



## Online Audiences and Gatekeeping: User Comments and Their Influence on Editorial Processes in Newsrooms in Kenya

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[Doi: 10.19044/esipreprint.4.2023.p204](https://doi.org/10.19044/esipreprint.4.2023.p204)

Approved: 16 April 2023

Posted: 18 April 2023

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*Cite As:*

Oywer B.A., Booker N., Owilla H.H. & Kimweli P. (2023). *Online Audiences and Gatekeeping: User Comments and Their Influence on Editorial Processes in Newsrooms in Kenya*. ESI Preprints. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esipreprint.4.2023.p204>

### Abstract

In Kenyan newsrooms, there has been a debate about whether to keep the comment section on news websites in the aftermath of Social Media Networks, which allow the media to still collect user opinion without the risk of unregulated third-party comments. This paper sought to establish the nature and influence user comments have on editorial processes as well as explain what value media houses that have retained the comment section are receiving. To investigate this, the researchers adopted mixed methods research approach (quantitative and qualitative) and concurrent mixed methods research designs. The targeted population was journalists working in media houses that operate in print, broadcast, and digital news website in Nairobi County. The targeted media houses were: Nation Media Group (NMG), Standard Group (SG), and Radio Africa Group (RAG). Sample size comprised of 252 participants for quantitative data, 9 key informants for in-

depth interviews, and 84 articles for direct content analysis. Survey and directed content analysis were used as strategies of inquiry. These strategies were aided by questionnaires, in – depth interviews, and code sheet as data generation tools. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM/SPSS) was used to analyse quantitative data. Quantitative data was presented using tables and pie-charts. Qualitative data was thematically analysed and presented in form of themes. The findings show that, contrary to popular belief, discussions in news website comment sections are frequently marred by incivility. Instead, the majority of the comments were deliberative in nature, with audience members just looking for a forum to express themselves in a civil manner. However, in cases where there were reported incidences of incivility, the sources quoted were the main trigger. Journalists have been shown to use user input in the comment section to gauge the quality of the content they produce, while media companies use audience knowledge to make strategic decisions. The results shed light on how newsrooms may give the public a platform to discuss and give their input on the news and still maintain deliberative debates.

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**Keywords:** Audiences, Online Audiences, Online News, User Comments, Editorial, Gatekeeping

## **Introduction**

Online discussions of the news media provide unique ways for the public to engage with the news content, provide real time feedback as well provide platforms for socio-political discourse by the news consumers. As technological innovations continue to change the landscape of journalism, digital media platforms have been increasingly important avenues for news distribution. These include websites and social media platforms. Additionally, the comment sections in news websites and social media platforms provide real time interactive opportunities for participatory journalism (Han et al., 2022). Indeed studies in South Korea, Australia, Germany and North America indicate that over 70% of digital news consumers read the comment sections and they are seen as valid cues of public opinion, generates further user engagement but importantly, the nature of comments can potentially influence other readers' sense of media objectivity and credibility, news quality and may activate prejudices and stereotypes toward the subjects featured in the news (Han et al., 2022; Korea Press Foundation, 2018; Barnes, 2015; Springer et al., 2015 & Stroud et al., 2016). The comment sections have also emerged as important objects in digital journalism whereby they are used as data sources for gathering further information, quality improvement and evaluation as well as innovation and development of new technologies.

The comment sections also provide opportunities for readers to provide alternative perspectives, seek or offer clarifications on the information provided, and as studies in South Korea have shown, user comments may enhance readers understanding of the news content (Korea Press Foundation, 2018). Teresa et al. (2020) studies have shown that the number of comments that flood newsroom comment sections can sometimes become overwhelmingly a lot and diverse in nature, and are often critical of the news item's content, the writer or issues raised. While this may provide invaluable feedback and insights to the media houses, in most unmoderated comment sections abusive, uncivil and inflammatory comments and in extreme cases become online 'battlefields' for groups and people with rivalling opinions and as earlier noted may provide grounds for harassment and discrimination against subjects of the news items. In these contexts, then, the comment sections become potentially damaging for the media houses' image or even expose them to litigation. This has also made journalists stop to see the comment sections as places of public discourse and journalistic learning.

Scholars have established that user comments as a tool of measuring audience engagement are critical in editorial decisions as they increase website traffic, create a platform for the public to engage in public discourse and allow the media to understand their behaviours and preferences among others (Ben-David & Soffer, 2019; E.-J. Lee, Jang, & Chung, 2021; Liu & McLeod, 2019; Loosen et al., 2018; Reich, 2011). Despite these robust engagements with the public that gives the media feedback on their consumers; major news websites internationally including Reddit, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), Aljazeera among others have all disabled their comment section, with the New York Times only allowing comments on specific news articles.

In Kenya the script is the same with the top news websites: *Tuko.co.ke*, *Kenyans.co.ke*, *Citizen Digital*, *People Daily Online*, and *Pulse live* following suit by disabling their comment sections thereby limiting their audiences' feedback options, only allowing them a chance to comment on stories posted on social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Nel (2007) notes that newsrooms have no control over the content posted on news websites and social media sites by third parties exposing them to ethical, legal and brand identity challenges. In addition, user comments are mostly posted by people who want to remain anonymous or those using pseudonyms, with the liability lying squarely on the news website. In 2013, Nation Media Group (NMG) was found liable for defamatory content posted by members of the public on their news website on an article written by journalist Muchemi Wachira. By virtue of its role in providing a platform for publication of a defamatory comment, NMG was

found liable for defamation against the then Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, this case was later settled out of court (Goodman & Cherubini, 2013). In April last year, Maxence Melo founder of online discussion platform *Jamii Forum blog*, was convicted to pay a fine of three million Tanzania Shillings or serve a year in prison for obstructing police investigations by refusing to disclose the identities of whistle-blowers on his platform Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2020).

Despite the ethical, legal, and brand identity risks of uncontrolled user comments due to the provision that allows for anonymity on comments posted on news websites, *The Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *The Standard Digital* allow for public user comments. The challenges and risks that come with having a user comments section have not deterred Radio Africa Group (RAG), NMG, and Standard Group (SG) from having these sections on their news websites and the current study seeks to analyse these user comments sections, the nature of the comments and the influence on editorial processes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The importance of the audience to newsrooms is not a new phenomenon. Media organisations have now adopted new means of tracking both quantitative and qualitative data from the audience using data metrics and analysis (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). Tracking audience data and the attendant analysis has led to the development of new roles in the newsroom including audience engagement editor, growth editor, and audience development editors who oversee sieving this information which is then passed on to senior editors ostensibly as part of improving the editorial quality and consumer targeting.

