should have raised their standards instead of expecting me[n] to 
lower theirs" and going to add my little chuckle and hope you can just 
imagine pretty much everything I would have said in response to that 
ridiculous statement as wrapped up in that amicable chuckle.
(miasopapia, 2013)

By verbally describing the physical emotional reaction she wanted to display in response 
to a certain phrase, that writer was able to incorporate aspects of spoken interaction into 
the written comment thread.

Examples of incorporating spoken conversational-style writing into comments can 
also be seen in the use of all capitalized letters. Writers may use that to either simulate
yelling or to place extra emphasis on certain words or phrases within a post that would
normally be emphasized by changes in volume or tone of voice if spoken. The following
comment shows the use of emphasizing certain words with capital letters:

Tony T: Relax OB, most of the country is doing something. Its called IGNORING
YOUR WHINING!!! WHERE IS YOUR BUDGET???
(T., Tony, 2013)

By adding the emphasis of capitalized letters to certain words and phrases, comment
writers provide emotional cues for the reader to interpret, similar to those in spoken
language.

A 2010 study of online news participation showed that 72% of news consumers
do so because they enjoy the social aspect of discussing current events with others
(Purcell et al., 2010). Evidence of that discursive trend can be seen in the conversational
format of online news article forums. By taking advantage of the threading feature,
engaging in back-and-forth dialogue patterns, utilizing an informal writing style, and
incorporating implied physical and emotional cues into their posts, online commenters
create a conversational atmosphere in which themes of public deliberation can be
observed.

Themes

The textual analysis employed in this study reveals three main themes of social
interaction associated with the deliberative function of online commenting: a tolerance
for hostility and inclusion of all voices, encouragement of quality debate, and a value of
information exchange. Though all of the comments in threads containing three or more
posts were analyzed, the deliberative behavior that was the focus of this analysis was
especially present in extended information exchanges. That, combined with the tendency for a few individuals to contribute large numbers of comments to those exchanges, results in several users to appear more than once among the examples of the themes. The user “Ron,” for example, contributed a total of 55 different comments to one forum—over 15 times the average number of contributed posts—therefore the frequency at which his posts appear in the results is also higher. However, examples of the main themes are also observed in varying degrees throughout the entirety of the sample of texts, which is reflected in the results. Each of the themes is addressed separately in the following sections.

_Tolerance for Hostility_

The presence of flaming, trolling, and hostile comment behavior is a widely acknowledged aspect of news discussion forums. There is some debate, however, over the actual pervasiveness and disruptiveness of such conduct. This study analyzed such occurrences of hostile behavior as they exist in their social surroundings.

The initial phase of analysis, which focused on the general tone and grammatical moods of the comment threads, shows that there is a substantial amount of frustration both with other individuals and with topics of discussion in general. That frustration can be seen in the occurrences of speech acts such as personal attacks, hostile disagreements, and sarcasm, which are present in all of the forums analyzed. The most common targets of those remarks are the political affiliations and education/intelligence levels of other individuals—often attacked without legitimate basis for assumption—but personal attacks also vary considerably in content and severity. The following exchange shows a
string of personal attacks and vented frustration following “tony barone’s” reference to “right wing wacos” as dangerous:

tony barone: There's no reason in hell for assault weapons. But it's the right wing wacos that are the real danger.
Tony T (to tony barone): You welfare sponges really do not count.
AlwaysFreeAmerica (to tony barone): Ignorance must be blissful in the left wing.
Leviathan14 (to tony barone): What assault weapons? My AR is NOT an assault weapon! What country uses it in their military - NONE... The US ARMY defines an Assault rifle is a short rifle, mag fed and firing more than one round per trigger pull... so the US MILitary defines a AR-15 as not an ASSAULT weapon... SO ITS NOT AN ASSAULT WEAPON! Nice try, please try again when the brain grows in... Actually the threat to the US today is the left wing loons, basically if your liberal, you despise the constitution and have surrendered your citizenship. Leftists are more enemies than terrorists.... Seeing we like to define things, I define a liberal as enemy of the state…
(AlwaysFreeAmerica; barone; Leviathan14, 2013)

The first response to the original content comment, or initial thread post, is a personal attack on the user, which makes an unwarranted assumption on the user’s financial situation and shows hostility toward welfare recipients. Because the topic of welfare was not previously mentioned or referred to in any previous comments or the article itself, the comment could be a result of already existing frustration being vented in the comment atmosphere. The following comments continue to attack “left wing loons” and “leftists.” While those attacks are more on-topic, they still make gross over-generalizations (“…basically if your a liberal, you despise the constitution and have [surrendered] your citizenship.”) and assumptions about the previous users.

