



ESJ Social Sciences

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

***Beryl Anyango Oywer***

Graduate Student, Graduate School of Media and Communications,  
Aga Khan University, Program Manager at NABU Global, Kenya

***Nancy Booker***

Associate Professor and Dean, Graduate School of Media and  
Communications, Aga Khan University, Kenya

***Hesbon Hansen Owilla***

Research Associate, Innovation Centre, Aga Khan University, Kenya

***Paul Kimweli***

Research Assistant, Graduate School of Media and Communications,  
Aga Khan University, Kenya

[Doi:10.19044/esj.2023.v19n16p105](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2023.v19n16p105)

---

Submitted: 24 March 2023

Accepted: 09 June 2023

Published: 30 June 2023

Copyright 2023 Author(s)

Under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

4.0 OPEN ACCESS

*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*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 19 (16), 105.

<https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2023.v19n16p105>

---

### **Abstract**

In Kenyan newsrooms, there has been a debate about keeping the comment section on news websites in the aftermath of Social Media Networks. This allows the media to still collect user opinions without the risk of unregulated third-party comments. This paper sought to establish the nature and influence user comments have on editorial processes and 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 websites in Nairobi County. The targeted media houses were: Nation Media Group (NMG), Standard Group (SG), and Radio Africa Group (RAG). The sample size comprised 252 participants for

quantitative data, nine key informants for in-depth interviews, and 84 articles for direct content analysis. Surveys and directed content analysis were used as strategies of inquiry. These strategies were aided by questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and code sheets 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 the form of themes. Contrary to popular belief, the findings show that discussions in news website comment sections are frequently marred by incivility. Instead, most of the comments were deliberative, with audience members just looking for a forum to express themselves civilly. However, in cases with 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 their content, 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 while maintaining deliberative debates.

---

**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, and 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. They are seen as valid cues of public opinion and generate further user engagement. However, significantly, 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 virtual objects in digital journalism, whereby they are used as data sources for gathering further information, quality improvement and evaluation, and innovation and development of new technologies.

The comment sections also provide opportunities for readers to provide alternative perspectives and seek or offer clarifications on the

information provided. Studies in South Korea have shown that user comments may enhance readers' understanding of the news content (Korea Press Foundation, 2018). However, Teresa et al. (2020) studies have shown that the number of comments that flood newsroom comment sections can sometimes become overwhelmingly diverse 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 rivaling opinions. As earlier noted, this may provide grounds for harassment and discrimination against subjects of the news items. In these contexts, the comment sections potentially damage the media houses' image or even expose them to litigation. On the other hand, 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 for 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). However, 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), and 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 posted mainly by people who want to remain anonymous or use 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 by journalist Muchemi Wachira. Although, by its role in providing a platform for the 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 the online discussion platform *Jamii Forum blog*, was convicted of

paying a fine of three million Tanzania Shillings or serving 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). The provisions that provide anonymity on comments submitted on news websites pose ethical, legal, and brand identification issues. However, *The Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *Standard Digital* nonetheless permit 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 in newsrooms is not a new phenomenon. However, media organisations have now adopted new means of tracking 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 when one would have to rely on letters to the editor to be published and the delayed and inferential feedback, the digital platform allows instant responses that are visible to other readers (Hermida & Thurman, 2007). However, 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 et al., 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, some 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 in 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 opportunities include commenting on stories, reader blogs, Have Your Say segments, and polls to keep engagement. In addition, the networked environment of the internet has provided a comfortable space for citizens bringing about feelings of connectedness and solidarity which motivate them to move from just consuming to participating in discussions (Lee, 2019). These discussions can form the basis for building on the news article through new story ideas, correcting misinformation or crowdsourcing for journalists.

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 respectfully despite the diversity of viewpoints, readers prefer combative, direct 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 their study, Ziegele et al. (2014) found that user comments online often lack interaction between users as most of them are focused on personal opinions and not so much on other comments. According to Tong (2015), news websites require user interaction to produce a high-quality conversation.

The quality of user comments is determined by, among other issues, personality traits, the 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. Concerning the personality and situational state of the user, Beckert and Ziegele (2020) found that people with sadistic personality traits and specific article topics mainly triggered incivility. Furthermore, users' cognitive involvement on a societal level influenced the deliberative quality of the comments they made online. Those involved in societal matters will look at the collective consequence of the topic under discussion and are more likely to encourage other members to reflect on the issues civilly and elaborately.

