

TROLLS UNDER THE BRIDGE:  
ANONYMOUS ONLINE COMMENTS  
AND GATEKEEPING IN THE DIGITAL REALM

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AND GATEKEEPING IN THE DIGITAL REALM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of purpose .....	4
Definition of terms .....	4
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Incivility in communication .....	8
Gatekeeping then and now.....	10
Notable court cases .....	15
Unmasking posters: A newsroom debate.....	16
Anonymity and the active audience.....	20
A changed reporter/audience relationship.....	22
Keeping a civil tone .....	24
The poster’s voice.....	25
Research questions .....	28
3. METHOD .....	29
Articles used for data analysis .....	30
Selection of method.....	38
4. FINDINGS .....	40
RQ1: Journalists’ perspectives.....	40

Anonymous posters as cowards.....	40
Anonymity as an affront to journalists standards.....	42
Anonymous speech as filth.....	44
Trolls as lesser humans.....	46
RQ2: Posters’ perspectives.....	49
Anonymity as a safety measure.....	49
Anonymity as insight.....	54
Social media as a flawed solution.....	58
Anonymity as a builder of community.....	61
Posters as an effective moderating force.....	64
Summary.....	68
5. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION.....	70
Purpose of study.....	70
Summary of findings.....	71
Implications.....	72
Implications for theory.....	74
Practical implications.....	75
Limitations.....	77
Directions for further study.....	77
Conclusion.....	78
6. References.....	80

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the trend of anonymous online speech and the evolution of traditional gatekeeping roles of journalists as new media interaction with the public becomes commonplace. A textual analysis explores the opinions held by journalists and commenters (to online news sites) on the topic of online comments boards, trolling and the role anonymity places in public discourse on the Internet. The issue of civility among posters to anonymous online comment boards must be studied if journalists hope to navigate the relationship with these participatory news consumers going forward. In order to benefit from the opportunities for interactivity that new media provide, the industry must work to understand the phenomenon of trolling and devise a way to promote productive conversation that protects the marketplace of ideas while maintaining civility.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, newsrooms have been forced to redefine the means by which they connect to the public they serve. Research shows the print product, however relevant its content or eye-catching its design, is no longer sufficient to suit the needs of consumers who turn to the Internet for up-to-the-minute news and interactive information (Kohut, 2012). News consumers know that whatever comes out in tomorrow's edition will have already been on web today, and as of 2012, more Americans reported getting their news digitally than from print sources (Pew Research Center, 2012). In an effort to keep up with this increasingly technology-savvy audience, media outlets have been challenged pair their print products with rapidly updating online content. Content and delivery of the news has been altered dramatically in the shift from old to new media, one example being the forums and comment boards utilized by new media (Beyers, 2011). As they embrace new media and the possibilities for interactivity, news organizations also invite online news consumers to participate in the discussion (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). Communication is no longer a one-way street between sender and receiver but an ongoing conversation in which readers are invited and encouraged to take part, making getting the news and reacting to it a social experience (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010).

Initially, providing readers with an avenue for talking back and talking to one another – anonymously, more often than not – seemed an innovative, user-friendly way to engage readers (Hlavah & Freivogel, 2011). Comment boards invited them in on the discussion as easily as one might sit down with friends over dinner, and as of 2010, the Pew Research Center found one out of every four Internet users had accepted the invitation and contributed feedback to a news story

(Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, Olmstead, 2010). Newspapers have a long history of publishing letters to the editor in response to concerns in the community, but the Internet provides readers immediate access to sound off with few barriers to posting their comments (Smith, 2000). Both kudos and criticisms are posted anonymously and automatically, in many cases, only to be evaluated for appropriateness later, if at all (Hlavah & Freivogel, 2011). With the digital race well under way, many news outlets embraced the interactivity of comment boards in hopes of furthering relationships with potential readers and advertisers (Cramer, 2013).

However encouraging the concept, the reality of anonymous online comment often fell short of expectations (Davenport, 2002). Editors soon found that the accessibility they provided invited knee-jerk reactions to articles, with some commenters violating the site's terms of service when posting comments that showed little forethought about how their remarks might hurt other participants (Ross, 2013). When commenters were allowed to remain anonymous, the conversation sometimes spiraled off topic and out of control, and newsrooms found themselves in the middle of a virtual argument as productive as barroom brawl (Shepherd, 2011).

Face-to-face etiquette is lost among many of these digital strangers who feel empowered, hidden behind computer screens, to act out more aggressively than they would were they identified (Suler, 2004). Some, under the cloak of anonymity, appear to operate with the sole purpose of inciting arguments. On the playground, they would be called bullies. Online, they are referred to as "trolls." These participants, whose actions are called "trolling," seek to injure, not inform, and delight in picking fights, confusing the issues at hand and causing outbursts from the readers they provoke (Cramer, 2013; Hardaker, 2010). Because many comment boards operate anonymously (requiring users to log in would take too much time and potentially stifle the conversation, or so the argument has gone), the John and Jane Does of the Internet are free



make incendiary comments, seemingly without repercussions (Gsell, 2009; Reich, 2011; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

Under the guise of anonymity, online posters tend to be more forward, at times even more aggressive, than they might have been had their names been signed beneath their remarks (Bischof, 2001; Suler, 2004). In some cases, this open-forum approach has created tension between media outlets and members of the public whose activity hijacks traditional media roles including gatekeeping, the process by which media determine which news messages to filter out and which to disseminate (Hayes, Singer & Ceppos, 2007; Smith, 2000). Uncensored interactivity has also strained relationships between news organizations and the political figures, businesses and everyday citizens who come under attack in these forums (Davenport, 2002). As commenters – and trolls, especially – engage in the online community, they do so seemingly without fear of repercussion. Posters seem to believe their identities will be protected, if not by the supposed anonymity of the process itself, then by the media outlets that have provided the forum for public discourse (Bischof, 2001).

If media hope to navigate the relationship with participatory news consumers going forward, they must understand the issue of civility among posters to online comment boards and the role of anonymity on that process. The concerns for journalists are not just ethical but legal, as efforts to unmask anonymous posters who have offended or libeled other members of the community are on the rise (Fredrickson, 2008; Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). Case law suggests the water is murkier than widely believed by commenters who consider themselves untouchable when posting, and news organizations can find themselves caught in the middle of a legal battle should a court seek to identify the author of an anonymous comment (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). The financial implication of such a fight is one reason the media industry must work to

understand the phenomenon of trolling and devise a way to promote productive conversation that promotes an open and inclusive discussion while maintaining civility among its participants. Succeeding in this endeavor helps to protect a news organization's credibility, bolster interactivity with its audience and push the newsroom to the forefront of digital media (Cenite & Zhang, 2010; Hlavah & Freivogel, 2011; Reich, 2011; Hlavah & Freivogel, 2011).

The purpose of this research is to expand upon prior research that explores journalists' and posters' views on the value of anonymity online and in turn provide newsrooms with data with which to inform their policies on comment board moderation. It also provides a basis for future research, which might examine how commenting norms change as anonymity is phased out and social media and other login requirements become more prevalent. Because this study examines posters and journalists' understanding of the media's responsibility to "give or withhold access to difference voices in society," it is guided by gatekeeping theory (McQuail, 2010, p. 309). In this study, posters' comments will be juxtaposed with the viewpoints expressed in opinion columns by journalists in an effort to find points of agreement and/or disagreement between the media and the public they serve on the role of gatekeeping in a digital context.

### **Definition of terms**

**Comment sections (or boards).** The creation of the Internet provided a variety of avenues for users to freely post their thoughts and opinions, including messages boards "where readers could start and participate in discussions" (Santana, 2011, p. 68). Comments sections in this research are those posted below and in relation to specific opinion columns on the topic of online anonymity.

**Anonymous.** Anonymity "is the condition in which a message source is absent or largely unknown to the message recipient" (Scott, 2004, p. 128). However, whether a poster is

considered anonymous for the purposes of this study is not based simply on whether that person is identified by first and last name, as in an online context, there are varying degrees of anonymity (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). A number of media websites require some identification of those who wish to post comments about the publication's articles. Some websites allow (or require) posters to create usernames, and while these are anonymous to a degree because they don't have to be composed of a person's first and last name, pseudonyms do make users recognizable to fellow posters (Hlavah & Freivogel, 2011). One prominent example is the *New York Times*, which invites commentary beneath its only stories but only from those users who log in and create a username ("Commenters and readers' reviews," n.d.).

**Troll.** Internet slang has developed over the years to explain phenomena that occur exclusively on the Web. Despite extensive researching into trolling, the identification of trolls remains subjective, and scholars have helped shape that definition (Hardaker, 2010). Hardaker defines a troll as

a user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement (p. 237).

Cramer (2013) adds that trolls "purposely sow the seeds of racism, bigotry or anything else that may coax online bickering among fellow commenters" (p. 6). Some prefer a broader definition for trolling, saying it can constitute or perhaps "any inflammatory behavior on the Web," (Alang, 2013, p. 1). It should be noted that trolling does not have a definitive definition upon which industry professionals and posters agree, which can complicate the issue of whether users are acting appropriately on comment boards. For the purposes of this research, trolling is defined as

an inflammatory comment or personal attack that appears to be posted in hopes of moving the conversation off topic or inciting arguments among posters.

**Moderation.** As best practices for managing comment sections have not yet been agreed upon by the media industry, it is important to understand the various means by which a poster's submission might undergo change. Newsrooms' moderation policies for comment boards vary among publications, but if moderation of posts is practiced, it general falls into one of two categories: pre-moderated or post-moderated (Reich, 2011). Pre-moderation of comments constitutes the most conservative practice, as each post is reviewed and must be approved by the moderator before it is posted and visible to the general public (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Post-moderation takes a more reactive approach, addressing a post's content only after it has appeared on the comment board and making changes/deletions only if deemed necessary (Reich, 2011). At times, the audience is also tapped for help in the post-moderation process. Some news sites have included a flagging system in the comment section that allows users to police the boards, alerting editorial staff if something appears offensive and in need of review (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

Allowing comments to be posted anonymously is thought to broaden discussion, making for a more complete set of opinions for readers to consider as they work to understand the world around them (McClusky & Hmielowski, 2012). However, allowing the opportunity for posters to speak out without being held accountable for their words has proven a double-edged sword for newsrooms that seek to provide a forum for public debate while maintaining journalistic standards, namely editorial filtering (Binns, 2011). The following chapters are structured as follows: Chapter two contains a literature review exploring prior research concerning comment section anonymity and its effects on the gatekeeping process online; chapter three explains the

method for studying journalist opinion columns and corresponding poster comments; chapter four presents the study findings; and chapter five concludes the research with a discussion of practical and theory-building implications.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how trolling has become a topic of interest to scholars of online anonymity and a concern to newsrooms that allow anonymous comments, it is best to first explore what scholars have learned about incivility in communication. This chapter begins with a brief overview of germane incivility research, which sets the stage for an exploration of the ways in which incivility can be exacerbated among parties in the anonymous online context. The chapter also includes a summary of gatekeeping theory's origins and how the theory has changed in the filtering practices on the Internet; an overview of legal precedent for anonymous speech online; and a summary of the relevant literature and studies centered on audience feedback and anonymity.

### **Incivility in communication**

One focus of incivility research is the notion that “bad” behavior itself is not inherently impolite; instead, others assign labels of incivility based on their interpretation of the message and whether it fits the perceived social norms of the interaction. In other words, incivility remains difficult to define despite substantial research, and there will always be variability in what is evaluated as uncivil, depending on the expectations of the person who is on the receiving end of the communication (Haugh, 2007). Incivility can take many forms, which include the following: threats; stereotyping; name-calling; vulgarity; pejorative terms; and uncooperativeness (Papacharissi, 2004). It should be noted that while some research makes distinctions between “impoliteness” and “incivility,” these finer points are not explored for the purposes of this research, and the terms are used here interchangeably.

Incivility research frequently draws from Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987), which posits that politeness stems from parties acting in ways to save face during interactions with others (Mao, 1994). However, achieving politeness and civility, some scholars argue, should not always be the ultimate goal in communication, as adherence to etiquette rules can stifle what would otherwise be fruitful discourse (Papacharissi, 2004; Schudson, 1997). Papacharissi (2004) recognizes that avoiding incivility might lead to smoother conversation but argues a secondary effect is that it also requires participants to withhold their true emotions or the depth of their true emotions and suppress strong opinions in favor of pleasing another person. Schudson (1997) goes as far as to suggest that impoliteness is not only productive but necessary, stating, "...democracy may require withdrawal from civility itself" (p. 431). Schudson's argument prioritizes straightforwardness over politeness, suggesting the only means to understanding all parties' stance on an issue is to focus solely on getting the point across and putting niceties aside.

Research shows there is the potential for incivility to be amplified in computer-mediated communication, where there are fewer social cues including facial expressions and eye contact (Cho, Kim & Acquisti, 2012; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). It is on these interactions that this study focuses, as scholars agree trolling – perhaps the most all-encompassing term for incivility online – is a widespread issue on the Internet (Binns, 2011; Cramer, 2013; Hardaker, 2010). The weakening of psychological barriers and resulting in a tendency to act differently online than one might in the real world have received considerable scholarly attention. Suler (2004) coined this phenomenon the "online disinhibition effect" and divides its effect into two categories, benign disinhibition (e.g., positive catharsis, such as sharing personal information with others, performing random acts of kindness, etc.) and toxic disinhibition (e.g., abusive behavior

including trolling). Anonymity, like that allowed in many new sites' comment sections, can lead users to feel unaccountable for their actions, resulting in increased incivility (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Such behavior raises ethical questions for news organization that seek to provide a forum for public debate but might feel obligated to filter that which does not meet their ethical standards. Online anonymity continues to disrupt the way newsrooms do business, namely in terms of determining what passes through the editorial gate. Traditional gatekeeping theory purports that the power to decide what messages will be disseminated to the public lies solely with news organizations, but that has standard has been challenged in the digital realm (Storm, 2007).