Another example of personal attacks in comments shows users exchanging curse words out of frustration but adding no actual explanation for their disagreement:

NRO: For dumb Republicans: If Republicans block Comprehensive Immigration Reform again then there will be no Republican Presidency in 2016 or 2020. Kapisch!
ultimat1red1 (to NRO): F U
NRO (to ultimat1red1): And F U through & through
(NRO & ultimat1red1, 2013)

Users also vent frustration in comments through the use of hostile disagreements, which is a speech act observed in addition to those listed in the methods. Those comments do not attack another user personally, but rather show hostile opposition to another user’s comments or opinions as in “Leishac’s” comment, “That’s the most ridiculous load of crap I have ever heard!” (Leishac, 2013).

Although instances of hostile disagreements and strings of personal attacks do occur, not all commenters respond to hostility with more aggression. Often users either completely ignore a flaming comment or respond normally with a respectful response as if there were no hostility. That can be seen in the following example:

Joe Wilson: But corporations actually produce something. I know it's hard for someone as slow as you to understand that concept. You really should have paid attention in school unless it was an inner city school.
maxime1793: Some do, some don't. Producing derivatives is not productive, it is Parasitic.
(maxime1793 & Wilson, 2013)

In that case the hostility and personal attack in the comment is ignored and it still receives a respectful response. Another user, “Ron,” engages in multiple back-and-forth exchanges with the user “123MarkW,” who consistently attacks “Ron’s” comments and “Ron” himself. These comments are often unprovoked and make unwarranted accusations and criticisms. Especially toward the beginning of the forum and discussion, “Ron” replies to “123MarkW’s” comments either without hostility or by using sarcasm to imply amusement instead of offense. That can be seen in the following example:

123MarkW: Notice how the liberal won’t even try to defend his hatred of those who have more than he does.
Ron: Not to you after you’ve used that tone, young man.
123MarkW: Poor Ron, uses any excuse to avoid revealing his inadequacies
Ron: Thanks for your concern, Mark.
(123MarkW & Ron, 2013)

In another instance, users respond respectfully to a comment that is later removed for inappropriate content. It was rare in this study to see evidence of removed posts (although some users complain about their posts disappearing without notice), and despite it being offensive enough for the moderators to remove it, the comment is still able to spark respectful debate among other users, who respond only to the relevant content.

That general acceptance and filter for what is often considered unfavorable content also extends to the comments of trolls and spammers. While spamming messages are relatively sparse compared to other speech acts in this study’s sample, when they are present, they are often ignored or replied to without hostility by other users.

In the comment threads studied here, there appears to be a number of individuals who attempt to ignore flaming behavior or who have a high “filter” for hostility. Though they acknowledge it is there and generally tolerate it to an extent, those people do not encourage the behavior and choose to focus more closely on constructive debate and arguing. The following user, “bl2r”, refers to that difference between users in his or her response to “IrmaLaDuce” and shows intent to maintain respectful, “open-minded dialog.”

IrmaLaDuce: I think this is the first article posted in the National Review that I wholeheartedly agree with. And to think, I clicked the article expecting the "why is there no white history month” nonsense. So shame on me.
ETA: of course, the comments are the usual NRO stew of white resentment. But still, good on you Cooke.
bl2r (to IrmaLaDuce): Good for you! Glad to see you could open your eyes a little. And I'm really hoping no one spastically down-votes your comment, as I imagine some of our cruder readers are tempted to do.
In the interest of continuing open-minded dialog, I'd be curious to see which comments you consider "white resentment." Maybe I'll learn something in return!
(bl2r & IrmaLaDuce, 2013)

By at least attempting to deal with or accept a certain level of hostility in comments, users appear to provide a social atmosphere that includes all voices, even if that means disagreeing or being offended by a statement. One commenter shows that respect for being able to speak out by saying, “You can say anything, of course. Sometimes (like here) what you say just ain’t so” (River, 2013). Although he or she ultimately disagrees with the other user’s comment, it is acknowledged that the user can use the space to say anything they wish.