Unlike the past when one would have to rely on letters to the editor to be published and the delayed and inferential feedback, the digital platform allows for instant responses that are visible to other readers (Hermida & Thurman, 2007). The nature of these user comments which in some cases do not adhere to journalistic standards has exposed media houses to ethical, legal, and brand identity challenges and could be the reason why many news websites have disabled this vital feedback tool (Beckert & Ziegele, 2020; Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Hermida & Thurman, 2007; Liu & McLeod, 2019; Nel, 2007; Reich, 2011).

Globally and locally there have been repercussions for unmoderated user comments on news websites with media houses held liable for defamation (Goodman & Cherubini, 2013) while in some cases journalists have been jailed for failing to reveal the identity of commentators (CPJ, 2020). In other instances, the media house brand has come under attack due to third party user comments influencing the perceived quality of journalism (Lee et al., 2021).

However, despite the ethical, legal, and brand identity risks, a number of media houses have retained the comment section as a vital audience feedback tool (Goodman & Cherubini, 2013; E. Lee, 2016; Thurman, 2008; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014) while others have deactivated the section (AlJazeera, 2017; Coe et al., 2014; Gross, 2014). There is a gap knowledge as to why media houses would take the risk and allow user comments on their news websites. Thus, this study focuses on the nature and extent to which these sections are of value, if any, to the editorial processes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Nature of User Comments on News Articles**

The digital disruption has provided numerous opportunities for readers to contribute to news articles posted online. The available opportunities include commenting on stories, reader blogs, Have Your Say segments, polls among others, to keep engagement. The networked environment of the internet has provided a comfortable space for citizens bringing about feelings of connectedness and solidarity which motivates them to move from just consuming to participating in discussions (Lee, 2019). These discussions can then form the basis for building on the news article through new story ideas, correcting misinformation or to crowdsource for the journalist.

Juarez (2020) in a study looking at journalist gatekeeping and audience participation in the New York Times comment section noted that journalists and readers value the comment section differently. While journalists prefer comments that are intelligent, conciliatory, or presented in a respectful manner despite the diversity of viewpoints, readers prefer combative, direct, and views that are similar to their own. This is further supported by Ben-David and Soffer (2019) who noted that controversial political and social news received the highest number of media-critical comments which may be directed towards an individual journalist, the media house or in some instances the media industry in general. Ziegele et al. (2014) in their study found that user comments online often lack the interaction between users as most of them are focused on personal opinions and not so much on other comments. Tong (2015) argues that to have quality discourse there needs to be a level of interactivity among users on news websites.

The quality of user comments has been shown to be determined by among other issues, personality traits, situational state of the user, the type of issues reported on, sources quoted in the news item, the level of moderation and whether the users can share comments anonymously or not. With regard to personality and situational state of the user, Beckert and Ziegele (2020) found that incivility was mainly triggered by people with sadistic personality

traits and specific article topics. Furthermore, user's cognitive involvement on a societal level influenced the deliberative quality of the comments they made online. Those who are involved in societal matters will look at the collective consequence of the topic under discussion and are more likely to encourage other members of society to reflect on the issues in a civil and elaborate manner. However, Coe et al. (2014) argues that incivil communication behaviour is largely rooted in the situation one is in as compared to the feelings of connectedness to societal issues. In their findings they noted that just being in a negative mood can trigger uncivil comments. In addition to this, they also found that contrary to popular beliefs those who comment frequently are more likely to be civil compared to those who do not. Moreover, the frequent commenters are more likely to back up claims with evidence as compared to those who just want to stir up trouble, a concept referred to as trolling (De-La-Pena-Sordo et al., 2016).

Beckert and Ziegele (2020) also noted that topic selection can influence the nature of comments. They noted that conflict laden issues and other controversial comments generate more negative emotions among users creating a spiral effect for incivility in the comment sections. However, in as much as the news topic can be a strong predictor of incivility in the comment section, the deliberativeness is not affected by the topic of the article. However, this is contradicted by Coe et al. (2014) who found that some topics may evoke negative emotions and this makes readers express themselves by writing discourteous comments. In their findings after a content analysis of 300 articles posted on a local news website, they also concluded that sources quoted within the article could trigger incivility in the comment section. It is imperative to understand how topic selection which is an editorial function and the moderation thereafter contributes to the types of comments on news websites that have retained the comment section

Ksiazek et al. (2015) in their study of hostility and incivility in user comments noted that news organisations are also to blame for the uncontrollable levels of uncivil comments on some stories. They argue that editors may decide to give controversial stories prominence to evoke discussions in the articles comment section. The goal here is to maximize on popular and engaging content to drive more eyeballs to the website which may unintentionally generate hostility. This brings to question the delicate balance media organisations must look at while weighing profit making decisions and its duty to public service. Popular and engaging content is good for business but highly incivil comments undermine the deliberativeness of online news conversations. Confirming findings by Liu and McLeod (2019) that comment sections attract traffic to websites and the numbers can be used for commercial purposes to show advertisers the target audience reach a media house has. This study, therefore, seeks to understand

how the nature of user comments on the *Star Online*, *Nation.Africa* and *The Standard Digital* may affect editorial decisions to include topic selection, story placement among others.

The anonymous nature of comments posted on news websites is a great contributor to incivility in the comment sections especially among users who hide behind pseudonyms (Cho & Kwon, 2015; Liu & McLeod, 2019; S. Wang, 2020). In a comparative analysis of user comments posted on news websites and those on Facebook for the same news article Liu and McLeod (2019) found that comments on news stories posted on Facebook were more civil due to the high social risk involved. In addition, hostile comments make people discredit the quality of the news article, negatively influence a reader's attitude and can push them to also leave a negative comment. Newsrooms use of participatory features like the positioning of comment numbers next to the headline coupled with the display of a few comments at the end of an article also contribute to incivility in the comment section (Netzer et al., 2014).

