Article

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Are Newspapers' Online Discussion Boards Democratic Tools or Conspiracy Theories' Engines? A Case Study on an Eastern European "Media War"

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Abstract

This article analyzes quantitatively and qualitatively 1,583 comments by national newspapers' online readers in Bulgaria. It investigates readers' reactions to articles discussing the media war between the biggest press groups—one owned by an MP known as "the Murdoch of the East." The study explores how these stories influence the relationship between newspapers and their readers, and whether they enhance the democratic potential of online discussion. The results show a higher level of reader engagement than in established democracies or nondemocracies. The online space provides an arena for democratic conversations and it is also used as an engine for conspiracy theories.

The year 2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Two key developments of the last 25 years are of particular interest for this article. On one hand, in spite of the significant changes democratization brought about in Eastern and Central Europe, most notably freedom of expression and free media markets, the global financial crisis led to a worrying "regional trend" (Štětka, 2012). Prior to 2008, a lot of media companies were in the hands of foreign owners, but many subsequently withdrew due to financial difficulties. Many big media corporations are now owned by

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local businessmen with strong political interests (Štětka, 2012). As a result, as Štětka (2012) claims, "media independence and autonomy are currently at stake," because journalists "are under twofold pressures from politicians and media owners, who are often interlocked in an informal power alliance." "Media freedom and pluralism appear to be in jeopardy" in Bulgaria mainly due to the increasing influence of one media group (New Bulgarian Media Group [NBMG]) and its alleged owner—an MP labeled as "the Murdoch of the East" (Štětka, 2012). Pressure escalated at the end of 2010 when the German company Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) refused to sell the other big player in the market—Media Group Bulgaria (MGB)—to the MP's corporation and instead sold it to a newly formed company. This prompted an open verbal war between the two biggest press groups, which lasted until 2013 (when ownership changed hands again) and was largely led on the pages of their newspapers and on TV. The war quickly transcended into the political and judicial realms—key scandals revolved around the political career of "the Murdoch of the East," the depositing of more than 50% of public money in a bank owned by his alleged partner, charges pressed for money laundering and fraud against their rivals, and allegations about the Prime Minister's involvement in these "battles." Although a number of studies have investigated the media landscape in Eastern Europe, no known study has looked at audiences' perceptions of those worrying developments or the role these largely negative stories play in the relationship between newspapers and readers.

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On the other hand, a key change the digital age has brought about is the alleged empowerment of media users via the ample interaction and engagement opportunities the Internet and mobile technologies offer. There is an increased immediacy not only of news breaking and delivery but also of readers'/viewers'/listeners'/users' contributions and reactions to journalistic outputs. Most publications have online editions and offer their readers the opportunity to comment on articles. At least in theory, online comments have the same, if not more significant democratic potential, than the traditional letters-to-the-editor. They provide an arena "for public discussion by regular citizens and can be seen as a key institution of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1989, as quoted in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 69). However, studies focused on comments (e.g., Richardson & Stanyer, 2011) explore the situation in established democracies or nondemocratic societies (Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008) and reach largely pessimistic conclusions—that "the deliberative democratic potential of online discussion is a long way from the deliberative ideal" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 983).

What this article intends to do is to bridge the gap between what appear to be two distinctive developments and bodies of research—a worrying trend toward decreasing media freedom and pluralism in Eastern and Central Europe, on one hand, and the alleged empowerment of media audiences, on the other hand. The study will focus on Bulgaria—a country where these trends are most pronounced and also representative of the region (Štětka, 2012). The focus will be further narrowed down to the comments published under articles explicitly discussing the media war between the biggest corporations. Key questions this article aims to answer are as follows: What role do these largely negative stories play in the relationship between newspapers and their readers and to what extent do they enhance the alleged democratic potential of online discussion? Does the public agenda as evidenced in comments differ from the media agenda as demonstrated in newspaper articles? The expectation is that the alleged democratic potential will be stronger on this topic, because media freedom and pluralism are a key aspect of any democracy and therefore something even more greatly valued and cherished in a new democracy, which has only recently "regained" these key freedoms.

Literature Review

Newspapers' Online Discussion Boards—Democratic Tools or Tribunes for "Unashamed Bigotry"?

The increased use of online platforms, applications, and tools by journalists and citizens has indisputably led to increased academic interest. Numerous studies investigate the challenges mainstream media have faced and the subsequent changes they have made, including in their relationship with audiences. The current study will make a contribution to this body of research. It will delve deeper into the wider

political and social implications of these changes. More often than not journalism studies have remained journalism-centric—mainly revolving around the ultimate question of "What does this mean for the future of journalism and journalists?" As important and valid this question is, we should not forget that there is the related and perhaps more fundamental question of, as David Marsh (2012) puts it, has the digital age rewritten the role of journalism? We cannot really answer this question without investigating the role journalism plays (or should play) in democratic societies.