Encouraging Quality Debate

Although hostile and flaming comments do occur in the threads of online news articles, there is a clear theme of encouraging quality debate among all the forums analyzed. One way that can be observed is in the criticism of arguments made by commenters by the rest of the group. While some users ignore personal attacks made in the comment forums, others respond with criticism and by encouraging better argumentation methods. One user responds to an attack on another’s intelligence by replying, “Talking about people is a diversion, Jane. Do you want to appear dishonest and wrong? People who know what they are talking about and who have an HONEST disagreement stick to the point instead of talking shi+ about people” (Maq, 2013). Another user criticizes a different user’s argument, which was a list of recent gun crimes, based on a lack of logical reasoning:
superduckz: Again. SO WHAT? refer to my above comment. I can produce a list of murders not involving firearms if you like. Baseball bats are #1 Do we ban baseball bats? Your argument is emotional not logical. It's useless. (superduckz, 2013)

That shows criticism of an argument based on logical reasoning but other examples of argument criticism point out good or bad quality arguments based on other argument fallacies, which are described in basic argumentation theory. The use of ad hominem and straw man arguments are among those that are criticized.

Another commenter criticizes an argument made in the original article, saying “your bringing up Singapore’s ridiculous laws is called a straw man. It comes off a bit desperate” (Alexander, 2013). That criticism sparks a small debate over whether the argument is, in fact, a straw man.

The relevance of arguments made in comments is another common way of encouraging quality debate by users. Although conversations frequently merge onto different topics of discussion during a thread, there is evidence of support for making relevant arguments against another person’s post. In the forum to the article “Obama Takes Gun Debate on the Road,” there is one user in particular who questions the relevance of several other commenters’ posts. In most cases he simply replies to the comments with the word “relevance?”

It should be noted, especially in cases where criticism is not given an explanation (as in the case of “relevance?”), that the intentions of the author cannot be clearly understood. Although some argument criticism may be meant to encourage understanding, some may have more strategic intentions aimed at excluding or harassing other users. Habermas referred to these differing motives as understanding versus strategic social actions or “actions oriented to understanding and actions oriented to
success” (Habermas, 1984, p. 331). Though the acts are described as having different objectives, Habermas’ priority thesis argues the priority of communicative acts, in that without communicative understanding, strategic acts would fail to be successful (Habermas, 1984, Niemi, 2005). While it is important to this study to understand the differences between strategic and understanding social actions, “Habermas’ objective in the TCA is not to present an empirical characterization of behavioral dispositions, but to grasp general structures of processes of mutual understanding that can be used to deduce formal characteristics of participation” (Saretzky, 2009, p. 156). While determining the exact motives of those who criticize the relevance of posts (or the motives of any commenters) is unlikely, a consideration of the different possibilities is useful.

In another case of relevance criticism the same user who responds with the single word “relevance” actually criticizes the relevance of a comment posted by a user that criticizes the relevance of a different comment, and in that case he also goes beyond criticism and includes a personal attack and the suggestion that the user stop talking as well:

Dumbfuckistan: OK. But what's that got to do with this article?
Why don't you go find an article about the deficit to spew your rhetoric.
Tommy Maq (to Dumbfuckistan): But your whining about religion being boring was on topic? And his point about spending was "logic" the _opposite_ of "rhetoric"
So your comment was not only irrelevant by your own standards, you made a false claim in the guise of an irrelevant whine.
Perhaps you should just stfu instead of proving your country was named after you.
(Dumbfuckistan & Maq, 2013)

In the same forum, another user responds to an attack on her intelligence and education level by responding, “what does my education have to do with anything?” and then continuing to elaborate on her own argument (Jane106, 2013). In another article forum, a
user responds to the comment “foreign trade is why we are as strong as we are” with the following response: “What irrelevance! As soon as someone says free trade (i.e., low tariffs) is destructive, the response is, ‘We need trade.’ You will have trade with higher tariffs!!!” (maxime1793, 2013).

Another way users encourage quality argumentation is by criticizing the sources (or lack of sources) users provide to back up their information. Not only is the presence of sources valued, but also the quality and relevance of those sources as well. The following is the beginning of a post by user “miasopapia” that questions the validity of another user’s source:

miasopapia: You are listing one study from 1994 (when rape was still strongly stigmatized within research communities) which did not provide enough information about the study (i.e. the police department) to allow other researchers to verify the results. In the world of research, information which is not verifiable loses credibility. There are, of course, other reasons why this study and the anonymous town are suspect, but I think I will leave it at this since you wanted to play the fact game and this singular study can hardly qualify as fact.
(miasopapia, 2013)

