Normalizing Online Comments

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This study sought to understand the role of online comments—particularly uncivil ones—in journalists' routines. In-depth interviews with 34 journalists reveal they are becoming more comfortable with online comments and often engage with commenters to foster deliberative discussions or quell incivility. However, our data also suggest some journalists feel discomfort with engaging in this way for fear it breaches the journalistic norm of objectivity. Overall, findings suggest journalists are not ceding their gatekeeping role to the public through comments, but rather re-asserting it through moderating objectionable comments and engaging. In addition, findings suggest journalists are participating in "reciprocal journalism" by fostering mutually beneficial connections with the audience.

Introduction

The job of a journalist used to be fairly straightforward: reporters gathered facts and told stories; photographers took still pictures; videographers shot video; and editors put it all together. The digital revolution, of course, has changed much of that, leading to a world where reporters shoot pictures and edit video; photographers become videographers (Santana and Russial 2013); and many journalists tweet the latest news (e.g. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). Amid this convergence, online news sites opened their stories to user-generated comments (Hughey and Daniels 2013). Online commenting on news has grown significantly in recent years as the audience has embraced the chance to become content creators and post their opinions directly to news websites (Canter 2013). Some suggest these changes ceded control of the journalistic space that news practitioners once held to the general public, at least in part (Loke 2012; Mabweazara 2014; Santana 2016; Singer 2010). This may lead to a further "blurring of lines between professional and citizen" (Reese 2016, 3) as well as significantly reinventing the norms and routines that journalists follow in their news work.

This study draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with 34 professional journalists with direct experience with online commenting to understand the influence that user-generated comments—particularly those that are uncivil—have on the norms and routines of their jobs. To understand our data, we examine it through the lens of public deliberation, which suggests that open discussion has positive values for society and journalism (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). We also draw on gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a) to explore how commenting has disrupted—or reinforced—the journalists' traditional role of deciding what gets published and what does not. In addition, we employ the conceptual framework of professional normative constructs to examine how online commenting fits into journalists' traditional news work and whether it has been "normalized" to "fit—and sometimes augment—traditional professional norms and practices" (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Singer 2005, 174; see

also Singer 2007). Finally, Lewis, Holton, and Coddington's (2014) theorizing on reciprocal journalism, which situates journalists as community-builders who can foster engagement between the user and the journalist, informs our work.

While prior research has examined how journalists view online commenting, most focused on newspaper journalists only, examined smaller community newspapers in a particular geographic area, or relied on the observations of editors alone (Brost 2013; Hatcher and Currin-Percival 2016; Loke 2012; Mabweazara 2014; Meyer and Carey 2014; Santana 2011). Our study differs because it involves interviews with journalists from a variety of professional jobs, including television news stations, radio, traditional newspapers, and Web-only news publications in a wide geographic area. In addition, our main contribution is that we focus specifically on how journalists deal with incivility in online commenting. Only a few studies have focused on this topic (e.g. Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Meltzer 2015). Exploring how journalists respond to incivility in news comments is an important area for inquiry because incivility has been found to taint as many as 20 percent of comments (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014), and both the public and journalists report being concerned about uncivil comments (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Meltzer 2015). Our aim is to build on this foundation by exploring through the words and experiences of journalists what changes online comments—especially uncivil ones—have wrought for their news work and what that means for the future of journalism.

Literature Review

Online Commenting

The *Rocky Mountain News* in the western United States is credited with being one of the first online newspapers to offer same-page comments in 1998 (Santana 2011). By 2007, 33 percent of the top 100 newspapers with the highest circulation rates in the United States offered commenting on stories, and a year later that percentage had climbed to 75 percent (Santana 2011). Online comments have evolved into an important form of user-generated content that some argue is making the internet more of a "shared space" (Singer and Ashman 2009, 3), as commenting allows people to express themselves in collaborative ways not previously available (Reich 2011). In some ways comments mimic the traditional letters to the editor that newspapers have offered, but comments are more immediate, posted directly on the story to which they are related, and offer the potential for one or more responses (Bergström and Wadbring 2015). As such, commenting can offer a direct link between the media organization and its audience and, in the process, connect institutional and citizen voices (Rosenberry 2005; Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). This offers potential to create an audience-entered deliberative space for multiple discussions (Boczkowski 2005; Manosevitch and Walker 2009).

