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Triggering participation: Exploring the effects of third-person and hostile media perceptions on online participation

Myojung Chung [a,*], Greg J. Munno [b], Brian Moritz [c]

[a] Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
[b] S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, United States
[c] Department of Communication Studies, SUNY Oswego, United States

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ABSTRACT

Using a 2×3 mixed between-within subjects experiment ($N = 102$), we tested how the presence of online comments affects self-other differences and perceptions of media bias, as well as factors predicting subjects' likelihood of commenting on an online news story. We found that (a) presence of comments lowers self-other differences and consequently attenuates the third-person effect, and (b) perceptions of media bias significantly predict likelihood of commenting. Additionally, we found that subjects were more likely to comment on stories they found biased against their position as a form of corrective action, and that subjects were more likely to share and like stories they found biased in favor of their position as a form of promotional action.

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1. Introduction

The study of the antecedents and effects of online behavior has applications to psychology, health promotion, deliberative democracy, journalistic enterprise, and various types of marketing. In journalism studies, there has been much debate about the promise and pitfalls of comments on online news articles. On one hand, comments are devices that increase web traffic and profits, in addition to providing an important forum for policy discussion and debate. On the other, concerns abound about the lack of reader engagement on some stories, and about the excessively vitriolic, spurious, and/or off-topic commentary on other stories.

Meanwhile, in fields such as health communication and marketing, researchers and practitioners are interested in how participation with media content changes the effect of the message (Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014; Shi, Messaris, & Cappella, 2014; Sparks & Browing, 2011). They are asking questions such as: How do we prompt the target audience to engage constructively with the message? Does that engagement lend the message some of the power of interpersonal communication? Does it lower the perception of self-other differences? Does it increase self-efficacy? And, ultimately, does it lead to more effective interventions? For instance, can it help overcome policy differences on key issues such as gun rights and gun control?

Answering any of those questions requires a more sophisticated understanding of the psychological processes involved behind comment behavior. We believe that key determinants include a potential commentator's position on any given issue, the relationship of that position to the content of the news article, and the extent to which the potential commentator believes others will be affected by the news content.

2. Theory

2.1. Online participation

The Pew Internet & American Life Project's "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer: How Internet and Cell Phone Users Have Turned News into a Social Experience" found that 61% of Americans get at least some of their news online, second only to television at 78%, and well ahead of print newspapers at 50% (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). The report concludes that the social-functionality of online news sites drives consumption. Fifty-two percent of online readers share links to news articles by email and on social networking sites, while 75% of online news readers utilize those links to help them discover news content (Purcell et al., 2010).

Among various features of online news sites, this study mainly focuses on online comments. Commenting is one of the most

common forms of online participation, and is a signature characteristic of online news portals. Santana (2011) found that 95% of American newspapers with online websites allow readers to comment, a result of the sections being seen as both popular and profitable. Goode (2009) sees the audience's growing influence as an important check on the power of elites, calling it a democratizing force. Although the number of commentators is relatively low – about 25% of online readers in the Pew study, with less in most other studies – the number of news consumers who read comments is far greater (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

Concerns about comments abound. Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) found that readers of Sacramento Bee's online site found many of the comments offensive. Journalists at the paper expressed concerns about "personal attacks on sources or reporters, flaming, propagation of misinformation, and the tarnishing the reputation of the paper" (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011, online resource without page numbers). Jim Brady, the first executive editor of WashingtonPost.com, said shortly after the launch of the site that he hoped it would "build a community to talk about the news and not just read it" (Howell, 2007, no page number). But he acknowledged that the conversation turned out to be "more of a free for all." As Kristina Ackermann (2010), managing editor of the trade magazine Editor & Publisher writes,

> "In theory, the ability to comment gives readers, bloggers, and citizen journalists the chance to chime in on a story: to check facts, clarify points, share personal experiences, even pick a side and argue their case. All this while boosting the number of clicks on the paper's website, making it more appealing to advertisers. The hiccup in this theory is … newspapers have opened themselves up to hate-filled rants and profanity-laden arguments that would make even the saltiest of sailors blush" (p. 44).