However, Coe et al. (2014) argue that in civil communication behaviour is primarily rooted in one's situation 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, they also found that contrary to popular beliefs, those who comment frequently are more likely to be civil than those who do not. Moreover, frequent commenters are more likely to back up claims with evidence than those who 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 could 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 of incivility in the comment sections. However, as much as the news topic can strongly predict incivility in the comment section, the article's topic does not affect the deliberativeness.

However, this is contradicted by Coe et al. (2014), who found that some topics may evoke negative emotions, making 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. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how the topic selection is an editorial function, and the moderation after that 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 give controversial stories prominence to evoke discussions in the articles' comment section. The goal here is to maximise 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 consider while weighing profit-making decisions and their duty to public service. Popular and engaging content is good for business, but highly uncivil comments undermine the deliberativeness of online news conversations. Confirming findings by Liu and McLeod (2019) that comment sections attract website traffic, and the numbers can be used for commercial purposes to show advertisers the target audience reach a media house has.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand the nature of user comments on *Star Online Nation.Africa* and *The Standard Digital* may affect editorial decisions, including topic selection and story placement.

The anonymous nature of comments posted on news websites significantly contributes 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 leave a negative comment. Newsrooms' use of participatory features like the positioning of comment numbers next to the headline and 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 the nature of audience feedback as engagement, media criticism, incivility, and correction. Engagement is where the audience member brings 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 criticising 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 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, how it is rated, and the brand values, news organisations are keen to moderate the content that appears below articles on news websites. In a study to understand why 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 implications of gatekeeping. Harrison (2010), in a study of how the BBC moderate's 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 that 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 do not have the financial muscle to maintain the comment section have been forced to do away with the mechanisms for audience participation. CNN is a major global news outlet that deactivated the comment section. Gross (2014) notes that editors now only selectively activate comments on stories they feel will generate meaningful debates in which they can actively participate. In disabling its comment section, Aljazeera noted that it had been hijacked by 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, 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 on online news websites 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 adds that to prevent this; media outlets should search for ways to keep the dialogue respectful by directing it towards particular subjects they want their audience to explore.

To ensure meaningful conversations are promoted through comment sections of news websites, news organisations have been forced to devise ways to moderate the comments and steer conversations 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**

Digital disruption has revolutionised how the audience reviews news articles posted online. Through the comment section of websites and comments on news stories posted on social network sites, the user can now express their emotions and opinions, add information or correct inaccuracies instantly (Lee, 2019). Lee et al. (2021) noted that user comments epitomise the participatory nature of online journalism. Their study of how user comments affect a reader's opinion argued that user comments played a significant role in creating pictures in our heads and shaping our opinions on matters. They further noted that the user comments shaped the perception of public opinion and the perceived quality of the news item. News articles with critical comments were rated lower even though the comments were not related to the story.

Lee (2016) further argues that comments are the best way to test deliberative democracy. She adds that the feedback mechanism is the best place to showcase competing viewpoints, arouses public interest in critical issues and starts discussions around them. Reich (2011), in his study on gatekeeping of online content, found that journalists are driven by the need to democratise the flow of information 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 with brand objectives and strategies accordingly (Assmann & Diakopoulos, 2017). In their study of how newsrooms have created new roles like 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 per the audience's needs to build and maintain brand loyalty. However, Cherubini and Nielsen (2016) state that data and analytics can be rendered useless if organisations do not have a clear use structure.

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 trolling and flaming, profane, abusive or insulting language has gone up (Cho & Kwon, 2015). Cho and Kwon (2015) further argue that these beats advance democratic dialogue as many users are less likely to participate in essential discussions due to incivility in the comment section. Ernst et al. (2017) further advance this argument, noting that online comments 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 story's facts. This can 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. Some organisations have employed moderators who are either journalists or non-journalistic staff, whose mandate is to sieve third-party users' information in the 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 newsrooms have adopted three ways of moderating comments to avoid potentially damaging legal, ethical or brand value repercussions. They include pre-moderation, where one's comment is screened before it is 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 several 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. However, 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 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. In addition, journalists constantly fear ethical and legal concerns, which can eventually make a news outlet shut down the comment section. This could be the motivation behind significant 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 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 specific 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 specific 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. In addition, the networked environment has provided a comfortable space for the audience to move from just listening, reading or watching the news to actively participating in news processes (Lee, 2019).