Comments as Deliberative Space

Some have touted the online space as offering "potential to revive the public sphere" (Papacharissi 2004, 259) through a diversity of voices in computer-mediated conversations, offering the give and take that is at the heart of deliberation. Deliberative disagreement is when people differ on a basic moral view but seek to see the other side and resolve the dispute (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). This deliberation is vital to the democratic

process because it allows the public to voice its opinions, and, in so doing, communicate to government and society as a whole what issues are important and valued (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). Gastil (2008) defines this deliberative process as one where individuals view themselves as part of a public discussion aimed at finding solutions, and where everyone is a potential source of information. Deliberative spaces must offer a respectful space for all participants (Gastil 2008), even though deliberation may include disagreement. Scholars suggest deliberation should include everyone, not just elites; involve a variety of voices; be rooted in reason; and promote consensus (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). Findings from a pilot study (Manosevitch and Walker 2009) suggest comments can manifest both the analytic and social processes necessary for public deliberation because comments allow people to gain and offer facts, raise questions, and converse with others. Another study found that comments at *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* websites demonstrated deliberation through respectful commenters who put forth a diversity of ideas, although these attributes were lacking in comments posted at other news sites they studied (Ruiz et al. 2011).

For journalists, this potential for deliberation in news story comment threads presents a challenge and an opportunity. Encouraging and fostering engagement in comment streams could be viewed as a continuation of a journalist's job of presenting facts and information by encouraging interaction with the audience. Engagement with the audience has proved a fundamental shift in journalists' work routines in the digital era (Nielsen 2012), as demonstrated by their tweets (Barnard 2014). Research also suggests that engagement can produce more deliberative comment spaces. For example, an experimental study (Stroud et al. 2015) found that if a recognizable reporter engaged in the comment stream, commenters were more civil and more likely to exhibit deliberative attributes, such as offering evidence rather than just opinion, in their comments. In fact, researchers have found that the way people comment conforms to the norms of the site, such that when civil comments dominate, other commenters are more likely to adopt that strategy (Sukumaran et al. 2011).

However, several studies of journalists' attitudes toward comment streams suggest they may not be embracing this engagement role. For example, in-depth interviews with 29 journalists in Zimbabwe found that journalists saw comment streams as spots of "unfettered" public deliberation (Mabweazara 2014, 52). However, they seldom engaged with the commenters despite this potential for deliberation because they felt joining in the conversation violated the "journalistic ethos of detachment and impartiality" (54). Loke's (2012, 236) interviews with 30 newspaper journalists produced comparable findings: "Journalists suddenly find themselves caught between the traditional responsibility of fostering public participation and the emerging frustration of losing control over the content on their space." Similarly, a survey of 435 reporters (Santana 2011) found that while journalists saw comment streams as a way for the audience to be heard, 80 percent of the sample reported they rarely or never responded to online reader comments. A survey of a representative sample of 1042 people reported that they were more likely to comment and engage in a news site if journalists responded to them on the site, but 77 editors questioned in same study had a dimmer view of sites with a large number of commenters (Meyer and Carey 2014). This suggests a lack of consensus between expectations of the audience and the journalists (Reader 2012). In addition, it suggests that journalists may not be fully realizing the deliberative value of comments. Based on this literature, we sought to understand whether journalists in our sample see the comments as a space for deliberation and whether they engage in that space.

RQ1: To what extent does the way journalists handle online comments reflect the principles of deliberative discussion?

Comments and Gatekeeping

One of the main concerns journalists, as well as scholars and the public at large, have identified in online comments is the frequent incivility. While most comments are civil (Papacharissi 2004), incivility—defined as mean-spirited remarks that attack with a disrespectful tone, profanity, or name-calling—has been found to mar as many as one in five comments (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014). Incivility in comments has been found to lead to negative emotions and escalating verbal aggression (e.g. Chen and Lu, forthcoming; Rösner, Winter, and Krämer 2016). Allowing anonymous commenting is a common shift on news sites from the traditional norm of requiring signed letters to the editor (Nielsen 2012), but it has been linked to greater incivility (Santana 2014). Requiring commenters to register, use real names (Ksiazek 2015), or verify their identities through Facebook or other social media accounts are efforts to increase civility (Meltzer 2015). For news sites, this "rampant incivility" (Santana 2014, 18) presents challenges for journalists as they navigate these digital spaces. Journalists worry the incivility may taint their news brand (Singer and Ashman 2009), present risks of libel (Brost 2013; Singer 2010), or alienate other audience members (Loke 2012). In interviews with 18 editors, reporters, and moderators at a California news site, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) found that journalists worried that their sources might be targeted with criticism or other types of attacks in comments, impeding their own abilities to tell stories with a variety of voices. A survey of 390 readers in the same study found that incivility or personal attacks in comments was a main reason people cited for not reading them (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011).