Why are readers' opinions important? Wahl-Jorgensen claims that the letters-to-the-editor sections in newspapers provide arenas for "public discussion by regular citizens" and can, therefore, be potentially regarded as "a key institution of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1989; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 69). Hence, we can infer that online comments play a similar (or perhaps even stronger) role due to the more limited gatekeeping and moderation. Not only do they provide opportunities for newspapers to develop and "reform" their relationships with readers but they also give citizens a voice in the public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 69). By "providing opportunities for critical debate," media institutions play a dual positive role—They facilitate participation in democratic "conversations" and enhance citizens' role as active participants in critical debates (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 78).

However, as Richardson and Stanyer (2011) recognize in a U.K. study of online comments, "the deliberative democratic potential of online discussion is a long way from the deliberative ideal" (p. 983). They conclude "that the vast majority of reader comments and arguments failed even basic standards of reasonableness" and most comments, even in broadsheets involve point scoring and name calling and are "a paradigm example of how *not* to engage in critical discussion" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 995). Similarly, observers in the United States note that anonymous comments are "a place where unashamed bigotry is all too easy to find" (Washington as quoted in Santana, 2014, p. 20). Researchers in China (Zhou et al., 2008), however, identify an opposite trend—most comments are "in consensus" and do not disagree with or offend previous "posters" (p. 767). This difference alone demonstrates the importance of accounting for the level of democratization of a country when evaluating the democratic "reality" of online discussion.

Equally important is to acknowledge that lots of studies reach pessimistic conclusions, because their investigations are rigidly based on Habermas's romanticized normative ideal of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). Useful attempts to measure "deliberativeness" have been made,[1] but Papacharissi (2002) reminds us that scholars often fall into the trap of idealizing the public sphere as "a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate and . . . could lead to public agreement and decision making" (p. 11).

However,

> . . . a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy. (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11)

Similarly, Dahlberg's (2001) analysis shows that although "vibrant exchange of positions and rational critique does take place within many online fora," a number of factors such as the increasing commodification of cyberspace, minimal reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening, and social inequalities limit the expansion of the virtual public sphere. All these are sets of conditions formulated in Habermas's original study.

Nonetheless, as Papacharissi (2002) argues, "people who would never be able to come together to discuss political matters offline are now able to do so online, and that is no small matter" (p. 22). Dahlgren (2005) also warns that

> while it is important to keep a clear perspective and not exaggerate the extent of the activities or their impact, it would also be foolish to underestimate what seems to be a major development in the contemporary history of Western democracy. (p. 160)

This is largely the view this article adopts: Even if it is highly unlikely to find an idealized virtual public sphere in the Bulgarian context, it is still important to consider the extent to which readers engage in discussions of political and democratic importance. Moreover, as Freelon (2010) reminds us, the Internet "can support democracy" (p. 1183) in different ways, and the deliberative model offers one (albeit not the only one) possible explanation.

The Internet's role is potentially even more important in Eastern Europe's new democracies because of the generally weaker civil societies there ("a lasting feature"—European Union Center of Excellence, n. d.) and therefore, fewer opportunities for citizens' contribution to the public sphere. Although the European Union and the United States have invested significant efforts and funding into nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society is still very weak in Bulgaria due to the low rate of civil involvement (Howard, 2003). It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the reasons behind this, but suffice it to say that "a mistrust of communist organizations, the persistence of friendship networks, and post-communist disappointment" (Howard, 2003, p. 12) have all contributed to it. Beissinger (2012) argues, however, that in countries with weak civil societies, "virtual" civil society can play a much stronger role—It "may function as a substitute, providing the basis for civic activism even in the presence of an anemic conventional civil society" (p. 1). Dahlberg (2001) also recognizes that the development of online deliberation is inherently linked to a range of offline structural factors. He claims that "offline social and cultural conditions" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 628) hinder online deliberation. However,

in spite of the fact that he briefly mentions one case from a non-Western nondemocratic country, most of his case studies are from Western democracies. Given that inequalities in the distribution of social resources are more prominent in less developed new democracies such as Bulgaria, we can assume that we are highly unlikely to observe an ideal version of the public sphere there.

Another claim that Dahlberg (2001) makes but does not fully explore is that in an ideal virtual public sphere, "discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power" (p. 623). He seems to imply that independence from direct state and commercial interests in itself guarantees publicly driven discourse. Is this really the case? Agenda-setting theory suggests that this relationship between policy makers, the mass media, and the public is much more complicated. Its main premise is that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13), but "there is undoubtedly a two-way, mutually dependent relationship between the public agenda and the media agenda" (Rogers & Dearing, 1988, p. 571). Although this study is not representative and does not aim to fully investigate this relationship, it is worth to at least briefly compare the media agenda with the public agenda as expressed by readers in our sample. We can do that by exploring the topics and themes that attract more interest and argumentation. Zhou et al. (2008) argue that "topicality" is important because "the content of the dialogue or the topics that are discussed . . . is one of the key characteristics of the political public sphere" (p. 762). Do readers discuss the same topics as suggested in the articles or do they consider other issues important as well?