Scholars have categorised nature of audience feedback as: engagement, media criticism, incivility, and correction. Engagement is where the audience member is bringing forth some issues in a civil way, advancing a story and promoting public discourse (De-La-Pena-Sordo et al., 2016; Ziegele et al., 2014); Media Criticism is where users question the quality of journalism (accuracy, fairness, correctness), an attack to an individual journalist, an attack the media house (based on story selection, prominence of stories), an attack on the media industry and criticizing management strategies (Ben-David & Soffer, 2019; Cheruiyot, 2017; Juarez Miro, 2020); Incivility is where an audience member uses hostile, hateful, rude and offensive comments towards other users or towards the sources quoted (Beckert & Ziegele, 2020; Cho & Kwon, 2015; Coe et al., 2014; Ksiazek et al., 2015; Netzer et al., 2014); and, Correction are comments that seek to correct the facts of journalistic content with evidence. Comments which highlight typos and errors or point out inconsistencies by a quoted source (Ben-David & Soffer, 2019; Ksiazek, 2018; Tong, 2015).

Since comments affect the value of the news article and how it is rated as well as the brand values; news organisations are keen to moderate the content that appear below articles in news websites. In a study to understand why the British News Media are struggling with user comments, Hermida and Thurman (2007) found that news executives are finding it hard to incorporate user content into the professional journalism systems due to concerns about reputation, trust, and legal issues. Hermida and Thurman (2008) support this argument stating that editors view user content as complementary to professional journalism implying that professionally produced content is superior. Newsrooms are still working out how to

integrate user participation within existing norms and practices due to the cost and time implication of gatekeeping. Harrison (2010) in a study of how the BBC moderates user-generated content (UGC) noted that moderation of online comments was the most time consuming and resource hungry element of the BBC's UGC hub largely because of the success of their "Have Your Say" section. He adds editors at the BBC find the segment beneficial as eye-witness accounts are used to advance stories. Hermida and Thurman (2008) further this argument, noting that as Newsrooms weigh the commercial potential of user media against the cost implication of moderation, smaller organisations that don't have the financial muscle to maintain the comment section have been forced to do away with the mechanisms for audience participation. CNN is one of the major global news outlets that have deactivated the comment section. Gross (2014) notes that editors now only selectively activate comments on stories they feel will generate meaningful debates and which they can actively participate in. Aljazeera in disabling its comment section noted that it had been hijacked with individuals hiding behind anonymity and spewing derogatory and abusive messages, which they did not endorse as an organisation (AlJazeera, 2017).

For the media houses that have decided to maintain the comment section, that is, RAG, NMG, and SG through their news websites – *The Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *Standard Digital* – gatekeeping in terms of moderating comments is inevitable. However, moderating comments made on news websites online has also come under scrutiny. Wang (2021) in a study of the effects of content moderation found that deleting racist, sexist or homophobic comments may also hurt organisations as it reduces trust by readers. She further notes that to avoid this, media organisations should look for ways to keep the conversations civil by steering the discussion around specific topics that they would like the audience to engage in.

To ensure meaningful conversations are promoted through comment sections of news websites, news organisations have been forced to device ways to moderate the comments and steer conversations occurring on their platform. This study seeks to understand the value *the Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *The Standard Digital* are deriving from the comment section of their news websites that far outweigh the financial resources and time implications for maintaining the comment section.

### **User-Generated Content and Gatekeeping**

The digital disruption has revolutionized how the audience gives feedback to news articles posted online. Through the comment section of websites, comments on news stories posted on social network sites, the user is now able to express their emotions, opinions, add information or correct inaccuracies instantly (Lee, 2019). Lee et al. (2021) noted that user

comments epitomise participatory nature of online journalism. In their study of how user comments affect a reader's opinion argued that user comments portrayed a significant role in creating pictures in our heads as well as shaping our opinions on matters. They further noted that the user comments not only shaped perception of public opinion but also the perceived quality of the news item. News articles that had critical comments were rated lower even though the comments were not related to the story.

Lee (2016) further argues that comments are the best form to test out deliberative democracy. She adds the feedback mechanism is the best place to showcase competing viewpoints, arouse public interest in important issues and start discussions around them. Reich (2011) in his study on gatekeeping online content found that journalists are driven by the need to democratize the flow of information which is necessary for public discourse and therefore would support the presence of a feedback mechanism. In addition, the scrutiny by readers keeps journalists on their toes and has led to a more accurate account of the news.

For News organisations, audience feedback is the best form of data to understand the users' needs, wants and consumption patterns which can be aligned to brand objectives and strategies accordingly (Assmann & Diakopoulos, 2017). In their study of how newsrooms have created new roles like an audience engagement editor, they argue that media organisations are now able to gather data from users which forms part of business strategies driven by the need to generate revenue from digital content which is provided for free. In addition, the engagement editors are tasked with updating, re-writing and repositioning stories as per the audience needs to build and maintain brand loyalty. Cherubini and Nielsen (2016) however, state that the data and analytics can be rendered useless if organisations do not have a clear structure of using them.

In as much as user comments allow for the advancement of democratic dialogue, they are a controversial element of online communication. Anonymity online has exposed users to uncivil comments, hate speech, deception, and impersonation. In addition to these instances of trolling and flaming, which is the use of profane, abusive or insulting language, have gone up (Cho & Kwon, 2015). Cho and Kwon (2015) further argue that this then beats the purposes of advancing democratic dialogue as many users are less likely to participate in important discussions due to incivility in the comment section. Ernst et al. (2017) further advance this argument noting that the comments online can affect perceived journalistic quality, the trustworthiness of a news article and its persuasiveness. Lee et al. (2021) also noted that users rated news credibility lower when the comments posted were critical towards the article even if they were not based on the facts of the story. This can in turn alter a user's perception of media bias and

ultimately affect the brand identity of the media house. Such effects can potentially influence what editors do to ensure that the stories posted or placed in prominent positions do not attract negative comments. Since no studies have focused on this, it is a gap that the current study seeks to fill.

