EFFECTS OF ANONYMITY ON ONLINE NEWS COMMENTING

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By
Tom Greene
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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

[Signature]
Thesis or Project Director

[Signature]
Faculty Mentor

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
Abstract

The freedoms afforded by the internet give voice to people who might not have previously been heard; democracy is enriched with the increase of platforms for the voiceless. Cultural critic Neil Postman (1992) theorized on what is gained and lost when new technology is introduced into culture, and while more people might be empowered by commenting on journalistic writing, they are not held to the standards traditional journalists follow. This thesis explores the effects of anonymity on online journalistic commentary and examines the quality of online dialogue with respect to anonymity. This qualitative research includes interviews with three participants who have working knowledge of both anonymous and identity-linked newspaper commenting. A multiple case study employed an interview protocol with seven open-ended questions. Transcriptions from the interviews were coded, analyzed, and distilled into themes. Each of the emergent themes was explored along with discussion on how news organizations can apply that knowledge in their day-to-day operations. The findings reinforced the argument that online anonymity empowers free speech, but the loss in civility might come at too great a price. It also suggests that online dialogue can be relocated from news websites to social media platforms and the quality of comments would not be drastically reduced.

Keywords: Anonymity; Journalism; Anonymous Posting; Online; Commenting; Identity; Computer-mediated Communication; Troll
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The landscape of communication in the media has changed drastically in the last decade. Because of the Internet, instead of a one-channel model with a sender and a receiver, mass media communication has increasingly become a two-way street where users are allowed to make comments and return information. Online newspapers, news sites such as CNN, blogs, YouTube, and some forms of social media like Reddit, offer users the ability to post their opinions anonymously. For unmoderated forums, this can devolve into a cesspool of racism, aggression, and bullying. People are emboldened by masks of online anonymity to communicate thoughts they would not and, oftentimes, should not, say in public.

Still, moderated forums that offer their users anonymity can be useful. For some communities, anonymous blogs can give people an outlet that might not be available unless their identities are hidden. Politics are polarizing and it is naïve to think that every view can be expressed without some repercussions. Anonymity, correctly used, can be empowering.

In addition to damaging the product by association, anonymous comments following articles can potentially open newspapers up to libel litigation. Some larger newspapers have dedicated full-time staff members to monitor their blogs and article comments. Smaller newspapers do not have this luxury and tend to their online comments as needed. This method increases the likelihood for profane and/or libelous material to slip through filters and post before newspaper staff members have an opportunity to remove them.

Online anonymous comments, unmonitored to at least some degree, have an increased tendency to become irrational. By coding thousands of newspaper articles to measure for civility, Santana (2014) wrote that 53 percent of anonymous online comments include racism and/or
profanity, compared to 29 percent on sites that link identity. For online newspapers, anonymity and linked-identities present a give-and-take condition: Anonymity can both enrich the level of discourse and degrade it.

“Proponents of keeping anonymity in the comment boards have argued that requiring a real-name login decreases the quantity of the comments,” Santana (2014) wrote. “Opinions and engagement on topics are also presumed to be watered down or less substantive when a person’s identity is intact” (pp. 87-88).

**Importance of the Study**

People can be creative with their cruelty. The nastiness of some comments juxtaposed with articles can change the nature of the experience, leaving the reader with a bad taste in their mouth after reading a benign bake sale story. Online products require some degree of moderation, whether it is a paid service that that automatically removes profanity, but leaves the rest of the comment intact, or, a system that requires commenters link their profiles to a Facebook account in addition to regular monitoring by trained employees. Highly moderated commenting systems cost more money.

Newspapers in the U.S. have seen dramatic cutbacks in the last decade. Readers switching from paper to online products (with cheaper advertising rates), the loss of classified revenue to sites such as “Craigslist,” the dilution of the marketplace to more available options, and an aging readership have all contributed to razor-thin profit margins for newspapers. Yet, while newspapers are cutting staffs, there has increasingly been the need for newspaper personnel dedicated to monitoring their online product.
Faced with declining profits, it is beneficial for online news organizations to understand which methods of commenting are the most cost-effective and beneficial or if commenting should not be allowed at all.

In addition to damaging the product by association, anonymous comments following articles can potentially open newspapers up to libel litigation. Some larger newspapers have dedicated full-time staff members to monitor their blogs and article comments. Smaller newspapers do not have this luxury and tend to their online comments as needed. This method increases the likelihood for profane and/or libelous material to slip through filters and post before newspaper staff members have an opportunity to remove them. Understanding the effect anonymity has on online news products can aid in protecting news organizations from lawsuits as well as having a better sense of where to dedicate resources.

Online commenting is still in its early stages of development. Topical headlines at the time this paper was written highlight the importance of understanding this new tool as Russian trolls have been implicated in attempts to utilize anonymous online commenting to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Free and open forums for speech unhindered by the interference of foreign interests is the foundation of democracy.

**Statement of Purpose**

This paper explores the effects of anonymity on online commentary for news organizations and questions whether the quality of online dialogue is enriched through anonymity or the level of discourse is lowered by it. Some commenters use anonymity as something to hide behind and lob bombs that disrupts dialogue and meaningful debate. Others find anonymity a legitimate vehicle for expressing dissenting thoughts that might earn repercussions at their job or even garner physical threats. News organizations with online
products struggle with the balancing act of providing a forum for anonymous commenters unsure of whether the vitriol that accompanies it is worth the higher level of interaction afforded to their readers. This study examines these issues, with particular attention paid to how news organizations can apply this knowledge in a practical manner.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

The following terms and definitions will be used in this study. These definitions should give the reader a better understanding of how these terms are being used:

- **Anonymous commenting profile**: A profile created online that is used to make comments on articles, press releases, stories, etc. that does not have identifying traits.

- **Blog**: An online journal or repository for news that is typically interactive and allows for commenting.

- **Commenter**: An individual who posts content online following a news article or story.