### **Gatekeeping, then and now**

Gatekeeping theory emerged in the post-World War Two work of German psychologist Kurt Lewin, and though it was not originally intended for the study of mass communication, the potential application was clear, even to Lewin (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Though an understanding of the selection of news items for publication had been around for decades, Lewin coined the term, "gatekeeping," in 1943 as part of a sociological study on food and the "gates" through which it must pass before it ends up on the dinner table. The identified gatekeeper, in Lewin's original work, was the housewife. Because the housewife was looked upon to shop for groceries, as well as cook and serve meals, Lewin viewed her as the key person who controlled what foods were – and more importantly, weren't – distributed to her family for consumption. David Manning White adopted the theory for the study of communication in 1950 when he applied gatekeeping to the selection of news. White's case study of a newspaper wire editor's news judgment sparked one of the most enduring theories in mass communication (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001).



The rise of the Internet as a platform for news-sharing leaves the media industry in a position where its role as gatekeeper of the news is threatened not just by advancing technology but by the audience it serves (Bowman & Willis, 2005). Traditionally, media gatekeeping has been a reactionary process, as industry professionals see and have the opportunity to evaluate a message before deciding whether to disseminate it to the public. Journalists are exposed to potential news stories through a variety of means, from traditional press releases to casual interactions they have on a daily basis with potential sources (Tenore, 2012; Winegarner, 2012). However formal or casual the initiation, what follows under the traditional understanding of gatekeeping theory is an evaluation by one or more gatekeepers of the appropriateness of the message for inclusion in that day's or future days' news coverage.

Journalists are still grappling with how to adapt traditional gatekeeping practices to fit the new demands of an interactive online news experience (Storm, 2007). In the digital realm, citizens who have become part of the message-distribution effort complicate the process (Johnson & Kelly, 2003). Journalists have long prided themselves on providing a forum for discussion and debate, and that role has been enhanced online, where readers become publishers with relative ease and a lack of editorial stringent filters (Smith, 2000). The traditional reporter-reader relationship changes in this virtual village square, where journalists and their audience exist alongside one another, both with access to disseminate messages to a broader audience (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins (2008) refers to this phenomenon as participatory culture, noting that "rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (p. 3). Two breeds of content producers have converged in the same space. Reporters use comment sections to engage the community, taking its pulse on

important topics and even looking for potential news tips (Reich, 2011). As online news consumers post to comment boards made available beneath news stories, they, too, interact directly with reporters and fellow readers (Beyers, 2004). They may do so in an effort to provide helpful information that can shape future coverage of existing stories, or they may post unrelated information simply in an effort to reach a wide audience without interference. However, researchers have found that unfettered access to such a wide audience, especially when it is allowed anonymously, also attracts trolls (Binns, 2011; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). These posters' often offensive contributions to the online comment board have left news organizations wondering if they need to reexamine their gatekeeping roles – and perhaps do a better job of maintaining the same standards online that they have for their print products (Bowman, 2008).

In the digital age, where many comment boards are anonymous and accessible to anyone who happens upon a website, journalists are rarely afforded the opportunity to conduct the screening process associated with traditional gatekeeping (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011). Online comments are frequently posted automatically, without monitoring, to a news organization's site (Smith, 2004). Many sites, in an effort to thwart potential trolling or deter posters from engaging in personal attacks, require users to agree to their terms and conditions before posting (Ness, 2010). Warnings to remain civil and engage in productive discussion only are often included in those terms, but some sites fail to enforce their own standards, and unsavory comments are published without moderation (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Ness, 2010). In the media industry, this means the same news groups that invited readers to talk back are faced with determining whether they want their organizations to be associated with what readers have to say.

Web editors are charged with deciding whether a comment is appropriate after it has already been posted, thwarting their traditional gatekeeping role. Instead of exercising a professional standard to determine what messages may pass through the gate, journalists are challenged to decide whether to do away with what has already slipped inside (Reich, 2011). Potentially, those messages have already been viewed by dozens of posters before they ever come to the attention of the news desk. Providing online comment boards, especially those that allow users to remain anonymous, has opened the gates in some respects (Smith, 2004).

Traditionally, gatekeeping theory suggests the authority to dictate which messages will be disseminated belongs to news organizations alone, but media are also influenced in their gatekeeping decisions by a multitude of external forces, including their audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In this way, “the media act as agents for the audience,” taking into account the audience’s preferences as they shape the public’s understanding of reality through the gatekeeping process (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 80). These forces are at work in the context of comment board moderation, as building reader engagement is on the priority list for any web publisher, and readers become more engaged when they feel welcomed into the conversation (Binns, 2011; Cramer, 2013).

The threat that accompanies anonymity is exacerbated when a troll makes a libelous statement, which can land the media outlet that provided the forum for that statement in legal trouble (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). While the Communications Decency Act of 1996 protects news organizations from lawsuits stemming from comments made on their sites by third parties, newsrooms still face court orders for identifying information from parties seeking redress against posters who make libelous statements (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). And so, today’s newsrooms have been forced to redefine the gates by which they prevent such messages from reaching a

wider audience. A step many news organizations are considering is disallowing anonymity on their websites (Pérez-Peña, 2010). The *Buffalo News* took that step in 2010 after a string of particularly hateful comments was posted to its website in response to an article about a local shooting. An anonymous poster blamed the black community, suggesting that a neighborhood safety was adversely affected any time an African American family moved in (Goldberg, 2010).

One alternative to allowing anonymous comments is to require users who wish to join in the discussion to log in, identifying themselves to the webmaster, fellow posters or both. Requiring a social media account in order to comment, for example, has a fairly high probability of identifying a person by first and last name, and so, it has also become one of the choices being adopted by newsrooms that no longer allowing anonymous comments, despite criticisms this practice requires users to participate in social media they might otherwise have no interest in using (Sonderman, 2011). The hope is that requiring some means of identification, the effect of signing the virtual letter to the editor, will promote civility among posters (Cramer, 2013). Gatekeeping, as these steps to disallow anonymity illustrate, has evolved from its origin into a complex process and is no longer "... just a series of 'in' and 'out' decisions" (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001, p. 233).

Gatekeeping remains one of the media's central roles. Journalists ask the public to trust that they have carefully vetted the news of the day and are presenting all that is newsworthy and relevant to readers' lives. In their role as gatekeepers, journalists vow to sift through the extraneous and pass along the relevant, paring down countless events to a manageable number of media messages that are accessible to the audience (Santana, 2011). The industry remains divided as to whether comments made to news stories constitute messages that should be part of that filtering process. Part of the concern is that excepting comments from the gatekeeping

process could land newsrooms in court (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). The following section will examine the legal precedent for anonymous speech.

### **Notable court cases: A rocky legal landscape**

Editors who continue to provide a platform for anonymous audience feedback face having to defend their position and should be aware of the potential ramifications of their policies (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). The following is a brief look at some of the more notable court cases involving anonymity and an explanation of the legal precedent these cases have set for nameless speakers in the digital realm.

The U.S. Supreme Court first ruled to protect anonymous speech in its 1960 decision, *Talley v. California*, a case that centered on the distribution of anonymous leaflets encouraging the boycott of businesses accused of unfair employment practices based on race. In its decision, the Supreme Court voided a Los Angeles city ordinance that required anyone distributing handbills to include with the information the name and address of the author, arguing that “[a]nonymous pamphlets, leaflets, brochures and even books have played an important role in the progress of mankind” (*Talley v. California*, 1960). The Supreme Court applied the principles of *Talley* 35 years later when it struck down the Ohio statute that forbade Margaret McIntyre from distributing unsigned campaign pamphlets at a public meeting at an area middle school regarding a proposed tax levy. In *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, the court again recognized the right to speak anonymously, noting that McIntyre’s speech was political in nature, which made it of the utmost importance to protect under the First Amendment. As a side note, the court reaffirmed the notion that shielding an author’s identity can prevent retaliation against unpopular viewpoints. In the *McIntyre* decision, the court quoted New York state law from a former case that struck down a similar statute for being overbroad, the public can be

trusted to discern the value of an anonymous message “as long as they are permitted, as they must be, to read that message. And then, once they have done so, it is for them to decide what is ‘responsible’, what is valuable, and what is truth” (McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission, 1995).

The Courts that ruled on *Talley*, *McIntyre* and cases like it could not have predicted how those cases would apply to the digital realm decades later, and media experts remain divided about whether its spirit should apply to anonymous speech online (Strickland, 2001). The debate is not contained to whether a poster’s identity can legally be protected, however; it also extends to whether, ethically, media outlets consider protecting those identities a priority.

### **Unmasking posters: A newsroom debate**

A news organization that accepts contributions from nameless commenters might one day risk a court order that aims to unmask the author of an anonymous post and will have to decide whether it values that poster’s privacy (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). How gatekeeping responsibilities are redefined in the news industry going forward is critical to understanding the role of the media when it comes to protecting – or not protecting – anonymous online speech.

Industry leaders remain at odds about whether news organizations should fight to shield those who speech has made them the target of lawsuits or criminal investigations (Abello, 2009). Those who advocate for free speech, regardless of its message or medium, maintain that identifying Internet posters should be avoided whenever possible because it will have a chilling effect on the rest of the online community (Balough, 2003). That leaves media without viewpoints that, while anonymous, provide valuable insight to issues reporters are covering or might cover in the future (Mazzotta, 2010). Others remain less convinced that online contributors should have any reasonable expectation of anonymity, arguing that while faceless,

nameless interaction might bolster important dialogue, it also provides an avenue for libel and other harmful, if not illegal, activity (Eckstrand, 2003). At its best, allowing anonymous comments can lead to a productive debate among civil participants; and at its worst, the practice can spark hurtful and potentially defamatory commentary, placing news organizations' reputations at risk (Weber, 2013; Barclay, 2010; Cenite & Zhang, 2010; Reich, 2011).

Some legal experts consider anonymous commenters like any other anonymous source and conclude it is the media's responsibility to guard posters' identities (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). Much of the literature surrounding this debate highlights the protection anonymity affords whistle-blowers who feel enabled to speak without fear because they believe their identities will be kept secret. Kissinger and Larson (2009) contend there are more everyday benefits of embracing anonymity, including the opportunity to present unconventional ideas, catalyze community development and suggest solutions to today's political, social and cultural challenges. They argue anyone who speaks out via a news organization's public forum should have an understanding of trust with that news organization, which includes identity protection even if it was not explicitly agreed upon beforehand. They argue

when a person has entrusted a media company with her identity as she takes a stand in public debate, there is significant social and economic value in defending against attempts by others to pierce the veil of anonymity that emboldened her to speak in the first place (Kissinger & Larsen, 2009, p. 38).

Research points to anonymity as a cultural equalizer, leveling the playing field for speakers, regardless of background or social standing (Reader, 2010). Other studies discount the notion that protecting anonymous speech guarantees robust debate that will push an issue forward or empower citizens in a way that actually impacts the society in which they live. Davenport

(2002) disagrees that nameless sources have the power to effect change because not all anonymous sources are valued equally by the public. In the case of a traditional reporter-source relationship, the public generally feels confident the reporter knows the identity of the source and therefore can vouch for that source's integrity when going forward with a story based on the claims of a contributor who remains nameless in print (Davenport, 2002). Without that relationship of trust, readers have no means of discerning the anonymous speaker's credibility, and they can't feel confident that a trained journalist vetted the source's claims carefully before presenting them to the masses (Davenport, 2002; Kirtley, 2010). Using this reasoning, Davenport concludes there is little to warrant going to extreme measures to protect an online poster's identity, as "cowering behind a cloak of anonymity hardly seems an auspicious basis for profound social upheavals" (2002, p. 34). If news outlets continue to allow comments on their websites, they will be faced with having to develop ways to maintain trust with their readers while still allowing audience feedback.

Some critics suggest that shielding sources not located during the traditional newsgathering process puts journalists' privileges in general at risk (Abello, 2009). Proponents of protecting anonymous online speech contend it is moot to argue whether Web posters should be defined as actual sources, as most states' reporter shield laws were penned before the Internet existed and thus can't be expected to encompass any details that would clearly apply to the online experience (Martin, 2011). On the whole, the threat of online anonymity to the common good has been met with judicial indecisiveness (Kissinger & Larsen, 2010). Here are three prominent examples that illustrate how these issues are being decided on a case-by-case basis:

In January 2009, a poster on the *Gaston Gazette* website made a comment that a murder suspect had failed his polygraph test – a fact that had not been made public. The defendant's



attorney filed a subpoena to unmask the commenter, but a judge denied the request. He cited North Carolina shield laws, which protect news-gatherers from having to release the identities of sources, a bold stance that defined the act of receiving posts part of the reporting process at the same time it deemed posters like any other source (*State v. Mead* 2010). The *Alton Telegraph* was subpoenaed by Illinois grand jury in 2008 after five posters suggested they had personal knowledge about criminal activity committed by the lead suspect in a murder case. One poster called the suspect, charged with beating the 5-year-old son of his ex-girlfriend to death, a drug dealer known for hitting children, while another noted having seen the child with two black eyes a week before his death (*Illinois v. The Alton Telegraph* 2010). Ultimately, the court ordered the *Telegraph* to turn over information, including IP addresses, for two posters whose comments were deemed germane to the ongoing police investigation, arguing feedback to a published story couldn't be considered part of the newsgathering process. An Indiana court applied the Illinois court's definition of source in the *Alton Telegraph* case in 2010 when the former CEO of Junior Achievement of Southern Indiana sought to unmask posters for a defamation suit. Commenters on *The Indianapolis Star's* website lashed out at Miller after questions arose about misappropriated funds at Junior Achievement. Citing the *Alton Telegraph* case, the court initially ruled Indiana's shield laws did not protect online commenters whose posts appeared after the *Star's* story ran and whose information did not prompt any follow-up coverage. An appellate court, however, later declared Miller failed to prove the statements were false and defamatory and reversed the lower court's decision.