Newsrooms want to regulate user comments because of their desire to maintain journalistic professionalism. A number of organisations have employed moderators who are either journalists or non-journalistic staff, whose mandate is to sieve the information from third party users in form of comments on articles posted on news websites (Lee et al., 2017). In as much as journalists want to engage with users through the comment section in order to build a relationship and brand loyalty, to find new story ideas as well as feedback on their work; there is a need for gatekeeping as Reich (2011) argues that reporters feel legally and ethically responsible for user comments on their stories posted online. He adds that to avoid potentially damaging legal, ethical or brand value repercussions, newsrooms have adopted three ways of moderating comments. They include pre-moderation where one's comment is screened before it's posted, post-moderation where an editor allows you to post then offensive comments are deleted and the autonomous model where a reader has to sign in with their personal social media account before commenting on a story. The autonomous model has been backed by a number of scholars (Lee et al., 2021; Lee, 2016; Ziegele et al., 2018) who argue that it is a way to reduce incivility online as the authors can easily be identified. Anonymity online has provided room for spamming, hate speech, deception and impersonation (Cho & Kwon, 2015). Globally and locally there have been repercussions for unmoderated user comments on news websites. In 2015, the European Court for Human Rights ruled that news portals could be held liable for unlawful content in third party postings (Ermert, 2015, December 02).

In the long run, overly uncivil comments deter other users from making their contributions. Journalists are in constant fear of ethical and legal concerns which can eventually make a news outlet shutdown the comment section. This could be the motivation behind major news websites internationally including Reddit, BBC, The New York Times, CNN and Aljazeera and local outlets like *The Standard*, *People Daily*, *Tuko.co.ke*, and *Pulse live* disabling their comment sections thereby limiting their audiences' feedback options.

This initial understanding of the ethical, legal and brand identity challenges that newsrooms fear brought about by unregulated third-party user comments does not explain why the *Star Online*, *Nation.Africa* and *The Standard Digital* have maintained the comment sections on their news websites, a question this study seeks to understand.

## **User Generated Content Impact on Editorial Processes**

Changes in technology may have reworked how journalists perform certain functions like news gathering, selection/filtering, distribution and even presentation, however, the gatekeeping function to maintain journalistic professionalism is yet to change (Adornato, 2016). Gatekeepers determine whether a news item is worthy of dissemination based on certain traditional news attributes such as timeliness, proximity, conflict, sensationalism, prominence, interest, importance, and novelty (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, this is constantly being challenged by the social aspect of news online which has added a layer where the audience also has a say on the newsworthiness of a story. The networked environment has provided a comfortable space for the audience to move from just listening, reading or watching news to actively participating in news processes (Lee, 2019).

Lee et al. (2021) noted that the participatory nature of journalism online is epitomized through user comments. Audience feedback through comments posted on news articles online promotes democratic discourse, gives journalists a better understanding of their audience preference and views, a great source of new story ideas as well as an avenue to build reader loyalty among others (Lee & Tandoc Jr, 2017). Despite these advantages, journalists still exercise the need to regulate the comments as they affect the perceived quality of the news article, the trustworthiness and how persuasive the article is (Ernst et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2021). News quality is highly valued in the newsroom with Naab et al. (2020) adding that people use critical user comments as cues to evaluate the quality and credibility of an online news article.

Through moderation, newsrooms can control the quality and quantity of comments that appear on news articles online. Moderation can be done in various ways including pre-moderation, post moderation or through an autonomous model where users can comment only if they meet a certain criterion. However, journalists are still concerned that the volumes of comments are making gatekeeping efforts impossible due to the cost implication as well as the time consumed (Harrison, 2010; Reich, 2011). In addition, journalists are finding it difficult to incorporate user media into the professional journalistic structures as they are concerned about legal, ethical, reputation and trust issues (Hermida & Thurman, 2007). Hermida and Thurman (2008) in their study of how British Newspaper websites were incorporating user generated content noted that editors felt that professionally produced journalistic content is superior. In addition, news professionals are still working out whether and how to incorporate user content with the prevailing concern of the potential it must damage a newspaper's brand.

Paulussen and Ugille (2008) in their analysis however argue that user generated content does not fit in the journalistic routines of news gathering, there are no structures to support the process and this could be the reason newsrooms are not incorporating user content into their production process. In addition, they also noted that in as much as journalists are not opposed to participatory journalism, concerns on quality are a big hindrance as amateur journalists may not live up to the standards of objectivity, accountability, and independence. This is reiterated by Thurman (2008) who added that some editors are worried about the legal liabilities of non-journalistic content with some news websites completely shutting them off. If indeed the three news websites: *the Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *The Standard Digital* do incorporate third party user comments in their daily journalistic routines then this study seeks to understand the structures they have put in place to support such non-journalistic contribution, considering the risk factors.

Hille and Bakker (2014) in their study of how comments on news websites as well as social media platforms impact the practice of journalism found that often user comments do not complement the original journalistic stories to which they refer. After an analysis of over 3,000 comments, they also noted that users were more concerned about responding to their fellow user comments which provided an opportunity for conversation and debate rather than focus on the title topic. This is confirmed by Milioni et al. (2012) study that showed that users rarely use the comment sections in online articles to provide additional original information about the news rather they limit themselves to expressing their opinions on public matters which can't be included as part of journalistic content because of lack of objectivity. They further noted that this type of participation shows the audience are not yet co-producers of news content as they lack professional journalistic skills. Since user comments cannot be used for some core journalistic functions such as agenda setting, providing original unreported information or challenging journalistic viewpoints through verified oppositional views, the current study seeks to analyse how *the Star Online*, *Nation.Africa* and *The Standard Digital* are maintaining the boundary between individual opinions and professional journalistic content.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopted a mixed methods approach (both quantitative and qualitative approaches) to explain the nature of the audience feedback and the influence user comments sections have on editorial processes of newsrooms that have such sections active. The value of such comments sections to newsrooms certainly required in depth engagement with newsroom staff to elicit rich data while the nature of such comments and the extent to which such comments influence editorial processes required a

directed content analysis and a survey questionnaire respectively. Thus, the essence of this approach was to provide a better understating than either form of data set alone (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Concurrent mixed methods research design was employed. It implies that qualitative and quantitative data is collected at the same time as well as the presentation of the analysed data (Akhtar, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This design was appropriate for the study as the qualitative data was used to corroborate the quantitative data. The researchers needed to collect both data sets to give an in depth understanding of the study problem.

