ENGAGING THE SOCIAL NEWS USER
Comments on news sites and Facebook

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One of the most common formats of audience participation in journalism consists of online reader comments in response to articles, weblogs, or online television and radio broadcasts. While initially the audience only commented on media platforms themselves, Facebook made it possible to outsource commenting to a third-party platform. The options users have, the rules commenters are obliged to follow, and the moderation regime they confront, could influence the quantity and quality of comments. In this study, we explore how news media deal with audience comments on Facebook and their own news site, and how this influences the quality and quantity of comments. We compared comments on news platforms and Facebook of 62 Dutch national and regional newspapers, public and commercial broadcasters, newsweeklies, national news programmes, and online news sites. Subsequently, we analysed the content of the comments with the qualitative text analysis tool MAXQDA. The results indicate that news media prefer outsourcing comments to Facebook although commenting on their own platforms is still possible. By discouraging anonymous responses, the quality of comments improved but above all the quantity of comments decreased after outsourcing comments to Facebook.

KEYWORDS audience participation; comments; Facebook; journalism; news media; social media

Introduction

Dealing with user comments can be a real struggle and Facebook could be the solution. Jimmy Orr, the manager director of latimes.com, complained that user engagement sometimes led to “mean-spirited, profane and sometimes useless responses” on the website (Los Angeles Times, March 15, 2011). Therefore, in March 2011 the Los Angeles Times switched to the Facebook commenting system. The Dutch current affairs television programme EenVandaag stated that comments posted to a Facebook account produced more and higher-quality comments (Pleijter 2011). The media, entertainment, and showbusiness news site digitspy.co.uk switched to Facebook commenting in the same year—and for the same reasons as EenVandaag (Marshall 2011).

At these three news sites the editors experienced the self-policing nature of Facebook. Comments on Facebook can be read by all Facebook users and are linked to personal accounts. This loss of anonymity ensures that Facebook commenters become more hesitant about posting abusive and offensive comments. The use of Facebook comments could also generate more traffic to news sites. But still, these examples are anecdotal; the impact of Facebook on the quality of the comments cannot be proved empirically in this regard. There is little comprehensive and comparative research on comments on news sites and Facebook, except for a study of the website and the Facebook page of the Washington Post (Rowe 2013). Santana (2014) examined the—related—impact of anonymity on online newspaper comments.

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Reich (2011) emphasizes the relevance of user comments as they create a new phase in journalism audience participation. While previously traditional gatekeepers determined which voices were important enough to be heard (e.g. in letters-to-the-editor or radio call-ins), posted comments allow other and perhaps deviating voices to be heard as long as the reactions comply with the house rules of the media.

There are examples from online media indicating that comments have improved by using the Facebook plug-in on news sites. The question is whether the same can be said about the Facebook fan page comments in comparison to the comments on the news sites. To what extent will the introduction of Facebook commenting influence the number of comments and the quality of the discussions now that users are less inclined to express themselves completely freely, as commenting anonymously on Facebook is not possible?

The answer to these questions is still lacking, as little empirical research has been conducted on this subject. As user comments are an interesting subject for investigation in the context of audience participation in journalism, we pose the following question: What are the qualitative and quantitative differences in comments between Facebook fan pages of Dutch news sites and their own online platforms and how do news media deal with audience comments on both platforms? To answer these questions we examined comments of 62 news sites and their Facebook sites where these comments were posted.

The Quality and Quantity of Comments

In this section, we discuss the context of user comments in journalism and how we might assess quality and quantity. Empirical evidence reveals that in general, both journalists and audiences do not appreciate user comments very much. The abusive nature of comments makes them suspect among media and journalists (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Reich 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2009). Diaz Noci et al. (2010) show that user comments posted on Catalan online newspapers are predominantly abusive and do not contribute to a relevant and judicious debate.

Reich (2011, 104) investigated journalists’ attitudes towards user comments from news organizations in 10 countries. He discusses both advantages and disadvantages of user comments. Journalists, for instance, mention "defamation, incitement, abusive content, racism and hate speech". Advantages are detecting sources, giving story ideas or additional material, providing leads to follow-ups, and identifying errors and typos.