Lee et al. (2021) noted that the participatory nature of journalism online is epitomised through user comments. Audience feedback through comments posted on news articles online promotes democratic discourse, gives journalists a better understanding of their audience preferences and views, is a great source of new story ideas, and 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 particular criterion. However, journalists are still concerned that the volume of comments makes gatekeeping efforts impossible due to the cost implication and the time consumed (Harrison, 2010; Reich, 2011). In addition, journalists are finding it challenging 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) noted that editors felt that professionally produced journalistic content was superior in their study of how British Newspaper websites incorporated user-generated content. 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.

In their analysis, Paulussen and Ugille (2008) argue that user-generated content does not fit into the journalistic routines of news gathering. There are no structures to support the process, which could be why 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 about quality are a big hindrance as amateur journalists may not live up to the standards of objectivity, accountability, and independence. Thurman (2008) reiterates this, 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: *Star Online*, *Nation.Africa*, and *The Standard Digital* 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 contributions, considering the risk factors.

Hille and Bakker (2014), in their study of how comments on news websites and 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 analysing over 3,000 comments, they also noted that users were more concerned about responding to their fellow users' comments, providing an opportunity for conversation and debate rather than focusing 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; instead, they limit themselves to expressing their opinions on public matters which cannot be included as part of journalistic content because of lack of objectivity. They further noted that this type of participation shows the audience is 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* maintain the boundary between individual opinions and professional journalistic content.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopted a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative approaches) to explain the nature of the audience feedback and the influence of user comments sections on the editorial processes of newsrooms with such sections active. The value of such comment sections to newsrooms requires in-depth engagement with newsroom staff to elicit rich data. In contrast, 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 are collected simultaneously, and the presentation of the analysed data (Akhtar, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This design was appropriate for the study as the qualitative data corroborated 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 print, broadcast, and digital news websites in Nairobi County. The targeted journalists should have editorial responsibilities in media

houses with 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 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 with news websites with active comment 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. With this in mind, 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 three media mentioned above houses with an active comment section on their news website and are based within Nairobi County.

This study's sample size comprised 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 as  $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$ , where  $n$  is the sample size 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 the 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), 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 is not represented within Nairobi County

As indicated above, the sample size for NMG = 94 participants, SG = 118 participants, and RAG = 40 participants. 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 ( $3 \times 3 = 9$ ). 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 websites were sampled. This means 252 comments were sampled ( $84 \times 3 = 252$ ). 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 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, a simple random sampling technique was adopted 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 the selection of the directed content analysis articles. According to Etikan et al. (2016), Purposive sampling entails choosing participants who possess particular traits the researcher seeks. RAG, NMG, and SG newsrooms were selected as they were the only media houses operating on all three platforms in Kenya: 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 surveys, directed content analysis, and in-depth interviews as inquiry strategies. Through this, the researchers could 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 the study population's trends, attitudes, or opinions (Creswell, 2014). Content analysis, on the other hand, is a systematic coding and categorising approach used to explore large amounts 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 the 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 to make valid inferences (Krippendorff, 2004). 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 involves a researcher and an informant (Berger, 2016). This was to gain data that could not be attained through surveys. This strategy allowed further probing of the key informants to understand the study phenomena better.

Questionnaires, code sheets, and 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 user comments: engagement, media criticism, correction, and incivility (*see literature review*). Thus, a code sheet is a list of codes with corresponding definitions to allow a researcher to make sense of its content and analyse it based on an analysis criterion (Mihás & Institute, 2019). For this study, the content in the comment section determined the availability of the characteristic of the nature of user comments.

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

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

The researchers met all necessary ethical study requirements. 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 the 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 come 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***

This study's Sample size comprised 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 with 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) of the nine (9) key informants participated in the study. This translated to a 77.78% response rate. Of 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 were thus eliminated from the analysis. Out of the 84 articles (252 comments), sixty-six (66) articles (198 comments) were analysed. This results in 78.57% of the articles/comments analysed. Wang (2020) notes that a sample size of six days for a news website is sufficient to determine content analysis results for up to six months; however, a researcher must consider variables such as

multimedia news articles that would require additional days spread out across some 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 (see table 2 below), the study found that the articles elicited almost similar levels of engagement with *Nation.Africa* led with (36.36%) of comments, followed by *Star Online* (32.83%) and, finally, *Standard Digital* (30.81%).