Some news outlets have recently unplugged their comment sections, and others are considering various levels of facilitation, moderation, or outright restriction on commentary (Beaujon, 2012; LaBarre, 2013). When Popular Science disabled its commenting section, it cited communication research that found exposure to nasty online comments increased opinion polarization on the issue of nanotechnology (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; LaBarre, 2013). Nonetheless, fears of angering readers by suppressing comments and the revenue they generate are keeping these rollbacks in check (Beaujon, 2012). Indeed, some news outlets have begun evaluating reporters based on the number of comments their stories receive, increasing scholarly interest in the triggers of commenting behavior. Moritz and Munno (2012), for instance, found that some story frames generated more comments than others. What's even more apparent is the opposite relationship: comments can impact other readers' perception of the news story itself, providing competing frames from which to interpret the story (Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010).

The importance of comments goes well beyond the developing digital business model for news organizations. Comments are dialogic, and that makes them different from other online behaviors that have been broadly dubbed as participatory, such as sharing, tagging, and liking content. Discourse has long been recognized as crucial to the proper functioning and legitimation of democracy, and so too has the press's role in informing, sparking, capturing, and hosting those discussions (Lasswell, 1941; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Schudson, 2011). As Lasswell writes, "democracy depends on talk" (1941, p. 81). With more and more discourse taking place online, the tenor and inclusiveness of the digital debate may have significant influence on the quality of our national discourse in general (Gimmler, 2001). This is particularly important as political polarization grows and trust in government diminishes (Nabatchi, 2010).

New, participatory, online news consumption behaviors like the comment, then, are changing our national discourse, creating new challenges and opportunities for the press, opening the door to participation for some citizens, and perhaps closing it for others. It also provides a new frontier for examining, expanding, and challenging traditional communication theories that examine the processes and effects of news creation and dissemination as linear, unidirectional, and largely within the control of stable organizations (Schudson, 2011; Shoemaker & Voss, 2009). Research on how online comments affect audiences' perceptions of online news content is growing (Anderson et al., 2014; Antonopoulos, Veglis, Gardikiotis, Kotsakis, & Kalliris, 2015; Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013; Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2014; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Stavrositu & Kim, 2014). This study seeks to continue this line of research focusing on the third-person effect (TPE) and the hostile media perception (HMP).

3. TPE and HMP

First proposed by sociologist Davison (1983), the third-person effect posits that people tend to assume others are more vulnerable to persuasive media messages than they are. For the past 30 years, the third-person effect has generated substantial research interest in a variety of contexts, including news (Salwen, 1998), commercial content (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), health (Henriksen & Flora, 1999), entertainment (Gunther, 1995; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999), and political communication (Pan, Abisaid, Paek, Sun, & Houden, 2006; Wei & Lo, 2007). A meta-analysis of 372 effect sizes from 106 studies found a very robust average effect size of $d = .646$ ($r = .307$), (Sun, Shen, & Pan, 2008).

Hostile media perception predicts that people with strong attitudes and group identifications tend to perceive that media are biased against their side of a social issue, even if the news report is neutral (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Ample support for the effect has been found in different types of media (Coe et al., 2008), message contexts (Lee, 2012), issue domains (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006), and political systems (Chia, Yong, Wong, & Koh, 2007). A recent meta-analysis also found a clear link to hostile media perception across 34 studies with an average effect size of $r = .296$ (Hansen & Kim, 2011).

Given that both are based on perceptual biases about the effects of media messages, the theoretical link between the TPE and HMP has received much scholarly attention. For instance, Vallone et al. (1985) found that the level of involvement with a topic enhances the third-person effect. The level of involvement can be defined as a position of strong opinion or attitudes toward a certain issue (Perloff, 2002), which is the basic premise of HMP. Perceptions of media bias have also been found to influence the magnitude of TPE (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Gibbon & Durkin, 1995), attesting to a clear link between the two theories. Studies focusing on the concept of perceived reach (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006) showed that when the subjects surmised that the content would have a greater influence on others (i.e. newspaper article vs. college student essay), the subjects scored the content as more biased.

The fundamental premise underlying the two theories is a lack of knowledge about how others perceive or react to any particular media message. When reading newspapers or watching television news, traditional news consumers did not have any direct information about what others thought about the news. A rich body of research has discussed how this ignorance influences media effects, employing the concept of *presumed media influence.* Scholars have suggested that people tend to assume media effects