The literature repeatedly calls for the courts to create a uniform set of terms to be met before a poster is unmasked. Proposed requirements include a reasonable effort to notify the anonymous defendant of the complaint, assurance the purpose of identifying the poster goes

beyond simple retaliation against cyber-smearing, evidence that the disclosure goes to the heart of the plaintiff's case, and evidence all other avenues for pursuing the case have been exhausted (Smith, 2000; Ness, 2010). Regardless of whether a media outlet opts in or out of allowing anonymous comment, fostering engagement with the audience and continuing to encourage feedback remains a priority.

### **Anonymity and the active audience**

Encouraging readers to react and respond to messages delivered by the media is not a novel concept. Newspapers have a long-celebrated tradition of encouraging letters to the editor in which readers sound off about issues of concern in the community, and that practice is still in effect today (Reich, 2011). The standard regarding anonymity in letters to the editor, however, is almost universal – if you want your opinion printed, you have to sign your name; the idea being, if a person is planning to take a stand, that person should have to be accountable for what is said (Davenport, 2002). Letters that are submitted to a news organization without names attached to them are generally considered suspect (Reader, 2005). Anonymous letters rarely find their way into print, mirroring the sparing use of anonymous sources by the majority of reputable publications (Crandell, 2011).

However, in a context where page views equal advertising dollars, many newsrooms set aside this principle in regard to their comment boards, assuming that allowing anonymous discussion would result in more active participation (Crandell, 2011). Editors reasoned providing this forum would work as an extension of the print edition's feedback feature (the traditional letter to the editor), inviting an interactive discussion instead of a singular, reactive response (Beyers, 2004). Allowing comments to be posted anonymously is also thought to broaden discussion, making for a more complete set of opinions for readers to consider as they

work to understand the world around them than was provided by infrequent letters to the editor (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012).

While news organizations continue to impart knowledge to their audience and exercise their role of determining what events and issues warrant coverage, online news consumers are now talking back and in many cases having their comments automatically posted, a process that bypasses the gatekeeping processes as it has been practiced by journalists for decades (Bowman & Willis, 2005; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). Today's readers provide feedback on the content of news sites, give tips to steer reporters to future stories/related coverage and offer criticism of any topic they find relevant to the community at large, all actions "that can enhance not only public dialogue but also the company's own reporting" (Kissinger & Larsen, 2009, p. 4). Online posters are often invited to engage in their activity anonymously, as media experts have found that requiring users to register or provide other identifying information before posting is cumbersome and potentially stifles the discourse (Reich, 2011; Robinson, 2010). At some news sites online posters are required to subscribe and log into a website in order to leave commentary, but more often than not, that registration consists of little more than a simple email address verification process that presents few barriers to entry and takes no reliable identifying measures (Ness, 2010). While news organizations may have access to the Internet Protocol address where the comments that appear on their sites originate, there is no immediate means or guaranteed means of unmasking the anonymous online poster (Ness, 2010). Communication is no longer a one-way street between sender and receiver but an ongoing conversation in which readers are invited and encouraged to take part, making getting the news and reacting to it a social experience (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010). With online forums

connected to every story on many sites, the media invite readers to interact not only with the reporters who wrote the stories but with each other (Smith, 2000).

### **A changed reporter/audience relationship**

The transition from old to new media and the ways in which new media have reshaped the relationship between media outlets and their audience frame the debate of how to address anonymous online contributors. To explore the consideration of anonymous online commenters, it is important to first understand how managing them has become part of the everyday responsibilities of today's newsrooms.

With the continued push for more digital content, journalists must adapt traditional professional practices to apply to the online news experience where the audience becomes an active part of discussion (Johnson & Kelly, 2003). Many researchers celebrate the newfound relationship between the media and the public they serve through the use of digital platforms, but scholars are quick to point out that with new media come new challenges ("A question of velocity," 2008; Santana, 2011). Some argue that while the interactivity of the online experience has thwarted some traditional reporter roles, the strengthened connection between sender and receiver should be applauded (Spence & Quinn, 2008). For better or worse, those who might never have raised their voices before are now speaking out, many of them feeling safe to speak freely for the first time because their words are posted without their names attached (Cramer, 2013).

While many of the tenets of journalism remain the same, regardless of the medium, some change is inevitable when an industry undergoes such a complete transformation as journalism has in recent years. As Mitchell (2002) stated, "As dedicated to principle as journalists might be, the Internet provided so many opportunities to do things differently that any adherence to

traditional approaches would be called into question” (p. 2). The industry remains divided as to the appropriate standard for handling anonymous commentary on a digital platform.

A variety of traditional reporter roles have been turned on their proverbial heads on account of the emergence of new media (Bowman, 2008). As an increasing number of news consumers head online and voice their opinions on anything they find there, the inherent filter of legacy media models has in some ways deteriorated (Smith, 2000). In traditional interaction with the media, members of the public had to call in tips, submit a letter to the editor or have a standing relationship with a reporter in order to have their viewpoints published. New media have caused content control to shift from resting solely with the journalist. Such activity thwarts the gatekeeping process by giving the reader increased power over message distribution with fewer, if any, editorial barriers (Storm, 2007). Instead of being filtered directly by a reporter, contributors may now choose, without interference, to post information on public forums. Journalists, who traditionally were counted on and expected to filter what messages are disseminated, are bypassed by posters who go directly to comment boards (Ness, 2010).

On the other side of the debate about whether to fully embrace reader participation are researchers who have found “the problem with an all-inclusive approach is that persuasion and diversion are too easily confused with enlightenment and fact, potentially weakening democracy unless citizens are paying close attention” (Hayes, Singer & Ceppos, 2007, p. 264). Hayes, Singer and Ceppos argue that simply increasing the volume of speech in the marketplace of ideas does not guarantee increased the quality of perspectives presented, only the quantity.

## **Keeping a civil tone**

A number of scholars have pointed to anonymity on news comment sections as an aggravator of trolling, resulting in aggressive posts, as well as personal attacks and derailing commentary (Bischof, 2001; Crandell, 2011; Shuler, 2004). To understand the trolling phenomenon's significance, however, it is first important to explore why civility on an online discussion board might be considered important in the first place.

Maintaining reader engagement and avoiding damage to a news organization's credibility are among the most frequently cited reasons media organizations should ensure civility on their comment boards (Binns, 2011; Weber, 2013). Newspapers that allow anonymous comments risk losing participants who might otherwise have made worthwhile contributions but don't want to stand up in front of people performing the virtual equivalent of throwing eggs (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Concerns of lost engagement are not limited to the comment boards themselves, either, as sources could refuse to be cited in a story for fear of the reaction that awaits them online (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). This occurred at the *Denver Post* in early 2011, when a business reporter encountered problems writing a story for the print edition because a key source worried what would occur on the comment boards after the story was posted online (Arellano, 2013). A news organization's reputation can be damaged if unsavory comments are left, unchecked, on the outlet's website (Cenite & Zhang, 2010; Reich, 2011). Anonymous comment boards can also give a negative impression of the readership as a whole, suggesting it is less intelligent than it might be in reality, which in turn, reflects negatively on the media organization because of the kind of audience it appears to attract (Cramer, 2013). These threats factor prominently into the debate as to whether gatekeeping in the digital realm must include monitoring anonymous comment boards.

Research shows a lack of polite conduct on comment boards can also have an adverse effect on how audiences understand the news being presented to them (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos & Ladwig, 2013). A 2013 study found that “much in the same way that watching uncivil politicians argue on television causes polarization among individuals, impolite and incensed blog comments can polarize online users ... when processing the blog’s information” (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos & Ladwig, 2013, p. 1). This would suggest that because, in their role as gatekeepers, journalists help to construct the public’s understanding of reality, they should also be concerned with maintaining civil discourse that helps them to achieve that goal (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001).

### **The posters’ voice**

Anonymous commenters have been the subject of several studies that seek to understand the new relationship between media and their audience. How comments posted to news sites influence journalists, however, has not been well studied (Reader, 2012; Santana, 2011). This literature review found only a handful of studies that took the posters’ opinions into consideration as a key component of the research. One of those studies, a textual analysis by online anonymity expert Bill Reader (2012), serves as a template for the proposed research, which replicates its method while using a different theoretical approach to guide the research questions.

Reader (2012) sought to fill a gap he recognized – and that still exists, to some degree – in the literature on this topic. Reader wanted to understand how working journalists feel about the debate surrounding anonymity in online forums, as well as what value readers recognize in the practice. Reader conducted a content analysis of two things; six opinion columns from news professionals on the topic of anonymous online commenting and the corresponding comments

from readers on those very columns. Reader considered essays on the topic, all authored by those in the industry, from the spring and summer of 2010, as well as 1,320 responses to those texts. Reader centered on 2010 because of two news hooks relating to the debate over anonymous online posting. First, several newspapers had recently (and very publically) chosen to disable the ability for anonymous commenting on their online counterparts, and second, a debate was still swirling around an incident involving an anonymous poster who had been publically unmasked in Cleveland (2012). Around this time, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* revealed that a local judge was responsible for some of the anonymous comments to the *Plain Dealer's* news site; specially, comments about cases over which the judge was presiding, making his commentary highly unethical, if not illegal (McCarty, 2010).

Reader (2012) found a disconnect between what journalists and posters consider the worth of online anonymity. Journalists overwhelming argued against allowing commenters to remain nameless, while posters saw the value of anonymity but desired more restrictions in place on comment boards (Reader, 2012). Journalists frequently cited the comments of trolls in their arguments for the reason anonymity – if not online comment boards in their entirety – should be banned. Reader studied how the issue of civility was understood and valued by both groups. For journalists, a lack of basic civility among posters seemed to be a defining factor in the argument that feedback should be allowed only by those willing to add their names to their criticisms, much like the standards for a general letter to the editor (Reader, 2012).

Posters who commented on the essays responded entirely differently, leaning toward the notion that anonymity is equivalent to liberty in a world often controlled (in their view) by big news outlets. The vast majority of the comments (71 percent) studied were opposed to banning anonymity in online forums. Another 17 percent supported a ban, and the remaining 12 percent



suggested a negotiated solution in hopes of both encouraging discourse and maintaining civility among participants (2010).

Reader's method provides a solid foundation for the study of user comments and how they relate to journalists' views on online anonymity. Reader has laid the groundwork for future research in terms of exploring the themes that emerge among these two groups that have converged in one space. This study differs from Reader's in two distinct ways; first, it does not seek to understand how commenters and journalists define civility, a key focus of Reader's study, and second, it considers how commenters affect the gatekeeping process through their participation on message boards. Seeking out journalists' editorials (to find commenters' posts on anonymity) for this study has an express purpose. Commenters utilize comment boards not just to interact with fellow readers about a topic but to directly address the authors of those articles and the news organization they represent (Beyers, 2004). It is important to consider how online anonymity makes commenters feel about journalism's evolving industry, and these sentiments would more likely be expressed in forums attached to journalists' texts where commenters might feel empowered by the possibility they will be heard by those who have a say in whether anonymity is permitted, going forward (Beyers, 2005). They are talking back to those who have the power to make a change. In so doing, they are acting as external agents seeking to bring pressure upon media organizations, whose members' "perceptions about what the audience wants should be important in guiding their decisions" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 80). Journalists have not reached a consensus as to whether allowing anonymous comments without moderation thwarts their role as gatekeeper, and this research seeks to inform that debate by finding common ground between these two groups. From the above theoretical framework, the following research questions emerge:

RQ1: How do journalists perceive online anonymity in relation to comments posted to news comment boards?

RQ2: How do online commenters evaluate news organizations' policies in regard to posting anonymously?

### CHAPTER III: METHOD

To answer these questions, news posters' comments were be juxtaposed with the viewpoints expressed in journalist columns in an effort to find whether points of agreement exist between the media and the public they serve regarding the role of gatekeeping in a digital context. This research utilized a textual analysis of 13 opinion columns and 896 user comments on the topic of online anonymity. The 896 posts came directly from the comment boards available to readers beneath columns also selected for analysis.

An Internet search was conducted on Google, Google Scholar, and LexisNexis using keywords including “troll/trolling,” “online anonymity,” “anonymous posters/comments,” etc. Results were then filtered to find opinion columns meeting the following criteria: First, the opinion column had to be published by a reputable U.S. news media publication. The geographic constraint was chosen not only in an effort to keep the research focused in one area but because industry standards differ among countries, and combining columns from areas of the world with dissimilar cultures could skew the research. The publication could include a mainstream online newspaper, specialty publication, magazine, etc., provided the site was a source of news on one or more given topics. Blogs were not included, as the focus of the study is on mainstream journalism publications, and citizen journalists/bloggers constitute a separate area of research. The column did not have to be authored by a member of that publication's staff; guest columnists were also considered for this research provided they had a background in journalism, a fact verified by a thorough Internet search of each author. Second, the column had to have been written within the past five years (but not so recently that comments were still being contributed to the feedback section). Because technology is constantly evolving, and the means

by which newsrooms handle anonymous comments is a current debate, it is prudent to study recent material. Third, the column had to address anonymous online comments and incivility on comment boards.

It should be noted that commenters are a self-selecting sample group, and this study does not seek to represent readers as a whole. There are a number of means that could have been used to gather anonymous comments for study, but special effort was made to find forums in which commenters were already discussing online anonymity and its effects on public discourse in an online forum. Columns accompanied by a comment board where posters debated the journalist's view were deemed most appropriate for this study, though it should be noted not every opinion column provided an avenue for feedback. Gathering comments in this way for a textual analysis is an appropriate approach to analyze relevant and honest opinions from posters, who utilize comment boards for both cathartic and social purposes (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010; Shuler, 2004). The next section will provide a brief overview of the texts selected for this study:

### **“Signing Off as Post Ombudsman”**

In his farewell March 1, 2013, column, Patrick Pexton discusses some of the challenges he faced during his time working as ombudsman for the *Washington Post*. The complaint he fielded most often, he says, was about the *Post's* allowance of anonymous online commentary. Pexton notes in his early days, he was a supporter of the give and take of the online community. At the conclusion of his tenure with the *Post*, he concludes there is too much take – the taking away of constructive conversation, of kindness and of decency. While Pexton's last piece focused on a variety of things about his tenure at the *Post*, his suggestion that the *Post* allow comments only by readers signed in via Facebook is the point that generated the most discussion

on the comment board (Pexton, 2013). The column drew 291 comments. The *Post's* comment policy at the time of this study required users to log in to the news site or connect via Facebook before commenting. Creating a site login required a user to provide an email address and desired display name. The *Post* discussion guidelines policy requires users to agree not to post inappropriate content but does not mention whether comments are moderated or removed if deemed inappropriate.