- **Comment or Post**: Content created by a user that follows a news story or article. Comments can be either anonymous or identity-linked.

- **Facebook**: A social networking website.

- **Identity-linked commenting profile**: A profile created online that is used to make comments on articles, press releases, stories, etc. that is linked to an identity. This is typically created through Facebook. While identities can be faked, fake identities are against Facebook policy and are removed if discovered.

- **Moderate**: The act of a person whose responsibility it is to monitor online comments and, if necessary, remove those that are offensive or libelous.
Troll: A person who intentionally antagonizes others online by posting comments that are offensive, derogatory, and disruptive to healthy discourse.

Twitter: A social media website.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 offers a review of literature that pertains to the subject of the effects of commenting – both anonymous and identity-linked. The use of today’s tools of mass communication that are utilized by journalists to form an interactive relationship with the public is a fairly new phenomenon; Chapter 2 will explore the literature from previous studies relevant to this topic. Chapter 3 details the scope of the study and explains why the qualitative method was employed. Chapter 4 includes the results of the study and interviews along with an analysis of the themes that emerged. The final chapter, Chapter 5, is an in-depth discussion of the ramifications of the study, its limitations, and what further research could be done to advance understanding of this subject.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

And I could say, if we had the time, (although you know it well enough) what Jesus, Isaiah, Mohammad, Spinoza, and Shakespeare told us. It is all the same: There is no escaping from ourselves. The human dilemma is as it has always been, and it is a delusion to believe that the technological changes of our era have rendered irrelevant the wisdom of the ages and the sages.

-Neil Postman, speech in Denver, March 27, 1998

It can be argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) serves to democratize today’s press, which is often controlled by massive media conglomerates. Or, it can be argued that this form of opinion-making and mass communication deteriorates the quality of public discourse by giving anyone with an Internet connection the ability to reach large audiences with their personal opinions regardless of their qualifications, biases, or agenda. Postman (1992), a media theorist and cultural critic, focused on this topic – what is gained and what is lost with different mediums or forms of CMC, which is the philosophical foundation of this paper. As communication evolves and enters new territory, it is important to note that not everyone is being swept up in this wave. Today’s tools of mass communication -- specifically modern journalistic tools such as blogs and article comments -- are not being utilized equally by everyone.

Taking a cue from Oliver Wendell Holmes when he defined law as “what the courts say it is” (p. 12) in his book “How to Watch TV News,” Neil Postman (1992) defined news as “what news directors and journalists say it is.” We let others tell us when enough of the story has been
covered or even that all the appropriate stories and events have been covered. These decisions have been left up to those in broadcast or print news media. In “From Cronkite to Colbert,” news is defined as “a journalism of information and accuracy, integrity and objectivity” (Baym, 2010, p.24). These are the ideals that most journalists strive for.

Journalism is one of only three professions explicitly protected in the U.S. Constitution. In its preamble, the Society of Professional Journalists declared that its members “believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues” (SPJ.org, 2012). The U.S. has relied on dedicated professionals to provide us with the news of the day since this country’s origins. The profession is far from perfect, but it is a system that has worked for hundreds of years and is essential for a healthy democracy.

Still, alternative news sources have found fertile ground for seemingly opposite reasons. In the U.S., the distrust of traditional news organizations has reached its lowest point in two decades (Pew, 2009), encouraging the public to look for new sources. According to Domingo and Heinonen (2008):

In the United States particularly, one important driving force has been discontent with the performance of journalism by the established media. It has been pointed out that journalism has distanced itself from civic society in its pursuit of nonpartisanship. The profession has come to see its niche as connected to the often-misunderstood concept of objectivity, which refers not to the absence of personal bias but rather to journalistic method. Instead of being the fellow citizens of their readers, journalists (pre)tend to act
like non-committed observers. The result has been that journalism is, from the point of view of the public, an institution somewhere out there with no real ties to its constituency. (p. 5)

Some forms of CMC, such as article comments and blogs, can be seen as journalism with a human touch – something that not only gives the facts, but provides the otherwise absent narrative that makes a human connection available. CMC, at times, is created by people involved in an event. This is contradictory to traditional journalism in which stories are covered by the journalist who, ideally, observes and reports events from the sidelines. “Weblogs threaten to expose journalism at one of its weakest points – its lack of personal contact with readers” (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008, p. 12). Article comments and blogs demand discourse and debate more thoroughly than traditional media. CMC can come from sources outside of traditional journalism, but oftentimes link, connect, or cover stories written or reported in the mainstream media:

Citizen blogs challenge journalism from the outside, without any of the constraints of the media institution, and media blogs transform journalism from the inside, which is relevant to understanding how professional newsrooms are ‘normalizing’ the new genre and embedding it in their production logics. (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008, p. 7)

**Theoretical Basis**

Ultimately, like Postman’s trade-off, there are good and bad aspects to CMC. While CMC has altered the way people send and receive “news,” it has not changed the fact that people still need to be discerning about the information they receive. This problem is nothing new. The need for a discerning audience is not restricted to just CMC; it’s been necessary for newspapers since their creation and, maybe, now more than ever. On the Internet, the reader must be their own...
own editor and fact-checker. The reader has to ascertain if the internal logic of a CMC post holds up, or if there are holes in the story – the reader must ask themselves what pertinent information is being omitted as well as question the author’s background. Keeping a sharp eye out for sourcing can also aid a reader in testing the reliability of a post. If the information is thinly sourced, or if no attribution is given at all, the post’s reliability is questionable. It needs to come from a credible eyewitness, with several sources that can be verified, or it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Audiences must recognize that the level of accountability for computer-mediated communicators is, oftentimes, zero, while newspapers and professional journalists typically have agreed-upon standards. Newspapers and journalists have codes of ethics and ombudsmen. They traditionally have readers who demand unbiased reporting or, at least, an attempt at unbiased reporting. While some news organizations have tarnished traditional journalism in recent years with blatant partisanship, the public awareness of the differences between credible news sources and Internet cowboys is vital.