The target population for this study was journalists working in media houses that operate in print, broadcast, and digital news website in Nairobi County. The targeted journalists should have editorial responsibilities in media houses that have the three platforms where the comment section on their digital news website is active. Media Council of Kenya (MCK) notes that the four media houses that have operations in all three platforms include: NMG, SG, Mediamax Ltd, and RAG. They have a total of 1,238 journalists (NMG = 338, SG = 423, Mediamax Ltd = 323, and RAG = 154) with editorial responsibilities (MCK, 2021). MCK further, indicates that 915 journalists work in the four media houses that have news website with active comments sections. However, Mediamax Ltd with 233 accredited/active journalists with editorial responsibilities are not represented within Nairobi County. Thus, this leaves the researchers with NMG, SG, and RAG. Having this in mind, then, this brings the number of accredited journalists with the study criterion to 682 (NMG = 254, SG = 320, and RAG = 108). Thus, the sample size for the study was drawn from the forementioned three media houses that have an active comment section on their news website and are based within Nairobi County.

The sample size for this study comprised of 252 participants for quantitative data, 9 key informants for in-depth interviews, and 84 articles for direct content analysis. The sample size of 252 participants for quantitative data was achieved through a mathematical formula. This formula allows a researcher to sample a population with a desired degree of accuracy (Adam, 2020). For this paper, the researchers used Slovin's formula which is given as  $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$ , where  $n$  is the sample size which is determined by the known population  $N$  and the acceptable error value (Adam, 2020) as shown below.

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

Where:

$n$  = the sample size

$N$  = the size of population

e= error margin of 0.05, and  
a confidence level of 95%

$$n = \frac{682}{1 + 682 (0.05)^2} = 252$$

Therefore, using the ratios of the media house population (NMG = 254, SG = 320, and RAG = 108) and dividing by the cumulative quantitative sample size (682), then, the researchers achieved the sample size for each media house. Table 1 represents the distribution summary of the quantitative sample size.

**Table 1.** Summary representation of the quantitative sample size

Media House	No. of Accredited/Active Journalists	No. of Accredited/Active Journalists in Nairobi	% Ratio	Sample Size
Nation Media Group	338	254	93.85337	94
Standard Group	423	320	118.2405	118
Mediamax Ltd	323	(233) *	-	-
Radio Africa Group	154	108	39.90616	40
Total	1,238	682	252	252

\*Mediamax Ltd not represented within Nairobi County

The sample size for NMG = 94 participants, SG = 118 participants, and RAG = 40 participants as indicated above. Further, the researchers purposely selected three (3) key informants from each of the three targeted media houses for qualitative data. This sums to nine (9) key informants (3\*3 = 9). They included digital, echo, and news editors identified as the final decision makers for the stories posted on a media house's online platform. Moreover, eighty-four (84) news articles posted on the three news websites were sampled. This means 252 comments were sampled (84\*3 = 252). The researchers picked the first article given prominence on the front page of the print edition, in this case the headline, and searched for the corresponding digital edition of the article on the news website. The first three comments were targeted for the news articles published in the first week of April, the second week of May, the third week of June, and the last week of July (April – July, 2021).

The researchers adopted stratified random sampling, simple random sampling, and purposive sampling techniques. For quantitative sample size, the researchers grouped the units composing a population into homogeneous groups (or strata) before sampling (Babbie, 2016). In this case, the strata

were: NMG, SG, and RAG. After the groupings, adoption of simple random sampling technique was employed to select elements in each media house (see table 1). Purposive sampling was entranced in the selection of key informants for the in-depth interviews, the targeted population (three media houses), and selection of the directed content analysis articles. Etikan et al. (2016) note that purposive sampling involves the selection of participants who have specific qualities the researcher is looking for. RAG, NMG, and SG newsrooms were selected as they were the only three media houses that operate in all three platforms in Kenya, that is, print, broadcast, and a digital news website with an active user comment section. Informants were selected because they are well versed in the study phenomenon.

The researchers adopted survey, directed content analysis, and in-depth interviews as strategies of inquiry. Through this, the researchers were able to describe to what extent the comment section influences editorial processes and the inherent value newsrooms that have it active are deriving (Creswell, 2014). Further, these strategies aided in determining the nature of the user comments on *The Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *The Standard Digital* news websites. Surveys provide a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of the study population (Creswell, 2014). Content analysis on the other hand, which is a systematic coding and categorizing approach used to explore large amount of data to determine patterns of text used, their frequency and relationship based on predetermined variables (Vaismoradi et al., 2013); focused on articles posted on front page of the print version headline for the specific dates sampled and traced them back to the news website looking at the first three comments. To this end, the researchers explicitly identified the context within which analysis will be done in order to make valid inferences (Krippendorff, 2004). It is on this basis that the current study used the four characteristics of the nature of user comments based on previous literature to direct the text analysis and make inferences. Previous literature outlines the four characteristics of the nature of user comments as: engagement, media criticism, correction, and incivility (Coe et al., 2014; Juarez Miro, 2020; Liu & McLeod, 2019; Milioni et al., 2012; S. Wang, 2021). An in-depth interview is a conversation between a researcher and an informant (Berger, 2016). The essence of this was to gain data that could not be attained through surveys. This strategy allowed further probing of the key informants so as to gain deeper understanding of the study phenomena.

Questionnaires, code sheet, interview guides were used as data generation tools. The researchers used questionnaires on journalists. The questionnaires had closed – ended questions and were self – administered. Interviews guides were used to collect data from non-journalistic staff (key informants) involved in audience data collection in newsrooms and editors to

further expound on the numerical data as they are the final decision makers on the content posted to the news websites. The interview guides were semi-structured. The semi-structured nature of the interview guide allowed the participants to fully express themselves while at the same time steering the conversation to ensure there was uniformity in the type of data collected (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). The code sheet was developed based on the four characteristics of the nature of user comments: engagement, media criticism, correction, and incivility (*see literature review*). A code sheet is a list of codes with corresponding definitions to allow a researcher make sense of it of content and analyse and code content based on an analysis criterion (Mihás & Institute, 2019). For this study the availability of the characteristic of the nature of user comments was determined by the content in the comment section.

Short-hand notes and recording with consent from key informants were used for in-depth interviews.

To analyze quantitative data, the researchers used IBM/SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The data was presented in graphs, charts, and tables. Thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze qualitative data. The analysed data was organized into themes.