Media try to improve the quality of comments by using a strict comment management strategy. House rules, registration, post-moderation, pre-moderation, report buttons to report abusive comments, and social media plug-ins (to login with a social media account) can be used. News media may even disallow any comments on their news sites or decide to close the comment features on sensitive or controversial news items. Bakker (2010) indicates that pre-registration leads to fewer complaints about comments, but also results in fewer comments as it takes more effort to post a comment with this system. Santana (2014) endorses this principle about the influence of pre-registration on the quality of comments. When comments are posted, news media can choose to moderate the comments before or afterwards. Pre-moderation is labour-intensive and therefore costly. Reich (2011) concludes that this could be the reason why large news businesses opt for post-moderation combined with pre-registration. Moderation can be done by editors...
themselves or can be outsourced. Additionally, news media can use moderation software to discover abusive comments or to let users themselves moderate other comments by using buttons to rank comments or to report abuse. With the introduction of Facebook commenting, this issue is partly resolved, as anonymous commenting is no longer an option. Users, however, can still choose to post abusive comments under their real name.

The most simple and open comment system is when users are allowed to comment anonymously with a post-moderation policy. The downside is that this strategy will lead to a lower quality of comments. Reader (2012) points out that if anonymous comments are not permitted on news sites, the comments will more closely approximate the journalistic quality of the news media on which they are posted. The expected advantage of not allowing anonymous comments is the improvement in quality, which subsequently leads to a decrease in moderation costs. The downside of not allowing anonymous comments is the possibility that divergent voices will not be heard.

Method

For this study we made an inventory of 62 Dutch media to determine how they deal with audience comments on Facebook and their own news sites, and how their approach influences the quality and quantity of the comments. These 62 news media represent an important section of Dutch online news media. The inventory contains all Dutch national and regional daily newspapers, news magazines, most of the national news programmes, regional broadcasters, and the most important independent news site in 2013 (see Hille and Bakker 2013). In previous research, we have shown that most of these 62 Dutch news media are already active on Facebook. They post content on Facebook fan pages, which can be liked, shared or commented by the audience (Hille and Bakker 2013). Facebook is an interesting platform for news media to reach the audience and to accomplish audience participation. According to Eurostat (2012), 75 per cent of the Dutch population is active on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This is a higher percentage than other European countries and compared to an average of 40 per cent of the European Union (Iceland 65 per cent, Norway 58 per cent, and the United Kingdom 57 per cent). According to Socialbakers.com, a social media analytics platform, 50 per cent of all Dutch internet users had a Facebook account in February 2013 (Socialbakers 2013).

We investigated whether or not these 62 news media implemented commenting options on their website. We also looked into the comment management strategies (e.g. moderation and registration regimes) of all these media. Additionally, we observed whether these news media have a fan page on Facebook to publish their content and if they offer commenting opportunities.

We subsequently gathered news items on Facebook and the news sites of the 62 news media in April and May 2013, and chose two events that we expected news media would report on extensively:

- The inauguration of the Dutch King Willem-Alexander.
- The disappearance of two Dutch boys Ruben and Julian.

The inauguration of the Dutch King Willem-Alexander was an historic occasion that was in the news frequently after the announcement of the abdication of Queen Beatrix in January 2013 until the inauguration on 30 April 2013. The disappearance of the two young boys, Ruben and Julian, captivated the Netherlands for almost two weeks in May 2013. They were found dead after 13 days of searching by police and civilians. The father,
divorced from their mother, took his two sons for a holiday, killed them, and committed suicide afterwards.

These two cases probably produced more comments than an average news event because of the impact and their sensitive nature. Although this will affect the absolute number of the comments on both platforms, we are mainly interested in the difference between the Facebook comments and the comments on its parallel news website. There is no reason to expect that the nature of these two news stories will influenced the outcome of our research in a qualitative way.

Not all media allow comments, 50 of the 62 media we researched have comment sections on their websites, 20 published content about the inauguration and/or Ruben and Julian on their own site and Facebook. We found 1239 comments on the inauguration of the Dutch King and 2250 comments in reference to news items about the disappearance of Ruben and Julian.

In order to identify what the differences are in terms of the quality of the comments, we looked at the number of variables or indicators of quality mentioned by Reich (2011, 104). The indicators of low quality are: "defamation, incitement, abusive content, racism and hate speech". Indicators of high quality are: detected sources, story ideas, and material and leads provided by commenters to be followed up. In addition, we used the variables anonymous (nicknames) and not anonymous, and a reference to a (social network) profile.

With the use of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, we systematically analysed these comments. Apart from analysing the 3489 comments, we identified the comment management systems the media use.

Results

To outline the context of this research project, we firstly describe what type of comment management system the media use and what their comment options are. Additionally, we will present results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the comments.

Comment Management Systems

The 20 media that report on news stories and allow comments use different comment management systems (Table 1). The second column in Table 1 shows that most media (17 out of 20) have house rules or terms of use on the website. These house rules usually refer to comments that can create commotion or are insulting and racist. The media vary widely when it comes to the number of house rules. Both evening newspaper NRC Handelsblad (NRC) and news website Nu.nl have a comprehensive set of house rules and terms of use. Both media, however, target a rather different audience. NRC has by tradition a well-educated and somewhat older audience, while NU.nl is a general Web-only operation aimed at the general public. Other media only describe what they expect from contributions in general terms.