That comment questions the validity of the study cited, which would otherwise be seen as supportive to the argument. It also shows that users pay attention to the sources others use to support their claims and that there are those who hold the sources used to a high standard. Other comments criticize an argument for not having sources at all, such as “rocky garner’s” reply to another, “MLK was a conservative republican. If you think that your statement is true offer some facts to prove it” (garner, 2013). Another user replies to a list of crimes posted by commenting: “Do you even look at these stories you cite? Do you realize how many involve dirtballs, gangbangers and various assorted and sundry scumbags? And these stories are supposed to convince us that we should DISARM in the
face of such lunacy?” (DocinPA, 2013). In that case, the commenter criticizes the source not for validity, but for its strength in supporting the other user’s argument, which he or she appears to view as weak.

While spelling and grammar are often overlooked in the stream-of-thought colloquial writing style of many commenters, there is generally a strong emphasis on the clarity of word choice where the meaning of a comment may be affected. That clarity in communicating and interpreting comments is another way commenters encourage quality debate in forums. Because communication between commenters relies solely on written words, even slight discrepancies in the literal and intended meanings of those words are often the subject of debate. That can include the choice of wording or grammar of a comment where even one word can cause debate over the meaning. For example, the user “RenegadeScholar” corrects another user by saying, “By ‘outsourcing,’ you actually mean ‘offshoring.’ There is a huge difference” (RenegadeScholar, 2013). He then goes on to elaborate on the terms and the issue.

In another article’s comment forum, users discuss the word choice and intended meaning of the phrase “male masculinity” by the article’s author in an extensive comment thread discussion. Users refer to grammatical usage and other article content to debate the clarity and appropriateness of the phrase. One commenter admits, “oh yeah no I get it, I just think it’s not the best way to phrase it… though I’m not sure if I could think of a better way to put it either, without an entire paragraph…” (helfk, 2013). The overall clarity of comments is an ongoing discussion point throughout all the comment forums showing that, although spelling and grammar mistakes can be overlooked, users often insist upon clarity of meaning in comments. That occurs both in writing comments and in
interpreting comments, where a misinterpretation of what is written is often corrected by others, especially when it results in an aggressive response. Clarifications can be made by the original author or by other users who notice the misunderstanding, like the following user: “looks like you should reread the comment, because you appear to have completely missed Griffonn’s point” (River, 2013). In that case the user “River” points out a misunderstanding between two other users and recommends one reread a comment for clarity.

In another case, a commenter corrects his own statement in order to improve clarity and admits that the clarity of his statement caused a misunderstanding:

Goosey (to Ron): Greed isn’t related to outcome of greed. Greed is an end in itself. I know plenty of greedy poor people, just because they suck at making money doesn’t make them any less greedy. But to play your game, name all of the corporations that have more money than the U.S. Government.
Ron (to Goosey): My mistake, Goosey. I was thinking of corporation vs union money in elections, both feeding the greedy government. Careless writing on my part.
(Goosey & Ron, 2013)

In that case, the user “Ron” recognizes that he was unclear in his previous comments and that it is resulting in an argument based on misunderstanding. By correcting himself, he restores the clarity and brings the discussion back to more productive deliberation.

Another common way users improve the clarity of their posts is by quoting the specific phrase they are responding to from the previous comment. Since some comments can be multiple paragraphs long, users avoid having their comments applied to the wrong part by specifying the text and then replying to it directly.

Finally, users encourage quality debate in forums by leading by example. While commenters often disagree over issues, those differences don’t always regress into
hostility or personal attacks. Often, users are able to find some areas of agreement to go with their opposing statement. For example, one commenter replies to another: “Kevin Schooler… I give you that Belle Isle would inject ‘fresh capital’ into the Detroit area”… “However, the notion that these are ‘fresh ideas’ isn’t in any [way] convincing. The freshness of these libertarian, anti-egalitarian ideas has been fresh a long time” (Bullock, 2013). Another user also finds a point he can sympathize with before respectfully disagreeing with another:

Pilipo Underwood: I sympathize with your first point, Education is always a step behind current wisdom. As for MLK Day, I don't think only elected officials should be recognized. And I consider the day more of a symbol for the entire Civil Rights struggle, and Martin was a reasonable candidate because he advocated peaceful resistance, as taught by Jesus and Ghandi. Hence there will be no Malcom X day, thank goodness! (Underwood, 2013)