Newspapers should, for a start, get out of the information business and into the knowledge business. I define knowledge as organized information – information that is embedded in some context; information that has a purpose, that leads one to seek further information. The problem to be solved in the 21st century is… how to transform information into knowledge, and how to transform knowledge into wisdom. If we can solve that… all the rest will take care of itself. (Postman, 2000, p.1)

Any way one looks at the topic, journalism is in a state of flux as it rides wave after wave of technological advances. “In our own time, we have consciously added to our language thousands of new words and phrases having to do with new technologies” (p.8). Technology in the last generation has gone from a color television in every home to one in every room, along
with stereos in every room, cell phones owned by each family member, and computers as a requirement for all professional jobs. The world exists on the Internet. As culture rapidly changes, it then becomes a question of what is being lost and what is being gained.

With new technologies, computer-mediated communicators “change what we mean by ‘knowing’ and ‘truth’; they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real” (Postman, 1992, p. 12). Postman’s warning here is never more evident than with the changes we have seen with CMC and journalism. “One significant change generates total change… A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything” (Postman, 1992, p. 18). When article comments are written well and are responsible, they can be a great source of information that one might not obtain in mainstream media; however, it is apparent that the reader must do their homework as well.

For democracy to continue, it is imperative that we have a strong journalistic community that functions as watchdogs. Journalism is the guardian of the people – the bedrock of democracy. There have been cutbacks at newspapers and CMC can help fill in that role in some ways. CMC can offer a platform for people who might be voiceless without it. But CMC also demands more responsibility and awareness from its readers. Here, it seems, is the trade-off: We are given more news sources, but those sources require more insight, judgment, and critical reasoning than before. Being a discerning receiver of news has, arguably, never been more important.

The Literature

Several studies have been conducted on the reasons why anonymity leads to uncivil behavior. Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) define the disinhibition effect as the phenomenon of
online, anonymous commenters displaying decreased inhibitions and increased self-disclosures compared to commenters whose identities are known. This is similar to a “strangers on a train” effect, in which a person will disclose more information with a stranger than with someone who is known to them since there is less risk and social constraints (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013, p. 283). Prevailing research supports a positive correlation between anonymity and self-disclosure, as cited by Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013).

Bloggers, however, are seemingly different. Many bloggers post material (like names and pictures) that make them identifiable, yet still post with high rates of self-disclosure. According to Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013), only 42 percent of bloggers self-censored themselves. This suggests that the disinhibition effect on blogs needs further investigation: Does increased self-disclosure raise the level of discourse?

Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) employed a quantitative content analysis to test the effects of anonymity on “amount, breadth, and depth of self-disclosure” in blogs (p. 287). A total of 243 bloggers were surveyed. These bloggers were a wide range of ages and races -- both male and female. Researchers visited each of the bloggers’ websites and coded them for amount, breadth, and depth of self-disclosure.

Research Question 1 tested the effects of “visual anonymity” on amount, breadth, and depth of self-disclosure. Researchers discovered that visual anonymity did, indeed, significantly contribute to the amount of self-disclosure (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013, p. 290).

Research Question 2 tested the effects of “discursive anonymity” on amount, breadth, and depth of self-disclosure. Researchers discovered that discursive anonymity did not contribute to
the amount of self-disclosure. Whether bloggers used their real names or not did not affect their amount of disclosure.

In a related study, Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, and Anthony (2010) investigated whether seeing negative comments about public service announcements on YouTube affected viewers’ evaluations of the PSAs. The Walther et al. (2010) study can be seen as an extension of Hollenbaugh and Everett’s (2013) work. Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) established that visual anonymity affects online bloggers’ amount of self-disclosure. Walther et al. (2010) demonstrated that anonymous comments, positive and negative, can affect how participants evaluate a PSA.

Walther et al. (2010) drew on the theory of social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model) for their study. The SIDE model explains the effects of anonymity and group identification. It is a counterpoint to deindividuation theory, which explains how people can become irrational in anonymous groups. The SIDE model, instead, suggests that people in anonymous groups can self-define themselves as members of an anonymous group and promote rational behavior due to that membership. Walther et al. (2010) conceded that the SIDE model has some deficiencies, such as the inability to study related, online interactions long-term -- comments, such as those on YouTube, come and go. The deindividuation theory posits that online, anonymous commenters are at increased risk of posting irrational comments. Coupled with Walther et al.’s (2010) work, this suggests that irrational comments do have undue influence on readers. Readers are also under pressure from influences such as those put forth by the “spiral of silence” theory.

According to Griffin (2006), people feel pressure to conceal their views when they believe they are in the minority and have an “extraordinary sensitivity” to information concerning their society in general (p. 372). Griffin cited the research of Elisabeth Noelle-
Neumann (1984), whose “spiral of silence” theory proposes that public opinion acts as a force that keeps people in line with technologies such as television hastening the spiral.

People have an innate ability to test the wind of public opinion and react accordingly to social change, Noelle-Neumann theorized (Griffin, 2006), and fear of isolation drives them to conform to majority opinions. Since some opinions can be exaggerated by influential media, a condition of “pluralistic ignorance” can take effect, in which public opinion is overestimated (Griffin, p. 374, 2006).

When the spiral of silence theory is coupled with the deindividuation theory – that people have a tendency to become irrational in anonymous groups (Walther et al., 2010) – a climate that runs counter to social norms can prevail. Behavior is less tempered by public opinion, yet sets the standards and acts as a force which promotes the spiral of silence.

Believing that civility in online comments is tied to anonymity, some news organizations have turned to Facebook as a way of keeping the discourse polite. Rowe (2014) analyzed content of discussion on politically sensitive and divisive issues on both the Washington Post website (anonymous) and the Washington Post Facebook page. This study found that political discussion on the Washington Post website was “significantly more likely to be uncivil than discussion of the same content on the Washington Post Facebook page” (Rowe, p. 121, 2014). In addition, this incivility was directed toward other commenters with a higher frequency on the website compared to the Facebook page.