The majority (14 out of 20) of the researched media moderate comments afterwards (post-moderation) and they also refer to that policy in their house rules. Pre-moderation is much less common. Users hardly get the opportunity to respond anonymously and unregistered, particularly because the alternative to registration is the social plug-in which requires a social media account.
NRC has a different system. An editor evaluates the first comment of every user and when the comment fits the house rules, users can participate without pre-moderation. Nu.nl employs an alternative strategy. The news site does not allow any comments under articles but instead points the user with a specific button to go to the reaction site NUjij.nl (NOW you).

Facebook and services like the Disqus comment system or social plug-ins for websites encourage users to comment on their sites. Eleven news media are using such a social media plug-in. The user-moderator option is not used frequently. Only five news media have added “report buttons” for users to notify inappropriate comments (Table 1).

The Quantity of Comments

We found 1239 comments on the inauguration of the Dutch King and 2250 comments on the disappearance of the two boys Ruben and Julian. As we see in Figure 1, more comments appear on the sites of the media themselves than on Facebook;

| TABLE 1 | News media and their content management systems |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                | Number of Facebook friends | House rules | Registration | Post-moderation | Pre-moderation | Report buttons | Social plug-in |
| Nu.nl          | 71,712            | ✓            | ✓            | ✓              | ✓              | ✓              |               |
| Hart van Nederland | 30,150       | ✓            | ✓            | ✓              | ✓              | ✓              |               |
| RTL Nieuws     | 20,999            | ✓            | ✓            | ✓              | ✓              | ✓              |               |
| NRC Handelsblad| 19,033            | ✓            | ✓            | ✓              | ✓              | ✓              |               |
| Omroep Brabant | 13,579            | ✓            | ✓            | ✓              |               |               |               |
| Omroep Gelderland | 13,343     | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Metro Courant  | 12,589            | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Eenvandaag     | 5520              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| BN/de Stem     | 4110              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| RTV Oost       | 3712              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Elsevier       | 3499              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Eindhovens Dagblad | 3174      | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| RTV Noord Holland | 2750       | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| De Gelderlander| 2130              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| PZC            | 1184              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Trouw           | 1111              | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Haarlems Dagblad | 857           | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Noordhollands Dagblad | 771         | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Nederlands Dagblad | 538         | ✓            | ✓            |               |               |               |               |
| Total           | 17              | 14           | 14           | 6              | 5              | 11             |               |

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84 per cent of the comments on the inauguration were posted on the news site, compared to 16 per cent on Facebook.

The comment section of news site Nu.nl (Nuij.nl) generated by far the highest number of comments (882) about the inauguration of the Dutch King Willem-Alexander, followed by commercial news broadcaster RTL Nieuws (55 comments) and NRC (53 comments). On Facebook, Nu.nl received 38 comments, RTL Nieuws 19, and NRC 14.

So far as the news story about the disappearance of the boys was concerned, 28 per cent of the comments were posted on Facebook, 72 per cent appeared on the websites. NRC received 857 comments on their website and a mere 25 on Facebook. Nu.nl also had many more comments on the website (549) than on Facebook (17).

Websites of regional newspapers and broadcasters and smaller newspapers published no more than five comments, which makes it difficult to draw sustainable or generalizable conclusions. An explanation might be that these media with a regional focus attract a much smaller audience.

Providing comments to these two news events was more common on online news sites and national news media than on regional news media. Facebook is far less used as comment platform than the websites of news media. Only one—human-interest—programme differed in this respect.

The Quality of Comments

Having examined the quantity of posted comments, we focus on the content of the comments. Are abusive comments removed? Do comments comply with house rules? Do comments stay on topic? Is there interaction between news media and users and also between users that comment on the same topic?

Nu.nl shows when a comment is removed. At the other news sites it is less clear whether comments are deleted. There is little to no off-topic response. The inauguration comments on RTL Nieuws’ site were the most off-topic, with nine out of 19 comments straying from the initial theme. Noteworthy is the interaction between users. They interact noticeably with each other, particularly on the news site and Facebook page of Nu.nl and NRC. They respond to comments of other users and start conversations. There also seems to be a pattern of the same people returning regularly to the conversation.
There is not only a difference between the number of comments, but also between the content of the comments on Facebook and the website. The following comments illustrate this:

Something I noticed today; During the past recent years Willem-Alexander wore his wedding ring on his left hand (Catholic way). Also during the ceremony of the abdication. Immediately after the abdication, balcony scene and Inauguration of the New Church, he wears his wedding ring on his right hand/finger (Protestant way). Something worth knowing? (Jon, NRC website)

Below is a comment on the same article on Facebook. These comments are mainly one-liners expressing opinions of the commenters:

She looked beautiful … Hollywood you are too late. (Mo Adag, NRC Facebook page)

Commenters provide more elaborate comments on the news websites compared to the more personalized comments on Facebook. Hart van Nederland uses the Facebook comment plug-in on their website and generates personal comments on both platforms.