**Table 2.** Publication

	Frequency	Percent
Star	65	32.83%
Nation.Africa	72	36.36%
Standard	61	30.81%
Total	198	100%

We also observed pronounced comments engagement in political stories 102/195 (52.31%) followed closely by socio-cultural issues (26.67%; cumulative for health, crime, and education), while legal affairs and sports stories attracted the least user commentary as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** News Beat and Comments

News beat	Frequency	Percent
Health	17	8.72%
Current affairs	22	11.28%
Business	12	6.15%
Politics	102	52.31%
Education	18	9.23%
Sports	1	0.51%
Law	4	2.05%
Crime	17	8.72%
Courts	2	1.03%
Total	195	100%

The key informants corroborated these findings during the in-depth interviews and noted that political scandals, unique health stories, and crime receive the most engagement on their news websites. One respondent noted:

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

While looking at the nature of comments (*see table 4 below*), the study found that most comments could be classified as engaging (51.06%) - here defined as commenters 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 40.96%, while comments that could be seen as critical of the media or corrective tailed at 4.79% and 3.19%, respectively.

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

	Frequency	Percent
Engagement	96	51.06%
Media criticism	9	4.79%
Incivility	77	40.96%
Correction	6	3.19%
Total	188	100%

The key informants indicated that political and other human-interest stories generate high volumes of comments, often overwhelming for the moderators and editors due to limited resources in the newsrooms. This makes it harder for the newsrooms to sieve out some uncivil comments, which often creates a 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 is that you have to have someone on standby 24/7 because they are the ones to activate every comment. So, it is challenging because sometimes you get slow feedback from the newsroom on what people need to follow up on. And then secondly, you push away people from your website because if they are coming to a website, they have to knock on the door before people tend to fall back and drop off. Okay, now, for post-moderation, the beauty is that you have given the users the confidence to be on your platform.*

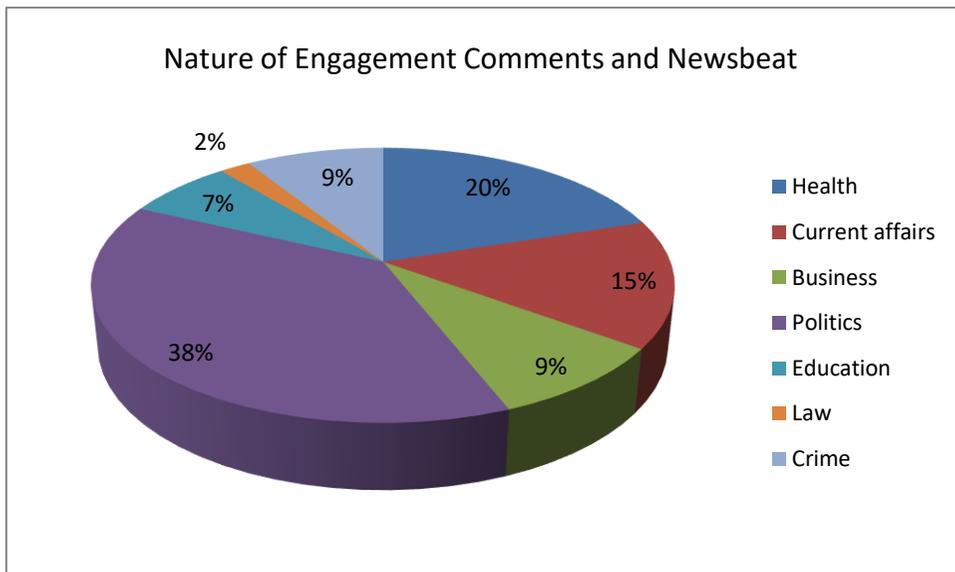
Where comments were deemed as engaging, reconciliation, and articulation of issues in a civil way (45.92%) and promoting public discourse (42.86%) are the two most dominant aspects of engaging comments, something that the key informants noted that have improved with increased moderation of the comment sections and sometimes interventions by journalists and other experts. This is illustrated in table 5 below.