Even when a user does disagree entirely with another user’s comment, there are those who refrain from hostility and instead respectfully explain why they think the other user is wrong:

123MarkW (to Oakeshott): What is the power of big business? They can’t force you to buy their products. To the extent that businesses buy gov't power, that’s a problem with big gov't, not big business.

nickshaw (to 123Mark): Well, they can, in a way, Mark. Simply by lobbying they can get tax breaks or special deals which, in a way, is us ‘buying’ their products. Look at ‘green’ power for an example. We are forced to buy that! Did you catch Stossel’s latest offering? Oakshott isn’t all that far off the mark. (123MarkW & nickshaw)

Leading by example may not directly affect the quality of other posts but it does help to counteract the hostility in comments and encourage respectful disagreements rather than flaming behavior.
Value of Information Exchange

There are many types of content shared in the comment forums of online news articles ranging from personal stories to opinions to facts with supporting sources. Those information-based aspects are referred to by Manosevitch and Walker (2009) as analytic criteria for deliberation. What they refer to as the social process of deliberation includes a more interactive aspect in which users discuss issues together and form back-and-forth exchanges of information. Those patterns of interaction, also discussed in the format section, make up a large part of this study’s comment sample.

According to research, one of the major motivations for commenters to contribute to online forums is the ability to engage in exchanges of information. As described in the speech act inventory, information exchanges can include both requests for information or sources, responses to those requests, or unsolicited offerings of information for others to consider and to discuss together. Those interactions can be seen throughout the forums that make up this study’s sample, especially in the tendency for users to ask and answer questions of each other. The following user, who finds the article helpful for her own life, asks for additional insight into a specific problem she is having:

Hacer: I love the end where you talk about approaching those who you hear calling others "sluts" with gentleness and patience. I am about to have a meeting with a co-worker who just called another colleague a "slut" to me, and ANY suggestions you have about messaging that [a]s clear and also somehow palatable for someone who thinks this kind of talk is acceptable, would be most appreciated.
(Hacer, 2013)

In that case the user is requesting help with her own issue, however, other instances of users asking questions of each other may do so in order to gain more knowledge,
information, or a better understanding of other views. In the following exchange, the user
“buster” asks another user about an opinion:

buster: Wait, so it's your opinion that a good case could be made that many white
Republicans if not most could be represented by Strom Thurmon? I don't
know why I've come to doubt your GOP bona fides.
AmosJones: A good many were, at least in South Carolina. He served as their
Senator
for 48 years, 34 of those as a Republican. I don't think he gathered many
black votes during that stretch. Who do you think was voting for him?
Being a Republican doesn't mean I should ignore history, does it?
buster: So now you're going to claim that you were talking about the literal
concept of 'representative'? That would contradict your own comment,
because by definition Thurmond represented "most" Republicans in South
Carolina, he won the primaries. There's no 'arguable' about it. It is a
peculiar Republican who obviously holds so much of their own party in
such obvious contempt. But if you want to continue pretending that you're
some sort of GOP voter who is just speaking truth to power, who am I to
gainsay you? Your comments will continue to speak for themselves.
AmosJones: Let's try again. I don't think it's even debatable that a great many
white
voters in the old South switched their allegiance from the Democrats to the
Republicans during the 1960's. What was formerly a solid voting block for
Democrats both statewide and nationally became a solid base for the
Republican Party beginning about 1960. Why? The Civil Rights
Movement and the Civil Rights legislation certainly played the main role,
but there were other cultural issues as well. Strom Thurmond represents
this in his breaking with the Democrats in 1964 as well as his subsequent
successful political career. Many Republicans supported the Civil Rights
legislation, by the way, and that support was needed to counterbalance the
opposition from Southern Democrats. LBJ believed that by signing that
legislation "we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long
time to come". He was right.
(AmosJones & Buster, 2013)

In that exchange, two users discuss and debate an issue and exchange their views. Other
exchanges, however, are made up of more than two people who collectively ask and
answer questions in discussing a topic. That concept exemplifies Dutwin’s (2002)
conclusions that deliberation can be a “group effort” (p. 182) and can be seen in the
following exchange:
splashy79: Sooo, the servants and other maintenance workers like sanitation will live where? Who is going to take care of the infrastructure, hygiene, and other basic necessities?