All necessary ethical study requirements were met by the researchers. The study was conducted at NMG, SG, and RAG newsrooms within Nairobi County from June 2021 to February 2022.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The study sought to: a) describe the nature of user comments available on the three news websites through content analysis of user comment sections, b) understand how the user comments influence editorial process through online administered structured questionnaire and key informant interviews and c) establish what value media houses derive from the user comment section on their news website despite the ethical, legal and brand identity risks that comes enabled user comment sections through key informant in-depth interviews. We adopted mixed methods research approach and concurrent mixed methods research design to understand the value media houses derived from the user comment sections despite the ethical, legal and brand identity challenges occasioned by unregulated third-party comments, and how user comments influence the editorial process.

### ***Response rate summary***

Sample size for this study comprised of 252 participants for quantitative data, 9 key informants for in-depth interviews, and 84 articles that accrued to 252 comments for direct content analysis (*see methodology*). It means thus, 252 questionnaires were shared out to the study participants.

Ninety-six (96) of the questionnaires were returned [(15) were from RAG, NMG (30), and (51) from SG]. This formed a response rate of 38.1% of the survey. Baruch and Holtom (2008) the average response for studies that use data collected during research at organisations is 35.7% with a standard deviation of 18.8 compared to individuals who are not linked to a specific organisation. Seven (7) out of the nine (9) key informants took part in the study. This translated to 77.78% response rate. The articles published between April (2021) and July (2021); 18 out of the 84 (21.43%) of the articles selected did not have comments and thus eliminated from analysis. Out of the 84 articles (252 comments), sixty-six (66) articles (198 comments) were analysed. This results to 78.57% of the articles/comments analysed. Wang (2000) notes that a sample size of six days for a news website is sufficient to determine results of a content analysis for up to six months; however, a researcher must consider variables such as multimedia news articles that would require additional days spread out across a number of months.

#### ***Nature of user comments available on the three websites***

In order to describe the nature of user comments on news websites, we conducted a directed content analysis of the user comment sections on the three news websites (*Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *Standard digital*). On publication, the study found that the articles elicited almost similar levels of engagement with *Nation.Africa* leading with (36%) comments followed by the *Star Online* (33%) and finally the *Standard digital* (31%).

**Table 2. Publication**

	Frequency	Percent
Star	65	33%
Nation.Africa	72	36%
Standard	61	31%
Total	198	100%

We also observed pronounced comments engagement in political stories 102/195 (52%) followed closely by socio-cultural issues (27%; cumulative for health, crime, and education each at 9%) while legal affairs and sports stories attracted the least user commentary as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 3. News Beat and Comments**

News beat	Frequency	Percent
Health	17	9%
Current affairs	22	11%
Business	12	6%
Politics	102	52%
Education	18	9%
Sports	1	1%
Law	4	2%
Crime	17	9%
Courts	2	1%
Total	195	100%

These findings were further corroborated by the key informants during the in-depth interviews who noted that political scandals, unique health stories, and crime receive the most engagement on their news website. One respondent noted:

*Most of our comments are debates, and we find that we have a very vibrant section of our audience that just debates on the politics. So political stories attract the most comments, and then you'd find it for debating whether it's about UDA or ODM with Ruto or Raila and there're all manner of comments.*

While looking at the nature of comments, the study found most comments could be classified as engaging (51%) - here defined as commenters that were interested in adding their voice to matters, they were passionate about - something that may explain why political and socio-cultural stories elicited the most comments. Incivil comments closely followed at 41% while comments that could be seen as critical of the media or corrective tailed at 5% and 3% respectively.

**Table 4. Overall Nature of User Comments**

	Frequency	Percent
Engagement	96	51%
Media criticism	9	5%
Incivility	77	41%
Correction	6	3%
Total	188	100%

The key informants indicated that political and other human-interest stories generate high volumes of comments, which are often overwhelming

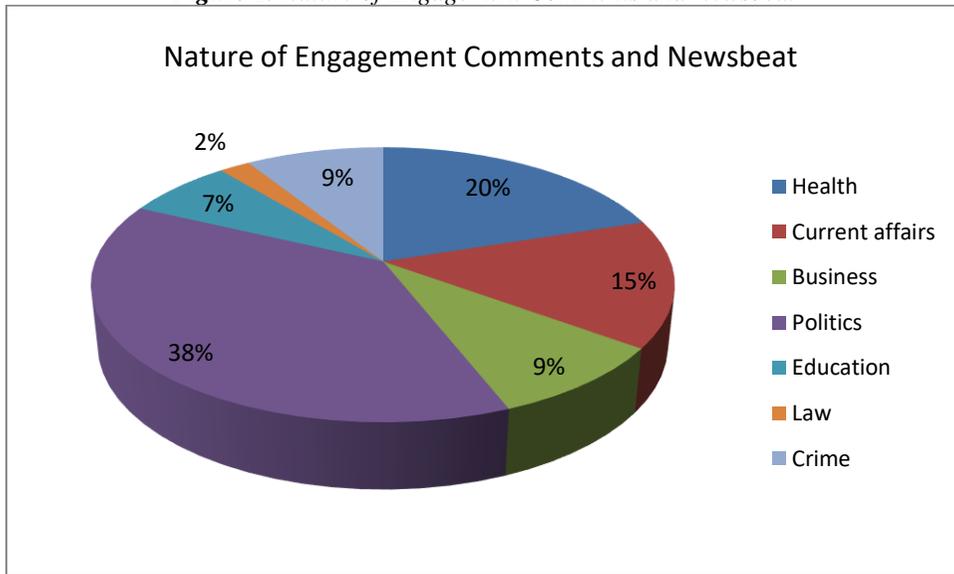
for the moderators and editors due to limited resources in the newsrooms. This makes harder for the newsrooms to sieve out some uncivil comments, which often creates the spiral of incivility. For some of the editors, the decision is really about striking a balance on a strategy for moderation that would still keep the readers engaged with the news items. They postulated that:

*Now, the challenge with pre-moderation, you have to have someone on standby 24/7, because they are the ones to activate each and every comment. You know, and it is challenging, because sometimes you get a, first of all, the slow feedback to the newsroom on what people need to follow up. And then secondly, you push away people from your website, because if they are coming to a website, and they have to knock on the door first before... people tend to you know, fall back and drop off. Okay, now, for post-moderation, the beauty about it is, it shows that you've given the users that confidence to be on your platform.*

Where comments were deemed as engaging, reconciliation, and articulation of issues in a civil way (45.9%) and promoting public discourse (42.9%) are the two most dominant aspects of engaging comments, something that the key informants noted that have improved with increased moderation of the comment sections and sometimes interventions by journalists and other experts. Nonetheless, political stories (38%) had the most comments presented in a reconciliatory and civil way to bring forth more issues. The findings also indicate that health stories (20%) and current affairs (15%) news articles also generated a high number of reconciliatory comments.