### **“Online and Anonymous: A Key Facet of Web Culture is a Double-edged Sword”**

Pexton's editorial about his departure from the *Post* sparked this March 5, 2013, by fellow *Post* employee Manuel Roig-Fraza, who summed up the debate about online anonymity in one concise thought: “Anonymity is great! Except when it's not” (2013, p. 1). As that comment would suggest, Roig-Fraza doesn't choose a side but presents what he sees as the key arguments of both. Roig-Fraza applauds the way anonymity allows posters to take risks, resulting in the “creation of a culture that fostered experimentation and new ideas” (2013, p. 1). At the same time, he suggests that anonymity can sometimes exacerbate our worst qualities because it allows use to fully unleash them, “embolden[ing] the kook to get kookier and the racist to get . . . well, you get the picture” (Roig-Fraza, 2013, p. 1). There were 69 responses.

### **“Internet Trolls, Anonymity and the First Amendment”**

In this September 26, 2011, column, *Washington Times* guest columnist Gayle Falkenthal equates signing your name with bravery argues some speech is so poor in quality that it deserves no forum at all. She contends out that without a name attached to a comment, readers have no way of judging that comment's validity. A bad restaurant review, she cites by way of example, could have come from someone who legitimately had an unpleasant dining experience, but it could also originate from a disgruntled employee or a competitor. The corresponding comment

section contains 74 comments, though it should be noted that some of these comments come from the author of the article, who weighed in on occasion when readers had specific questions or made allegations to which she felt compelled to respond. The *Washington Times* has an open commenting policy that allows users to post as guests, which automatically attaches their comments to the message board without requiring a login or formal registration process. Users also have the option of registering and creating a pseudonym, or using social media logins including Disqus, Facebook and Twitter. A flagging system allows users to alert staff to inappropriate comments. The site's terms of service agreement includes 16 points related to what users are prohibited from posting. Some of those include comments that do not pertain to the site, comments not in English and comments that are libelous or threatening.

#### **“Web Sites’ Anonymity Brings Out the Worst in Some Posters”**

Nationally syndicated columnist Connie Schultz is well-known for her stance against anonymous commentary online. In this September 28, 2009, column, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*-based journalist shares a personal experience comparing the comments to the *Plain-Dealer's* anonymous feedback section versus her own Facebook page, where users debate similar topics but by first and last name. Schultz recognized phrases from a particular Facebook friend as strikingly similar to those that appeared on the newspaper's website, the difference being that the poster, when granted anonymity, unleashed upon the audience in ways he did not when identified. The man admitted he and the website poster were one and the same, and Schultz declared his behavior evidence that anonymity exacerbates posters' worst qualities. Schultz's column drew 126 comments. The site requires users to create an account, verified by email address, in order to submit feedback on the comment boards.

### **“Newspaper Comments: Forget Anonymity! The Problem is Management”**

Scott Rosenberg, founder of *MediaBugs* an independent news site, argues that anonymity, in and of itself, is fairly innocuous. In this April 13, 2010, column, Rosenberg suggests it is not allowing people to speak unabashedly that is the problem but neglecting to step in when the conversation begins to derail from the topic at hand. There were 56 anonymous comments posted in response to the article. No formal registration is required to post to *MediaBugs*. The commenting section requests a name and email address, but they are not confirmed before a user is allowed to post. Users are called upon to help police the section, as *MediaBugs* provides a “flag a problem” button. According to the site, flagged comments are reviewed by staff. There is no other detail regarding whether comments are monitored by staff unless they are flagged. The site’s terms of service include refraining from posting items that are abusive, threatening or libelous, among other criteria.

### **“In Defense of Anonymous”**

*Washington Kitsap Sun* editor David Nelson sees value in allowing users to remain nameless when expressing their opinions in response to news online. Nelson argues in this November 16, 2011, column that technological solutions (logins that would identify posters) aren’t necessarily the answer to making the back and forth more mature or relevant. Nelson laments the suggestion in the industry that the registration process should be handed over to a social media site like Facebook. That would be unfair, he argues, as it would force readers who want to participate in the conversation to sign up for a site in which they might have no interest. Instead, he suggests that anyone participating in the online community operate with a thick skin and a decent sense of humor. There are 80 comments posted in response to Nelson’s editorial, though it should be noted a few of those comments are responses from the editor, which will be

considered separately. Only subscribers may comment on *Kitsap Sun* articles. They are, therefore, identifiable to the newspaper but not to the community at large, as users are welcome to use pseudonyms. Non-subscribers may read comments but not join the conversation. First-time commenters have their comments pre-screened before they are allowed to comment on articles. The site's terms of service agreement warns that any user that repeatedly violates posting guidelines (including using profanity, posting in all capital letters, etc.) will be banned from the site. Users are also invited to click the "suggest removal" button beneath a comment if they feel a comment is inappropriate and should be reviewed by staff.

### **"The Growing Cowardice of Online Anonymity"**

In this August 27, 2008, column *New York Times* columnist Richard Bernstein points to anonymity as one of the journalism industry's longtime friends, a relationship upon which the reporters' ability to inform the public is partly based. Yet, online, it has become a "tremendous aid to the resentful, the scandalous and the cowardly" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 1). In this column, Bernstein notes that as a *New York Times* book reviewer, he has to be held accountable for her words, and he believes others should have to operate by the same standard (2013). There is no comments section provided for this article.

### **"Eliminating Online Anonymity: New Policy Will Not Allow Anonymous Comments on SteamboatToday.com"**

On February 20, 2012, editors of *Steamboat Today*, a daily newspaper that covers Steamboat Springs, Colorado, declared they would cease allowing anonymous commentary on SteamboatToday.com. Editor Brent Boyer said the decision was the culmination not just of years of discussion in the newsroom among staff but with members of the public during the company's "Coffee and a Newspaper" community meetings. Boyer concludes "the greater good



that comes from the accountability inherent in putting your name next to your words far outweighs any defense of anonymity” (p. 1). In accordance with *Steamboat Today*’s new policy, no anonymous comments were allowed following the editorial announcement, but there are 58 comments from registered users. Registration requires email verification and a username. Posters may also connect via social media networks including Facebook and Twitter. Users who register agree not to post items that are libelous, racist, abusive, etc., in nature. The terms of service agreement warns that comments might be edited or removed.

### **“Why Defend an Anonymous Troll’s Right to Insult?”**

Shawn Vestal, reporter for the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, used the example of his own publication’s recent legal battle over anonymous posters to illustrate his reasoning why chilling their speech (by requiring logins) might not be so bad in this July 12, 2012. Following an article featuring a photo of former GOP Party Chairwoman Tina Johnson, a poster asked if the Republican Party’s missing \$10,000 might be stuffed in Johnson’s blouse, which not only made a crude reference to Johnson’s physical appearance but accused her of stealing. In Vestal’s 2012 column on the topic, he concludes that despite a training and background that has taught him “more speech is always better,” the Internet has taught him that’s not always – in fact, it’s rarely – the case (p. 1). When this article was written, the newspaper was in the process of battling a court subpoena to unmask the poster. There are 142 comments responding to Vestal’s column. Commenters are required to sign in with a social media account or create an account for use on the site. They may use pseudonyms if they register with the site.

### **“Anonymity in Keeping with Season’s Spirit”**

This December 12, 2010, *Athens Banner-Herald* article does not sugarcoat the issue of online anonymity, nor does it ignore its dangers, pointing out that anonymity sometimes provides

a platform for foul language and unfair sentiments. However, it focuses on one concrete example of when allowing posters – “people sometimes vilified by many of us for the way they handle the anonymity they’re offered” – to remain nameless prompted them to utilize “a tool of the still-evolving digital media world to reach out to other human beings in loving care” (*Athens Banner-Herald*, 2010, p. 1). In this Christmastime 2010 column, the staff of the *Athens Banner-Herald* in Georgia took the opportunity to highlight an instance when allowing anonymous comments made a positive difference in the life of a local family. That December, the newspaper published a story about a burglary that prompted dozens of readers to respond. The burglars had stolen about \$2,000 in goods from the area home, including toys and the change from a child’s piggy bank. Within hours of the news staff posting the story online, anonymous commenters were talking about ways to assist the family that had lost so much around the holidays. Though the editorial dealt with the newspaper’s online comments, there was no comment board attached to this particular article.

**“No Comment: It’s Time for News Sites to Stop Allowing Anonymous Online comment”**

*American Journalism Review* editor and senior vice president Rem Rieder takes a dim view of online anonymity in this article for the June/July 2010 edition of the publication. He points to the need for a unified standard between print and Web submissions; in other words, if someone wishing to speak out has to sign a letter to the editor, that same person should be identified online as well (Rieder, 2010). Rieder is one of few who brings up the financial drive for anonymous online comments, the idea that page views will increase based on having posts that, while they might harm, also entertain. But anonymity “does wonders for the bravery levels of the angry,” he notes, and “rare is the advertiser who would want to be associated with the ugliness” (Rieder, 2010, p. 1). Rieder concludes that, amidst all the industry’s other challenges,

legal battles arising from disparaging comments made online are headaches news organizations simply don't need. A commenting section was not made available to readers.

**“On the Media: Your Words, Your Real Name (If People Posting Comments on Websites Had to Use Their True Identity, They Might be More Civil)”**

In this February 26, 2011, column, James Rainey of the *Los Angeles Times* contends that news organizations wanting to remain reputable must require users to identify themselves before allowing them to freely post their opinions. Rainey sees little value in anonymous comments, which he says tend to drive away those who would have participated in a productive discussion (2011, p. 1). Rainey concludes that he doesn't buy into the notion that whistleblowers require anonymity online, as “sources can still pick up a phone and find a platoon of reporters ready and willing to pursue their exposé” (p. 2). There is no comment section for readers to respond to this particular column.

**“Entering Hostile Territory: The Elusive Face of the Web Hater”**

In this February 27, 2010, column, *Lincoln Journal-Star* reporter Micah Mertes examines why trolls act the way they do when allowed to remain anonymous. Mertes focuses on the theory of deindividuation, which seeks to explain why people act differently when they are anonymous to those around them. Mertes concludes that anonymity online is a double-edged sword that both allows for uninhibited conversation and also invites aggressive behavior. There is a comment section below Mertes' article, but there are no comments posted. An attempt to post a test comment suggests the feedback section was disabled for this particular article. The *Journal-Star* requires users to login with the website or use a social media login in order to post. The login process requires a first and last name and email address, none of which is confirmed being posting is allowed. The website is also equipped with a built in cooling-off function;

comments that are submitted have an automatic five-minute waiting period before they are posted.

### **Selection of Method**

This study utilizes a textual analysis that “enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of the participants” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 180). Utilizing posters’ and journalists comments verbatim for study helps to achieve one of the key goals of a textual analysis, “to understand some of the relationships between media, culture and society,” (Brennen, 2013, p. 193).

There are two somewhat separate bodies of work being considered as one for this analysis – journalists’ columns and news posters’ commenters. Using Reader’s 2012 study as a model, these texts will be analyzed in three steps; first, the columns will be analyzed, then, the news posters’ comments. Finally, the two will be analyzed as a whole in an effort to identify overarching themes and reoccurring rhetorical patterns.

By identifying the points of agreement and disagreement between these two groups, this research seeks to help determine common ground upon which editors may utilize as they form policies for their online comment sections going forward. Qualitative analysis allows the researcher to “understand social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, giving due emphasis to the meanings, experiences and views of all the participants” (Pope & Mays, 1995). The research for this study began with Hall’s recommended “long preliminary soak” in the information to establish familiarity with the texts (1975). The subsequent process of open coding allowed for a line-by-line analysis, without preconceived ideas about which themes might emerge or how they will relate (Benaquisto, 2008). Because textual analysis “depends from the beginning on astute pattern recognition,” each text was read several closely times, and detailed notes were taken on themes and repeatedly reviewed in order to recognize where repetition

among texts occurred (Patton, 1991, p. 1191). Subsequent readings utilized axial coding to home in on individual categories until “links between various codes [were] made, and relationships among categories began to solidify” (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 87).

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study sought to understand the perspectives of two diverse groups – journalists and online news posters – in relation to anonymity in online comment boards, a topic that has come repeatedly to the forefront as publications debate how best to provide a productive forum for public feedback in the digital realm. This study sought answers two research questions, the first focusing on journalists’ views toward anonymous on new sites’ comments boards and the second concentrating on the perspectives of posters. This chapter is organized by research question.

### **RQ1: Journalists’ Perspectives**

Prominent themes that emerged in analysis of the journalist opinion columns (and in a few cases, the authors’ conversations with posters on the comment boards) were as follows: Anonymous posters as cowards; anonymity as an affront to journalistic standards; anonymous speech as filth; and trolls as lesser human beings.

**Anonymous posters as cowards.** A common thread among the journalists’ opinion columns was the suggestion that those who post anonymously do so not because they have a legitimate reason to remain unidentified but because they simply lack the courage to sign their names to their comments. Falkenthal ridiculed those she perceived as hiding under the cloak of anonymity solely for the purpose of attacking others. She lamented what she saw as a lost tradition of bravery among her fellow citizens, stating, “Americans used to be known for endless courage in stating their views and being forthright to a fault,” but “now, everyone wants to hide behind their cybermama’s skirt” (Falkenthal, 2011, p. 3). She concluded the thought with a challenge to “man up, trolls,” (Falkenthal, 2011, p. 3).