A survey of journalists about user-generated content suggests that commenting has shifted the traditional gatekeeping model of journalism, giving the audience more power (Singer 2010). Instead of journalists controlling the gates of information by deciding what news to cover and how to cover it (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a, 2009b), the public decides in online comments what to say and how to say it. This "secondary gatekeeping process" (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a, 7) provides an active audience that either shares the gatekeeping role with the journalists or takes it over completely. As Shoemaker and colleagues explain: "When readers communicate with other readers, they extend the usual gatekeeping process but their selections may not reflect the news values of the journalists who put the sites together" (Shoemaker et al. 2010, 55). This concern about sharing or ceding the gatekeeping role permeates across newer forms of media that journalists are embracing, such as social media and blogs (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Singer 2005). In some cases, journalists adjust these online forms to retain their gatekeeping function in interactive and participatory formats in a process Singer (2005) calls normalizing because it perpetuates normative professional news work. In her study of political journalism blogs, for example, she found that the bloggers offered little opportunity for the audience to provide input, keeping journalists firmly in control of the gates of information. In a more recent study, Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) found that journalists normalized their use of Twitter by refraining from expressing personal opinions, staying objective, and maintaining some form of a gatekeeping role. Studies of online commenting suggest journalists normalize comment streams by maintaining a gatekeeping role by monitoring and moderating comments, banning anonymous commenting, or shutting down commenting

completely (Brost 2013; Hatcher and Currin-Percival 2016; Ksiazek 2015; Loke 2012; Reader 2012). Journalists deal specifically with uncivil commenting by requiring that commenters link to their own Facebook, LinkedIn, or other social media profiles as a means to verify who they are, or news sites provide etiquette guides with hopes that will quell attacks (Meltzer 2015). Our interest is in building on this research. Therefore:

> **RQ2:** To what extent does the way journalists handle online comments reflect their traditional normative role as gatekeepers?

> **RQ3:** To what extent does the way journalists handle online comments reflect a normalizing role of commenting?

Commenting and "Reciprocal Journalism"

Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014, 229) extend the concept of reciprocity—which has long been considered a defining feature of forming online communities—to the realm of digital journalism in a concept they call "reciprocal journalism." They argue this reciprocity builds upon the notions of audience engagement and participation, which have become buzzwords in journalism but still face resistance from many journalists (Hermida 2011; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). Reciprocal journalism goes beyond those concepts by encouraging multiple forms of participation between the audience and the journalist that are mutually beneficial (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). Journalists who retweet a non-journalist on Twitter are engaging in a direct form of reciprocal journalism by establishing a habit of "responsiveness and mutual concern" (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 235) for the audience. In contrast, with indirect reciprocity, the journalist may use a hashtag that members of the audience are using, and this benefits all of them indirectly in a more generalized way. Our aim is to apply this theoretical concept to online commenting to understand if this type of reciprocity can play out between journalists and the audience in comment threads. Therefore:

> **RQ4:** To what extent does the way journalists handle online comments reflect the reciprocal role of interacting with the audience?

Method

This study qualitatively analyzes data from in-depth interviews. To find journalists to interview, we asked for referrals from colleagues as well as posted pleas on Twitter and Facebook, social media groups for journalists and journalism professors, and on listservs of journalism professors. In addition, we employed purposive snowball sampling (Welch 1975), where we asked each member of our target population that we encountered to identify potential interview subjects. Our final sample size is 34 journalists, with experience in the profession ranging from 1 to 40 years (mean = 16.69; SD = 12.45). Half the journalists are female and half are male. The majority are White (79.4 percent), followed by 14.7 percent Latino/Hispanic, 2.9 percent Black/African-American, and 2.9 percent biracial. The journalists are predominantly located in the United States, although one is in Spain and another in the United Kingdom. The US journalists came from nine states and the District of Columbia. Our aim is to interview journalists with a wide range of jobs, and our sample includes 20 reporters (some with editing duties as well), six editors, three people whose job is specifically to

engage readers online, one columnist, one television news anchor, one online publisher, and one news station director. Eighteen (52.9 percent) of the journalists are employed at traditional newspapers, but our sample also includes eight (23.5 percent) journalists at online-only publications, three (8.8 percent) television news journalists, two (5.8 percent) wire service reporters, two (5.8 percent) magazine writers, and one (2.9 percent) radio employee. All the journalists reported direct experience with commenting.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at our university granted approval for the project on January 29, 2016. After participants consented to the interviews on an online form, the two researchers contacted them for phone interviews, which were conducted from February 5 to March 10, 2016. The length of the interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes (mean = 20.68; SD = 8.19). The researchers posed a series of open-ended questions, asking about their typical routines reading or responding to online comments on their news sites or social media pages, their experiences with online comments generally and specifically regarding uncivil comments, and their methods for dealing with comments. In all cases, journalists were asked to discuss broadly their attitudes about commenting, regardless of whether the comments appear on their news website or news organization's Facebook, Twitter, or other social media pages. We employed McCracken's (1988, 9) long interview technique, which allows researchers to "step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves." Using this approach, researchers become like anthropologists, immersing themselves in the culture and norms of their subjects to gain understanding and meaning as they interpret the data (Cassell 1977; McCracken 1988). Questions were added in the flow of the interview when appropriate (McCracken 1988). Interviews were recorded and analyzed for recurring themes. In accordance with IRB approval, participants' names are not used.