A key indicator of the extent to which the democratic potential of online discussion is realized is the quality of argumentation. Richardson and Stanyer (2011) argue that "a fundamental cooperative principle underwriting a reasonable argumentative discussion is that participants open themselves up to the possibility of having their opinion changed by the standpoint and reasoning of other participants" (p. 1000). Other academics (Papacharissi, 2004; Ziegele & Quiring, 2010) offer a less idealized understanding of democratic deliberation. Papacharissi (2004) endorses Lyotard's view of "democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy" and argues that rude comments by their very nature do not hinder democratic debate. Uncivil and offensive comments, however, have a detrimental impact. Papacharissi (2004) defines incivility as "the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (p. 267). This article will therefore investigate the quality of argumentation by using a mixed methods approach—by reporting the level of negativity in the comments and looking closely at how the conversations evolve. Argumentation is defined as follows:

> A written or verbal exchange of views between the parties with the aim of either justifying or refuting a standpoint in order to settle a difference of opinion (Atkin and Richardson, 2007). Even more succinctly, argumentation is a process whereby claims are

attacked and defended and differences of opinion resolved. (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 986)

The presentation of findings will be structured around the three key issues discussed above: (a) level of engagement, (b) topicality and potential differences in agendas (public vs. media), and (c) degree and quality of argumentation.

"Mini-Murdochs" of the East—Journalism in the New Democracies of Eastern and Central Europe

The demise of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 to 1991 led to rapid trends toward democratization, including liberalization of media markets. These developments attracted increased interest in the region. As Hume (2011) claims, "recognizing the importance of the media in bringing about democratic changes, intensive Western democracy aid poured in to help create independent media" (p. 9). Initially a clear upward trend was evident—democratization and media independence, freedom and pluralism went hand in hand (Hume, 2011; Jakubowics, 2012). A worrying regional pattern has emerged since 2008—the withdrawal of international media investors "selling out to local entrepreneurs who are interested in harvesting the political potential of these now-established media venues" (Hume, 2011, p. 6). Štětka (2012) argues that the region is now "plagued by their own mini-Murdochs[2]—and in these more fragile democracies, they represent an even bigger threat." Why are local entrepreneurs "dangerous"? These questions can be best answered if we look closely at one case study—the Bulgarian "Murdoch of the East" (Štětka, 2012).

The two biggest players in the Bulgarian press market are MGB and NBMG. Until December 2010, MGB was owned by the German newspaper group WAZ. WAZ bought the two biggest selling national dailies in 1996 and in next 10 to 15 years "totally dominated" the market (Tabakova, 2014). This changed in 2007 when NBMG—a company allegedly related to the party of "the ethnic Turkish minority"—emerged in the market (Tabakova, 2014). It expanded so rapidly that commentators now worry about the "gradual concentration of a large part of Bulgarian news media" in its hands (Štětka, 2012).

The corporation is headed by "the controversial duo of Irena Krasteva, the former head of the Bulgarian State Lottery—lacking any previous media experience—and her son Delyan Peevski, who is an MP for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms" (Štětka, 2012). Peevski started his political career at the age of 21 when appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport and Chair of the Board of Directors of the biggest port ("Кариерата на Делян Пеевски," 2011). At 25, he became deputy minister and has been an elected MP since 2009. Numerous rumors have circulated about his property portfolio, tax evasion strategies, and allegations that his company has been financed by banker Tsvetan Vasilev. The former government has been accused of "indirectly subsidizing {Peevski's} conglomerate through

deposits by state entities" in Vasilev's bank (Freedom House, 2014). EurActiv (2014) describes Peevski as follows: "A symbol of the shady power brokerage that has impoverished Bulgarians, and ruined the country's reputation." Public pressure against Peevski escalated in 2013 when he was appointed head of the State Agency for National Security. This appointment prompted a mass wave of public protests, which "almost brought down the then two-week old government" (EurActiv, 2014). Parliament's vote was reversed, but Peevski's political career has recently gone from strength to strength when he was elected as an MEP in May 2014 but chose to remain an MP.

Peevski's "verbal war" with MGB openly started after WAZ sold its titles to Bulgarian "millionaire tycoons: Ognian Donev, chairman and executive director of Bulgaria's biggest pharmaceutical company, and Lyubomir Pavlov, a former banker" and politician (Langley, 2013). Soon after the deal, Pavlov and Donev were charged with fraud and money laundering. Their rivals also published "transcripts of alleged phone conversations that indicate Bonev and Pavlov have undue influence with leading political figures" and "an investigation alleging that Pavlov used real estate he owned in the French Cote d'Azur to launder money" (Langley, 2013). The war between the two press groups was led on the pages of their newspapers and on TV. Journalists and academics have strongly condemned these developments by arguing that "media freedom and pluralism" are in "jeopardy" (Štětka, 2012), because investigative and "true" reporting is endangered when "tycoons have been buying up media outlets and appearing to exert editorial control" to further their political and business interests (Langley, 2013). However, an important question not yet asked is, What role do these largely negative stories play in the relationship between newspapers and their readers and to what extent do online discussion boards enhance the alleged "deliberative democratic potential of online discussion" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 983)?

