

Online Readers' Comments Represent New Opinion Pipeline

by Arthur D. Santana

Reporters at the country's largest U. S. daily newspapers generally take a dim view of the online reader comments. Many are troubled by their content and express dismay over their newspaper's providing a forum for anonymous discussion where emotions can run high.

A future journalism scholar might one day describe a particular era of U.S. newspapers this way: Readers regularly interacted with newspapers. They wrote letters, expressing their opinion on all manner of topics, much of it pegged to current events. Intemperate remarks were routine and civility was not a lasting hallmark. Still, newspapers were happy to give the public a platform to exchange ideas.

Probably because of the often-inflammatory nature of their comments, many readers preferred to hide their identity. "Cato" and "Candidus" and "Vindex" and "Humanus" and "Curtius" were among the assumed names.¹ One person's published opinion was often followed by an opposing response. And although the comments ran the gamut of topics, politics and government were especially ripe areas for debate.

If a future scholar were to be more specific about this era of U.S. newspapers, he or she might further explain that some of the letter writers included Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, writers whose publishers knew their true identities and granted them pseudonyms. Others, like Benjamin Franklin, who wrote 14 letters to the *New England Courant* in 1722 under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood," remained anonymous.² For publishers of the era, the letters were a boon. Franklin's older brother, James, who ran the *Courant*, was very

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pleased at how the letters were witty, deft and often challenged Boston's ruling elite. Their presence in the *Courant* helped establish the newspaper's distinctive style as one of America's first fiercely independent newspapers.³

Such letters are important because they allow a glimpse of how early editors and publishers felt about reader input. Journalists' desire to maintain communication with readers has been historically, and remains today one of the basic tenets of journalism.

Today, online reader comment forums are a relatively new phenomenon in online journalism and represent one of the newest ways for readers to be heard. With the rapid decline of circulation across the board, newspapers are in the throes of figuring out new ways of holding on to existing readers while attracting new ones. One lure to readers is the promise of a more-participatory role—one newspaper publishers hope will encourage community dialogue while also building reader loyalty. And, as with the migration to any new medium, there is still plenty to learn. But for better or worse, newspapers have been thrust into a Web 2.0 world, where, unlike the letter writers of a bygone era whose letters were vetted, anyone who has an opinion can be heard. At the heart of this research is the question: Are reporters listening?

This study, based on a national survey of large- and mid-size newspapers, examines the attitudes of reporters toward online reader comments. The findings will elaborate on the extent to which they read them, how they use them, how they feel about them and the extent to which the comments have changed how they do their jobs.

Theoretical Framework

In the context of traditional journalism, journalists are the gatekeepers who filter the happenings of the world. They perform the entire news process, coming up with stories, gathering the news, writing, editing and publishing. This process happens free from any contribution from members of the public—other than as sources—who are otherwise relegated to commenting via a reader representative or letter to the editor.⁴

Under this one-way-flow-of-communication model, news organizations inevitably set the news agenda.⁵ In making this argument, McCombs and Shaw first established a few hypotheses: that most of what people know comes to them via second- or third-hand from the mass media or other people, that voters learn most of what they know from the mass media and that people vary greatly in their attention to the mass media.

Not explored in depth in the literature, however, is the role that audience feedback plays in shaping the media's agenda, so-called agenda building. Research has shown that while reporters clearly set the agenda for readers in the online comments,⁶ the extent to which readers help develop those agendas is less clear. Through a content analysis of *The Indianapolis Star*, Martin found that there were no overt actions by Indiana's largest newspaper to explain how it

used online reader feedback,⁷ a finding that is consistent with other research.⁸ This research will explore the role that online audience feedback plays in developing the media agenda by directly querying newspaper journalists.