The goal of this project is to gain factual information about how journalists handle online commenting as well as to develop an understanding of the challenges journalists face in dealing with commenting and explore the meaning this has for them, using an interpretivist paradigm (Brechin and Sidell 2000). As such, in our data we look for both discrete facts and commonalities in what the journalists are saying in an attempt to describe and relate the ways they construct meaning (Bogdan and Biklen 1992) of their own experiences with commenting. Through this process we search for both manifest meaning and "deeper more critical interpretations" (Kvale and Brinkman 2009, 207) in our data. We code our data into categories by grouping together interrelated ideas (Cresswell 1994), and go through this process multiple times, to gain more meaning and understanding. Finally, we aim to make sense of what the journalists are saying, using the context of theory.

Results

Three main themes surface in our data: "If We're in There, the Readers Are More Likely to Behave," which deals with observations from journalists who regularly engage with commenters; "I'm Not the Facebook Police," which focuses on journalists' concerns that engaging with commenters compromises their objectivity; and Normalizing Routines, which explains how journalists' news work has changed because of comment streams. The themes are discussed in detail below, as we explain which research question each answers.

"If We're in There, the Readers Are More Likely to Behave"

Two-thirds (66.7 percent) of journalists in our sample reported that they responded to commenters at least occasionally, and all suggested they aim for responses that would be

defined as deliberative, answering RQ1. For example, when possible, they try to be the first commenter, to set a civil tone for the conversation. This supports research that has found civility breeds civility on a news site (Sukumaran et al. 2011). They also provide links to resources or other stories, answer questions, request information from commenters, or provide extra information or quotes that did not fit in the original story. Modeling the norms of public deliberation (Gastil 2008; Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009; Stroud et al. 2015), they aimed to offer comments that are respectful of others and rooted in reason, not emotion. Several conceded it took some practice to distance themselves from harsh comments and not take them personally, and two journalists mentioned using humor or sarcasm to diffuse tense situations online. As a male 40-year veteran newspaper reporter noted: "I try to find a funny way to throw it back in their face. I think they like a response."

Overall, these proponents of responding to comments saw it as means to calm the comment streams or at least make the audience feel more a part of their websites and improve the quality of the sites. A male freelance journalist in Spain with 12 years' experience explained: "Comments are generally better if the journalists jump in there." Those who respond to comments saw it as their obligation, as a means to encourage audience engagement, to find future sources, and to increase traffic for their news sites. The goal to increase traffic was not directly related to incivility, but the journalists suggested a link between these ideas and outcomes. Journalists reported that they felt their audience would be more comfortable at sites that were not overrun by incivility, and, as a result, people would visit more frequently. They saw gaining traffic for their sites as part of their jobs, so limiting incivility was important to them. This supports prior research that has found that news consumers are uncomfortable at sites with frequent uncivil commenting (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). These journalists saw comments as part of the journalistic space, or the "broader deliberative arena to which journalism contributes" (Reese 2016, 3). As one journalist, a female social media engagement editor with 21 years' newspaper experience, expressed it: "People are part of the story to begin with. The story doesn't end when you finish writing it. You're selling yourself short if you don't get involved."

Many of these journalists acknowledged that engaging in comments was a shift in their traditional journalistic roles, but they saw this engagement as necessary in today's highly competitive drive to attract an audience. For some, commenting was codified as part of their job duties, and two journalists reported that it was required and linked to the size of their annual bonuses. One journalist, a female reporter at an online-only publication with one year's experience, noted that responding to commenters fosters a sense of community that may deter incivility and attract repeat readers. A few noted that they embraced the directive to comment more than their colleagues, suggesting that responding to comments has not been completely normalized within journalism. For example, a male newspaper reporter with 10 years' experience explained:

> In our newsroom, I have come to be seen as someone who pushes the envelope in interacting with commenters. I feel that is what readers expect in the modern journalism world … A lot of journalists are still very uncomfortable putting themselves out there like that. I don't think you can do that anymore. If you're going to have comments under your story, you have to engage there the best you can or I don't think you're doing your job.