Method

The study uses a mixed methods approach. It combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis. The initial sample consisted of the four biggest selling dailies owned by NMBG and MGB—*Telegraph*, *Monitor*, *Trud*, and *24 Chasa*. *Telegraph* was first in circulation in 2011 with 105,000 copies, followed by *Trud* with 85,000 copies, then *24 Chasa* with 70,000 copies, and *Monitor* with 15,000 copies (Štětka, 2012). The intention was to download all articles (and the comments underneath) containing the names of the (alleged) owners (and associates)—NMBG's Irena Krasteva and Delyan Peevski and their alleged supporter Tsvetan Vasilev, and MGB's owners Lyubomir Pavlov and Ognian Donev. However, NMBG's newspapers had to be subsequently excluded because *Telegraph* does not publish any articles online—only a screen shot of their front page. *Monitor*, however, publishes articles online, but does not allow comments under them. Therefore, the final sample consisted

only of comments published under the articles in *24 Chasa* and *Trud*. This is a major limitation but one that cannot be overcome because it is a reflection of the actual situation. None of the editions published by the MP's company allow readers to express their opinions. To post comments in *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, users have to either register (only email addresses are required) or log in via Facebook, Yahoo, AOL, or Hotmail. Verification emails are not sent out, and there is no reference to editorial policies.

Owners' names were published in 387 articles in *Trud* and *24 Chasa* between December 2010 and May 2013—when Pavlov and Donev's company owned MGB. The total number of comments was 5,305. All articles were coded in SPSS with the aim of identifying the main themes. To allow for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the comments, their number was further reduced to only those comments published under the 53 articles explicitly discussing the media war—1,583 comments. All 1,583 comments were initially quantitatively coded in SPSS and then thematically analyzed in NVivo. This two-stage process allowed for an initial screening and quantification based on a coding schedule adapted from previous research (Richardson, 2008; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). Some of the categories for coding were main topic of the article, main theme of the comment, author's pseudonym, engagement with other readers, tone of the comment, tone toward newspaper, and so on (operational details of all coding variables are available separately). Nine percent of the sample (randomly selected) was recoded by an independent second coder. As Table 1 demonstrates, intercoder reliability was within the acceptable limits.

The qualitative analysis then allowed for a more in-depth investigation of the degree of and quality of argumentation as well as the main themes emerging from the comments. "The data are read for analytical themes, which are listed" (Fielding, 2001, p. 159) in two stages: initial coding and focused coding. This combination of quantitative content analysis[3] and qualitative thematic analysis served a twofold purpose—the probing and "testing" of prior expectations as revealed in previous research and the unveiling of new trends and themes (a grounded theory approach), which led to new theoretical and empirical insights.

Newspapers' Online Discussion Boards—Democratic Tools or Conspiracy Theories' Engines?

Engagement. The 53 articles explicitly discussing the media war attracted 278,787 views or 5,260 views per article; 1,583 comments or 30 comments on average per article were posted. A very small proportion of readers actually commented—0.6% of those who viewed the articles; 60.5% involved some level of

Table 1. Intercoder Reliability.

Variable	Simple agreement %	Krippendorff's alpha (calculated in SPSS 21)
Keywords	93.7	.8812
Engagement with other readers/users	93	.8563
Tone toward newspaper in which the article is published	91	.8400
Tone toward keyword actor(s)	97.2	.8699
Tone toward newspaper's owner(s)	88.8	.8159
Overall tone	93	.6840

Note. A full operationalization of the variables is available in Online Appendix 1.

Table 2. Main Topics of Discussion.

Topic	Newspaper articles (%)	Reader comments (%)
TV presenter Nikolay Barekov's tearing to pieces of *Trud* live on air	11.8	25.8
Distribution scandal	25.5	20
Public appearances of owner Lyubomir Pavlov	31.4	18.8
Die Welt's article about the state of the media market in Bulgaria	4	6

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100% because other topics have also been discussed.

engagement with other readers, which on the surface is perhaps a good indicator of the deliberative democratic potential. Both figures suggest a much higher level of engagement that was demonstrated by readers in Western democracies (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). *24 Chasa*'s readers were engaging more actively with each other (64.6%) than *Trud*'s readers (55%). The difference is statistically significant (Pearson $\chi^2 = 16.576$, *df* = 3, *p* = .001). However, the fact that more than half of the readers engaged in some "conversations" is not in itself evidence of argumentation but it suggests that conversations between readers take place in the online space, supporting Papacharissi's (2002) claim that online fora can be important spaces for political conversations.