Altering the conventional agenda setting theory that those journalists abide is what Nip calls the second phase of public journalism.⁹ One of its components is “interactive journalism,” where readers are more engaged with reporters in the news-making process, either by content interactivity or interpersonal interactivity. Bulletin boards and online discussion groups have the potential to serve as an equalizer to the old model, balancing the power of traditional mass media by serving in a more engaging role with the conventional gatekeepers while also more immediately and publicly criticizing journalism.¹⁰

Literature Review

Studies have examined factors influencing news treatment,¹¹ but how readers influence reporters or how reporters feel about readers’ input has not been well studied. The extent to which online newspaper readers’ comments have had an impact on reporters is unaddressed in the literature. Considering the rising chorus of journalists and industry observers calling for the end of anonymous comments,¹² such research is needed in order to gauge the boards’ value better. This review of the literature will examine the tools that readers and journalists have used to maintain communication and the extent to which journalists use those communication tools to help them produce the news.

Background

By the mid-1990s, when newspapers began to reach a critical mass online, an estimated 84 percent of newspapers required printed letters to the editor carry their authors’ names.¹³ But readers had found a new way of expressing themselves. Online forums—standalone message boards where readers could start and participate in discussions—had been growing in popularity and soon migrated to the first newspaper websites. Links of stories were sometimes posted in the message boards. Within a few years, comment boards around the country began to usher in a flood of defamation lawsuits, prompting the American Civil Liberties Union to step in to protect the anonymity of online commenters.¹⁴ Academic researchers also set out to learn about the extent to which readers were engaging journalists with online communication.

In 1998, Schultz queried 50 *New York Times* journalists about their interactivity with readers. Of the 19 reporters who responded, most thought that e-mail with readers facilitated communication.¹⁵ One reporter explained that reader e-mails occasionally led to a story, which was the main reason they were read.¹⁶ While reporters seemed to appreciate online communication with readers, the use of e-mail appeared mainly reactive. Twelve reporters admitted that they

did not pay any attention to the online forums.¹⁷ Schultz concluded: "At the moment, the online forums are initiating reader-to-reader communication while journalists are hardly involved."¹⁸

Comment boards continued to evolve and spread to website pages offering news, and in 1998, the *Rocky Mountain News* was one of the first online newspapers to begin inviting same-page comments following movie and restaurant reviews.¹⁹ In June 2006, *The Washington Post* began allowing comments to follow news stories, initially debuting in the Sports section.²⁰ In November 2007, *The New York Times* also began to allow user comments on select articles.²¹ By then, other newspapers around the country had already begun adopting the forums. Among the top 100 U.S. newspapers, 33 percent accepted article comments in some form in 2007; the following year, it had risen to 75 percent.²²

Some editors initially reported being pleased with the comments following news stories, deeming them "high-level" and on-topic. They also considered them to be a forum by which dialogue between readers and journalists could be generated; journalists were able to learn more about issues based on the comments.²³ But within a year, that tone changed when *The Post* described the growing frustration among journalists and readers at how many of the comments were "raw, racist, sexist and revolting."²⁴ The forums had begun to test the newspaper industry's ability to weather new technology—one that broke from the traditional paper-and-ink model of communicating with readers.

Engaging the Mass Communicator

Letters to the editor have long been recognized in the literature as one of the few means by which journalists can learn what is on the minds of audience members.²⁵ And that connection with readers has been shown to affect coverage priorities. Research in 1991 sought to substantiate the hypothesis that the level of attention to letters about crime would precipitate commensurate levels of crime coverage on the front pages of newspapers and in editorials. Studying 10 newspapers, Pritchard and Berkowitz found that their hypothesis was generally supported. They concluded:

*These findings are consistent with the notion that, in the absence of a more valid indicator, newspaper journalists may tend to take cues about reader concerns from letters to the editor.*²⁶

Generally, most editorial sections do not print anonymous letters to the editor because they are considered suspect.²⁷ Newsrooms in general have similar benchmarks for anonymous sources in news stories: they are avoided as much as possible, although newspaper journalists still rely on a significant amount of anonymous input.²⁸ According to Reader,