Rowe (2014) also drew from the deindividuation theory and connected it to computer-mediated communication, suggesting that “this medium is liable to produce relatively self-centered and un-regulated behavior leading to more extreme, impulsive, and less socially
acceptable communicative behavior… This is because CMC lacks the vital social context cues necessary to regulate communicative behavior” (p. 124). Tracking this perceived incivility, news organizations “continue to focus their efforts on reducing or removing anonymity altogether from these sections, and increasing users’ sense of accountability when commenting” (Rowe, p. 125, 2014). One method of increasing accountability, Rowe noted (2014), is to only allow commenters to post comments through Facebook. Facebook users not only have their identities linked, but their entire community of online Facebook “friends” can view the comments in their Facebook “newsfeed,” which promotes any new activity.

While Rowe’s study did, in fact, find that Facebook-linked commenters were more civil than anonymous commenters, its findings were less pronounced than Santana’s 2014 study and its overall level of incivility to be lower. Of 369 uncivil comments on a news article concerning immigration, 65 percent were from anonymous commenters and 35 percent were from identity-linked commenters, according to Santana’s study (2014). Rowe found only 33 percent of the total comments from the Washington Post website and Facebook page to be coded as impolite.

Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012) studied the impact of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, on news consumption. The researchers took an online survey of 1,682 randomly selected Canadian adults who use the Internet. They found that 43 percent of Canadians who use social networking (such as Facebook) receive news on a daily basis from “friends” and family they follow on social networks. A smaller, but not insignificant number of respondents use Twitter to receive some news on a daily basis. “The results suggest that a significant number of social media users tend to rely on people around them to tell them what they need to know rather than relying solely on institutional media” (Hermida et al., p. 819,
In fact, 71 percent of social media users said that one of the main reasons they engage in sites like Facebook is to receive news (Hermida et al., 2012).

Hermida et al.’s (2012) research “suggests sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news” (p. 821). The work of Stassen (2010) corroborated these findings, with survey respondents finding value in social media as a method for disseminating news because “it is a source of story ideas and information; it provides feedback from users; it serves as a platform to promote the news organization and it helps build a community of users who feel connected to the news organization” (p. 13). The audience becomes more involved in the news-creation process, Stassen (2010) wrote, with online “friends” sharing an interconnectedness and buy-in to the news that they share with others. Other studies have made similar claims that social media leads to more engagement between a source and its readers (Criswell & Canty, 2014), levels the playing field for community newspapers (Greer and Yan, 2010), and provides an avenue to a hard-to-reach younger audience (Palser, 2011). Palser (2011) wrote “At news conferences, news and marketing managers fill rooms to learn how they can use Facebook and Twitter to grow and engage with audiences. They anxiously monitor their competitors’ fan bases, investing time and money to grow their own” (p. 58).

Significance/Rationale

Newspapers in the U.S. have seen dramatic cutbacks in the last decade (Lacy et al. 2012). Readers switching from paper to online products (with cheaper advertising rates), the loss of classified revenue to sites such as Craigslist, the dilution of the marketplace to more available options, and an aging readership have all contributed to razor-thin profit margins for newspapers – if they are in the black at all. Yet, while newspapers are cutting staff, there has increasingly been the need for extra newspaper personnel dedicated to monitoring their online product.
In addition to damaging the product by associating it with extreme and profane commentary, anonymous comments following articles can potentially open newspapers up to libel litigation. Some larger newspapers have dedicated full-time staff members to monitor their blogs and article comments. Smaller newspapers do not have this luxury and tend to their online comments as needed. This method increases the likelihood for profane and/or libelous material to slip through filters and post before newspaper staff members have an opportunity to remove them. So, newspapers have the choice of either making identity-linked accounts mandatory, which might result in a loss of quality of comments, or, risk anonymous comments that can spiral into unproductive discourse.

**Specific Purpose**

The news shared through social media such as Facebook and Twitter does have value; however, what is unknown is whether value is lost or gained when the source of the shared news is anonymous on identity-linked.

**Resource Question**

How does anonymity affect the interaction between readers and online newspaper publications?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

This study explores how anonymity affects the interaction between readers and online newspaper publications. This qualitative research will include interviews with three research participants who have intimate, working knowledge of online newspaper commenting both anonymous and identity-linked.

The breadth of work to be included in this study is broad and exploratory in nature: The three interviewees, though connected, will have unique, separate viewpoints regarding anonymity and online commenting. The scope of will build primarily on the work of Santana (2014), whose research established that anonymous, online comments are less civil than comments from posters who have their identities linked to their posts. This research will explore this issue further by attempting to discern the quality of online anonymous comments compared to identity-linked comments. It will investigate “quality” within the framework that the three individuals live and work in a community in which one party dominates the political landscape to such an extreme that those having dissenting opinions fear repercussions. In this environment, it will examine whether anonymity affects the quality of online comments if the anonymous commenters belong to a group that would be considered a “muted group,” in which Griffin (2006) defined as “mutedness” as “due to the lack of power which besets any group that occupies the low end of the totem pole” (p. 495).

Methodology of the Study

Qualitative research design methodology is preferred since it will allow the research to utilize multiple case studies, in which “the one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer
selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue...often the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 74).

Creswell (2013) wrote that the qualitative approach is useful in several instances that correlate to this study such as its ability to give nuanced, complex understanding of an issue when studying a group or population, to empower participants to share their stories, and to “hear silenced voices” (p. 40). Qualitative can be a superior method when trying to understand “context” of certain situations and “We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 40). “We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it—whether this context is their home, family, or work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 40).

There are several types of case studies available for this research including single instrumental case studies and intrinsic case studies, however; a multiple case study would best address this research issue, since it demands it be examined from different angles. “Often the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 74).