Kevin Schooler (to splashy79): They will live in Detroit and the surrounding area. Who do you think maintains and provide sanitation for Beverly Hills? Or upper west Manhattan? All the buildings and infrastructure that Belle Isle requires would be built by contractors, garbage collection and utilities would be "farmed out".

noodleman (to Kevin Schooler): Why don't the residents of Belle Isle take care of their own garbage and sewage? Or does Libertarianism automatically create an under-class, in the great tradition of "I got mine; screw you"? Why can't Belle Isle also be home to people who do some actual labor, or does Libertarianism force such people into ghettos -- outside the gated community?

Nick (to noodleman): Because most people who do actual labor are lucky if they can come up with $3,000 cash. $300,000? Not in their wildest dreams. What Lockwood appears to want is to create the world's largest gated community (pretentious 'e' and all!) and be able to import the people that will actually keep his little nation running from the US so he and his "libertarian" buds can point and say "See how well it works?".

(Nick, noodleman, Schooler & splashy79, 2013)

Using questions in information exchanges to gain a better understanding of another person’s views can also be seen in the exchange between the users “homosapiens” and “Muser,” which is already presented as an example in the format section of this results chapter on page 41. Those examples show instances of individuals participating in comment forums not just to vent frustration and personal opinions, but to gain information and points of view from other individuals and to provide others with knowledge that they have.

Another way users participate in exchanges of information is by offering others information to consider and discuss. That is often done without a request for the information, rather, the user provides it as relevant to the discussion and for the other user to know. The following example shows the end of a discussion between two commenters, in which there is a clear exchange of information:
rocky garner: You know a lot more about this than I do, so I'll concede the point to you, but didn't LBJ call black people by the n-word? I didn't think he was such a great guy. Honestly, I wasn't born until the mid 60s, so all of my memories of the time are from a very different perspective.

AmosJones: Robert Caro's biographies of LBJ are the gold standard on the subject. Of course they're four weighty volumes so you'd better have plenty of free time. I still haven't gotten to the fourth. Sure he used the N word, coming from his time and place it would have been remarkable had he not. He was a complex man, who helped bring about a fair amount of good, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, and a good deal of failure, Vietnam and the Great Society. On the civil rights side, PBS did a great documentary on the era called Eyes on the Prize, you might want to check that out, most libraries would have that. Interesting times, the Chinese curse.

rocky garner: How many? Who else could be compared to that guy?

(AmosJones & garner, 2013)

That exchange, which made up the last few posts in a string of back and forth discussion, shows the user “AmosJones” admitting to knowing less about a subject than another user. That user, “rocky garner,” responds by providing a recommendation of books and a documentary that “AmosJones” could use to learn more. On the forum of a different article, the user “sotto voce” responds to a comment by the user “Ron” to provide him with a relevant source of information saying, “Ron, visit www.opensecrets.org. It will help you connect the dots” (sotto voce, 2013). He then goes on to explain the website and the information it holds. “Ron,” who appears to appreciate the recommendation replies, “Thanks sotto. I checked it out and have a few comments for you.” He then lists his comments so that they can discuss the information together. Another user, who commented on thehill.com’s article “Landscape Shifts on Immigration,” provided quoted excerpts from the constitution for users to read and discuss. Those examples of constructive interaction show users are willing to go beyond arguing about who is right and use the space to discuss topics and exchange knowledge.
The attention paid to information and the value placed on information exchanges in comment sections suggests that commenters are not simply venting or dumping their own opinions and leaving, but are actually considering other commenters’ opinions and points of view. That can be seen in the following comment, another from “miasopapia,” which displays an example of respectful disagreement:

miasopapia: Yeah... In general your responses to my comments have been respectful with several valid points. I'm not going to say that some of the things you had to say here weren't compelling (your discussion of the initial spread of AIDS, STD risk function, etc.), but I'm also not going to say your answers were convincing since you used a lot of circular language and assumptions (e.g. "random conquest", "the flighty types"). Healthy, protected sex with many partners over time is very possible and doesn't necessarily have to be an indicator of emotional instability. … (miasopapia, 2013)

In that case, the user disagrees with the previous commenter’s statements but they do take what they say into consideration and acknowledge that they make some interesting and valid points. Another user, “Liz…,” considers another commenter’s views on rape. Though she disagrees overall, she also acknowledges points she agrees with and ends her post by saying “However, you do make a good point that anyone can be a victim. Maybe the author should have acknowledged this in a sentence or paragraph somewhere” (Liz…, 2013). That acknowledgement of other users’ points of view is an important indicator of deliberative discourse in comment threads.