Overall, commenters who worked for online-only publications were most likely to embrace the role of responding to comments. However, all journalists who reported

responding to comments conceded they are choosy about which commenters they engage with. They weighed whether responding would "make a difference," noted a male wire service reporter with 30 years' experience. A female newspaper reporter with eight years' experience explained the process she uses:

> I do jump in when I see that the problem or discussion might benefit from my comments as well. I don't do this all the time, but sometimes when I see that a simple misunderstanding is causing a lot of heated arguments, I like to clarify points.

For the most part, the journalists did not respond to uncivil comments unless they felt they could tactfully mollify the tension. "Don't usually respond to rude comments," said a male newspaper reporter with 18 months' experience. "But if the topic is dear to my heart, I point out the actual facts. Be kind about it and show them there are better ways to deal with things than being an asshole about it." Calming commenters' incivility without getting emotional oneself can be a "little bit of a high-wire act" one journalist acknowledged. However, another journalist noted that his mere presence in the comment stream pays off: "If we're in there, the readers are more likely to behave," he said.

Overall, the journalists who respond to comments felt responses to their engagement were generally positive. Journalists said that when they kindly redirected the conversation or even reminded a person that a comment violated the site's rules against incivility, most commenters stopped the behavior, although a few snarled back. If that happened, they would not continue to engage. "I'm not there to get into a flame war with anyone," explained a male newspaper reporter with 10 years' experience, "so I just say what I have to say and move on." However, the journalists worried the benefits diminished once they left the comment stream to attend to their many other tasks. "I'll engage the readers for a short amount of time, but I'm not going to sit there all day and engage the commenters," explained a male newspaper reporter with 35 years' experience. "Once I leave, I don't think it has any effect."

"*I'm Not the Facebook Police*"

A third (33.3 percent) of the sample strongly opposed responding to comments in any fashion. Some cited policies at their news organization that they felt prohibited them from engaging, but others were jaded by negative experiences when they tried to engage. One journalist, a freelance reporter with 10 years' experience, said she tried to respond to every comment on her stories when she was a rookie, but soon reversed her own policy because people lashed back at her with venom. She explained:

> I felt like it's great to be interacting with readers. And I think I was too young to think … I was green … I didn't realize you might want to be selective. Not everyone is going to love you … I decided it was not safe anymore to comment to the mean people … Do I want to go back and forth with someone who thinks I'm a crap reporter? … No, not really.

Similarly, a female reporter at an online-only publication with 20 years' experience said she tried to talk to people online and educate them about how journalism works. She retreated from that approach because "they just got angry; they just got mean." A female newspaper reporter with eight years' experience said she felt responding to comments fomented a "circular pattern of people being more entrenched." She continued: "It becomes a problem where it looks like you are either defending or promoting what you're writing."

The journalists who shunned responding to comments described comment threads as a public space, not a journalistic space. They viewed the comments as an open forum for readers to "engage and sound off," as a male newspaper reporter with 35 years' experience described it. Three journalists used a law-enforcement metaphor to explain why they should not be engaging in the comment streams. As a female television journalist with three years' experience explained:

> I'm not the Facebook police … Journalists aren't meant to make sure no one's feelings are hurt or to let them be civil online. You can't control that aspect of the commentary … Facebook is supposed to be an open forum. [To] take away that forum part is to take away your audience.

Similarly, a male newspaper journalist said: "I'm not a First Amendment cop. Mainly it's an open public forum … There's no reason for me to say, 'You got that wrong.'" A third journalist, a female with eight years in the business, also employed the police metaphor to explain her resistance to any type of engagement:

> I don't think it's the place of news organizations to police the conversation. It's think it's an incredibly arrogant way to think of it … I do think we shouldn't be adding to it by responding to people.

This theme, which answers RQ4, strongly suggests that these journalists did not embrace the idea of reciprocal journalism, which situates journalists as community-builders who can foster engagement between the user and the journalist (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). Instead, they saw their role as disseminators of information. Once that task was done, their job ended. The comments for them were not an extension of the story, but a separate entity where they did not belong. In addition, in answer to RQ2, these journalists seem to eschew their gatekeeping role, at least as it pertains to comments. Rather than assert control over the comments by responding to them and attempting to tame them, they saw the comments as a non-journalistic space where their attention was not appropriate. In our sample, journalists who worked for more traditional news organizations, such as newspapers and television stations, were least likely to feel comfortable engaging.