Editors tended to view the comments in anonymous forums as somewhat tawdry and shallow, while viewing opinions in signed letters forums as somewhat more noble and intelligent.²⁹

Reporters have also registered their disapproval of anonymous letters to the editor.³⁰⁻

User-generated and social media sites have also emerged as online resources for journalists, but one study found that among business journalists, the frequency of such use was limited.³¹ Surveying 200 business journalists, researchers found that 7.5 percent indicated that social media were “very important” to their work while 24.5 percent believed them to be important.³² Fully 34 percent considered social media use to be of little or no importance. Of the sample group, 18.5 percent identified a social media tool they first use when writing a story; of that group, 59 percent first used blogs, 24 percent used Facebook and MySpace and 14 percent used wikis.³³ Other research showed that bloggers influenced the content in newspaper op-ed pages.³⁴

The post-Internet research compares to a pre-Internet era of the 1980s in which reporters had a vague notion of their audience and generally desired autonomy from the audience.³⁵ In his research on the BBC, Schlesinger remarked that reporters simply didn’t have a satisfactory method of feedback that would enable them to be better in touch with their readers.³⁶ Observational research in 2000 continued to support the notion that rather than consult their audience, reporters constructed substitute audiences from newsroom peers to determine the newsworthiness of a story.³⁷

In the 1970s, newspapers turned to a new approach in an effort to listen to their readers: the focus group. Random sampling pioneered by Gallup and Politz ushered in a new way of making editorial decisions.³⁸ Readers told journalists “they wanted an emotional bond with the newspaper, that they wanted news that was relevant to their lives,” and journalists listened as focus-group wisdom drove the editorial decisions of many newspapers.³⁹ Through the 1990s, focus groups continued to have an effect on news decisions. But media experts also concluded that blindly heeding the will of the public could have a downside. As Leonard pointed out, “Looking to readers for editorial direction has proven to be an easy way to get lost.”⁴⁰ These days, some newspapers follow web traffic metrics in order to gauge what readers find interesting, including the most popular web searches, which articles are generating unique visitors and what posts are generating buzz on social network sites.⁴¹ Such use of the web is part of the new reality of modern journalism.

Indeed, research has shown that journalists increasingly look to the Internet when seeking information; they employ computer-aided tools more frequently but for shorter periods than classical, non-computer-aided tools.⁴² Journalists see e-mail as a fast, low cost, convenient and flexible way of communicating with the public. Research found that the most common use of e-mail among reporters was to contact sources.⁴³ Other research found that 36 percent of re-

porters said they conduct interviews via e-mail, and 68 percent said they use e-mail press releases for story ideas.⁴⁴ Modern newspapers use a host of online tools to interact with readers, including online polls, feedback forums, message board and chats with journalists.⁴⁵ But Rosenberry concluded in 2005 that while some editors wanted to use the Internet to “bridge a two-way thoroughfare” between newsmakers and readers, the bridge was “still under construction.”⁴⁶

Overall, research found that computer-aided tools supplement but do not replace traditional reporting as evidenced by the finding that the telephone remains the most important newsgathering tool for reporters.⁴⁷ Indeed, call-in comments have played an important role in maintaining reader-to-reporter communication. Research on a comparison of a call-in column⁴⁸ and letters to the editor found that the column expanded public dialogue, although the calls were filled with more opinion than fact.⁴⁹ Other research has shown that callers were also more likely to express negative comments, which researchers attributed to their tendency to be impromptu and direct.⁵⁰ Today, newspapers have adopted other mechanisms for direct reader-to-reporter communication. The *News & Record* of Greensboro has an “Ask a Reporter” online column reminiscent of the old “Action Line” columns. The *Times* of Northwest Indiana asks readers to become directly engaged in the newsmaking process via the comment boards. “Give us your eyewitness accounts, background, observations and history,” they suggest. “What more do you want to know about the story?”⁵¹