“Ron,” who contributes multiple posts throughout one article’s comment forum and generally holds opposing views to those of the collective group, directly describes his appreciation for considering other views. He responds to a user who agrees with his comment but typically disagrees with what he says in the following exchange:

nickshaw: It sickens me to agree with you, somewhat.
But, most of us are big enough to cop to it.
Unfortunately, I don’t see much of that from your side.
Ron: Thanks nickshaw. I respect that. I try to do the same.
I need to hear the conservative slant on things to guide my decisions, in
real life, as well as the ballot box.
We all have similar concerns.
We all see things from our own point of view.
We all need to hear the other side.
(nickshaw & Ron, 2013)

In that comment, Ron shows that he values the comment thread as a space to gain more
understanding of opposing viewpoints and to see issues from different perspectives. He
also uses the words ‘thank you’ or ‘thanks’ six more times throughout that comment
forum. Two instances are in response to personal attacks on him (using sarcasm rather
than reflecting hostility) while the others show continued gratitude for well-thought
comments and appreciated information. Another commenter, “evensteve,” showed
appreciation for information exchanges by thanking the moderator: “To the moderator of
the comment section: Thanks for keeping the dialog open” (evensteve, 2013).
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The discourse that occurs in the life of an online comment forum is made up of many different types of content ranging from flaming and trolling to respectful discussion and information sharing. In its most chaotic and destructive state, comment forums are a breeding ground for frustration, hostility, and personal attacks. While this study acknowledges that level of discourse in comments, it also identifies the presence of more constructive discourse, which occurs among the chaos to form an aspect of public deliberation among users.

The fact that more than 75% of the comments included in this study were posted as responses to other comments suggests that online comment forums are not just used for people to blindly vent frustrations and opinions about what they read or believe. Many users appear to be paying attention to what others are saying and then responding to them accordingly.

While frustration and hostility in comments may be disruptive in some cases, many users generally tolerate the behavior and have adjusted to it by either ignoring it or, in some cases, attempting to correct it. That behavior supports an atmosphere of inclusion. The ability to include all voices is an important aspect of a civil voice and is vital for equality in deliberation. Although comment sections could hardly claim to include all voices, as not all the users who read the articles participate in commenting, it does provide an open space for those who wish to participate to do so, including those with opposing or inflammatory views.

Users who are able to look beyond the chaotic and hostile aspect of online comments may find there is an underlying level of public deliberation occurring between
participants. That layer provides an outlet for argumentation and information exchange in an informal conversational format. That interactive social behavior also provides the basis for public deliberation to occur.

Within those apparent social interactions between commenters, evidence of conversational argumentation can be observed including an attempt to discourage argument fallacies. The back-and-forth patterns of interaction are especially indicative of argumentation where users are able to ask questions and receive answers, or debate different viewpoints of an issue between two or more users. The information exchanges, which vary in length, complexity, and number of participants, contain instances of complex thoughts, sources, and a give and take of knowledge and opinions. Additionally, it seems some users are also considering other views and opinions, which is important to the deliberative process.

Though attention to detail and emphasis on clarity may seem unexpected in an atmosphere where spelling and grammar mistakes are regularly overlooked, cases where wording affects the meaning of a statement often result in commenters posting corrections and/or debating with others over the intended meaning of previous phrases. Also, if a user appears to have misunderstood another comment in their reply to it, it is common for others in the forum to correct their mistake or recommend the user reread the comment for clarity. That behavior suggests that at least some participants value clarity in ideas, even if the method of communicating them is informally written. It also suggests that many forum participants are interested in improving the overall quality of writing, both their own writing and the writing of others.
While there are many different theoretical definitions of “deliberation,” Dutwin’s use of rational/instrumental and communal/conversational frameworks describes the balance between theoretical expectations of deliberation and how people actually deliberate in real life (Dutwin, 2002). The real life deliberation that occurs in this study’s sample appears to match up with Dutwin’s newer framework. Like his description, deliberation in this study aligns more closely with the communal/conversational framework but also shows aspects of the rational/instrumental frameworks as well.

The rational/instrumental framework, which “remains largely a theoretical perspective with little empirical support (p. 23),” refers to the theoretical expectations for deliberation to create well-informed opinions toward public policy decisions through rational argument and informed reason-giving (Dutwin, 2002). It should also follow Habermasian ideals of a fair, open, and engaged process of communication (Dutwin, 2002). While comment forums may not fit the ideal version of deliberation through that framework, there is evidence of rational, well-informed arguments that are open to the public for participation.