Nonetheless, political stories (38%) had the most comments presented reconciliatory and civilly to bring forth more issues. The findings also indicate

that health stories (20%) and current affairs (15%) news articles generated many reconciliatory comments (*see figure 1 below*).

**Table 5.** Nature of Engaging Comments

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Reconciliatory and articulate issues in a civil way	45	45.92%
Promote Public discourse	42	42.86%
Appreciate the media	5	5.1%
Engaging but not related to the story	5	5.1%
Other	1	1.02%
Total	98	100



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

Two of the key informants argue that:

*For instance, if it is, let us say, a bottom-up issue, they now even bring up and say, like in, let us 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.*

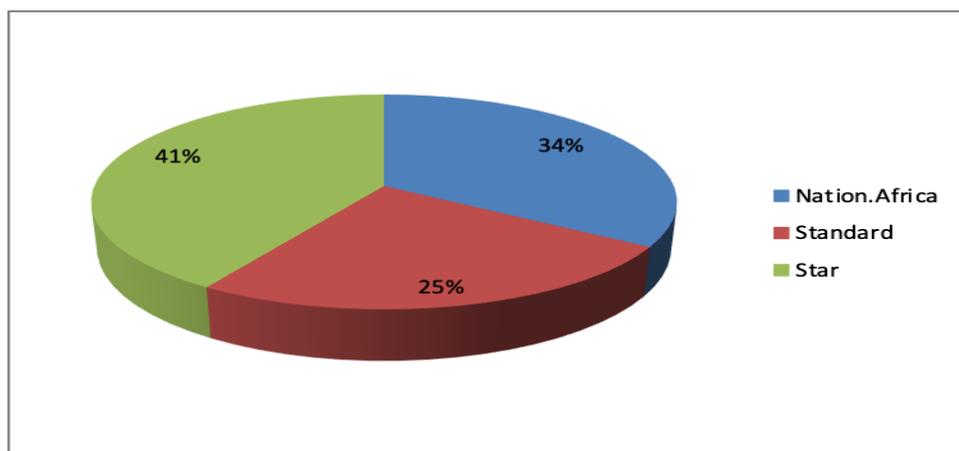
*So, I will go to health. That is another topic in which you will find much engagement and see much of what I call constructive feedback. People are sharing what they have*

*gone through and how they treated themselves, quote, and quote. So, it is a story about hypertension; people will share their experiences. If it is a fertility story, they will ask us to recommend doctors, where they can go for checks and whom they can visit, 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 primarily positive and are geared towards promoting balanced journalism or seeking clarification or additional information:

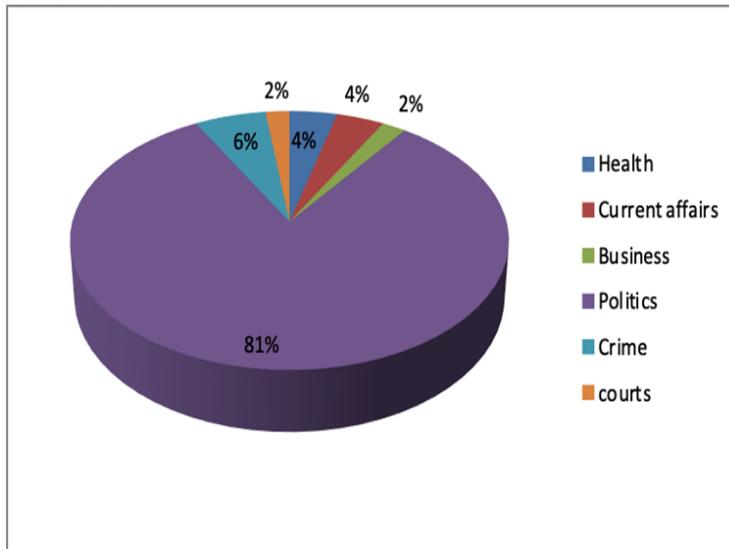
*They say the story does not give the complete picture or the full information. Could you please do a part two and give us much more information? Alternatively, they suggest that you interview somebody else. If you interviewed Tuju, they are saying go and interview Mwalimu Dida next time so that we also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

*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 *Star Online* are post-moderated while the ones on *Standard Digital* are not actively moderated; however, only paid subscribers can comment on news articles, with the comments being deactivated on content deemed polarising. On the other hand, the *Nation.Africa* (34%) website user comments are pre-moderated and have a somewhat less percentage of incivility. This is demonstrated in figure 2 below.