Topicality and agenda setting? Four main topics discussed in the articles attracted readers' comments (Table 2). There is a slight mismatch between the topics newspapers prioritized and the ones readers were interested in. Although nearly a third of the articles were about owner Lyubomir Pavlov—related either to the money laundering and fraud charges or to his legal battles—readers discussed this topic in only 18.8% of their comments. By contrast, readers devoted more attention to TV

presenter Nikolay Barekov's tearing to pieces of *Trud* live on air. Bakerov's TV show is aired by TV7—a channel owned by NBMG.

Are there any other topics that readers find interesting but newspapers do not really discuss? Ten broader overlapping themes emerge from the qualitative bottom-up analysis with two dominating more than half of the comments (Table 3).

Table 3. Themes Emerging From the Qualitative Analysis.

Theme	*n*	%
Conspiracy theories	468	29.6
1. Newspapers as paid, servile media		
2. Readers as being on "payroll" at a rival press group		
3. Overriding plot and/or all-powerful actor (e.g., a politician)		
Journalism:	430	27.2
1. "Real" journalism		
2. "Ideal" journalism		
TV presenter Nikolay Barekov	208	13.1
Media ownership and owners	175	11.1
The role of the state and/or politicians and political parties	175	11.1
Explicit hatred	114	7.2
Censorship and/or freedom of expression	112	7.1
Emotive reaction to the fate of given newspapers	99	6.3
The European Union and the West	83	5.2
Readers' empowerment	34	2.2

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100 because of overlaps between the themes.

Readers attempt to put slightly different issues on the agenda or at least a different spin to the interpretations offered by newspapers. Thus, although most articles are very black and white—with a clear villain (the rival owner/newspaper) and hero ("our" owner/newspaper)—comments are much more nuanced. Nearly a third engage in "conspiracy theories" narratives, namely, they make attempts to see through the alleged facts and reach to the bottom of the problem/issue at stake. Very often these conspiracy theories offer a damning verdict on journalism in Bulgaria. Journalism and its relationship with democracy are explicitly discussed in more than a quarter of the comments. A key difference between readers' and newspapers' narratives is the evaluation of the state of journalism in Bulgaria.

When discussing the current state of journalism ("real journalism") and their expectations about what journalism should be about ("ideal journalism"), most readers are very critical:

Paisii: If somebody shows me even a single journalist who cannot be bribed and even one independent medium, they will get a Nobel

prize from me for invention. Journalists have been and will always be dependent on someone or something.

Atanasova: If it's a journalist (Bulgarian)—spit on him and ignore him. Nasty, low, uneducated, mercenary brood. They are not worth a damn.

Nearly half of the comments make strong allegations about payments to journalists or journalists serving their owners. Further 30% make claims about poor professionalism—mainly of their own newspapers (i.e., the ones in which they post comments). Very few actually discuss the quality of rival newspapers. In some of the threads, readers do not only criticize certain journalistic practices, but they also compare them with the ideals they believe in. Moreover, prompted by the perceived bad quality, they discuss journalistic values and ideals, such as objectivity and impartiality, serving the public interest:

Elina Angelova: Misunderstood journalism! When did objectivity and the search for impartiality disappear? I'm tired of reading manipulative articles, twisting the truth to serve the respective editorial office. This is not journalism. This is an attack over freedom of expression forced to trade with its body to please the sick ambitions of those who have enough money to buy it.

Pushit: The publication is rubbish—couldn't you just ask both sides like they do in normal journalism—it's a pity!

Rasputin: Bulgarian journalists will sell their mother's milk for money and power!!! What a shame!!! It's not the journalists' job to be watchdogs of society at any cost! This can be a main task for a rascal who has waved journalism and critiques power to enter into it (when the criticized fall down). The task of REAL JOURNALISM, you bedpan, IS TO SERVE THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST! That's it!

The tone of 87.1% of all comments is negative and only 2.2% are positive. Quite tellingly, in 35.8% the tone toward the newspaper the comment is published in is negative and in 3.3% positive. Very few readers (2.7%) openly defend their newspapers and further 3.2% say that what is happening to their newspaper is "a pity" or "a shame." Even though the majority of articles depict rival owners in a negative light (72% of the headlines include negative references), the comments indicate a different trend. The tone toward rival owners is negative in only 20.3% of comments but a higher proportion (37.9%) include negative references to the respective newspaper's owners. This trend is even more pronounced in comments under articles with positive headlines about owners; 27.5% of the articles had a headline about Pavlov or Donev. The tone toward them in 52% of the comments is negative and in 14.3% positive.

The qualitative analysis further illustrates why readers feel this way:

Kiki: I've had enough of oligarchs such as Papkata {Pavlov} and Donev. I will personally stop reading *24 Chasa* and *Trud* because true journalism in Bulgaria passed away.