Bernstein (2008) echoed Falkenthal's sentiments. Writing from a personal experience in regard to anonymous feedback, the *Times* columnist pointed to the example of negative anonymous reviews of a book he had written, posted on Amazon.com. Bernstein took issue not with the criticisms but the namelessness "on the grounds that anybody who wants to say something nasty about somebody else's work ought to have the little bit of bravery needed to say it under his or her own name" (p. 2). He added, "under the guise of encouraging free expression and unhindered debate, Amazon was really encouraging cowardice instead" (Bernstein, 2010, p. 2). When confronted with reviewers who criticized his writing, Bernstein disregarded any potentially positive aspects of anonymous feedback. Journalists included for this study showed similar tendencies, focusing more on a message they found offensive than the reason why some messages might need to be presented anonymously. Rieder (2013) was perhaps the most unforgiving of anonymous speech, stating that when it comes to offensive comments made by those too cowardly to post their names, "there's just no defense" (p. 2.). For a journalist whose job it is to provide a forum for open discussion, Rieder's stance is significant, suggesting that a message phrased in an offensive way should not be heard, regardless of whether it is true or adds meaningful depth to the discussion.

Overall, the journalists gave little credence to legitimate reasons a poster might be afraid to have his or her name revealed to the public. References to the value of anonymous comments, when provided, were dismissive at best. Bernstein (2008) acknowledged the benefits of anonymity but concluded remaining nameless is ultimately "a tremendous aid to the resentful, the scandalous and the cowardly, and the signs are that the tidal of [sic] wave of anonymous comment made possible by the Internet is getting even bigger" (p. 1). Vestal (2012) scoffed at the notion those who speak behind the cloak of anonymity are bravely reporting what no one else

will, considering this version of free speech is nothing more than “frail, cowardly insults, tossed out from behind an opaque veil, with the paid legal protection of an actual journalistic organization” (p. 3). Where posters saw themselves as an important part of the dialogue, often adding something valuable to the conversation, journalists discounted any offensive speech as useless, overlooking the heart of its message.

**Anonymity as an affront to journalistic standards.** There was an overarching sentiment among the journalists analyzed that anonymous comments directly contradict long-held industry standards for managing audience feedback, handling sources (anonymous or otherwise) and presenting messages to the public (see e.g., Boyer, 2012; Falkenthal, 2011; Nelson, 2011; Rainey, 2011; Reider, 2010; Schultz, 2009; Vestal, 2012).

Five of the 11 columns studied made direct references to the disparity between requirements to submit letters to the editor and policies for submitting online feedback. Generally, the journalists responded negatively to the notion of allowing anonymous comments to accompany news stories online and called for a change that would require users to identify themselves in some manner in order to participate in the discussion, just as one would generally do in a letter to the editor. Otherwise, they argued, publications risk doing “real and lasting harm” to innocent people who are attacked by nameless, faceless critics (Falkenthal, 2011, p. 3). The change in policy for *Steamboat Today* rested on the fact the publication requires first and last names for letters to the editor, as Boyer stated “simply extending the guideline to today’s online version of the letter to the editor ... will attract far more engaging reader discussion” (p. 2). Boyer made brief mention of anonymity’s ability to “give a voice to those who might put themselves at risk professionally or personally for their candor on any given issue” but determined accountability serves the greater good (p. 2). The journalists sought equal standards



across the board, indicating that a division in policies between print and digital showed some kind of weakness in their publication. Falkenthal (2011) reasoned the Internet is undergoing the same process newspapers underwent during their early days, pointing to the anonymous letters to the editor that were a hallmark of early publications. Ultimately, editors decided against including anonymous submissions because they allowed anyone to “spew any sort of unfounded opinion without consequences and without backing an opinion up with any hard fact” (Falkenthal, 2011, p. 2). Similarly, as the Internet became popular, editors opened the floodgates to anonymous comment in the rush to embrace a new medium, but the Internet, Falkenthal (2011) argued, has matured, and policies should as well. As it stands, Schultz (2009) said, allowing anonymous feedback “breaks every rule newspapers have enforced for decades in letters to the editor, which require not only a name and a city of residence, but contact information to confirm authorship” (p. 2). Instead of viewing digital content as a new and different form of journalism that might be best suited to operate under by different rules, the journalists called for uniformity among policies, regardless of platform.

The journalists analyzed showed discomfort with having part of the reporting process, including awarding anonymity, taken out of their hands. Bernstein (2008) noted that anonymous sources, in typical newsgathering, are handled carefully and used only when they can provide information that otherwise would not be available. However, the conversation that traditionally occurs between news staff and those sources who wish to keep their names secret does not exist online, where “a blanket sort of immunity” is granted to every participant (p. 1). Bernstein called this departure from the traditional standard a “morally deformed exploitation of the concept of free speech” (p. 1). The journalistic perspectives clearly considered anonymity a privilege, not a right, and considered media professionals the authority figures who should grant

that privilege. Anonymity should be preserved for special circumstances, they argued, when the danger of naming a source is clear and recognizable. They rejected the way the online experience contradicts their understanding of how sources should be handled.

In traditional news reporting, those whose words make it into print are chosen carefully, and they are selected because they are seen as being able to further the public's understanding of a specified topic (Ibrahim et. al, 2011). Nelson (2011) pointed to comment sections as one area in which the media's long-revered goal to "give voice to the voiceless" ("SPJ code of ethics," n.d.) has run rampant. Nelson gave an example from the *Kitsap Sun's* feedback section in which two posters "commandeered a comment thread by pointing it in a direction [Nelson] thought was off-topic from the story itself" (p. 1). Nelson went as far as to email the posters and ask for a personal meeting, though the damage had already been done. While defending the occasional need for anonymity, Vestal considers the relationship between posters and journalists, where anonymity is the norm instead of the exception, "a perversion of what, in other circumstances, is a valuable journalistic relationship: helping to get at the truth by protecting people for whom it's dangerous to speak the truth" (p. 2). The departure from standard policies appears to be almost a personal affront to many of the journalists, who expressed indignation at having to stand by while others disregard the industry's long-held principles.

**Anonymous speech as filth.** Reader (2012) found that journalists equated anonymous speech with filth, and this concept was prevalent among the opinion columns analyzed for this research. Vestal (2012) put it most bluntly, even utilizing the same (albeit perhaps a bit politer) language used by the posters he despises, participants he says "are in there throwing poop," not making worthwhile contributions (p. 2). Vestal posited that a chilling effect caused by having commenters identify themselves might not be such a bad thing, as comment sections, he said, are

mostly “a sewer of stupidity and insults and shallowness” (p. 2.) Pexton (2010), in his call for the *Post* to transition to a social media login system, noted that some language used by nameless posters is so crude it shouldn’t be posted “within 10 miles of the *Washington Post*’s masthead” (p. 1). For the journalists, the conversation regarding the potential value of online anonymity stopped with indecency; if posters could not be cordial in the way they form their feedback, then media should disregard their opinions.

Rosenberg, whose 2010 *MediaBugs.org* column stressed the need for more feedback management, blamed newspapers for the “hellhole” and “cesspool” the comment boards have become over the years as they have grown in popularity (p. 1). Rainey chimed in with a similar assessment in his 2010 *Los Angeles Times* column, referring to the “gutter talk” allowed by what are otherwise reputable news sites (p. 1). Journalists referred to the work of trolls with disgust, rarely mentioning whether even a part of a troll’s message is true or has value, despite its distasteful presentation. By pointing to offensive language they find intolerable, journalists appeared to have an easier time rejecting anonymous speech as a whole. Journalists tended to consider all anonymous speech equally, regardless of whether that speech is meaningful or offensive. Comments considered counterproductive to the discussion devalued the rest of the speech, the journalists contended, or at least made it less approachable because it required readers to sift through the vitriol in order to find valuable insight. Falkenthal (2011) stated as much while engaging directly with a poster in the comment section following her column, stating that, without names, she “disregard[ed] anonymous opinions of value as well as the comments of someone out to do harm” (p. 24).

Even those columns whose titles suggested they would focus on positive aspects of allowing anonymity on the comment boards ultimately treated those aspects as the exception –

the theories that rarely played out in practice. This was most noticeable in the *Banner-Herald* holiday editorial, whose title, “Anonymity in keeping with season’s spirit,” suggested a wholly positive outlook. Indeed, the column highlighted an uplifting instance in which the anonymous community worked together to provide Christmas presents to a child whose home was burglarized, but the first half the of the column pointed to the overall failure of anonymity on comment boards, stating, “... the reality of online commenting remains somewhat further away from being the community-building tool that many newspaper professionals have envisioned” (“Anonymity in keeping with season’s spirit,” 2010, p. 1). Anonymous posters working together for the good of another was treated as something to celebrate only because it was the exception to the overall behavior on boards, characterized by “vitriolic outbursts from people who remain largely unaccountable for their words” (Athens *Banner-Herald* staff, 2010, p. 1). The editorial in the *Athens Banner-Herald* is unusual, as the journalists studied typically gave little attention to the instances when anonymity resulted in something positive or had the potential to effect a worthwhile change. By labeling anonymous speech as crude, it seemed easier for journalists to disregard its benefits and push toward a system that would identify posters who want to leave feedback. Journalists focused on the most offensive examples of anonymous speech, leaving out examples of anonymous speech that contributed something meaningful to the conversation.

**Trolls as lesser humans.** This research supported a second theme found by Reader (2010), the dehumanizing of trolls. The journalists discussed users they believe are abusing the privilege of anonymity in terms intended to strip them of their human qualities or imply they are somehow lesser beings in terms of intelligence. Even Rosenberg (2010), despite taking a compromise position in the debate over online, referred to these posters as vermin, calling the comment sections they inhabit “rat-infested” (p. 1). Rainey (2011) framed the debate over

anonymity online by comparing comment sections to a gathering in which “too many louts crash the party” (p. 1). He went on to describe these posters as “cretins” who alienate other participants as they “[leave] their ugly mark beneath ... news stories” (p. 1). The journalists analyzed sensed a danger of allowing such commentary to be left for readers to see, as they feared crude posts might devalue a reporter’s honest work.

Nelson (2011), despite defending anonymity online, noted in the comment section (in response to another poster) that “warts are something that comes with the territory” (p. 9). Mertes (2010) devalued all trolls and their input, calling them “... curmudgeons who haunt comment boards, waiting ... to pounce on some unfortunate thread and drag it down an unintelligible path” (p. 1). Trolls delight in hiding behind their anonymity, which Mertes added “emboldens them to squawk out whatever they want without accountability” (p. 2). Generally, the journalists supported the notion news outlets should provide a forum for commentary, and portraying trolls in this light – as lesser humans whose opinions should not be valued – appeared a justification for casting them out of the conversation.

Schultz made note that the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer’s* feedback site, Cleveland.com, recently underwent an upgrade that allows readers to see all of an individual’s previous posts. While explaining what she sees as the merits of this new system, Schultz alluded to hateful posters as poisonous creatures, noting her hope “... that even though they’re still anonymous, those who regularly engage in abusive comments will moderate their venom because of push-back from other readers” (p. 3). In comparing the anonymity of Cleveland.com to her own Facebook page, Schultz noted a clear difference, saying in a social media environment where names are attached to comments, “We get fired up, but we seldom lose sight of our mutual humanity” (p. 2). Vestal, who seemed to hope comment sections will fall out of favor all

together, referred to posters as “monkeys” who want to have their speech protected regardless of its importance (p. 2). Roig-Franzia (2013) pointed out that journalists against online anonymity aren’t the only one calling for posters to be unmasked, but that is “exactly what some of the folks who get savaged by anonymous commenters would love to see happen” (p. 1). The word choice is important in understanding Roig-Franzia’s beliefs about anonymous posters. His use of the word “savaged” (versus “attacked,” “insulted” or any other constructive term that would have had the same meaning) suggests he agrees with those who paint trolls as uncultured, unintelligent and even beast-like. Journalists are accustomed to being in the position where they determine who is worthy of receiving the promise of anonymity, and they generally seemed offended that someone whose sole purpose is trolling the comment boards would be granted the privilege automatically. Devaluing these posters as lesser beings makes it seem more reasonable that journalists would disregard their arguments for anonymity as well. Equating anonymous speech with filth suggests all comments provided by those who do not provide their names are inherently worthless.

Overall, the journalists showed a reluctance to evaluate posts for content alone, focusing instead on whether the messages were crude or expressed anonymously. Journalists displayed an inherent distrust of anonymous posters and their ability to leave unmoderated feedback without their names attached. This attitude appeared to stem from a discomfort (or at the very least, a lack of familiarity) with the platform through which these comments were presented. Without industry-wide best practices for the handling of news and its subsequent feedback on the Internet to guide them, journalists remain resistant to allowing different standards than those that exist to govern print media. Journalists also expressed frustration at what they perceived as ineffective moderation tools, despite comments from readers who said they took pride in helping police the

comment boards using those tools. It's important to note that much of the language journalists took offense to is language already prohibited by the average comment board's terms of service. This suggests the debate going forward could be focused more on moderation policies and less on anonymity as the root of the problem.

## **RQ2: Posters' Perspectives**

The following themes were prominent among posts to online comment sections: anonymity as a safety measure; anonymity as insight; social media as a flawed solution; anonymity as a builder of community; and posters as an effective moderating force.

**Anonymity as a safety measure.** Perhaps the most common sentiment posters expressed was the need to guard their identities for security reasons, a theme also found in Reader's study. There was a sense among posters that the Internet is rife with trouble-makers who might stalk or seek to injure anyone with whose opinion they disagree. Many posters expressed fear of physical harm if their fellow posters knew their real names. In response to Pexton's suggestion that the *Washington Post* go to a Facebook login system, a poster commenting under the pseudonym, "xenon," said he doesn't want "some wahoo kicking down [his] door at 2 A.M. with a shotgun over something [he] said on the internet" (in Pexton, 2013). Poster "bsumpter3," responding to Roig-Franzia's assertion that anonymity is a double-edged sword, asked why users should identify themselves – "So some nut who doesn't like what we say ... [can] track us down and do bodily harm?" (in Roig-Franzia, 2013). He added, "With all the nuts out there, I wouldn't speak freely" (Roig-Franzia, 2013). Some posters shared personal experiences illustrating what they see as the dangers of being identifiable. Poster "LouiseJ" stopped feeling safe when posting to the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* site after another user appeared to be collecting information about others. "LouiseJ" wrote,

When the comment was made in one posting how I moved from one town here to another - I realized the possibility for danger with some of these people. I'm sure we all know by now which posters on here are clearly unbalanced" (in Schultz, 2009).