**Sample Selection**

Prior research, such as Santana’s (2014), focused on the civility of anonymous comments. This research will extend that focus to whether anonymity can foster quality, depth, and honesty in comments, particularly when anonymity provides a cloak that might be necessary in an environment that is potentially hostile to dissenting opinion. The three interview
participants all work and live in North Idaho, which is overwhelmingly conservative politically (Prentice, 2011). The three proposed case study interviews, the samples, were chosen with different perspectives, knowledge and experience in mind. Called a “purposeful sampling strategy” by Creswell (2013), “This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). The three samples include:

1) A newspaper editor in charge of guiding online discussion and commentary on news articles. This editor is the gatekeeper for the newspaper’s online product, which has used both anonymous commenting and identity-linked commenting.

2) A newspaper blogger/editor who ran a popular political blog in the area. This blogger moderated online discussion/debate for 14 years in politically polarized North Idaho. The blog commenters were anonymous.

3) An anonymous blog/article commenter. This anonymous commenter was heavily involved in online political discourse for more than a decade on the blogs and newspaper articles facilitated by the other two interviewees, among others.

Data Collection

Each interview will utilize an interview protocol, defined by Creswell (2013) as a form that is four to five pages in length with, in this case, five open-ended questions and space between questions to write responses to the interviewers’ comments. “The questions are a narrowing of the central question and subquestions in the research study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 133). Along with the five questions, the interview protocol will also contain time, date, place, names of interviewer and interviewee, position of interviewee, a brief description of the research project, and a note reminding interviewee to thank individual for participating and assure him or
her of confidentiality of responses, according to protocol established by Creswell (2013). The interviews will be audio-recorded and, ultimately, transcribed. Esterberg (2002) suggested transcribing as soon as possible following each interview. The transcriptions will be in as much detail as possible without altering speech to correct for grammar. The transcription will be the basis from which themes can be drawn from in post-interview data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell (2013) defined data analysis in qualitative research as consisting of “preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 148). For Esterberg (2002), the goal of qualitative analysis is to begin to “focus on the potential meanings of your data” (p. 158).

**Ethical Considerations**

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, anonymity and confidentiality will be of the utmost importance. Participants will be identified using pseudonyms and transcripts will be kept in a locked office. It is critical that none of the participants are put at risk because of the study. Possible repercussions in the workplace is one of the key elements of the study, which highlights the requirement that all participants remain anonymous throughout the process. The interviews will be conducted in private settings and detailed, signed consent from all participants will be required before the interview process begins.

Creswell stressed the importance of ensuring the interview accounts resonate with the participants and are accurate reflections of what they said (2013). Each participant will be
provided with a transcript of their interview after it is produced and all data related to their interview and the final research paper will be offered. They will be notified that they have the ability to quit the study at any time. Chapter Four contains detailed accounts of the interviews.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how anonymity affects the interaction between readers and online news sources. Newspapers and other online news sources treat online commenters differently, from allowing them to comment anonymously, to having them link their identity through means such as Facebook, or not allowing commenting on stories all together. Examining the experiences of different individuals, who have different agendas and backgrounds but related concerns is designed to shed light on anonymity in regards to online commenting.

This chapter presents the data from three interviews with individuals who have participated in online news commenting – both anonymous and identity-linked – in different capacities. Each individual was interviewed over a two-week period, using the Interview Guide provided in Appendix A. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded using the open coding method followed by the axial coding paradigm (Creswell, 2013). The coded data was condensed into themes for qualitative analysis. Background information for the interviewees is included here:

Steve

Steve has worked for several newspapers and, at the time of this study, was presently employed at a newspaper that allowed online, Facebook-linked commenting. He also worked several years as the public relations representative for an institution in the area being studied. What separated Steve from the other two interviewees was that he also had extensive experience as a prolific online commenter using an anonymous moniker on a prominent newspaper blog.

Jane

Jane was the city editor for a medium-sized newspaper in the study area. In addition to her traditional duties such as guiding/assigning articles and managing reporters, Jane was
charged with monitoring the online news product. In more than 10 years managing the newspaper’s online news, the newspaper allowed anonymous commenting for about eight years until the last two, when it required commenters to link their comments to a Facebook account.

**Francesca**

Francesca was, at the time of this writing, the director of the Communications and Marketing Department at a community college. Part of her department’s mission was community outreach in various forms, which included a Facebook page and a newsroom hosted on the college’s website. The newsroom was a landing page for article and press releases produced by the college. Francesca’s job duties also included monitoring local news sites for news related to the college. She came from a newspaper background early in her career when online newspaper commenting was beginning to become commonplace.

**Results of the Study**

In chapter 2, the following research question was posed based upon the literature review as provided:

**Resource Question:** How does anonymity affect interaction between readers and online publications?

Several relevant themes surfaced from the interviews, coding process, and data analysis. The themes extracted from the data include:

- Inhibition when identity-linked; empowerment through anonymity
- Benefits/drawbacks to organization
- Anonymity breeds uncivil discourse; identity-linked more civil
- Danger of linking identity
- Credibility
Social media as an alternative

Inhibition when Identity-linked: Empowerment Through Anonymity

All interviewees indicated that they had, at times, either felt personally inhibited from commenting openly when their identity was linked, or they had observed fewer comments that were more subdued when identity was required. Jane said the quantity of comments on articles at the newspaper where she worked was “far less,” when that organization transitioned from anonymous comments to an identity-linked system.

Furthermore, Steve added:

There were two different roles that I used online: One was anonymous and one was as the spokesperson. As the spokesperson, it was all very formal and buttoned up. Nothing edgy, just very by the book. It was what you would classify as, you know, the correct answers that PR people are supposed to give in any situation … As an anonymous commenter, however; that allowed me to engage members of the community, the online community, in ways that were pretty irreverent and confrontational and argumentative and to be more in-your-face, you might say.