A strong sub-theme that surfaced within this theme was a concern that responding to commenters would jeopardize journalists' norm of objectivity, particularly among journalists who worked for more traditional news organizations, such as newspapers and television and radio stations. In answer to RQ3, this suggests that even in this newer format, journalists were retaining the routines of their prior news work (Singer 2005, 2007). A female radio journalist with 30 years' experience said sometimes she really wanted to comment, but she worried doing so would damage her credibility with the audience, make her appear biased, or harm her ability to do her job. "I have a job and a reputation," she continued. "I don't want to jeopardize that." A female newspaper reporter with eight years' experience noted she does not trust herself to respond in a way that does not come across as defensive, and she worried even thanking readers for a comment could be perceived as a breach in her objectivity. She explained:

> As a journalist, I think I need to publicly remain impartial not only to what I'm covering or to my coverage. I'm hesitant to respond to both positive and negative feedback. I just wonder if that's an attempt to manipulate my future coverage.

A female social media editor with 20 years' experience said she was often frustrated by her reporters' reluctance to engage with commenters. She said they saw it as unethical to respond to any comment because they saw it as becoming part of the story. She suggested reporters should leave responding to uncivil comments to editors but should be regularly engaging with readers when the tone is civil. She faces resistance:

> It's not the older reporters who find it challenging to engage … I still find the younger reporters have a standoffish take on what they should do. They struggle to interact with people. They feel like they're crossing some line they shouldn't … You're just really shooting yourself in the foot so many times. Social media is kind of like the new backyard fence … Now it's Facebook and Twitter and Snapchat and all that. That's how they communicate. That's where you need to be.

Normalizing Routines

A third theme that surfaces in our data shows that dealing with comments has become normalized (Singer 2005; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012) as part of a journalist's gatekeeping role and work routines, answering RQ2 and RQ3. While not all journalists in our sample respond to comments, as explained earlier, all reported that they read comments on stories, at least occasionally. Some set aside a specific amount of time to deal with comments, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours daily. Most of the journalists did not have a set schedule but checked comments whenever they got a chance. A female television reporter and anchor with 13 years' experience said she would check comments on social media seven or eight times a day, even though she did not really have time to do this: "It's part of the job." For some, comments were so frequent that they saw no way to read them all. "Even if I set aside 30 minutes of my day, going through posts, I would never get through a third of the posts, not even half," explained a female television journalist with three years' experience. Similarly, a female at an online-only publication with 30 years' experience, said she would check comments every couple of hours and has a notification set up to alert her when a comment is posted. Sometimes it feels overwhelming, she said: "If there is a ton of comments, I won't sit there and spend the time to read every single one until the end of the day, [but] it's a regular thing I do." Again, dealing with online commenting was most normalized among journalists who worked for Web-only publications.

Journalists in our sample offered varied responses in regard to moderating, hiding, or deleting offensive comments posted on their news organizations' website or social media pages or even banning people from commenting. Some news organizations did not allow reporters to handles these duties, while others encouraged it. For example, two of the reporters in our sample noted they could flag comments, but a third party had to actually remove them. Sometimes that process took minutes, but it could take as long as an hour if "the person moderating is too busy or out to lunch," said a male newspaper reporter with 35 years' experience. He wished he could just remove the offending comment himself. This suggests a desire to extend the traditional gatekeeping role (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a, 2009b) to the comment stream, as a means to control the conversation (Santana 2016) and decide what gets published and what does not (Singer 2010, 2007).

Guidelines for when to delete or hide a comment varied, although in general the journalists in our sample reported that some action would be taken against comments that contain profanity; personal attacks or threats; racist, sexist, or bigoted remarks; or "really callous things like making fun of someone who died," as one journalist explained. But

she would not delete comments if people were just arguing with each other: "There is the First Amendment. You have a right to say you don't like someone, or they're ugly. Those would probably be left up," said the 20-year veteran journalist who works at an online-only publication. A male social media newspaper editor with three years' experience expressed a comparable strategy: "You can call someone ignorant, but if you call someone stupid and use a curse word, we're going to delete it." A female television journalist with three years' experience said she tended to hide comments on the station's Facebook page, rather than delete them, to head off escalating incivility before it starts. For a post with 200 comments, she might hide as many as half of them, she said. "I can see where it's about to get ugly, but it's not ugly there yet," she explained. A television reporter and anchor with 13 years' experience had a similar approach. She said she hides comments that she knows will spark an argument. "If somebody starts calling [US President] Obama the anti-Christ … a lot of times I'll hide that," she said.