Stoyan Georgiev: I know there are normal people who work in 24 {Chasa} but I'm asking myself what motivation they've got to go to work after their bosses insist on them publishing such things and signing them off with the title of the newspaper. It seems a lot more shameful to say that you work for Papkata and Donev than to clean septic holes. Wow! What times arrived and there was a time when it was prestigious to work for 24 {Chasa} or *Trud*.

Readers are disenchanted and disappointed and they blame the new owners for that. A few explicitly mention the fact that their newspapers have turned their own owners, and their own fate into the main subject of their stories shows how distanced they are. Readers' verdict is damning:

Ordinary man[4]: Ladies and gentlemen, so-called journalists, as an ordinary person, parent, and user of medicines, I couldn't care less about your hurt pride. I don't want to pay for the medicines of foreign people and countries. Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Instead of covering this genocide against the Bulgarian people with this criminal medicine policy, you behave like pinched ladies who have lost their virginity ages ago and now offer paid-for love. You truly deserve this attitude.

Kuna P.: It's a pity how authoritative editions are engulfed in the personal and business battles between some controversial big businessmen.

Aristocrat: The fight for viewers and readers reached its culmination—that's why they decided to drive the whole society crazy. I don't want to know about your problems every minute and hour of the day, you pseudo journalists, who have distanced themselves from real problems and have focused so much on your owners' issues! How much circulation goes down the toilets of millions of Bulgarians and this is the greatest use of the so-called journalism so that we have to deal with a torn-up newspaper? The truth is simple—No one trusts you, people are just having fun. The fact that you become child-like, playing fascists and partisans will not move anyone!

Ordinary man, Kuna, P., and the aristocrat's comments exemplify a common trend —in their attempts to defend themselves in their battle with their rivals, *24 Chasa* and *Trud* have clearly lost some of their readers' trust. However, there are still readers who attempt to defend the professionalism and integrity of their newspapers. They do that not just by praising their newspaper but also by attacking the "enemy":

Citizen[5]: The job of independent publishers is not easy—even in the forums the media monopolist Peevski is paying unemployed losers to spit on and destroy the reputation to force them to sell their papers for petty cash!!! But the truth always wins!!!

Zhoro: A very good and meaningful material, a truthful one, *Trud* and *24 Chasa* remain the only independent and opposition newspapers in Bulgaria which were brave enough to stand up to the whole simple-mindness taking place in our country. And those who write comments against them are APPARENTLY PAID BY THE CHEAP NEWSPAPERS. I FEEL SORRY FOR THEM!

Presko: If you think the articles are manipulative, why do you keep reading them? I aim to inform myself from different sources and to make my own truth. The truth is not Delyan Peevski's.

The last post in this thread raises an interesting issue about readers' identity. A few readers defending *24 Chasa* and *Trud* ask a similar question, and in turn those who do not like the two newspapers often claim that they are not "readers" of these newspapers because they do not buy them.

Ginev: Why do you read them then? I like their content. You are in their forum, writing, this means you like them.

Roshav: You are very stupid, man. Your way of expression shows this. The fact that someone writes somewhere is not because he likes it but because some emotion has come onto him. I doubt it that the people who write about the dead girl in England do that because they like the news. You are so elementary. And Lubo and Ogi can be shot; without them the press will be revitalized and then we can truly talk about freedom of expression and truth in the media.

Ginev to Roshav: Your way of expressing yourself is much more literary. Just to explain—when we talk about freedom of expression and we hide Peevski, this is not a coincidence.

This thread poses an interesting question of whether it is time to redefine our understanding of the term "reader" but it ends up on a familiar note—strong opinions about media owners. The above comments provide invaluable insights into readers'

views on journalism and on the surface appear to drive democratic debate forward. All in all, the data suggest that the public agenda as evidenced in our sample differs or even deviates from the media agenda: (a) Readers have reordered the salience of the topics—They devote more attention to topics deemed less interesting by the media. (b) Readers put forward new topics. The last thread also gives us an indication of the nature of these conversations—Issues are discussed and counterarguments addressed but in fairly limited ways—Habermas's ideals of the public sphere are clearly not met so it is reasonable to assume that what we observe is closer to Papacharissi's (2002) notion of a virtual space that enhances discussion. A common approach is for readers not to fully deal with the previous comment but instead to swiftly try to change the direction of the conversation to a topic advancing their own argument.

Degree and Quality of Argumentation

We already explored 1 of the 10 topics identified in the bottom-up analysis—the state of journalism, so we will now focus on the second one—conspiracy theories. Readers put forward three interlinked theories. According to the first one (44.7%), *24 Chasa* and *Trud* are paid, servile newspapers—serving external political and corporate interests:

Ifihadagan:	This is the *n*th preordered material in *24 Chasa* and *Trud*.
Cveti:	This has been known for a while—why do you bring up the issue now . . . every newspaper is connected with some party or personality and everything they publish is in the interest of somebody . . . *24 Chasa* and *Trud* were owned and still are by Donev—the biggest fraudster who launders money, and has become even richer at the expense of poor people and what happened—he bought himself media to hide him, to speculate, and to advertise him . . . But we are not a brainless herd like all big "guys" think and we don't trust everything blindly.
Desi:	Preordered manipulative nonsense—yet again. You are trying to do something which proves even more that Donev and Pavlov are guilty, it has the opposite effect to the one you desire, don't you see that?