Dear Alex and Maxima, welcome as our new king and queen!

Good Luck in your future. (Marion Sieben, Hart van Nederland Facebook page)

Thank you for your impressive speech Willem Alexander. Nicely spoken. I also saw emotion by you. Well even though I kept it dry. You are a Darling. Maxima and also the three A's. What sweethearts. Have lots Respect your mom. I saw her emotions. She held herself bravely. (Sjaan Kelfkens, Hart van Nederland website)

We also examined the extent to which commenters provided tips, identified typos and errors, or suggested leads, sources, and material for (follow-up) stories. The commenters on the inauguration on the NRC news site are very much concerned with identifying journalistic errors.

The disappearance of the two boys also triggered a discussion about Dutch youth care with experienced experts participating in this discussion. The moderation ensured that abusive, racist, hate speech, incitement, and defamatory comment were hardly visible. Only on the RTL Nieuws news site were low-quality comments clearly visible. These comments were posted more often on items about the disappearance of the two boys. It is remarkable that there were very few comments on Facebook that could be defined as either low- or high-quality comments. Comments on Facebook do not seem to contribute to the discussion in a positive or negative way. Although comments on news sites vary in length (short: one or two sentences; medium: three or four sentences; long: more than four sentences), comments on the Facebook pages of all news media are by definition short.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the qualitative and quantitative differences in comments on the Facebook fan pages of Dutch news sites as opposed to their own platforms, and to establish the ways in which, as well as the extent to which, news media deal with audience comments. The majority of the media we researched apply post-moderation, probably because pre-moderation is an expensive and labour-intensive process (Reich 2011).
The discussions on NRC and NU.nl stand out because of the high number of comments on these sites and their Facebook pages. Both media show a high level of user interactivity. The comprehensive house rules and terms of use in regard to commenting on NRC and Nu.nl items seem to have a positive influence on both the quantity and quality of comments. People posting comments on NRC are moderated only for their first comment while NU.nl has created a separate discussion space for commenters. Both regimes lead to a high level of participation. Both media target rather different audiences but how this affects the number and the quality of comments is not yet clear.

Users are more likely to comment on news sites than on the accompanying Facebook sites. An explanation for this can be the visibility of the comments. Their Facebook comments will also be visible on their social network, meaning visible for all their friends, relatives, and relations, which could mean that they are more inclined to be outspoken on news websites. Comments on websites are certainly “more anonymous” than comments on Facebook.

Taking this argument a step further and looking at the quality of the comments, the interaction between users is particularly notable. Users like to respond to each other’s comments; the news events seem to provide an opportunity for conversation and debate. Interestingly, we found no examples of interaction between users and journalists. Comments are not popular among journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2009), which might explain why they do not want to participate in conversations or make individual statements on issues. Combining this with the time-pressured environment in which journalists work, an interactive relationship between journalists and users is not very likely to emerge. An underlying reason might still be the fear of losing journalistic authority.

The conversation between users is mostly “on topic” and there are few abusive comments observable on the news sites. An explanation for this is that all media are post-moderating comments.

The quality of the comments on news sites and Facebook do not seem to rise above common conversation between users. The comments do not complement the original journalistic news stories to which they refer. Tips, leads and follow-up material, story ideas, and additional sources were very seldom found in the 3489 comments researched. We identified some users, however, who found typos and errors in stories. These results correspond with the study of Diaz Noci et al. (2010) who demonstrate in their study that most of the comments were not abusive, but at the same time did not contribute to a relevant debate. From our study we cannot confirm that non-anonymous comments will be similar to the journalistic quality of the news media where they are posted, as Reader (2012) argued.

Nevertheless, we determined an obvious dissimilarity in the quality of comments on news sites and Facebook. Users posted more comments on news sites, where the quality was higher and the debate was much more vibrant. These outcomes correspond to the question Orr (2011) raised. He wondered whether the transition of the Los Angeles Times to Facebook would be a “Troll-Killer” or would make their blogs hollow. Facebook will provide fewer comments, will kill the trolls, but will not result in making the conversation more interesting.
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