Poster "Downer1" said that the last time after posting with a real name, "I had my address and phone number and my wife's place of work posted ... urging all their proponents to make my life miserable" (in Pexton, 2013). Poster "Colleen Smidt" added, "I have also been targeted for using my real name. Just this past month a poster ... was removed for posting something personal about me and had done so to others in the past" (in Nelson, 2011). The posters seemed to feed on each others' insecurities, sharing stories and fears about the potential for retaliation as justification for remaining nameless.

With almost the same insistence that journalists considered anonymous posting an act of cowardice, posters asserted that participating in the conversation at all is an act of bravery, and anonymity is a necessary cloak of protection. Poster "PV Bella" (who, interestingly enough, signed the name "S. Bryant" at the end of the comment) said having your name attached to your comment is tantamount to "walk[ing] around with a target on [your] back" (in Falkenthal, 2011). Hegel, a regular poster to the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer's* site, worried for everyone's safety, suggesting that the wrong comment could effect in a person's demise under mysterious circumstances. He wrote, "Mine (and a lot of others) comments could make us disappear in a quarry" (in Schultz, 2009). A commenter posting as "PineWalrus" mentioned depending on a moniker "to insult myself from those individuals who might disagree ... to the extent they want to punch me in the nose (or worse)" (in Pexton, 2013). Serving to confirm the fear that some posters track those whose comments have offended them was "poorrichrd2," who said, "I keep a



file of some of the most disgusting and vile things ... that have been posted on this forum” (Schultz, 2009). While concerns were often based on something that could happen – versus evidence of something that did – the posters showed real anxiety about the possibility of having their identities revealed as part of the participation process. They considered participating in the conversation to begin with brave enough, and they did not feel they should be expected to act heroically by attaching their names to their opinions.

Posters expressed a need to make their viewpoints heard, but they felt they were being realistic about the nature of the Internet and the ease with which others might find them were their names included. Poster “billsecure” pointed to anonymity as protection for posters with unpopular viewpoints, admitting, “I’m pro-choice. If I write a strong comment on this will I have anti-abortionists possibly picketing my house? I don’t want to take that chance” (Pexton, 2013). Poster “Robin in Manette,” hinted that providing a real name would exacerbate problems already in play, saying, “I’m torn on this issue because ... folks have taken overt measures to try and intimidate me. ...I refuse to be bullied” (in Nelson, 2011). The poster went on to say,

I would use my real name, but I’ve already become the victim of mail fraud and harassment when my real name was posted in these forums. Someone went so far as to call my house and leave offense messages. I have a wife and two teenage daughters. I have to think about their safety (in Nelson, 2011).

At the same time posters extolled the virtues of the online community, they feared their fellow participants and what they might be capable of if all commenters’ identities were revealed.

Other posters’ safety concerns centered on permanence of the Internet. They feared that comments they make now might affect them in the future if their real names are required. Most worries involved employers stumbling upon past posts with which they don’t agree. One

anonymous commenter<sup>1</sup>, who was not identified even by a pseudonym, wrote, “Give up anonymity and suddenly people are being called onto the carpet at their jobs because of an opinion they shared” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “Traveler112,” arguing that the positive aspects of anonymity outweigh the negative aspects, wrote, “... a reasonable political comment one made 20 years prior could be the reason one doesn’t get a job, and if people started worrying at that level, the discussion would slow down or cease” (in Roig-Franzia, 2013). Commenters feared that search engines that log cached data could lead potential (or current) employers to posts they made publically but didn’t actually intend to share with everyone or want to have linked to them indefinitely.

Again, some posters presented personal experiences as evidence of the reality of the dangers of revealing users’ real names. Poster “marvin” mentioned once having a blog that focused on politics. When a coworker discovered the blog and took offense at some of marvin’s beliefs (marvin was identified by real name as the author of the blog), the poster said it caused problems at the office, writing,

Overnight I went from being a “good guy” to being a “bad guy,” which affected my work and personal relationships. In other words, this can affect someone’s employment and livelihood [sic]. ...I was basically forced to change my behavior to be more politically correct or put myself at financial risk (in Nelson, 2011).

Whether these posters’ experiences are the norm or something unusual is impossible to determine, but they served to reinforce users’ belief they are at risk if they are identified. Poster “sideswiththekids” expressed similar concerns about how posts that express strong opinions might affect the way the poster is perceived in the job market. The poster stated, “I would hate

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<sup>1</sup> This is the lone instance in which a commenter was presented as wholly anonymous. No pseudonym was included with the comment.

to take part in a discussion about atheism, for instance, and discover the person I just criticized is interviewing me for a job the next day” (in Pexton, 2013). While poster “Robin in Manette” purported to be self-employed, the fear of potential financial loss was the same. The poster stated,

I run a small business and risk alienating my customers if they don’t agree with my political position. ...I’ve come to the conclusion that if a customer of mine stops doing business with me because of my position on a subject here, then I didn’t really need them as a customer anyway. But that’s one thing for me, I have my own business. What about the poor guy who has to work for someone else? (in Nelson, 2011).

Posters expressed the feeling that signing their names would be tantamount to having their bosses or coworkers peering over their shoulders as they type on comment boards, and posting could affect their livelihoods as a result.

Posters also expressed a general distrust of the government, and they considered remaining anonymous a safety measure for maintaining their privacy. An anonymous commenter objecting to Falkenthal’s disregard for anonymity stated, “The day that we allow our right to anonymity to be taken away is the day we let Big Brother in our house” (in Falkenthal, 2011). Some commenters alluded to anonymity as being the final stronghold against what they perceive as already too much government interference in citizens’ private affairs. Poster “JdL” wrote,

In this era of increasing government intrusion, it is more important than ever to be able to post anonymously...Falkenthal is living in a fantasy land where everyone can post passionate opinions without negative repercussions. The real world must more closely resemble Orwell’s “1984.” (in Falkenthal, 2011).

An anonymous poster chimed in, agreeing with “JdL’s” Big Brother assertion: “Either you are surveilled by us, or you are with the terrorists (i.e. trolls)” (in Falkenthal, 2011). Posts suggesting the government is watching tended to prompt responses of a similar tone. Echoing the tone of “JdL’s” comment, poster “NewAmericaNow” wrote, “In the age of unconstitutional infringement of privacy it is imperative to remain anonymous” (in Falkenthal, 2011). Posters already believe the government has overstepped its bounds, and they depend on anonymity to ward against additional unwelcome intrusion.

For commenters, there was an overarching sentiment that anonymity provides protection. While some acknowledged that a commenter can be identified by Internet Protocol address if someone is determined enough to find them, it is a generally accepted truth among posters that keeping their names a secret will keep them safe, whether it is from being harmed by fellow posters, unfairly judged by employers or tracked by the government.

**Anonymity as insight.** For many posters, the comment threads were seen not just as a place to go to debate an issue but an avenue for gaining valuable insight from those who might, while remaining nameless, provide important details. There was a perception among commenters that reading through the feedback section would fill in the gaps, adding information journalists failed (for whatever reason) to report. Poster “Robert Smith” explained this concept most eloquently in response to Rosenberg’s suggestion that comment boards should be moderated, stating,

reader comments are a very important part of supplying the citizens with the news in today’s day and age. Journalist’s [sic] and the press are on such limited time and budgets the proper news needs all the help it can get. So much more to each story can be gained by readers comments. They may be a victim, a family member, a CEO, an

assistant, an intern, a rescue worker, someone who knows what wasn't legal to grasp and ect. [sic]" (in Rosenberg, 2010).

Poster "Traveler112" agreed, adding "there are often ... comments which make note of information not included in the story, or anecdotes that apply color to a story, or give information that the writers of the story are clearly afraid to give" (in Roig-Franzia, 2013). Commenters displayed little understanding – or perhaps prioritizing – of the legal risks journalists must consider (and that might lead to them leaving details out) when crafting a story and therefore considered the posters' contributions a more complete version of what happened.

Commenter "erinoconnell," responding to Pexton's suggestion the *New York Times* move to a Facebook login system, echoed the sentiment that an anonymous feedback area allows commenters to help create a well-rounded story. Erinoconnell pointed specifically to what the poster considered the failure of the *Times* in terms of political coverage, stating, "The NYT ... does not publish much diversity in viewpoints. I rarely see a fair balance between liberal and conservative. I come here because the comments, though vile, better represent the realities of American politics" (in Pexton, 2013). Posters like erinoconnell didn't believe media do a satisfactory job of fulfilling their role to report both sides of a issue, and there was an overwhelming sense among them that the "true" story lies in the feedback section, where posters will fill in details until an article is fully reported, regardless if that means depending on rumor or irrelevant detail. Another commenter to the same article chimed in, agreeing with erinoconnell's sentiment. Poster "Crmudgeon" stated, "I often comment in the NYTimes comment section, often about inconsistencies in articles and viewpoints" (in Pexton, 2013). "Cindy Constantine," in reaction to Boyer's 2012 announcement that *Steamboat Today* would no longer allow nameless commenters to participate, lamented the decision, saying it will leave the publication

“without the ‘inside and important’ information anon’s bring to the conversation” (in Boyer, 2012). There was a strong suggestion that journalists alone can’t be depended on to report the whole story. Many posters said they count on the feedback section to get the most complete information possible, and they formed their opinions based on the combination of professional reporting and citizen input.

Posters said they valued their anonymity not only because they saw it as a means of gleaning additional details to a story but because they believed it allowed them to take the pulse of the community on any given topic. A poster identified by “44023” stated, “I enjoy the anonymity on here because it shows a pretty good barometer for how people feel about a topic in general” (in Schultz, 2009). Poster “jfp1” noted that while the feedback boards can be a place of hatred and ignorance, “...I’m grateful to have this window on the attitudes of my fellow citizens” (in Pexton, 2013). Users understood the window might sometimes reveal an ugly view, but it’s a reality they generally accepted. They believe offensive posts are as important to them as the well-stated comments, as they reflect something about the state of the world. Poster “duchess3” said, “It’s also important that we see the reality of how vile and hateful people can be as well so we don’t lose touch with the real world” (in Pexton, 2013). There was a sense among posters that the media can’t always be trusted to provide an accurate balance of perspectives, and one way to measure the reality of the public sentiment was to look at the comments below an article.

Some posters expected their experiences with public opinion in the real world to be reflected in the digital realm, and they were offended when media accounts did not seem to match what they considered to be reality. Poster “sideswiththekids,” for example, took issue with what the poster considered an incorrect indication that the election of Barack Obama, the country’s first black president, indicated there was “very little racism in the country” (in Pexton,

2013). Sideswithkids contended that a look at the comment boards suggested otherwise, saying, “The comments here and in other papers certainly disprove that. I also have realized just how much ignorance about the law and government there is even among ‘reasonable’ people” (in Pexton, 2013). With politeness aside, posters communicated their true feelings, helping to paint a more complete picture of public opinion, commenters said. “I look at these miniature letters to the editor as being a pulse of reader sentiment. They aren’t always pretty or even necessary, but they do provide insight into the readership,” poster “bocam48” stated (in Pexton, 2013). Unlike journalists, posters seemed willing to wade through the “filth” if it led to better understanding of how citizens are responding to an issue. Posters were able to look at the collection of comments as a whole, sifting out the irrelevant and crude without being distracted by it in search of the truth. Trolls were viewed as a minor annoyance, occasionally to be called out if not cast out, but overall, their work seemed to have little effect on how posters viewed the comment boards.

Visitors to the comment section went as far as to suggest the worst comments are vital to understanding the bigger picture. Commenter “va\_dawg” pointed to the unpleasant comments as a means to an end, stating, “I don’t enjoy the ugly, illiterate comments, but they are useful to see, because they reveal what some people really do ‘think’, feel and believe” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “Robert Smith” agreed, noting that “even online ‘brawls’ if you wish, will tell so much about the ‘heartbeat’ of this nation and the world. And do bring the truth out in one way or another” (in Rosenberg, 2010). “Livelifenow,” when taking issue with Schultz’s suggestion that anonymous comments be banned, wondered if the media are interested in all opinions, or only the views that are courteously stated. The poster asked, “Do we want a true cross section of the populace, of those whom we deem ‘civil’ only?” (in Schultz, 2009). The populace can’t be understood unless all of its components are considered and given a voice, even if what that voice

has to say is off-color or crude, commenters argued. Poster “PMichaels-Artist-at-large” pointed to the comment sections as “quite the education,” noting “while many comments are truly offensive, they remind us that the US is nothing if not a diverse nation of all kinds of free, if not intelligent, speech” (in Pexton, 2013). Posters appeared to make sense of the world around them by taking stock of how the community is reacting to a story – perhaps validating their own feelings in the process – and they depended on comments provided anonymously in order to do so.

**Social media as a flawed solution.** Several of the columns included for this study discuss a potential move (or mention another news organization’s move) to social media logins to identify posters, prompting an almost universally negative reaction from commenters. Despite the fact Pexton made only a brief reference to his hope the *Post* will one day move to a social media commenting system, the mere suggestion generated more discussion among users than anything else in his farewell column. Poster “BreckJack,” while agreeing with Pexton that requiring posters to identify themselves is a good idea, said, “...Don’t require use of Facebook or other social medium. Some people, like me, aren’t on Facebook and emphatically don’t want to be” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “hazmatdance” was more emphatic, noting in all caps, “... NOT EVERYONE IS ON FACEBOOK!! If you require a FB login that will shut people out” (in Pexton, 2013). “Add my voice to those against identification. And certainly against Facebook” added Greenmiss, despite admitting her belief the *Post*’s feedback section is “a blight on the paper” (in Pexton, 2013). Posters were united in their stand against being required to participate in Facebook or like programs, many of them stating they had made a personal choice to avoid social media and did not want to have to compromise that position in order to participate. “Why should those of us who choose not to become social media junkies be prevented from



commenting?” poster eomemars” asked, adding “Even if using FB were [to] eliminate most or all of the rudeness, etc., it also arbitrarily/artificially reduces the portion of the population participating” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “kevrobb” served as one example that when it comes to social media logins, some posters will opt out of the conversation, stating, “I try to keep my comments sober, polite, even sometimes thoughtful, but I’m one who would surely be driven away by a Facebook requirement. I don’t have or want a Facebook page” (in Pexton, 2013). “No,” poster “bretton3021” said definitively, “Facebook is not the answer” (Pexton, 2013). Regardless of whether they support banning anonymity or speak out adamantly against, posters saw few benefits from using social media as an avenue for joining the conversation.