The same newspaper also tells readers, “Don’t feed the trolls,” a popular web idiom and reference to online provocateurs who post inflammatory comments with the principal intent of provoking other users. Despite reminders like this, research has shown that comment boards have the potential to embody a space of public deliberation. Comments offered a substantial amount of factual information, and there were indications that posters did not “parachute” in, state their opinion and leave.⁵² Other researchers found that users did tend to return to post a new message after leaving an initial one, indicating that they viewed the forums as an ongoing conversation.⁵³

Reporters are not apt to use the forums as a means to interact with readers. Nearly 46 percent said they engage readers in the forums at some level; about seven percent said company policy prohibited them from responding; almost 49 percent said they “never” respond to readers’ comments on their own stories.

The age or experience level of the journalist who spurred—or even participates in—that conversation is marginally addressed in the literature. Younger reporters, those web savvy “digital natives,” might be more likely to view using online communication tools as beneficial and even intuitive. One study found that the most active users of the Internet are newspaper editors with five to 10 years experience, working at large circulation daily newspapers.⁵⁴ Whether the attitude toward the online comments by individual reporters is a function of experience has not been explored in the literature.

Research Questions

The online comment forums represent a potential new tool in the reporter’s toolbox of reader interaction, perhaps joining letters, calls, focus groups, e-mails and online social media as a new way of knowing what’s on the minds of readers. Considering these ideas, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1:

To what degree are reporters engaged with online readers’ comments?

RQ2:

To what degree have readers’ online comments had an impact on reporting practices?

RQ3:

Do reporters feel that online comments promote civil, thoughtful discussion of community issues?

RQ4:

Is there a relationship between reporters’ level of experience and their attitudes toward online reader comments?

RQ5:

Is there a relationship between reporters’ years of experience and the degree to which they have changed their reporting practices?

Method

The goal of this research was to reach news reporters at U.S. newspapers with a daily circulation of approximately 50,000 and larger under the presumption that large- and mid-size dailies were more apt to have online reader comment forums. This research involved contacting 1,498 reporters via e-mail from the largest 139 daily U.S. newspapers as defined by the Audit Bureau of Circulations for the period ending Sept. 30, 2009. These newspapers collectively reach more

than 26 million households weekdays in all 50 states and range in circulation size from 2 million to 49,000 daily.⁵⁵

Using online staff lists, 10-12 reporters who work for the metro, sports, business and features sections were randomly chosen from each newspaper, using every other eligible name listed in the online staff list.⁵⁶ The goal was to reach only reporters who report and write non-opinion news stories for a local audience.⁵⁷ To the extent that the reporters' gender could be deduced based on first name, half of the reporters from each newspaper were women, half were men.⁵⁸ Each reporter in the sample group was sent an invitation letter via e-mail with a link to an online survey.

The survey consisted of nine multiple-choice questions; some questions included space for an open-ended answer. The survey was created on Survey-Monkey.com. The survey was pre-tested with 15 reporters at two newspapers that were not part of the 150 examined. The survey was deployed on Feb. 9, 2010, and closed on March 9. Of 1,498 reporters queried,⁵⁹ 435 responded, a 29 percent response rate, which is commensurate with the response rates of other e-mail surveys.⁶⁰

Findings

RQ1 asked to what degree reporters are engaged with online readers' comments.

More than 98 percent of reporters who responded said they read the online comments at their newspapers at some level, although 12 percent said they "rarely" read them. Overall, almost 37 percent said they read them "often." Nearly as many (32.2 percent) said they "sometimes" read the comments. Only a small portion (1.6 percent) said they "never" read them. [See Table 1]

Reporters are not apt to use the forums as a means to interact with readers. Nearly 46 per-

Table 1
Reporters' Engagements with Online Readers' Comments by Percent

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Other</i>
How often do you read the online readers' comments on the stories you have written?	17.4	36.6	32.4	12	1.6	0
How often do you respond to online readers' comments on stories you have written?	1.2	3.3	10.7	30.8	49.2	7*

**Company policy prohibits me from responding*
N=435

cent said they engage readers in the forums at some level; about seven percent said company policy prohibited them from responding; almost 49 percent said they "never" respond to readers' comments on their own stories. Interpreted another way, 80 percent of reporters who responded said they "rarely" or "never" respond to online reader comments.