The communal/conversational framework of deliberation, which was formulated by Dutwin (2002) as a more realistic expectation for deliberation in action, focuses more on civic conversation rather than knowledge in deliberation. It acknowledges that people, such as the participants in online comment forums, communicate about politics in terms of personal experiences and it views deliberation as a form of citizenship rather than political policy formation (Dutwin, 2002). The comment forums in this study provide a space for that type of community interaction where, instead of talking face to face with
other individuals gathered together, participants can read other users’ comments and respond with their own views, opinions, support, or arguments.

The conclusions of comment forums as a social space for interaction and deliberation between users is important to the future of online news because the feature is often criticized for its chaotic and inflammatory traits. This study, however, shows that there is also an underlying aspect of public deliberation taking place in comment threads that provides a constructive and appreciated space for discussing current events and communicating with other individuals. In that space users are able to express their views, consider other viewpoints (both agreeing and opposing), ask questions of others, and exchange information with other users. Administrators and moderators of comment sections may take that information into consideration when planning sorting, rating, and moderating features of comment threads that could further encourage deliberative behavior.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the most controversial features of online commenting is the relative anonymity of users who contribute information. Because of that anonymity, there is no easy way to contact all of the users about their posts. This study attempted to make educated guesses about the communication contained in comment threads by observing patterns of interactivity and social norms. These observations, combined with the content of posts, provided insight into themes of communication present. However, the limitation of being an outside observer could have still caused oversight of subtle social cues, interactions, and intended meanings. To avoid this limitation, further research and
interviews with the commenters themselves could be done about their own interpretations and meanings of their posts. The undertaking of contacting such a large number of anonymous individuals, however, would not be a feasible research task.

This study is also limited in that it selected three online news sources for collecting comment samples that have strong socio-political biases and that encourage interactive commenting. The selection was chosen to provide insight into possible and attainable circumstances for constructive commenting rather than providing an overview of how people comment in general. These results, however, may differ considerably from the results of another analysis, using the same protocol but using comments gathered from different news sites. In fact, the findings could vary if different threads were analyzed from those same three media sites.

Because this is an exploratory study, it provides a basis for further research that could be applied to many additional focuses of study. An expanded look into the deliberation that occurs in comment threads could analyze the types of comments that are more or less likely to spark ongoing threads of responses and discussions in comment forums. Other suggestions would be to observe how many and what types of different topics of conversation occur during the course of a comment thread, as this study focused only on the deliberative qualities and not on the specific topics themselves. Finally, an expansion on this study’s limitation could focus on the ways that an article’s content or host site affects the deliberativeness of the resulting comment threads.
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superduckz (2013, February 4). Obama takes gun debate on the road: ‘It’s time to do something’ [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from


### Overview of Sample Body

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article topic</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Threaded posts</th>
<th>Threads</th>
<th>Unique users</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Hell Isle&quot;</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>&quot;Rape Culture&quot;</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>114</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<td>&quot;Immigration&quot;</td>
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<td>200</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Decline of Unions&quot;</td>
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<td>195</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Black History Month&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>248*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Article titles were abbreviated to fit in table space. Full article names are "Hell Isle," "Ten Things to End Rape Culture," "Landscape Shifts on Immigration," Obama Takes Gun Debate on the Road: ‘It’s Time to do Something’" “The Decline of Unions," and "Against Black History Month."

*The total number of unique users was calculated per article. There were eight users who commented on more than one article and, therefor, the number of unique visitors in the total sample is 240.
APPENDIX B: INCIDENTS OF SPEECH ACTS

**Incidents of Speech Acts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act</th>
<th>No. incidents or threads</th>
<th>No. associated comments</th>
<th>Related theme(s)*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Attacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trolling</td>
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<td>Respectful Disagreement</td>
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<td>Hostile Disagreement</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constructive Criticism</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarifications and Corrections</td>
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<td>73</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2 and 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Exchanges</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment of Views/Considering Other Views</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcasm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Stories</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Incidents of speech acts include either single comments or threads of multiple comments, both counted as one incident. Associated comments also count individual comments within incident threads. Comments/threads were organized based on the most descriptive speech act. Though most comments fit into multiple categories, labeling was limited to the one or two most fitting for the incident.

* Representative numbers for each theme are:
  1) Tolerance for hostility
  2) Encouraging quality debate
  3) Value of information exchange
  4) Conversational writing style (In the format section of the results)