**Table 5. Nature of Engaging Comments**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Reconciliatory and articulate issues in a civil way	45	45.9
Promote Public discourse	42	42.9
Appreciate the media	5	5.1
Engaging but not related to the story	5	5.1
Other	1	1
Total	98	100

**Figure 1.** *Nature of Engagement Comments and Newsbeat*

Two of the key informants argue that:

*For instance, if it is, let's say, bottom-up issue, they now even bring up and say, like in let's say, in Europe, this and this happened, and this and this worked, and this and this did not work. So, you see, we have those three categories, exchanges, the normal political exchanges, them now giving us feedback telling us that you people know if you have written these stories, also give somebody else an opportunity, yeah, and now they are those who engage on issues.*

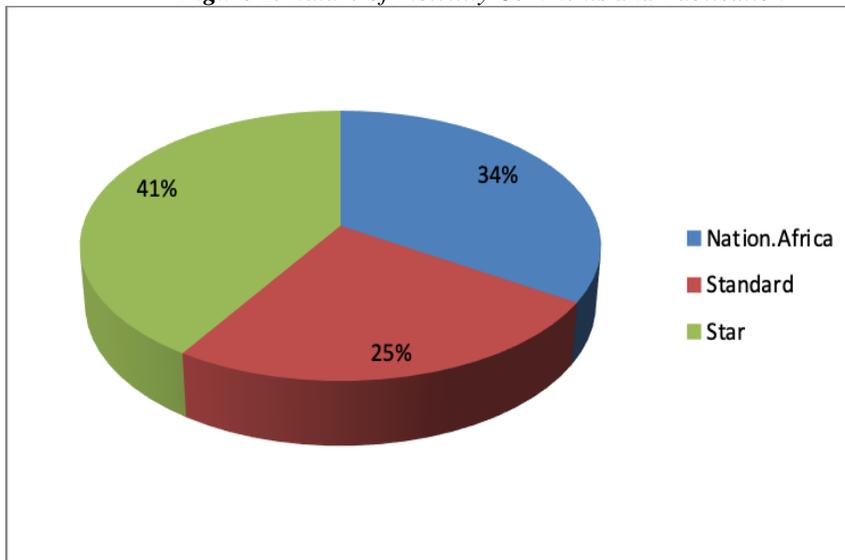
*So, I'll go to health. That's another topic that you find a lot of engagement in, and you will see a lot of what I call constructive feedback. People are sharing what they've gone through how they treated themselves, quote, and quote. So, it's a story about hypertension, people will share their experiences. If it's a story about fertility, they will ask us to recommend doctors, where they can go for checks and who they can visit to be able to say, have babies.*

It however emerged that media houses set rules and guidelines that dictate the level of maturity of arguments in the comment section. An interviewee noted that on their platform comments that could be classified as corrective are mostly positive and are geared towards promoting balanced journalism or seeking clarification or additional information:

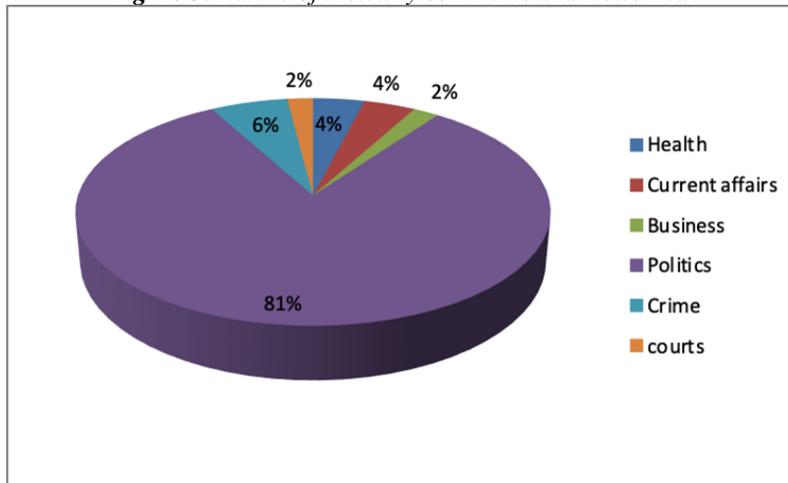
*They're saying the story doesn't give the full picture or the full information. Could you please do a part two and give us much more information? Or they suggest that you interview somebody else. If you interviewed Tuju, they're saying go and interview Mwalimu Dida next time so that we also hear from other voices.*

The *Star Online* (41%) generated the most uncivil comments compared to those posted on the *Standard Digital* website (25%). It also emerged that articles posted on the *Star Online* are post moderated while the ones on *Standard Digital* are not actively moderated however only paid subscribers have the privilege to comment on news articles with the comments being deactivated on content deemed to be polarizing. On the other hand, on the *Nation.Africa* (34%) website user comments are pre-moderated and they had a fairly less percentage of incivility.

**Figure 2.** *Nature of Incivility Comments and Publication*



Analysis of the news beats flooded with uncivil commentary indicated that political stories (81%) had the highest number of comments where the public expressed hostility either towards the source quoted or the media house (68.4%) or towards other users 31.6%. The health news beat and current affairs also elicited some uncivil comments however in very low numbers as shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 3.** Nature of incivility comments and News Beat

The predominance of incivility expressed as hostility towards sources quoted is further corroborated by findings from the interviews as participants were near unanimous that uncivil, rude, or offensive comments were being fuelled by personalities mentioned in news articles. Further analysis shows that stories that feature political personalities with large followings or highlight scandals, especially the ones involving people in high places, are more likely to generate the most comments that are pro or anti the individual. Some of the key informants alluded that:

*Comments are usually more on the negative side than positive because of the political tension, because of the, you know, preferences when it comes to political sides people take. So usually, the more comments that we get, basically, how do I put it, like people protecting their own, per se, in terms of you know, you cannot say this about, you know, this X politician or this other person.*

*It's the stories that are a bit controversial from any of the beats that intend to draw in comments from the readers. Kenya is a very tribal and highly politically charged nation. So, people love politics. Anything that touches on the big wigs, the so-called big wigs, this policy of not calling them big wigs because that's, you know, priming Kenyans to expect to vote or to have a leader between two people or the two horse races.*

***How do user comment sections influence journalistic and editorial decisions?***

Our second objective aimed to determine how user comments influence editorial processes. An editorial process in this study has been operationalized to mean the sieving criteria used by journalists to determine what to consider as news and what is not news. This process begins at the news gathering stage up until a news article is published on the website. From the survey, the study found that most of the respondents were assigned to cover political stories (26%) followed by the health and business news beats. The science news beat received the least number of respondents assigned to it.

**Table 6.** *Beat mostly assigned*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
<b>Health</b>	15	15.6
<b>Business</b>	15	15.6
<b>Science</b>	2	2.1
<b>Entertainment and Arts</b>	10	10.4
<b>Politics</b>	25	26
<b>Sports</b>	10	10.4
<b>Technology</b>	8	8.3
<b>Education</b>	11	11.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings suggest that Kenya is highly politicized nation and the media is a mirror of the society. That could be the motivation behind the media focusing on the coverage of political news stories. This is corroborated by the content analysis to determine the nature of user comments which revealed that political stories received the most engagement. However, it emerged in the interviews that political stories form the least number of stories done in comparison to the other news beats. The participant argued that what could be driving the high number of engagement when it comes to political stories was that they are written by senior members of the newsroom and are mostly lengthy and seek to give more of an analysis as compared to other news beats.

Majority of the respondents noted that they engage with User Comments daily (46%) followed by those who do so two to three times a week (24%) while only 9% have never interacted with online user comments.

**Table 7. Rate of Engagement with User Comments**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Daily	45	46.9
Several times a week (two to three times a week)	23	24
Weekly (once a week)	8	8.3
Monthly (two or three times a month)	6	6.3
Less than a month	5	5.2
Never	9	9.4
Total	96	100

As a key informant noted, at their newsroom, the journalists are encouraged to keep in touch with the user feedback as it forms important theses for story build up, follow-up, infographics and explainers. Audience feedback also have increasingly become important in determining the attention and placement of what is deemed as prominent stories on the website. The informant argued that:

*Like for instance, if we see a story is generating a lot of interest, and also have comments, I will probably tell someone in the online desk, please look at this angle, and see how you can generate another follow up story to this story. So, in that sense, what they do is for instance, they can do an explainer, they can do a fact check of the story, or an in-depth analysis of the story. So, you now generate more content on the same topic, but in the different angles now. Yeah, so, we do that a lot.*

The study also sought to find out if the audience's view influences editorial decisions. Majority of the respondents (91.2%) agreed that feedback from the audience has a bearing on decision in newsrooms.

**Table 1. User Feedback and Editorial Decision Making**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	83	91.2
No	8	8.8
Total	91	100

The findings show that there is a shift in anchoring power from journalists to the audience when it comes to decision making in the newsroom. Although journalistic independence is still maintained, the audience metrics has an influence on how and what journalists write. A key informant noted that:

*We have the regular people who will always be on the comments section. And how we do it is we've given this users opportunity to be columnists. So, if we know that you do a lot of long comments, you know, it becomes like an OpEd. This is because they're airing their views talking about, you know, challenging the opinions that people are talking about there. So, we give those people that platform to, you know, air their views. We have the contributors on the comments section, come up with articles. We identify the people who write well, and email them and tell them, hey, would you like to be part of the community and write an opinion piece about X topic? Send us your, you know, 800 words to this particular email, and we'll publish it on the website.*

We also sought to find out the extent to which journalists interact with comments and the criteria they use to sieve the quality comments that can be used to advance their editorial processes. 89% - political, sensational and cultural stories generate hostile comments. Perhaps, because of extra analysis, placement. 79% - interested in engaging with productive and civil comments that would add value to their stories and work. Such comment feedback has been instrumental in setting up online desks that are able to curate them and identify potential sources for story follow-up, gauge audience understanding and reception of the story - allowing for further adding of explainers or infographics as needed.

The study established that over 50% of the respondents indicated that they have experience some sort of negative commentary on their stories. Again, majority of the journalists that were affected reported to have worked on a political or current affair article - corroborating the findings from objective one, that such stories attract most individual targeted critics and harsh commentary. Over 6% indicated the negative comments were due to story sources, and reflected individual stereotypes, the framing, and sources.

When we sought to know whether the respondents had received user feedback called out the quality of their stories or that indicated media bias in a story, 82% agreed that such comments have been. The study established that majority of respondents had interacted with comments that criticize perceived media bias. A combined (87.5%) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they have come across User Comments that point out instances of media bias

How much do journalists use the comment sections to generate new story ideas (70%), improve the story or reedit (66%), pulldown (75%) and correction (78%). 56.3% of journalists have participated in correcting misinformation.

## Conclusion

From the findings the researchers can conclude that user comments on news websites can be generally categorized as engaging in nature where members of the public are simply looking to lend their voice to ongoing discussions online. However, comments which are uncivil in nature are also predominant in news websites and newsrooms must use some form of moderation either pre, post or A.I powered moderation to control and steer the discussion on their news websites to be more civil. That the user comments are shaping journalistic content as reporters are generating new story ideas from the audience, they can measure how the audience understanding towards a news article and the audience is keeping them on their toes by exposing gaps missed by reporters. In as much as the audience can influence the editorial process, journalists still take their gatekeeping role seriously and are keen to verify facts before incorporating user feedback to maintain professionalism. In addition, media houses with an active comment section are deriving a value adds on in terms of audience driven strategies for instances launch of new products on news websites as well as building a community of loyal readers.

This study established that there is value for including a user comment section on news websites as they improve workflow for journalists as well as inform strategic decisions in newsrooms. It also established that media houses looking to active their comment section must put in place moderation methods to steer the conversation online to maintain deliberative discussions. However, in a networked environment where the roles of the gated and the gatekeeper are interchangeable, it is prudent for the media to maintain its gatekeeping role even when incorporating audience insights that shape content to distinguish it as professionally produced content rather than an opinion of a user.

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