As Steve’s online moniker became more active and known in the community, the confrontational nature of the character he created drew the ire of other readers of the blog, some of whom made an outing attempt. For Steve, whose media/public relations job required he be in the public eye, anonymity was the only method that would allow him to voice certain opinions that were contrarian:

So really, with the identity thing, I think it does play a role, an important role, to be able to protect free speech. I know a lot of people would disagree with that and say ‘If you're going to have an opinion about something, then you should stand behind it with your name.’ Well, what if you're worried about losing your job if you express an opinion, you know?
Francesca’s work also required work in the public sphere. She found online anonymity to be empowering in a tightly knit community where there could be consequences for dissenting opinions:

There is an element of benefit to authentic and transparent public discourse that may not be possible if we had to have our identities linked to what it was that we were saying. And I think that that is a critical component of society. We ought to be able to speak our opinions without any sort of repercussions…There are just so many different things that we could be tied to if our identity was linked to some of the opinions that we have. I do think that that's the impact -- that it's important to be able to have an avenue for that kind of discourse to take place.

**Benefits/Drawbacks to Organization: Financial, Reader Engagement, Tracking**

All of the interviewees had experience, at some point in their careers, of working for newspapers that allowed online commenting. Newspapers across the U.S. have experienced major cutbacks of staff and resources in the last 10 years as readership declines to the lowest levels since 1945 (Pew, 2017). Forced to do more with less and charged with finding ways to increase and retain readership, online news organizations have discovered several benefits to allowing commenting on articles. Jane, who currently manages a newspaper’s online product, pointed to readers being able to assume a more active role and the ability to track reader interest as advantages for a struggling industry. More website clicks mean more money. Jane continued:

The best part of [online commenting] is that it’s a way to engage with readers and that’s a really big part of what we do today in media. Not only does it attract people to your website and keep them on your site, because that’s actually what helps drive revenue for advertising, it keeps them on the site and increases the stickiness, which is the amount of time a person stays on one page. Also, it gives us a little bit of feedback about what people like or don’t like in stories, what’s interesting to people, what drives them to actually comment, what angers them, what excites them. It’s a very small portion of our overall readership, but it is a bit of an indicator for us and that’s helpful.
In his previous role as a public relations representative, Steve found value in having the ability to track how certain issues in the news could potentially harm his organization. In his role working at a newspaper, the financial benefits were more tangible:

The benefits are reader engagement. That increases page views and more people coming to the site, or to come back to see what somebody else said. And so, in the case of a blog or a story, we want to monitor those. From an organizational perspective, it helps to make sure that your story is not going sideways or you’re losing control of the narrative. It’s really important to be able to watch those things as far as what’s going on.

Jane stressed that the benefits do not necessarily outweigh the disadvantages. Monitoring online commenting is labor-intensive and dealing with “trolls” takes a toll:

So, in some ways, I think, it might be easier to not have commenting, but I do think it also serves a purpose where people are actually right on our homepage, with our stories, commenting in real time. So, it’s kind of a toss-up for me.

Anonymity Breeds Uncivil Discourse: Identity-Linked More Civil

Online “trolls” shaped the way all three interviewees approached online commenting. For the college where Francesca works, online trolls were the deciding factor in its decision not to allow commenting on articles and press releases posted in its newsroom. She continued, “I think that while there are advantages to anonymity, it seems that the disadvantage is more powerful in the sense that people can get pretty ugly really fast when they're allowed in an anonymous place.” Interaction with the public is still important to Francesca’s institution, though perhaps not to the same level as the public discourse that takes traditionally place on newspaper websites:

There are many, many times I've had personal experiences myself, even recently, where I feel the need to have the protection and the safety of anonymity. That being said, human nature kind of makes that, and the cruelty of that, and the unprofessionalism of that, be bigger than the advantages of what it is that we're talking about. And that's unfortunate.
While anonymity could be freeing for some, others were less productive. For example, Jane posited:

You know there are people who really just sit home all day and comment on everything and they have nothing good to say about anything. Half the time they’re just doing the whole devil's advocate thing and generally just trying to anger people. It’s just very uncomfortable and unpleasant and it makes people not want to be there.

Jane had the most experience dealing with online “trolls” from a monitoring standpoint and said anonymity can bring out the worst in people who are not held accountable for their words.

It was really interesting because I had, at one point, a school board member who was using an anonymous pseudonym and I didn’t know it was a school board member, but it was a nasty, nasty person who was just saying all kinds of horrible stuff about people. And he forgot that he had sent me an e-mail at some point from the e-mail address he used to set up this account. So, I actually tracked it and found that. Oh, I was really surprised that it was him.

Although Steve used an anonymous identity himself, he acknowledged that the lack of accountability made civil discourse a challenge. He said discussions could go “sideways” and off topic quickly if someone doesn’t have to take as much care in what they are saying. Francesca, on the other hand presented interesting points on the devolvement of civility with respect to anonymity:

I think that while there are advantages to anonymity, it seems that the disadvantage is more powerful in the sense that people can get pretty ugly really fast when they're allowed in an anonymous place… I think that if you are disrespectful in any way, if your comments are attacking, hurtful, if they do anything to affect your own reputation or are libelous in a sense -- that level of offense where you're tearing down somebody else and it becomes personal or inappropriate, in that vein -- that's what I've seen take place and is an element of anonymity.
**Danger of Linking Identity**

Steve and Francesca both made a point of highlighting how dangerous linking comments to identity can be. For some, perhaps at a minimum, it might be the difference between being hired at a new job or not, depending on how much of their online presence is searchable and controversial. For others, online death threats could not be taken lightly. Steve stated, “We live in a world where people do go crazy and shoot up workplaces and churches. So being fearful of this kind of threat is very real.” In addition to an attempt to have him fired by people upset over the comments he made using a fake identity, Steve said he ran into a threat at the national level by posting an unpopular opinion on his Twitter account, which was linked to his identity:

Well, immediately on Twitter, in the Twitterverse, I began receiving death threats and people that didn’t even know me were saying we’re going to come to North Idaho and find you and murder you. And that’s a scary thing. I remember at the time I deactivated my account for a few days because I was worried that these people might actually carry out that threat … It’s amazing the power of the written word on the human psyche and how people, otherwise normal rational human beings when face-to-face, suddenly they read things and write things and people lose their minds and I’ve experienced that. I’ve seen it.