For the most part, journalists said banning a user was reserved for repeated incivility or a very serious one-time threat, such as to kill someone or to commit a terrorist attack. Two of the journalists said they retain a screen shot of the comment that got a person banned, so if the person complains, they have proof. A male journalist at a Web-only publication with 25 years' experience said he does not usually engage with commenters, but he will explain to them why a comment was taken down and invite them to repost something more civil. Two of the journalists said banned users could ask to be restored after a time period. However, one journalist, a female with one year's experience, said her online-only publication gives her an additional tool to figure out whom to ban. Comments from new commenters on her site are grayed out until the person gets approved. She and other employees can check the commenter's history on other news sites networked with her site, so they can assess if the commenter should be approved. "If they have a history of picking fights with our users or just saying terrible things, I can go into their comment history and see what else they have said and see if they are a troll and block them," she said.

The majority of the journalists in our sample supported some form of moderation, except one. This journalist, a female newspaper reporter with eight years' experience, said her newspaper allows her to remove comments, but she never does. She believes all comments should be left up, no matter how incendiary or profanity-laden they are, so other commenters could see the trolls for who they are. She explained:

> By censoring it, we're actually doing that. We're making them bad. If you just ignore it, you take all the power from the word. By making a big deal, you give it power … They are trolling to get attention. You ignore them; they'll go away. Or it won't become the all-controlling issue.

Her comments suggest she shuns a gatekeeping role, viewing comment streams as a non-journalistic space where journalists should not intervene. However, her response was not typical. Overall, journalists in our sample reported seeing it as part of their jobs to at least read comments, even if they felt uncomfortable responding, suggesting strong support for the idea that comments have been normalized into journalists' routines.

A majority of our sample expressed some degree of comfort with engaging with commenters and embracing reciprocal journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). This tendency was more pronounced with those who worked at online-only publications. Those employed at more traditional news outlets, such as newspapers or radio and television stations, were more likely to eschew engaging with commenters, seeing it as a breach

of their objectivity. All the journalists who reported engaging with commenters aimed to do so deliberatively, by promoting rational discussions. Our data suggest strongly that the gatekeeping role of journalists has shifted. Certainly, news consumers have gained more power to create content through commenting, but journalists are also embracing their new role as gatekeepers by managing those online conversations. As prior research has suggested (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Meltzer 2015), journalists in our sample were markedly concerned about facing incivility in comments but they were adapting their gate-keeping role to manage that issue, and they were attempting to prevent incivility by being deliberative in their own comments. This suggests that commenting—and particularly uncivil comments—have shifted journalistic routines, but in general journalists are evolving their news work in an attempt to keep up with this change.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study drew on in-depth interviews with 34 professional journalists to understand how they handle online commenting, particularly uncivil comments. We seek to under-stand through the journalists' words how their handling of commenting relates to fostering deliberative discussions online (Gastil 2008; Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009; Stroud et al. 2015) and perpetuates reciprocity as they interact with the audience (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). We also aim to explore how commenting relates to journalists' traditional role as gatekeepers of information (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a, 2009b; Singer 2010), and whether journalists have normalized (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Singer 2005) reading and responding to comments into their regular news work.

Overall, our findings show a shift toward journalists embracing commenting and seeing reading comments and responding to them as an essential part of their job, although a third of the sample did not feel this way. This differs from findings of earlier studies that demonstrated a more negative view of online commenting (e.g. Canter 2013; Santana 2011). For example, Nielsen's (2012) survey of 647 journalists at 36 news organizations found most did not read comments, although they thought the audience should have a right to post them. Similarly, Mabweazara (2014, 44) found that journalists viewed comments as posing "serious threats to the core value of news as well as the nor-mative ideals of traditional journalism." The journalists in our sample seemed more open to both reading comments and responding to them, which may suggest that the role of com-menting is becoming more normalized into journalistic routines. It also may be an artifact of our sample, which includes journalists at online-only publications where reader interaction may be more highly valued than at traditional news outlets, such as newspapers and radio and television stations. In particular, journalists in our sample at online-only publications were most open to changing their journalistic routines to deal with comments, particularly uncivil ones, compared to those employed at more traditional news outlets. It also suggests that all journalists are feeling some pressure to adjust to this new world of reader inter-action and to normalize reading, responding to, and engaging with readers. However, our data also show resistance to this transition, mirroring prior research (e.g. Hermida 2011; Loke 2012). A third of our sample reported that they never respond to comments, mainly because they feel it is not their job and may actually breach their objectivity as jour-nalists. The bulk of these journalists were employed at more traditional outlets. For these journalists, the comment stream is a public space, not a journalistic space, where they feel they do not belong. Or they may see the commenting space as "merely 'on loan to

readers'" (Loke 2012, 237), so their engagement is inappropriate. In addition, our data offer ample evidence that journalists are troubled by incivility in commenting, as prior research has found (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Meltzer 2015), even if not all of them see it as their task to fix this problem.