RQ2 asked about the extent to which readers' online comments had an impact on reporting practices.

The discussion boards appear to have made an impact on some of the fundamental duties of journalists. Nearly 70 percent said that reader comments changed their thinking on the newsworthiness of a topic at some level, though more than 44 percent said they "rarely" have. Nearly 31 percent of reporters who responded said the comments have "never" had that kind of impact. [See Table 2] Further, more than 24 percent reported getting story ideas from readers' comments "often" or "sometimes." Most reporters (56.5 percent) said they "rarely" get story ideas from the boards. About 20 percent said they "never" get ideas from the forums.

**Table 2
Readers' Comments Impact on Reporting Practices**

	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
How often have readers' comments changed your thinking about the newsworthiness of a topic?	.9	24.1	44.7	30.8
How often do you get story ideas from readers' comments?	2.3	21.9	56.5	19.8

**Table 3
Specific Ways Readers' Comments Impact Reporting Practices**

Check all the things you have done based on your experience with readers' comments.

Contacted or included more sources	23.1
Contacted or included more minorities as sources	1.6
Contacted or included more women as sources	.9
Contacted or included more conservative voices	2.3
Contacted or included more liberal voices	.9
Included more facts	22.9
Included more attribution	12
Been more mindful of word choice	38.2
Avoided a controversial line of questioning	.7
Avoided a story topic altogether	1.6
Nothing. I haven't changed my approach.	41.7
Other	14.6

Most reporters said that the online comments have altered the way they do their job in some way. More than 23 percent said they contact or include more sources in their news stories; nearly the same amount said they include more facts; 12 percent reported that they include more attribution and more than 38 percent said the comments made them more mindful of word choice. Very few (2.3 percent) said the comments made them wary of particular topics and prompted them to either avoid a controversial line of questioning or avoid a story topic altogether. [See Table 3]

In an open-ended option in the questionnaire, reporters spoke further of the myriad ways the comments have changed the way they do their job. "I'm more

Table 4
Reporters' Attitudes Toward Online Readers' Comments

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Undec'd</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
To what extent do you agree that online readers' comment forums at your newspaper promote civil, thoughtful discussion of community issues?	.2	13.6	21.6	37.1	27.7

aware now that some readers assume any fact that contradicts their bias is the product of MY bias," wrote one longtime sports reporter. "It could be that the web makes news and commentary hard to distinguish. Maybe this makes me more stringent about displaying—not just having—balanced sourcing." A new features reporter from a newspaper in the South with a circulation of more than 60,000 reported being "more careful using any terms or story construction that could be perceived as racist." A new reporter who works for a newspaper in the Midwest with a circulation of more than 100,000 admitted that comments "sometimes pose a question that I didn't answer in the story and should have." Others spoke of heeding the fundamentals: "I have been more deliberate in my self-editing (spelling, grammar, etc.) than before," wrote a veteran reporter at a paper in the Northeast with a circulation over 70,000.

RQ3 asked if reporters feel that online comments promote civil, thoughtful discussion of community issues.

Most (64.8 percent) reporters either "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that the online comments promoted civil, thoughtful discussion.⁶¹ Just over 21 percent said they were "undecided" about it, and more than 13 percent indicated that they did. [See Table 4]

RQ4 asked if there is a relationship between reporters' level of experience and their attitudes toward online reader comments.