Cveti's thesis about the media's manipulative role is echoed in follow-up posts, but readers tend to disagree in their evaluation of which newspaper/journalist/media owner is manipulative. Instead of attempting to resolve their differences, they often put forward a second conspiracy (40%)—that everyone holding an alternative opinion is on "payroll" at the rival press group. These threads involve active conversations, but although on the surface readers appear to address each other, including by using their pseudonyms, the posts do not involve much evidence of argumentative activity.

Ivan.yanev: Plamene, my boy, don't take yourself so seriously—you have occupied all forums, it's clear that you've just started this job because you are not simply writing but firing a volley of posts. You suspect others of being guilty of your own behavior, following the principle: "the thief says catch the thief."

Plamen 1972: I haven't stolen a thing but unfortunately I have to buy expensive medicines because of monopoly. How about you?

Plamen 1972: I haven't occupied all forums either—you write only in *24 Chasa* and *Trud* because you are on payroll and I'm having fun. I keep looking at other media from time to time, unlike you. Don't look at them, don't look at the comments about your bosses because it will hurt and you will find out everything. Although you look like an intelligent person and you probably know it. Yours is causa perdutta —and the more rubbish you write instead of keeping silent, the more you dig deeper into the s...t

Marina.y: Apparently, this is Plamen 1972's personal forum. It's a shame, I thought that there is a discussion here but as it turns out he is a paid fan of the competition . . . I'll come back later.

Although readers engaged in a conversation, this is the kind of conversation that hinders rather than facilitates argumentation. Plamen 1972 and Ivan.yanev did not really try to justify or refute "a standpoint in order to settle a difference of opinion" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). Instead they "fired" accusations at each other. These accusations preempted any meaningful discussion because they were underwritten by a lack of trust and allegations about lack of objectivity. Plamen 1972 tried to bring up an issue that could have potentially led to some meaningful discussion—the high prices of medicines. However, Ivan.yanev did not respond. The reaction of the third reader who ended the conversation was telling. This example demonstrates a common trend—although in quantitative terms the level of engagement is high because readers acknowledge each other's posts and address each other, the qualitative analysis reveals that the level of argumentation and democratic potential is fairly limited. These are not arguments over substance. They involve personal attacks and accusations, thus giving birth to or feeding conspiracy theories. They were not just rude but also impolite and uncivil, thus not enhancing but hindering democratic conversation (Papacharissi, 2004).

The third "conspiracy theory" (22.7%) includes claims about an overriding plot/conspiracy by an all-powerful actor (most commonly a politician or a businessman):

Igita: It looks as if she is really making money. 6pm came and she said "bye." This means she posts for Vasilev. BTW, she attacks the right-wing billionaires but she doesn't know that it's exactly Ivan Kostov {former right-wing PM} who created the wonder Vasilev and Boyko {PM} made him king.

Desy: I was last writing at 17.49, not 18, can I take my child for a peaceful walk on Sunday evening? Exactly because I'm not financially connected to any people, that is, I am not "a poster" on payroll, I couldn't care less about the one with the moustache {Vasilev} and I don't like the fat one {Peevski}. Unlike you, I am not serving anyone. It's a pity for you, you are in such a poor state exactly like your bosses Donev and Pavlov.

Igita: Desy, no need to excuse yourself. What was the walk like? Which park did you go to? Has Boyko {the PM} fixed the lighting?

Igita: Desy, if you are trying to convince us in anything, this is your problem. No one can persuade anyone else in the forums, people simply express their opinion. And mine is that people like Lyubomir Pavlov, with all his conditionalities, if he succeeds in suing the silly yellow editions of Peevski, then he would have done at least one good deed, because the Fat one started becoming very detrimental for freedom of expression. And if you deny that, you are a weak journalist and the conversation with you is meaningless.

Yet again even if any arguments were put forward with the aim of justifying or refuting a standpoint, the thread ended with accusations about "dependency." The more personal and uncivil the attacks became, the more difficult it was for readers to engage in argumentation. Some of the key traits of ideal deliberation such as ideal role taking and civility were not present (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004). The final answer touches upon wider issues such as owners' impact on freedom of expression, which could potentially attract a democratic debate. Unfortunately, none of the 14 subsequent comments elaborated on this issue. Instead the few immediate follow-up posts were focused on the personalities of the rival media owners as if deliberately shifting attention away from Peevski and his role. This seemed to be a common technique. Instead of addressing concerns, many shifted attention to the rival press group/owners. Very rarely would anyone defend "their" press group and/or owner, attack seemed to be the best defense.