**Credibility**

For Jane, credibility was a critical component to newspapers. For an organization that checks facts and sources every day, allowing anonymous commenters to post unchecked facts and outright lies on a newspaper’s website ran directly against Jane’s nature:

I have some personal experience with this because we, for many years, had an anonymous commenting section and we did require people to register but they could create a fake Gmail account, and they did, and would use pseudonyms that nobody knew who they were and would just kind of feel free to critique people and nobody knew where it was coming from. There's no credibility behind those comments … I just think it gives -- the commenting section, if you're going to have one -- having an identity linked to it
gives it a lot more credibility when people read it. Even if it is nasty, you know that this person is willing to stand up and say something really harsh or unpleasant (Jane).

Because of the lack of accountability, credibility, and quality, Jane said her newspaper would never return to an anonymous system.

**Social Media as an Alternative**

Using social media such as Facebook and Twitter has emerged as an alternative to the system that had previously become the norm: online commenting following individual news articles that were either anonymous or identity-linked. On this note, Francesca stated:

So, the online newsroom that I just described to you, that is within our website at the community college, does not have a comment section. And that was a decision that we made very intentionally at the time. Social media kind of accomplishes that goal for us in a sense … Social media sites become our comments section really. It’s through Twitter and it’s through Facebook comments that we receive a lot of that two-way feedback. We made the decision for our newsroom to not be another source to monitor.

Of course, newspapers have a different nature than the newsroom of a college or other organization. Free and public discourse is a hallmark of the press. Privately-run organizations are expected to attempt to control the narrative when they disseminate information about themselves. Still, apart from its own 140-character posts, the college is unable to control Twitter and shares a presence with other Twitter accounts in what basically amounts to the Wild West – the good, the bad, and the ugly. On its home Facebook page, Francesca’s college only deletes universally accepted offensive comments. Criticism is welcomed, and “Pot shots stay up.”

Of all the interviewees, Steve was the only one who would like to have some form of anonymous commenting still allowed. If possible, he said, he would like news organizations utilize both systems of anonymous and identity-linked. For Jane, “I would probably never go back to anonymous commenting. It was so, so nasty.” Jane continued:
A lot of newspapers today are actually trying to do away with online commenting and I don't think that's necessarily a terrible idea. I think there are other ways to engage readers because of social media today where you could get people off your website if you really want to interact with people. But then you do lose that little bit of an edge where you're driving traffic to a website which helps your ad revenue. But, I really think that sometimes it’s not worth it. It’s not worth the effort it takes to have to go through it, you know? I have to read and look at comments every day.

**Discussion**

Many of the interviewees’ experiences echo Postman’s that something is lost when something is gained in the medium of online commentary on news articles; however, they also brought forward another option of using forms of social media by itself -- such as Twitter and Facebook -- instead of as a tool that is paired with online commenting. This use of social media emerged as an unexpected option for news organizations to utilize.

The only interviewee who found enough value in anonymous commenting instead of online commenting to continue to utilize that option along with identity-linked was Steve. Seeing value in both anonymous and identity-linked, he said he would prefer a method that utilizes both systems, though did not offer a method that was able to accomplish this. Jane said she “…would probably never go back to anonymous commenting. It was so, so nasty.” Since it was a college, Francesca’s organization had a different mission from that of a traditional news organization; however, it did use a “News Room” on its website that contained articles and press releases. Her organization made a deliberate decision not to add a commenting feature specific to each article and instead focused efforts toward a moderated Facebook page and Twitter account for online interaction with the public.

All the interviewees stressed how anonymity in relation to online comments has the ability to degrade the discourse. Steve received actual death threats from anonymous users for
comments he made using Twitter. Jane indicated repeated bad behavior from at least two prominent members of the community who believed they were posting comments anonymously. Once the cloak of anonymity was removed, the bad behavior stopped.

Francesca emphasized that moderating anonymous comments was both labor-intensive and potentially fraught with issues that could arise over perceived censorship. Anonymity increased the likelihood of commenters crossing the line that would require moderators to remove comments that were offensive and potentially libelous. Except in extreme cases, her college left comments made on its Facebook page alone – even if the comments painted the college in a negative light. Linking identities through Facebook controls tampers the vitriol for the most part, she said, which allows them to sidestep censorship issues by using a light touch while moderating for comments.

Chapter 5 will analyze how the literature relates and compares to the finding of this study, and discuss the implications of anonymity for readers and online publications. Chapter 5 will also detail some of the limitations of the study and recommendations for further study.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

There are several unavoidable limitations to this research. The qualitative approach is considered by some to be less systematic or hard-fact based. Creswell (2013) wrote “This leads critics to claim that qualitative research is largely intuitive, soft, and relativistic or that qualitative data analysts fall back on the three ‘I’s’ – ‘insight, intuition, and impression’” (p. 150). The study could be considered subjective and less objective had it been quantitative.

There are also challenges inherent in utilizing multiple case studies. Selection of which case to study is important and requires that the researcher “establish a rationale for his or her purposeful sampling strategy for selecting the case and for gathering information about the case” (Creswell, 2013, p. 148). Care must also be taken in choosing the number of cases: “The study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the less the depth in any single case” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Three interviewees were chosen for this study, but an argument could be made for more subjects. In particular, all three interviewees came from a background rooted in journalism and newspapers. While one interviewee assumed the self-proclaimed role of internet “troll” and was able to give a perspective from this role, the study may have benefitted from a subject who participated in troll activities that were not filtered through a journalistic lens.