Posters also pointed to practical problems with having commenters sign in to Facebook or other social media accounts to participate, namely that utilizing a third-party application doesn’t necessarily unmask a poster. Commenter “Crmudgeon” joked, “What is stopping anyone from registering as Mickey T Mouse other than the ‘name’ is already taken?” (in Pexton, 2013). Facebook, for example, now allows users to use any pseudonym they desire, added “NNevada,” stating, “. . . Requiring signing on via Facebook or some other social media tool would not validate anyone’s identity. I could easily open a FB account as Robert NNevada” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “tbarksdl’s” sentiments about the move to social media harken back to the theme of depending on anonymity to feel secure – “Anyone who believes that that have clicked the right buttons that keeps FB and third parties from using your information any way they want needs to have their heads examined” (in Pexton, 2013). There was also concern about basic computer threats, such as hacking. Should someone else get into a user’s social media account, that would allow the person to post opinions under someone else’s name without their permission. Poster “Shelala” wrote, “I’ve . . . had family find me still logged in and will post

under my name as a joke. What happens then?” (in Vestal, 2012). Posters enjoyed the opportunity the Internet gave them to provide instant feedback, but they did not trust the platform’s security or others who use it. This led most of them to participate only with the promise that the media outlet would not reveal their identities and point them unnecessarily at risk.

Again, posters pointed to personal experiences, or experiences they’d heard about from others, as evidence their views about security concerns are valid. Poster “MrNatural” added, “... Often we read about people being vandalized, fired or even their families confronted for their Facebook posts” (in Vestal, 2012). For some posters, the concern was not as much about security but mixing two parts of their lives they wanted to keep separate, as they didn’t consider providing feedback to a news story an appropriate part of the social network experience. Poster “Liz24” noted that requiring a Facebook login would not have only a chilling effect on the conversation but stated, “...My Facebook is more of a family affair, it’s personal, has pictures of my children, and I don’t want strangers to be connected to that” (in Pexton, 2013). Poster “heybooboo” went as far as to declare there would be no benefits at all to joining Facebook, even if it would allow commenting on a site requiring a social media account, stating,

I am not a member Facebook and refuse to join it. I don’t like the way Internet sites are consolidating personal information about people and then reselling it (or forcing people to hire other websites to monitor and clean up the information).

That is the main reason that I prefer to stay anonymous. Facebook is part of that whole consolidation process” (in Nelson, 2011).

Posters showed a great amount of concern that third-party applications on the Internet could record their information, and that information could be used without their permission later.

Posters preferred the opportunity to talk back without every opinion they uttered being attached to their personal lives, which are often on display through social media networks like Facebook. Poster Jeff also objected to a social media switchover, echoing heybooboo's and others' comments:

I believe that using Facebook is not a good thing. If anyone has taken the time to read their legal notice, you will find that anything you post on a Facebook website whether it is a comment, picture, or even some personal poetry that it becomes the property of Facebook. By posting it on Facebook you are giving them permission to use it. Even as stated before, there is nothing stopping a person from using false names or information. ...To force people into Facebook will not solve any issues and only cause some to drop out of the blogs that have brought constructive comments. Let these social media sites remain being a social place for people to visit" (in Nelson, 2011).

Posters rejected the notion of using social media logins (Facebook being the primary option discussed) for a multitude of reasons. Some had no interest in social media and were offended at the suggestion they would be forced to sign on in order to participate on forums where they were once welcome as anonymous users. Others pointed to privacy and security concerns. Many of the posters concluded social media logins have never been a viable option because they don't guarantee a person's true identity is revealed.

**Anonymity as a builder of community.** Posters expressed a feeling of belonging on the comment boards, a sentiment they said is fostered by anonymity because it allows people to openly connect with one another. This was no more evident than in the comments following Boyer's announcement that *Steamboat Today* had moved to a login system. Commenters noted

which posters were missing from the conversation as a result and lamented the loss on a seemingly personal level. “Mr. Tia Chi,” poster “John Fielding” pleaded, “please continue your contributions, maybe use your grandsons name or some other ruse if necessary. You too Sledback. YVB, Seeuski, I will miss you” (in Boyer, 2012). Poster “mtrouch” also called out to those whose contributions were considered vital to the community, stating, “To Yvb, sled neck and the other I’ve enjoyed sharing viewpoints with, thanks for your opinions. Too bad the paper is ‘firing’ its biggest resource” (in Boyer, 2012). Poster “Brian Kotowski” chimed in with a direct address, writing,

MrTaiChi: You are so thoughtful, informed, and measured in all of your contributions here that I can’t imagine you’d ever need to be concerned about reprisal for anything you post in this forum. I earnestly hope you’ll continue to elevate this board with your participation. If you choose not to, I respect your decision, and will miss you nonetheless (in Boyer, 2012).

When faced with having to identify themselves, posters to Boyer’s column focused on what they lost personally as members of their community were kicked out of the conversation because they wished to remain nameless. Anonymity allowed them to build relationships, and the posters knew about each other from years of interaction. Poster “Scott Wedel” noted, “If someone at the paper had the slightest bit of creativity or intelligence then they’d be reaching out to YVB to see if they could help him write a column on soil conversation techniques, or MrTaichi on whatever, and so on” (in Boyer, 2012). The posters’ comments suggest anonymity allows people to be more comfortable taking risks with one another, thus increasing the bond among them. In some cases, those relationships are long-forged. “Colleen Smidt,” addressing a

few fellow commenters with whom she likes to converse on the comment boards, stated, “We have been talking to one another on the blogs for years” (in Nelson, 2011).

Though it is not uncommon for terms of service agreements to prohibit users from straying off topic, the comment boards showed this occasionally happened as posters built relationships with one another by sharing personal details about their lives and inquiring about the lives of others. “Jeff Kibler,” upon seeing a comment by “Phoebe Hackman,” addressed Phoebe directly, asking how things are going with Phoebe’s mother, who Phoebe had apparently shared with the posting community had been suffering from health problems (in Boyer, 2012). Phoebe responded in kind, writing,

Mom’s doing well. She had a rough January...blood pressure bottomed out for a few days, caught a stomach virus that put her out of commission for about a week, and took a tumble in the shower (just a small bruise on her elbow, thank goodness), but she always bounces back and, for the last few weeks, she’s been great...Thanks for asking! (in Boyer, 2012).

The interaction between the two posters suggests that over time, the comment boards had fostered a sense of community among posters who feel comfortable sharing personal details of their lives with one another. Poster “Shelalal,” rejecting Vestal’s accusation that posters are nasty cowards interested only in making cheap shots at one another, stated,

The people who routinely comment aren’t a group of barbarians. I have seen some genuine acts of compassion. Lewis is a regular commenter here and some time ago encountered a health scare. Other commenters showed concern and wished him well even the ones who routinely spare with him. He didn’t feel alone. ...Perhaps if Vestal took a nose dive off the high board of what he considers professional journalism and into

the pool of the community he writes about, he would be less inclined to label them as sewage seeking monkeys” (in Vestal, 2012).

When poster “Mick Sheldon” was questioned by a fellow poster about a somewhat incoherent post, he explained that he suffers from dyslexia. “Robin in Manette” reached out, empathizing with Mick Sheldon, saying, “Are you diagnosed dyslexic? I’ve been lucky, an avid reader since early grade school and the English language has come fairly easy for me. I have a cousin who struggled with Dyslexia, so I can relate a little” (in Nelson, 2011). “Robin in Manette” responded to the thread in hopes of connecting with Mick Sheldon, just as a concerned neighbor might check on the person living next door. These digital neighbors might have never seen one another in person, but their relationships, in many cases, appear to be just as real and meaningful.

Posters showed they value not only a message but its messenger, despite that person’s real name not always been shared. Poster “zelda” admitted coming to the comment board specifically to see what valued members of the community have to say about a topic, stating, “There are some commenters here that I look forward to reading such as RedCedar and Shelala because their viewpoints sometimes offer informed insights” (in Vestal, 2012). Posters don’t necessarily know each other’s first and last names but have built a community through pseudonyms that protect their identities while also allowing them to connect and share openly with one another.

**Posters as an effective moderating force.** Commenters expressed disappointment that journalists don’t have faith in their ability to police the comment boards. Reader (2010) found the same sentiment in his study among posters who believed they did an acceptable job of ridding the community of some of its bad apples. Commenter “edme13” stated, “...in the past, peer pressure has sometimes enabled decent comments to ‘crowd out’ the unwanted – making

the censor's job easier most times" (in Pexton, 2013). Poster "Robin in Manette" called for more commenters to do just that – take it upon themselves to "drown out the turds," (in Nelson, 2011).

Poster "John Haydon" stated,

It has been my experience that those who regularly post here, do a pretty good job of moderating the conversation. Sometimes it gets a little spirited, and some even get a little out of hand, but in the end, that's what conversation is all about (in Nelson, 2011).

Posters demonstrated through their comments that they are capable of keeping an eye on the tenor of the boards and gently prodding others to play by the rules. "Robin in Manette, after reading a fellow poster's lengthy and somewhat unintelligible response to Boyer's column, wrote,

Mick, To be honest, I have a hard time figuring out what you are trying to say something. I'm not trying to be rude, but please make an attempt at brevity and clarity in your posts, because I am interested in what you have to say" (in Nelson, 2011).

"Robin in Manette's" response illustrated one way in which posters consider themselves capable moderators of the threads. "Robin in Manette" gently worked to steer the conversation back to a point where others could participate, and in this case, it worked. Poster "Mick Sheldon" responded apologetically, saying "My English is terrible," and then clarified what he intended to say in his previous post (in Nelson, 2011). When a comment is posted that seemed out of bounds, posters came together to let the commenter know the behavior wasn't welcome, or, in "Mick Sheldon's" case, simply asked for a little clarification. In response to a poster's sarcastic remark beneath Pexton's column, poster "DavidGonzales" stated, "Hey bubbleggs, why are you so sarcastic in your postings? Can't you at least try to be civil?" (in Pexton, 2013). Posters also

prompt one another to keep potentially inaccurate information off the boards, said poster “MNUSA,” who wrote, “Many people do call out commenters to document their ‘facts,’ which forces everyone to rely on competent sources” (in Pexton, 2013).

There was also a sense among posters that journalists do not understand the value of letting a disagreement or misunderstanding play out in the feedback sections, something posters considered a necessary part of productive dialogue. In communities where posters had come to know one another, they had faith in their ability to keep one another in check should the conversation veer off course or become unfriendly. This was exemplified in the comment section following Nelson’s column. Poster “EndersMom” fired off a sarcastic comment at a fellow poster, suggesting the person must be of a diminished mental capacity to feel how he did. The comment was interpreted by others as an insult toward those with mental disabilities. The community called “EndersMom” out, and a few posts later, she apologized, saying, “...My comment was not meant to be bigoted or mean spirited in any way. ...I am truly sorry that it came across that way because that was NOT the way it was intended. My sincere apologies for offending you” (in Nelson, 2011). The next person to respond was forgiving, thanking her and saying, “Bless your heart. Your humility makes us all better” (in Nelson, 2011). Not all exchanges were so sincere and civil, but the spirit behind them was reflected in posts where commenters stepped forward to keep participants in line. This raises an interesting point about the ability of posters to police when given the chance. It also contradicts the journalists’ notion that posters act with only their own individual interests at heart, when in fact, exchanges like these suggest some posts are mindful of the community as a whole.

Posters suggested the sense of community will prevail when responsible users can unite to force trolls out of the conversation. Poster “Robin in Manette” stated, “Others may not



see me the way I see myself, but I try to be the champion of the bullied” (in Nelson, 2011). “Blondesquawker,” in response to Vestal’s column against anonymity, admonished a fellow poster for an offensive post, writing, “Remember, no threatening behavior allowed here (in Vestal, 2012).

While journalists overwhelmingly felt the anonymous posters act contradictorily to industry standards, comments that show them working to uphold the comment boards’ terms of use prove posters are more willing to enforce industry standards than journalists realize. It also goes against the journalists’ belief that posters have no regard for others’ feelings. While that might be true in some cases, the fact posters reacted negatively to trolling and attempted to control the trouble-makers suggests there are many who understand and are willing to play by the rules.

Where journalists rejected the notion that any vile comment should find its way onto the forum, posters were willing more willing to tolerate unwelcome behavior, believing civility would win out in the end. They saw their fellow posters as capable of keeping tabs on problem commenters and ultimately discouraging trouble-makers from participating, either by calling them out directly or ignoring their bad behavior. Poster “Shelalal” stated, “The beauty of the unfettered (within reason) dialogue is that it usually fizzles out and backfires. with the poster losing credibility in the process now and in the future. In a strange way it’s self-policing” (in Vestal, 2012). While leaving the moderation to posters certainly resulted in some off-color comments remaining in view, feedback section regulars had faith the conversation could work itself out. In cases where the conversation went out of bounds, posters viewed themselves as the first line of defense, capable of steering the discussion back to an appropriate place.