Did the second broader theme—readers' verdict on journalism—provide more opportunities for deliberation? Unfortunately, although readers brought up important issues such as censorship and freedom of expression, ownership and editorial interference as well as the role of the state and of the European Union, the quality of argumentation was far from ideal—These ideas and ideals were rarely picked up in subsequent posts.

Conclusion

This study shows that although a very small proportion of online readers actually comment on newspaper articles, still in comparison with established democracies

considerably more Bulgarians engage in conversations. The average number of comments per article in Richardson and Stanyer's (2011) study of U.K. newspapers was 18.62 in contrast to 30 in this study. Moreover, the percentage of readers who engage in dialogue and debate with each other is also considerably higher—60.5% as opposed to 31.3% of broadsheet readers and 2.3% of tabloid readers in Richardson and Stanyer's study. Similarly, unlike the Chinese readers in Zhou et al.'s (2008) study who are more likely to "present agreement with a given entry instead of proposing opposing ideas or viewpoints" (p. 767), Bulgarian readers express both agreement and disagreement. This goes to show that context matters and the more we contextualize, the better picture we get. The media war in Bulgaria attracted a range of polarized opinions.

Ten themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the 1,583 comments—from conspiracy theories and readers' opinions on the state of journalism to discussions about media tycoons, the role of the state as well as the potential involvement of the European Union, and the need to protect freedom of expression. Some readers even opened up more sophisticated debates about their own identity and the "powers" they have to choose which media to read and how to interpret messages. The range of topics and opinions clearly shows that the online space does indeed provide an arena "for public discussion by regular citizens and can be seen as a key institution of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1989; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 69). However, a closer look reveals that the quality of argumentation is not very high. A lot of these issues of significant importance in any democracy were mentioned but not really followed up. Instead attention was diverted to the identity of the media owners as well as various conspiracy theories that questioned both readers' and journalists' objectivity and therefore stifled any proper discussion. Although most comments were fairly negative, the "unashamed bigotry" or "explicit hatred" was not that common (7.2%). Name calling and swearing occurred but did not dominate the majority of posts.

Moreover, we should also acknowledge that the offline world is far from ideal (Dahlberg, 2001). This study shows that online discussion boards provide additional venues for democratic conversations insofar as they allow citizens to bring up or maintain on the public agenda issues of vital importance. The quality of argumentation is not perfect, but one could argue that it is still to a greater extent better than on the pages of mainstream Eastern European papers that face increasing threats to their pluralism. Some citizens made rudimentary attempts to hold debates about the state of their media. The "deliberative democratic potential of online discussion" is indeed "a long way from the deliberative ideal" (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 983) but we can argue in a similar way that especially in Bulgaria this is very much the case in the offline world—Civil society is very weak and the political and media systems are ridden by scandals. Bulgarian newspapers' online discussion boards are a new or alternative "public space" but they cannot be classified as "a new public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). It is perhaps worth revising the idealized and romanticized normative ideal of the public sphere as initially put forward by Habermas and

especially the role virtual spaces that cannot be defined as virtual public spheres play for democracy (Papacharissi, 2002). Some scholars propose a move away from Habermas's framework to more considerate frameworks that do not neglect "important aspects of the interpersonal communication process" (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011, p. 1082). These conversations between online readers do not take place in a vacuum and other contextual and (inter)personal factors and motivations are likely to affect the quality of argumentation and democratic deliberation (Eveland et al., 2011; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013). A full investigation of the interplay of these factors can only be conducted if textual analysis is complemented with an audience study—a task for future research.

Finally, the study's limitations should be acknowledged. The sample is limited to the newspapers that allow readers to post comments online, and therefore the study presents the views of their readers (which are nonetheless among those with highest circulation). Second, the word limit did not allow us to explore all emerging themes. Further studies will investigate in greater depth readers' views of ideal versus real journalism as well as shifting reader identities. It would also be worth exploring readers' perspectives on media scandals in other countries and contexts.

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Notes

1. Ruiz et al. (2011) focus on logic and coherence, cooperative search for truth and an agreement based on the best argument, whereas Zhou, Chan, and Peng (2008) measure the quantity of posts and participants, topicality, nature of the argument, and responsiveness and homogeneity of contributions.
2. Although Štětka (2012) does not explicitly define the term "mini-Murdochs," he calls Peevski "the Murdoch of the East?" thus likening him to Rupert Murdoch presumably because he operates in a similar way. Peevski's company owns a large part of Bulgarian news media and he has "a reputation for unscrupulously serving the government of the day" in exchange for the backing of his "aggressive price strategy" and "horizontal expansion."
3. Quantitative content analysis is "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p. 147), which involves counting the occurrences of content units based on coding manuals.
4. In Bulgarian, "обикновен човек."
5. In Bulgarian, "гражданин."

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