More than 41 percent of those reporters who responded have been journalists for more than 20 years, figures that correspond with the trend that the median age of U.S. journalists is increasing;⁶² 16 percent have been reporters for 15-20 years. [See Table 5]

Table 5
Reporters' Level of Experience

	<i>0-5 yrs.</i>	<i>5-10 yrs.</i>	<i>10-15 yrs.</i>	<i>15-20 yrs.</i>	<i>Over 20 yrs.</i>
How long have you been a reporter?	13.7	15.5	13	16.2	41.7

Of the five variables involving reporters' engagements with comments, two correlated significantly with reporters' years of experience. Reporters with more experience were more likely to respond to comments ($r=.103$, $p=.031$). But reporters with more experience were also less likely to change their thinking on the newsworthiness of a topic ($r=.116$, $p=.016$). The correlations, although significant, are both quite small.

There were no significant relationships between a reporter's experience level and whether he or she read or got ideas from the forums or felt they promoted civil discourse.

RQ5 asked if there is a relationship between reporters' years of experience and the degree to which they have changed their reporting practices.

There is no correlation between reporters' level of experience and the degree to which they change the way they report and write ($r=-.071$, $p=.155$, $N=407$). The analysis was based on summing the number of changes the respondent said he or she made (Table 3) in reporting practices. For example, some said they changed one, two and three things while others said they changed nothing. The number of items they checked was correlated with the number of years of experience. Most of the reporters who changed at least one thing changed many things about their reporting practices.

Looking at it in a different way, a Chi-square analysis was used to determine if years of experience were related to whether reporters made any change in their practices. The list was collapsed into two categories — reporters who made any change and reporters who made no changes. Once again, there was no relationship between the variables ($\chi^2=.770$, $p=.942$, $df=4$).

Discussion

Reporters at the country's largest U.S. daily newspapers generally take a dim view of the online reader comments. Their feelings toward them generally run the gamut from hot to cold; but overall, they consider them to be a vexing distraction and not utilized the way they were intended. Many are troubled by their content and express their dismay over their newspaper's endorsement of providing a forum for anonymous discussion, where emotions can run high and mudslinging is the norm.

Still, many find them useful. A vast majority said they at least occasionally got story ideas from the comments, positioning the comments as fulfilling one of the fundamental needs of the daily newspaper reporter. The reporter is still able to decide, of course, which idea is worthy of pursuing, but reporters also say that readers' comments have frequently altered their outlook on the newsworthiness of a story. Readers are essentially telling reporters (even if not directly): "Here's a good story, and here's why it's a good story." And some reporters are listening.

This finding suggests a newfound reliance by some journalists on a way of staying in touch with readers, even if they do not communicate directly with them. In this way, the online forums represent an entirely new opinion pipeline not seen in the letters-to-the-editors section of the printed newspaper. This research has shown that the comment boards, still in their infancy, have the potential to be viewed as favorably as popular means of communication, like the telephone and e-mail. Reporters see a new, potentially unprecedented means of gauging the thoughts of their readership, but they also see that the current model is in need of repair.

Commenters have had other effects as they wrestle their way into the consciousness of journalists. Reporters speak of how readers have essentially made them work harder and be more accountable. From seeking out more sources and facts to heeding word choice and sentence construction, reporters are changing the way they do their jobs. Just over half of the reporters who responded said the forums have prompted them to change something.

Finally, those reporters who generally have been engaging new media technologies and new ways of communicating with readers are not, as might be expected, part of a younger, web-savvy generation of journalists. Most reporters who participated in the online survey for this study are seasoned reporters. Further, reporters with more experience were more likely to engage with readers via the forums, although, interestingly, less likely to change their minds on the newsworthiness of a topic. One interpretation might be that experienced reporters were more apt to explain themselves to sources about the reasons for their news decisions.⁶³

Conclusion

Building on both the tradition of the letter to the editor as well as the chat rooms and bulletin boards of 20 years ago, the rise of the online forums is undeniable. This study shows that 92 percent of the top 150 U.S. newspapers have adopted the forums.