Overall, posters acknowledged that some comments are inappropriate, but they seemed unwilling to let trouble-makers set the tone for the entire conversation. They concluded instead

that those posts could be ignored or those posters could be pushed out of the discussion by responsible users who act as unofficial moderators. Yet, posters do not disregard problem users entirely; in fact, they considered some might be dangerous, and it is for that reason they expressed a desire to hide their identities. The sense of underlying danger on the Internet permeated much of the conversation about anonymity. For posters, remaining nameless acted as a sort of security blanket, shielding them from future employers who might disagree with them or government entities they worried might be keeping tabs. It is interesting to note that some contradiction exists among the posters, who overwhelmingly expressed the desire to remain nameless yet were not afraid to make personal connections with others, sometimes revealing intimate details about their lives.

### **Summary**

Both journalists and posters were concerned with exerting some level of control over the process of anonymous commenting. For journalists, the focus was on managing when, how often and under what circumstances sources of information should be allowed to remain nameless. For posters, the issue was more about being allowed to oversee the comment boards and police the conversation as needed without media intervention, which they pointed out could be misconstrued as a means of forcing out unpopular viewpoints. The friction between the two groups appears to result from a lack of trust on both sides. Commenters did not trust journalists to give them the full story and thus depended on posters to fill in the gaps. Journalists did not trust commenters to stay on topic and avoid launching personal attacks toward someone with whom they disagreed. Both groups pointed toward a need for moderation to ensure that the terms of service already in place for online commenting were being followed, and both groups

also expressed disappointment when a conversation was allowed to run rampant while clearly violating those terms.

The following chapter details how these findings relate to previous research, as well as what this analysis says about the potential for future study. The subsequent section also explores how gatekeeping theory is evolving as a result of the prevalence of online media and what that means for editors who are working to develop best practices for doing business on the Internet.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

As the media industry navigates the virtual frontier, it will continue to grapple with the complicated issue of anonymous online speech. As long as online forums remain on news organizations' websites, posters will be empowered to engage in unbridled conversation, which has both ethical and legal ramifications for new sites that host what is often unsavory content. The following chapter discusses the benefits of studying both journalist and commenter viewpoints on the topic. It delves into the implications this research has for theory building, as well as how industry professionals might utilize the data for shaping policies in their newsrooms. The chapter concludes with notes on limitations of the research and directions for future study.

### **Purpose of study**

This study sought to add to the existing body of knowledge related to online anonymity and the way it is perceived in feedback sections by both journalists and commenters. While there is a distinct divide between the way journalists and commenters view anonymity, the data analyzed on both sides for this study provides editors with valuable insight to consider while crafting policies for their newsrooms' comment board policies. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How do journalists perceive online anonymity in relation to comments posted to news comment boards?

RQ2: How do online commenters evaluate news organization's policies in regard to posting anonymously?

## Summary of findings

The journalists considered for this study showed little patience for arguments in favor of anonymity online, focusing instead on the most offensive examples of anonymous speech and arguing that the potential for such speech serves as justification for doing away with the option to remain nameless. They concluded that crude posts would devalue the rest of the commentary, regardless of the substance of those messages. While there was disagreement on the root of the problem, the journalists analyzed here were united in pointing to the disparity between policies for feedback in print and feedback in the digital realm as a matter of concern. They questioned the reasoning behind allowing audience members to submit anonymous feedback when the print equivalent, a letter to the editor, would require a verifiable signature. They viewed anonymous commenters who troll the feedback section as lesser beings who thrive on their ability to unfairly criticize others without being held accountable. Journalists pointed to the posters as acting more like wild animals, pouncing on one another and attacking, even when unprovoked.

In responding to the journalists' columns, posters overwhelmingly agreed that journalists are too harsh on commenters, making sweeping generalizations about them and failing to take into consideration that many posts are productive to the conversation, even if they are not eloquently presented. Posters viewed anonymity as a necessary evil, not ignoring the pitfalls of the feedback system but focusing on its advantages. The overarching sentiment among posters was that allowing the comment boards to remain anonymous provided a safeguard. That sense of security was outlined in what commenters saw as many forms of protection – from other posters, from government intrusion, from walking away from a story without all the details needed to form an opinion. As commenters struggled to make sense of what was happening in their world, they first looked to media coverage, but they also depended on supplemental

material in order to feel informed. In other words, they looked not just for *information* provided by journalists but *analysis, perspective, and deliberation* from audiences in order to gain a complete account of a particular phenomenon. This study shows how posters considered comment boards to be a valuable means of gaining insight, whether about a particular story or the community's reaction as a whole to a controversial topic. They utilized the board to learn about their world and each other, building relationships with other posters as they do so. In the cases when a poster strayed out of bounds, the commenters saw it as their responsibility to step in and steer the conversation back to a productive point, a task they believe they can do without extensive oversight from the journalists. Posters pointed to the board as self-policing, because responsible users considered themselves capable of keeping the conversation civil.

### **Implications**

This study provides support to previous scholarship that has found media are opposed to allowing readers to weigh in without attaching their names. Industry professionals have historically shown they see anonymity as encouragement for people to lash out without being held accountable for they say (Nielsen, 2013; Reader, 2012). Past research shows that while journalists generally support the theory behind allowing anonymous online feedback, media professionals today have concluded that comment sections no longer fulfill their original purpose to encourage healthy debate (Santana, 2011). While the journalists analyzed here generally did not focus on the positive aspect of comment sections, they did not wholly disregard the need for interactivity; this, too, supports earlier research. Neilsen (2012) found that journalists remain supportive of reader feedback provided it is responsible and accurate, not the “verbal free for all” that can appear on boards with little to no enforced standards (p. 97). This study provides further

evidence to Nielsen's point, as the data suggest media professionals are not opposed to providing a forum for conversation but are leaning toward a need for moderation in a more structured form.

Previous studies on online anonymity have found that reporters' negative reaction toward anonymous reader comments derives from frustration that media outlets are providing a forum for nameless contributions that go unchecked, and this study supports that conclusion (Santana, 2011). The journalists studied here overwhelmingly feared the position into which allowing anonymous feedback has placed their industry, pointing to the sharp divide between policies for print and online submissions, as well as the danger of allowing more liberal policies for anonymous contributors connecting via Internet. Journalists also expressed feelings of frustration over leaving the policing of feedback sections to readers, which suggests the tide is changing from a debate solely over anonymity to one that includes questions involving moderation responsibilities.

While research focused on posters' opinions of online anonymity is less prominent in the scholarly literature, this study complements Reader's (2012) finding that posters, regardless of whether they were pro- or anti-anonymity on comment boards, viewed participating in the feedback sections as an act of bravery. This study yielded similar results, as readers focused on a need for protection because of a perceived lack of inherent security on the Internet. Unlike the journalists, who viewed anonymity as an act of cowardice, comment board participants believe participation of any sort, even anonymous, carries a risk, and those who forge ahead in spite of that risk should be recognized as courageous. Commenters analyzed for this study overwhelmingly expressed the desire to visit the comment boards to become better educated on a topic, as they consider the viewpoints offered by readers as important supplemental information to what has already been provided by the journalist. This affirms Reader's (2012) findings that

posters value the chance to read what might be considered minority or dissenting viewpoints in order to become better informed. Commenters, past and present research finds, are far less concerned with trolls than the journalists seem to be, considering trolls to be nothing but trouble-makers who should be ignored. The posters displayed a remarkable level of patience when sifting through the comments to find those that added something thought-provoking to the discussion.

**Implications for Theory.** The Internet has afforded readers an unprecedented opportunity to interact with the media and fellow readers, but it has also posed great challenges to traditional industry roles including gatekeeping (Nielsen, 2013). The means to disseminate a message via a media outlet once rested solely with news professionals, but on the Internet, readers are granted access to a vast audience and invited to participate. This research lends credence to the suggestion that audiences are playing an increasingly powerful role as a gatekeeping force. This is especially true on comment boards, because on this digital platform, inclusion of reader feedback is the default instead of the exception. As Hayes, Singer and Ceppos (2007) found, the problem this poses is that "...with an all-inclusive approach, ... persuasion and diversion are too easily confused with enlightenment and fact, potentially weakening democracy" (p. 264). Thus, gatekeeping must evolve to include more advanced moderation techniques aimed at dealing with messages that have already been posted. This research suggests that as media organizations work to accommodate a variety of external factors when determining which messages to allow beneath their name plates, meeting the online audience's need to participate and interact will play an increasingly important role in the discussion. Commenters overwhelmingly expressed a desire to read the comment boards in order to broaden their understanding of a topic. Given that fact, if the media is to succeed in its role to



inform its audience, then the providing and management of the comment boards is critical to remaining relevant to readers. Thorough, involved moderation must become part of the gatekeeping process, with a connection to the audience being made repeatedly throughout the conversation.

**Practical Implications.** It is important to note that the posters and journalists were not divided on all points regarding online anonymity, and there are two items of agreement that have practical implications going forward. First, both groups acknowledged the Internet as a news dissemination medium unlike any that has come before it, and they attributed some of the inherent challenges to the fact this platform is undergoing continuous change. The nameless culture that has become associated with online interaction plays a key role in the debate over anonymous comments. Whether they agreed with allowing anonymous feedback on news sites or not, posters and journalists alike understood that remaining nameless has become an inherent part of the online experience. Posters were more accepting of, or at least adaptive toward, the native differences between print and online media, while the journalists – perhaps sensing their professional role is at stake – were resistant to allowing their print and online products to operate under different policies. Fighting against that culture, Rosenberg (2010) stated is “misdiagnosing (the) the problem, which has little to do with anonymity and everything to do with a failure to understand how online communities work” (p. 1). As poster “dougfresh” noted, “The internet was born on anonymity,” suggesting that posters consider the Internet as an avenue where they have always found ways to remain unidentified (in Vestal, 2012). Understanding the Internet as a unique experience is the first step to developing best practices for presenting news online. Simply put, coming to terms with the fact online users expect to retain some means of

anonymity while interacting on the Internet aids journalists in moving toward a more important step, determining whether they want to pre- or post-moderate comments.

Both groups pointed to moderation as an important part of the feedback process, a part that was sometimes overlooked by media organizations even as they recognized the need for some sort of filtering. The importance of moderating comments, whether achieved by software technologies or by a physical person charged with sifting out and responding to comments, was an issue on which journalists and posters shared more common ground than either group might be willing to admit. Both groups agreed that some form of moderation is essential to keeping a thread relevant and valuable to its readers. There were several levels of moderation demonstrated on the comment sections analyzed for this study. Often, readers were invited to help in the policing effort by flagging posts whose contents are out of bounds. The journalists analyzed for this study perceived commenters as potential trouble-makers who enjoy the chance to confront and rile others. The posters, however, showed they were not unlike the journalists in their view of trolling. Their comments showed they, too, found satisfaction in seeing an offensive post removed or a trolling commenter banned from the board.

In the comment threads beneath Falkenthal and Nelson's columns, the authors personally got involved in the conversation, acting as moderators who weighed in to clear up misunderstandings, provide additional insight and answer questions. The journalists who joined the discussion opened themselves up to attacks from angry readers, but more often than not, posters analyzed for this study appeared to appreciate the authors' presence. Even if a commenter disagreed with the journalist's viewpoint, they looked favorably on the journalist's willingness to engage with the audience. From a practical standpoint, this study suggests media professionals would be better served to prioritize moderation of the conversation instead of

focusing solely on whether anonymity itself is the problem. More often than not, the type of speech journalists and posters cite in support of disallowing anonymity is the same speech that is already prohibited by comment sections' terms of service agreements. This begs the question of what is really at fault for incivility on comment boards – anonymity for inciting such behavior or the media industry for failing to enforce its own policies.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in that posters whose comments were analyzed were a self-selecting sample. A study of this nature cannot answer questions about the dominant attitudes of readers who chose not to participate in the discussion, just as it cannot speak toward the opinions of other journalists working for the news organizations whose opinion columns were analyzed. What it does reveal is that those who choose to speak out on the topic typically had strong opinions as to whether users of an online news sites should have the option to remain anonymous. While those opinions are not always in agreement, they do provide valuable insight for industry professionals to consider when drafting rules to govern comment board participation.

### **Directions for Future Study**

Because posters and journalists both highlighted the effect of trolling in online discourse, future study might focus more closely on civility in communication, and whether banning anonymity increases civility. Several media outlets included in this study were considering or had recently transitioned to a sign-in system that identifies users by first and last name, and there was debate among posters and journalists alike as to whether the move would positively affect the feedback section. Future study could revisit some of these same institutions and determine whether the transition had the desired effect of improving the dialogue, achieved either by

conducting a comparative analysis of comment threads or by interviewing readers and journalists. Another aspect that emerged as a compelling qualitative aspect of the research is worth noting because of its implications for further study. The tone of the columnist appears to have an influence on the tone of the responses, especially in cases when the journalist could be perceived as aggressive or condescending toward anonymous posters. This could be explained by the overall tone/reputation of a publication and the readers it attracts or it could derive specifically from the attitude of the journalist. This merits further study. Considering this issue from the legal aspect, a future study could also focus on response of newsrooms that have received court order to turn over identifying information, including Internet Protocol addresses, for anonymous posters. As commenters continue to expect the opportunity to respond to what they've read, the normative role of the journalist as the primary provider and gatekeeper of information is challenged. Additional study might focus on how that normative role is evolving on a day-to-day basis in a digital context and what that means for the industry's future.

## **Conclusion**

The level of engagement among reporters and readers is enhanced through digital platforms that make it easy for every user with an Internet connection to make their voice heard. While the decision whether to allow such participation to remain anonymous remains an industry debate, there is little doubt of the potential for comment sections to keep online media relevant, perhaps even entertaining, for its participants. Industry leaders must continue to experiment to find the best way to encourage conversation while keeping the dialogue civil. Moderation, whether in terms of simply deleting offensive comments or involving an actual moderator in the thread, will be an increasingly important factor in that conversation. An effective moderator not only helps to keep a thread productive and on topic, but the moderator has the potential to

prevent a newsroom from having to engage in costly legal battles arising from libelous statements made to a comment board. While the threat of legal action, or even just the sacrificing of a media outlet's reputation, has led some news organizations to curb readers' ability to talk back, the trend toward an interactive online experience promises to bring this issue repeatedly to the forefront.

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