Clearly, our study offers some evidence of reciprocal journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014), as most of our journalists saw it as their job to establish a connection with the audience and build on that trust over time. Many saw responding to comments tactfully as a means to do that, although even those who do not respond acknowledged that fostering relationships with the audience was part of their jobs. In fact, they worried that responding to comments might harm their relationships with the audience, while those who do respond to comments saw that as a means to build trust with the audience. At the same time, journalists expressed a palpable tension over how they should assert their gatekeeping role in today's commenting environment. Some saw it as their job to keep a strong handle on online comments, flagging, hiding, or deleting any marred by incivility. This mimics the journalists' traditional role as the keeper of the gates of information (Shoemaker and Vos 2009a, 2009b) and mirrors Singer's (2010) finding that journalists saw maintaining high-quality user-generated content as part of their gatekeeping role. This suggests a normalizing of comments as the journalistic norm of gatekeeping is transferred to this newer form of media, such as has occurred in blogging (Singer 2005) and social media (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). Yet, other journalists, citing the journalistic norm of objectivity, eschewed this gatekeeping role and saw monitoring or removing comments as outside the journalistic norms, as demonstrated by our "I'm not the Facebook police" theme. Instead of seeing controlling the commenting conversation as gatekeeping, these journalists saw the commenting threads as outside the journalistic space. In essence, for them gatekeeping is defined very traditionally, as deciding what goes in a story, but commenting is outside that sphere. In our sample, journalists who worked for more traditional news organizations, such as newspapers and radio and television stations, were more likely to resist the change in their role as gatekeepers.

Finally, our data also suggest that journalists put a lot of thought into how to make the commenting threads a deliberative space where important issues are raised and discussed. They used strategies of deliberative discourse (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009; Stroud et al. 2015), such as asking questions, providing facts, or being the first to start the conversation to steer the discussion toward a higher-quality debate. This suggests that journalists can play a role in making the comment streams a type of "land of middle democracy" (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 252) where citizens can come together to discuss the important topics of the day (Boczkowski 2005; Manosevitch and Walker 2009). However, our data also suggest tension in this regard. Some journalists felt overwhelmed by trying to maintain a civil discussion, so they did not try or gave up quickly. Others felt challenged to be able to maintain their own personal distance from acerbic comments, so they were cautious about engaging. In addition, some felt that even positive deliberation was outside the journalistic norms that require objectivity and keeping politics and personal opinions to oneself (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). With uncivil comments in particular, journalists expressed concern or even fear about how to engage without inciting more incivility. Similarly, many journalists tried to prevent incivility by quickly hiding provocative comments because dealing with incivility was so troublesome to them. More training of journalists in how to handle uncivil comments is clearly needed, based on our data.

Some limitations of this research should be noted. Because our study is qualitative, our sample is small and not representative. Our aim is to find meaning through our journalists' responses to open-ended questions, not make generalizable inferences. Future research should follow up with a quantitative survey to more fully understand how comments—particularly uncivil comments—have altered journalists' routines and what type of journalists are most likely to engage in comment streams. In addition, this study sought to broaden our understanding by including broadcast and online-only journalists in our sample, but more exploration in this area is needed. In particular, future studies should examine whether the expectations to engage in comment streams and to regulate or even quell incivility in these streams is greater for broadcast journalists, online-only, or newspaper journalists. This would confirm our finding that journalists at online-only publications were most open to shifts in their journalistic routines in regard to engaging with commenters.

Our data suggest strongly that even those journalists who want to engage in comment streams and diffuse incivility need help knowing what to say. Future research should examine what specific types of speech are most useful to journalists as they manage comment streams and engage. Finally, a fruitful area for future research should consider how gender and race factor into online commenting. Prior research has found that women, people of color, and others from disenfranchised groups (Chess and Shaw 2015; Cole 2015; Rodino-Colocino 2014) may face a greater likelihood of confronting targeted attacks online, but this has not been explored fully among journalists. Future research should address this topic.

But, in summary, our findings clearly show that journalists are adapting to and embracing at least tentatively reciprocal journalism and attempting to foster more deliberative discussions online. At the same time, reading and responding to comments is becoming normalized, while journalists have translated their gatekeeping role in many ways to the comment streams, seeing it as their job to keep the space civil and interesting. In particular, many journalists are strongly concerned about uncivil commenting and are making attempts to control it through both engagement and moderation, but they need greater direction on how best to do that.

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