This research shows that in the few years since online comments have become regular fare in online newspapers, the forums have demonstrated some usefulness for reporters.⁶⁴ Commenters have spurred reporters to re-examine the newsworthiness of a topic and have also helped them think of new and different stories to tell while nudging them toward new and different ways to tell them. As such, the comment forums have risen to join other communication tools of the journalist and demonstrate the growing power of citizens to influence the mass communicator in their agenda-setting role in ways not previously seen. Reporters' contemporary behavior shows that they are willing to give new communication technologies a chance—an important finding as newspaper journalism continues a turbulent era of convergence.

Newspapers should be buoyed by the promise of this new communication tool and preserve the forums as a means of reader-journalist interaction. They

should either disallow anonymity, which is already beginning to happen,⁶⁵ commit resources to vet every comment, or employ effective user-regulation policies, such as those that rely on the wisdom of the crowd to decide which commenters should be heard and which should be muted. Newspapers should recognize this approach as a way of raising the level of discourse in the comment boards by providing a measure of accountability. Doing so could improve reader-journalist interaction, which would—as this research has shown—improve the quality of journalism.

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44. Wayne Wanta, Scott Reinardy and Jensen Moore, "How Do Newspaper Journalists Use the Internet in News Gathering?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, Calif., May 2007).

45. Rosenberry, "Few Papers Use Online Techniques to Improve Public Communication."

46. Rosenberry, "Few Papers Use Online Techniques to Improve Public Communication," 70.

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48. Call-in columns are places in the newspaper where short, often anonymous comments of recorded phone messages of readers are published.

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50. Michael Dupre, "Letters and Phone-Mails to the Editor: A Comparison of Reader Input," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, no. 2/3 (spring / summer 2002).

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53. Young-Gil Chae, "An Aspect of the Culture of the Public Sphere in U.S.: The Analysis of Online Public Forums in Local Online Newspapers" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New York, N.Y., May 2009)

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55. Of the largest 150 U.S. daily newspaper websites examined, all but 11 had comments sections. Reporters who worked for those newspapers that did not have readers' comments forums following news stories were not included in the survey.

56. In order to be included in the sample group, the reporter had to have either his or her work e-mail publicly available on the company website or be available via an electronic contact form through the company website.

57. Newsroom staffers who were listed in staff lists as being exclusively a columnist, editor, blogger, freelancer or newsroom manager were not part of the sample.

58. According to the American Society of News Editors, as of December 2008, women represented 37 percent of newspaper newsrooms while men represented 63 percent.

59. A total of 1,571 reporters were sent e-mail invitations to participate in the survey. Of those, 73 e-mails bounced either because they previously opted out of SurveyMonkey surveys or auto filters prevented the message from reaching the reporter.

60. Kim Sheehan, "E-Mail Survey Response Rates: A Review," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 6, no. 2 (2001).

61. In an open-ended question asking reporters what readers were most often commenting on, many reporters wrote about the proliferation of ad hominem attacks on racial groups, particularly Hispanics. "Comments often quickly turn to racist, bigoted, inarticulate diatribes related to the story's subject matter only tangentially at best," wrote one reporter. Of the 102 reporters who selected the "other" category of what readers were most often commenting on, 37 wrote that readers regularly made racist remarks.

62. David H. Weaver, *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium, Lea's Communication Series* (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

63. Similarly, there was no correlation between reporters' level of experience and the degree to which they made changes. This suggests that reporters adopt and maintain a particular approach to reporting regardless of age or level of experience; if they exhibit a willingness to alter their approach to reporting as a young or inexperienced reporter, that willingness is likely to persist as they gain more experience.

64. One reporter summed it up this way: "While I mostly dismiss the angry commenters who end up flaming the 'community discussion' into oblivion, there are cases where it works and truly creates an exchange of ideas."

65. In August 2010, *The Buffalo News* began requiring commenters to give their real names and towns, which will appear with their comments just as they do in printed letters to the editor. In September, the (Salt Lake City) *Desert News* announced that they would require every new user account to include a real name and location, much like *The Wall Street Journal*, although they will still allow screen names to appear with posts.