In addition, the study had certain geographical limitations. The interviewees all worked and lived in one region of the United States. This is addressed in the study and also has positive aspects since the region has an overwhelmingly conservative population politically. The conservative nature of the region produced an environment where there could be negative
repercussions for opposing views. This was an important element of the study since the subjects felt anonymity was sometimes necessary for certain point of views to be expressed; however, different results might have been obtained from a more diverse region.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Future studies may benefit from coding to gauge the quality of content from a pool of online comments that follow news articles. This could be done for both anonymous and identity-linked comments, then comparing them to see how quality is affected. The benefit of this type of research is the ability to gather data from a wider variety of sources. The problem with this type of research is that the results could be considered subjective; quality is a difficult characteristic to define.

More research could also build on this study by gathering interviews from a more diverse and wider geographic region. While the limited geographic region in this study did serve a purpose in highlighting the benefits of anonymous speech in an overwhelmingly conservative area, further research might produce different results in a community that was more diverse both politically and demographically.

**Conclusions**

Anonymity does, indeed, empower online free speech, according to the research of this study. It allows readers to voice opinions that would be stifled in communities where prevailing thought is imposed over minority opinions. All the subjects of this research indicated that they had first-hand experience demonstrating the benefits of online anonymity and recognized that discourse was more inhibited when identities were linked. Uninhibited, free speech is the cornerstone of an informed democracy and anonymity can act as a shield for unpopular dissent.
Unfortunately, unmoderated online anonymous comments also breed bad behavior. What is gained in freedom, is lost in civility. This conclusion coincides with Postman’s (1992) claim that there is a downside to technology – a give and take. For the subjects of this study who work in the newspaper industry, arguably as gatekeepers, the price of anonymity can come at too high a price. This can is be taken both literally and figuratively. One effect on newspapers from anonymous online commenting is that resources have to be dedicated to moderators to manage the content. Anonymous comments have to be filtered by newspapers to prevent libel as well as to ensure their product isn’t tarnished by trolls to the point where it is undesirable. One interviewee who managed a newspaper, Jane, pointed out that it is not just the news articles that are affected by online comments. Advertisers do not want to have their products promoted alongside offensive comments.

Credibility also emerged as a theme in the research. Anonymous comments lack trustworthiness. Particularly now, at the writing of this paper, as Russia is being accused of manufacturing troll farms to flood comment boards with divisive rhetoric, the increased credibility inherent in having an identity linked to a comment is rising in value. The usefulness of anonymous comments requires that readers are able to discern which ideas have merit and which are counter-productive or even disruptive to healthy discourse. While online commenting as a phenomenon is still in its infancy, the general public has not given a positive indication that it has the ability to differentiate between anonymous trolling and anonymous discourse that is worthwhile.

Perhaps the most unexpected revelation from the study was the use of social media such as Facebook as an alternative to online commenting. Instead of allowing just commenters who had their identity linked to Facebook to comment on news article, this practice would completely
abolish online comments in the traditional sense whether they were anonymous or identity-linked. The open forum of ideas would all take place on a social media website such as Facebook. The difference may appear subtle, but it is noteworthy. Facebook does have its faults and can be taken advantage of by trolls. Fake identities can be, and are, created; however, there are more safeguards in place to prevent trolling on Facebook than what newspapers currently utilize. For most online newspaper posting systems, a fake email address can give anyone access to commenting. Facebook has more hoops to jumps through to create an identity, has policies in place restricting fake identities, and is moderated somewhat with fake profiles actively being removed.

This study revealed that moving the discourse altogether from pages that contain the news source – the article itself – to social media pages run by news organizations is an alternative worth exploring. The discourse will still take place. It just won’t take place immediately following the article. While the newspaper may initially have less webpage “clicks,” the social media page could drive traffic to the articles themselves. Monitoring of the online news product will be minimized, thus reducing expenses incurred and freeing up resources.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Date:
Time:
Location:
Interviewer:
Participant (pseudonym):
Participant’s job/role:

I. Opening Questions

a. Please describe your job (or previous, relevant jobs) as it relates to online publications.

b. Please describe your experience with online comments as they relate to your online publications.

II. Topic Questions

a. What potential benefits do you see to utilizing a commenting feature in online newspaper or magazine articles? What potential drawbacks do you see, if any?

b. What, in your opinion, is the impact of having anonymous versus identity-linked user profiles with respect to a commenting feature?

c. In your experience, what differences have you observed in public comments when the commenters' identities are known versus anonymous?

III. Concluding Questions

a. If you had complete control over online policy at a news organization, would you allow commenting? If so, would it be anonymous or identity-linked? Why?

b. What else would you like to address related to this study?
Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Effect of Anonymity on the Quality of Online Comments

You have been invited to participate in a study exploring how anonymity affects the interaction between readers and online news publications. The principal investigator is Tom Greene, a graduate student in the Communications and Leadership Studies program at the University of Gonzaga. Dr. John Caputo is the professor instructing the program.

Procedures

The research of this study will be based on interviews with participants who have intimate knowledge of commenting on online news websites – both anonymous and identity-linked. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed post-interview. The interview is expected to last about one hour. The types of questions to be asked will include their experience with online commenting as well as their opinions – particularly in relation to the quality of comments: anonymous and identity-linked. Participants do not have to answer any question.

Risk, Stress, or Discomfort

There are no expected risks associated with this study. All data will be kept confidential and all parties/places will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for every interview. Transcripts will be kept in a locked office. There is a minimal risk that participants could be identified by someone recognizing participant’s characteristics or unique context of situations explored in the interviews. No discomfort is expected.

Other Information

You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any question. Data and results of the study will be made available to you after completion of the study upon request. Though there are no tangible rewards for you participation, you may benefit personally from the results of the study.

Participant’s Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and these questions have been answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Signature of Principal Investigator ___________________________ Date ________

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ________