PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE COMMENTS

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On social media and online news sources, comments and other forms of contextualization influence the ways consumers ultimately interpret information. One example of this is the "nasty effect," in which audiences react to the rude comments of other users on news articles by forming more polarized risk perceptions of the topic (Anderson et al., 2014). This report provides information on audiences' views of online comments on news articles and blogs, based on a nationally representative survey conducted from July to August 2014.
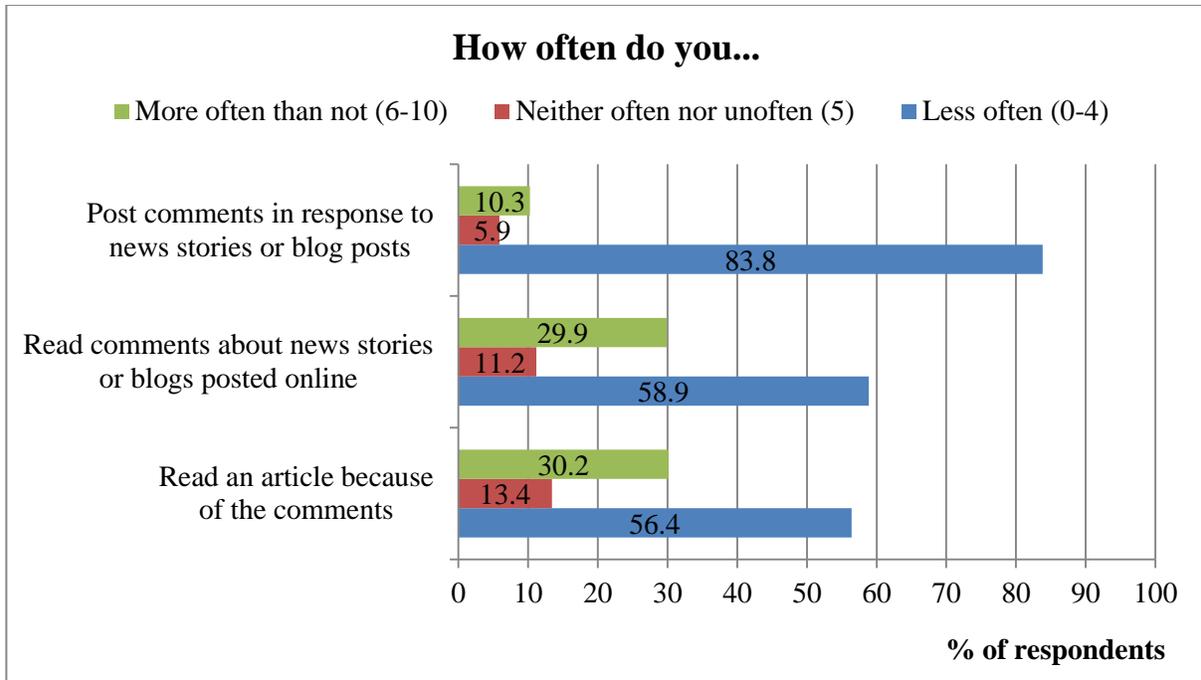
Findings

How often do you...

- More often than not (6-10)
- Neither often nor unoften (5)
- Less often (0-4)

Post comments in response to news stories or blog posts
- 10.3
- 5.9
- 83.8

Read comments about news stories or blogs posted online
- 29.9
- 11.2
- 58.9

Read an article because of the comments
- 30.2
- 13.4
- 56.4

% of respondents

Figure 1. Respondents' (*N*=3126 to *N*=3136) use of online comments on news articles and blogs. Over half of respondents do not usually post comments, read comments, or read an article because of the comments, but considerable portions report reading comments and reading an article due to them. (11 point scale, from 0="Never" to 10="Very often"; Missing values excluded.)

A substantial portion of respondents indicated that they used comments. About a third of participants reported that they read comments (30%) or read an article because of the comments (30%) more often than not (Figure 1). Considerably fewer (10%) reported that they often posted comments. The majority of respondents indicated that they do typically post comments (84%), read comments (59%), or read an article because of the comments (56%). However, the substantial portion of respondents that do use comments are indicative of the continued expansion of social media users. The numbers may also reflect the higher portion of "lurkers" (social media community members who observe but do not participate actively) compared to posters.
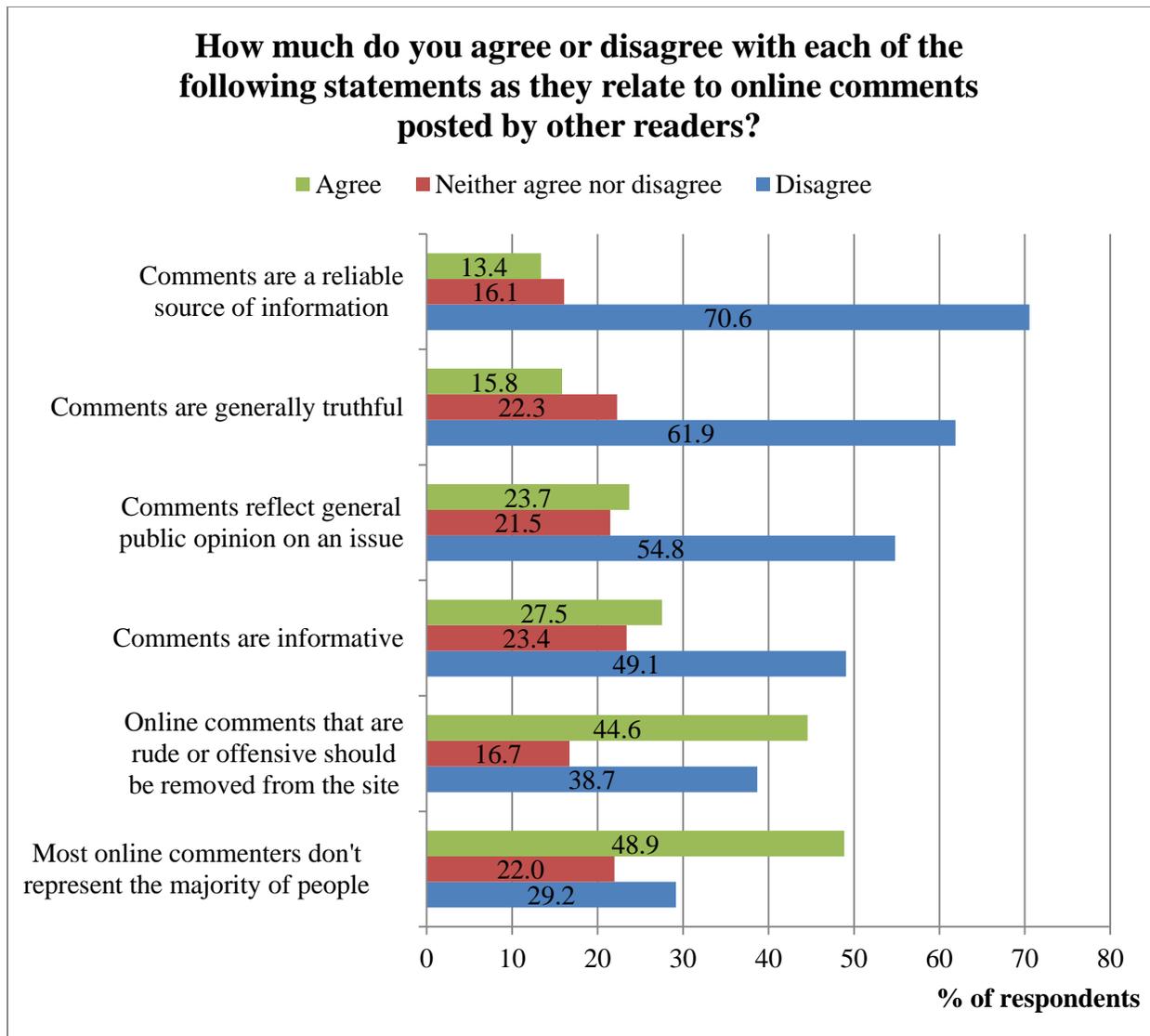
Figure 2. Respondent (*N*=3117 to *N*=3129) attitudes toward online comments. Opinions were fairly mixed about online comments, but participants generally did not find them to be a reliable source of information or truthful. Opinions on censorship were less straightforward. (11 point scale, from 0="Do not agree at all" to 10="Agree very much"; Missing values excluded.)

Participant attitudes toward online comments were generally mixed. While half of respondents (49%) do not believe that comments are informative, a considerable portion also found them to be informative (28%). Most participants reported that comments are not a reliable source of information (71%) or truthful (62%), but other attitudes were less clear cut. Opinions were more split on the representativeness of online commenters and the public opinion, with a little less than a third indicating that commenters are representative (29%) and around a fourth indicating that comments reflect the general public opinion (24%). Substantial portions also believed the opposite or were unsure for both of these attitudes. Lastly, participants were divided on whether rude or offensive comments should be removed, with comparable numbers agreeing (45%) and disagreeing (39%).

Table 1. Respondent (*N*=3106 to *N*=3113) attitudes toward comments compared to frequency of reading online comments. Broadly, participant attitudes varied based on how often they reported reading online comments.

		How often you… Read comments about news stories or blogs posted online		
		More often than not (6-10)	Neither (5)	Less often (0-4)
Online comments that are rude or offensive should be removed from the site	Count	473	138	777
	% Agree	50.5%	39.8%	42.5%
	Count	108	95	316
	% Neither	11.5%	27.4%	17.3%
	Count	356	114	736
	% Disagree	38.0%	32.9%	40.2%
	Total	937	347	1829
	N=3113	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Comments are informative	Count	400	85	370
	% Agree	42.9%	24.4%	20.3%
	Count	199	120	408
	% Neither	21.4%	34.4%	22.4%
	Count	333	144	1047
	% Disagree	35.7%	41.3%	57.4%
	Total	932	349	1825
	N=3106	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Comments are a reliable source of information	Count	199	41	175
	% Agree	21.3%	11.8%	9.6%
	Count	120	98	280
	% Neither	12.8%	28.2%	15.3%
	Count	615	209	1374
	% Disagree	65.8%	60.1%	75.1%
	Total	934	348	1829
	N=3111	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Participants who indicated they read comment more often than they did not were more likely to report that comments were informative (43%) and less likely to report that they are not a reliable source of information (66%) compared to those who read comments less often (20% and 75%, respectively). Attitudes toward removing rude or offensive comments were again divided, even within groups. Interestingly, just over half of respondents (51%) who more often read comments supported removing rude comments, but a significant portion did not (38%). Comparatively, those who reported reading comments less often were more evenly split, with almost equal numbers supporting the removal of rude comments (43%) as did not (40%).

Respondents in the mid-category for how often they read comment sections (neither often nor unoften) were more likely to indicate ambiguity in their responses, with a larger portion of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing with each statement compared to the other two groups.

Conclusion

Overall, a considerable (and growing) number of survey respondents often use online comments, with more respondents seemingly acting as lurkers than active participants. Respondents generally held mixed attitudes about online comments. The majority of respondents did not think comments were a reliable source of information, truthful, or reflective of the general publics' opinions (although significant portions held opposing views). However, participants were split on whether rude or offensive comments should be removed. Attitudes toward comments also varied based on how often online comments were read, with those who read them more often holding a slightly more positive outlook.

About the survey

Participants were asked specifically about "online comments to news articles or blog posts and those who contribute online comments." The survey was conducted online through the GfK Group online survey company using a nationally representative sample of 3,145 adult members of the U.S. public. The survey was administered between July and August 2014, with a final stage completion rate of 48.0%. On average, participants were middle age (M=46.8, SD=17.4) and slightly more female (51.8%), with the median level of education as "Some college, no degree" and income as "$50,000 to $59,999."

References

Anderson, A. A., Brossard, D., Scheufele, D. A., Xenos, M. A., & Ladwig, P. (2014). The "Nasty Effect:" Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(3), 373-387. doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12009

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