**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 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 3 below.



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

Findings from the interviews further corroborate the predominance of incivility expressed as hostility towards sources quoted 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 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 is the stories that are 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 is, 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 operationalised to mean the sieving criteria journalists use to determine what to consider as news and what is not. This process begins at the newsgathering stage until a news article is published on the website. The survey found that most respondents were assigned to cover political stories (26.04%), followed by health and business news beats. The science news beat received the least number of respondents assigned to it. This is indicated in table 6 below.

**Table 6.** Beat mostly assigned

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
<b>Health</b>	15	15.63%
<b>Business</b>	15	15.63%
<b>Science</b>	2	2.08%
<b>Entertainment and Arts</b>	10	10.42%
<b>Politics</b>	25	26.04%
<b>Sports</b>	10	10.42%
<b>Technology</b>	8	8.33%
<b>Education</b>	11	11.46%
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings suggest that Kenya is a highly politicised nation, and the media mirrors the society. That could motivate the media to focus on the coverage of political news stories. The content analysis corroborates this to determine the nature of user comments, revealing that political stories received the most engagement. However, it emerged in the interviews that political stories from the least number of stories done in comparison to the other news beats. The participant argued that what could be driving the high engagement in political stories was that senior members write them of the newsroom and are mostly lengthy and seek to give more of an analysis compared to other news beats.

Most respondents noted that they engage with User Comments daily (46.88%), followed by those who do so two to three times a week (23.96%), while only 9.38% have never interacted with online user comments (*see table 7 below*).

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

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Daily	45	46.88%
Several times a week (two to three times a week)	23	23.96%
Weekly (once a week)	8	8.33%
Monthly (two or three times a month)	6	6.25%
Less than a month	5	5.21%
Never	9	9.38%
Total	96	100

As a key informant noted, 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 at their newsroom. Audience feedback also has increasingly become important in determining the attention and placement of what is deemed as prominent stories on the website. The informant argued that:

*For instance, if we see a story generating much interest and also have comments, I will probably tell someone on 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 from different angles. Yeah, so we do that a lot.*

The study also sought to determine if the audience's view influences editorial decisions. Most respondents (91.21%) agreed that feedback from the audience has a bearing on newsroom decisions (*see table 8 below*).

**Table 8.** User Feedback and Editorial Decision Making

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	83	91.21%
No	8	8.79%
Total	91	100

The findings show a shift in anchoring power from journalists to the audience regarding decision-making in the newsroom. Although journalistic independence is maintained, audience metrics influence how and what journalists write. For example, a key informant noted that:

*We have regular people who will always be in the comments section. However, how we do it is we have allowed these users to be columnists? So, if we know that you do a lot of long comments, it becomes like an OpEd. This is because*

*they are airing their views about, you know, challenging the opinions people are talking about there. So, we also give those people that platform to air their views. We have the contributors in the comments section come up with articles. We identify the people who write well, 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 will 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 advance their editorial processes. 89% - political, sensational and cultural stories generate hostile comments. Perhaps, because of extra analysis and placement. 79% - interested in engaging with constructive and civil comments that add value to their stories and work. Such comment feedback has been instrumental in setting up online desks that can 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 they had experienced negative commentary on their stories. Again, most of the affected journalists reported having 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, framing, and sources.

When we sought to know whether the respondents had received user feedback about the quality of their stories or indicated media bias in a story, 82% agreed that such comments had been made. The study established that most respondents had interacted with comments criticising 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 re-edit (66%), pulldown (75%), and correct (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 categorised as engaging in nature, where public members want to lend their voice to ongoing online discussions.

However, uncivil comments are also predominant in news websites and newsrooms and must use some form of moderation, either pre, post, or AI-powered moderation, to control and steer the discussion on their news websites to be more civil. So, the user comments shape journalistic content as reporters generate new story ideas from the audience. They can measure how the audience understands a news article, and the audience keeps them on their toes by exposing gaps missed by reporters. 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 derive value in audience-driven strategies, for instance, launching new products on news websites and building a community of loyal readers.

This study established that there is value in including a user comment section on news websites as they improve workflow for journalists and inform strategic decisions in newsrooms. It also established that media houses looking to active their comment section must implement 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.

### References:

1. Adam, A. M. (2020). Sample size determination in survey research. *Journal of Scientific Research and Reports*, 90-97.
2. Adornato, A. C. (2016). Forces at the gate: Social media's influence on editorial and production decisions in local television newsrooms. *Electronic News*, 10(2), 87-104.
3. Akhtar, D. M. I. (2016). Research design. *Research Design (February 1, 2016)*.
4. Al Jazeera. (2017). Why We Are Disabling Comments On Aljazeera.com. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@AJEnglish/why-were-disabling-comments-on-aljazeera-com-a9ffbac61f10>
5. Assmann, K., & Diakopoulos, N. (2017). *Negotiating change: Audience engagement editors as newsroom intermediaries*. Paper presented at the International symposium on online journalism (ISOJ).
6. Babbie, E. R. (2016). *The practice of social research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Cengage Learning.
7. Barnes, R (2015) Understanding the affective investment produced through commenting on Australian alternative journalism website

- New Matilda. *New Media and Society* 17(5): 810–826. DOI: 10.1177/1461444813511039.
8. Baruch, Y., & Holtom, B. C. (2008). Survey response rate levels and trends in organisational research. *Human relations*, 61(8), 1139-1160.
  9. Barzilai-Nahon, K. (2008). Toward a theory of network gatekeeping: A framework for exploring information control. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(9), 1493-1512.
  10. Beckert, J., & Ziegele, M. (2020). The Effects of Personality Traits and Situational Factors on the Deliberativeness and Civility of User Comments on News Websites. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 22.
  11. Ben-David, A., & Soffer, O. (2019). User comments across platforms and journalistic genres. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(12), 1810-1829.
  12. Berger, A. A. (2016). *Media and communication research methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches* (Fourth Edition). SAGE.
  13. Cherubini, F., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). Editorial analytics: How news media are developing and using audience data and metrics. *Available at SSRN 2739328*.
  14. Cheruiyot, D. (2017). Do bloggers who criticise the press ultimately matter?(Re) defining media accountability in the age of citizen participation. *Comunicació: revista de recerca i d'anàlisi*, 107-121.
  15. Cho, D., & Kwon, K. H. (2015). The impacts of identity verification and disclosure of social cues on flaming in online user comments. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 51, 363-372.
  16. Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Online and uncivil? Patterns and determinants of incivility in newspaper website comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 658-679.
  17. Committee to Protect Journalism. (2020). Tanzanian court convicts Maxence Melo of obstructing investigation, levies fine [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2020/04/tanzanian-court-convicts-maxence-melo-of-obstructi/>
  18. Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Mapping the field of mixed methods research*. In: SAGE Publications Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA.
  19. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*: SAGE publications.
  20. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed). SAGE Publications.
  21. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed). SAGE Publications.

22. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*: Sage publications.
23. Daymon, C., & Holloway, I. (2010). *Qualitative research methods in public relations and marketing communications*: Routledge.
24. De-La-Pena-Sordo, J., Pastor-López, I., Ugarte-Pedrero, X., Santos, I., & Bringas, P. G. (2016). Anomaly-based user comments detection in social news websites using troll user comments as normality representation. *Logic Journal of the IGPL*, 24(6), 883-898.
25. Ermert, M. (2015, December 02). *YouTube Blocking in Turkey, Another Violation of Fundamental Rights*. <https://policyreview.info/articles/news/youtube-blocking-turkey-another-violation-fundamental-rights/387>
26. Ernst, J., Schmitt, J. B., Rieger, D., Beier, A. K., Vorderer, P., Bente, G., & Roth, H.-J. (2017). Hate beneath the counter speech? A qualitative content analysis of user comments on YouTube related to counter speech videos. *Journal for Deradicalization*(10), 1-49.
27. Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1-4.
28. Goodman, E., & Cherubini, F. (2013). *Online comment moderation: Emerging best practices; a guide to promoting robust and civil online conversation*. Paper presented at the World Editors Forum.
29. Gross, D. (2014). Online comments are being phased out. *CNN*, November, 21.
30. Han, J., Lee, Y., Lee, J., & Cha, M. (2022). News comment sections and online echo chambers: The ideological alignment between partisan news stories and their user comments. *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211069241>
31. Harrison, J. (2010). User-generated content and gatekeeping at the BBC hub. *Journalism Studies*, 11(2), 243-256.
32. Hermida, A., & Thurman, N. (2007). *Comments please: How the British news media are struggling with user-generated content*. Paper presented at the 8th international symposium on online journalism.
33. Hermida, A., & Thurman, N. (2008). A clash of cultures: Integrating user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 343-356.
34. Hille, S., & Bakker, P. (2014). Engaging the social news user: Comments on news sites and Facebook. *Journalism Practice*, 8(5), 563-572.

35. Juarez Miro, C. (2020). The comment gap: Affective publics and gatekeeping in The New York Times' comment sections. *Journalism*, 1464884920933754.
36. Korea Press Foundation (2018) Media Audience 2018. Available at: <http://www.kpf.or.kr/site/kpf/mediasta/selectReceiverCodingList.do?cbIdx=249>
37. Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in content analysis: Some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(3), 411-433.
38. Ksiazek, T. B. (2018). Commenting on the news: Explaining the degree and quality of user comments on news websites. *Journalism Studies*, 19(5), 650-673.
39. Ksiazek, T. B., Peer, L., & Zivic, A. (2015). Discussing the news: Civility and hostility in user comments. *Digital Journalism*, 3(6), 850-870.
40. Lee, C. S. (2019). Web series, YouTube, and politics: Affective and emotional dimensions of WIGS Lauren's user comments. *Social Media+ Society*, 5(1), 2056305118820766.
41. Lee, E. (2016). Despite flaws, comments are good for public discourse. *The New York Times*.
42. Lee, E.-J., & Tandoc Jr, E. C. (2017). When news meets the audience: How audience feedback online affects news production and consumption. *Human Communication Research*, 43(4), 436-449.
43. Lee, E.-J., Jang, Y. J., & Chung, M. (2021). When and How User Comments Affect News Readers' Personal Opinion: Perceived Public Opinion and Perceived News Position as Mediators. *Digital Journalism*, 9(1), 42-63.
44. Lee, E.-J., Kim, H. S., & Cho, J. (2017). How user comments affect news processing and reality perception: Activation and refutation of regional prejudice. *Communication Monographs*, 84(1), 75-93.
45. Liu, J., & McLeod, D. M. (2019). Pathways to news commenting and the removal of the comment system on news websites. *Journalism*, 1464884919849954.
46. Loosen, W., Häring, M., Kurtanović, Z., Merten, L., Reimer, J., van Roessel, L., & Maalej, W. (2018). Making sense of user comments: Identifying journalists' requirements for a comment analysis framework. *SCM Studies in Communication and Media*, 6(4), 333-364.
47. Media Council of Kenya. (2021). *Active and Accredited Journalist*. Retrieved from <https://accreditation.mediacouncil.or.ke:882/active-journalists>
48. Mihas, P., & Institute, O. (2019). *Learn to Build a Codebook for a Generic Qualitative Study*: SAGE Publications, Limited.

49. Milioni, D. L., Vadratsikas, K., & Papa, V. (2012). 'Their two cents worth': Exploring user agency in readers' comments in online news media. *Observatorio (OBS\*)*, 6(3).
50. Naab, T. K., Heinbach, D., Ziegele, M., & Grasberger, M.-T. (2020). Comments and credibility: How critical user comments decrease perceived news article credibility. *Journalism Studies*, 21(6), 783-801.
51. Nel, S. (2007). Online defamation: the problem of unmasking anonymous online critics. *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 193-214.
52. Netzer, Y., Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K., & Shifman, L. (2014). The construction of participation in news websites: A five-dimensional model. *Journalism Studies*, 15(5), 619-631.
53. Paulussen, S., & Ugille, P. (2008). User generated content in the newsroom: Professional and organisational constraints on participatory journalism. *Westminster papers in communication & culture*, 5(2).
54. Reich, Z. (2011). User comments. *Participatory journalism: Guarding open gates at online newspapers*, 96-117.
55. Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*: Routledge.
56. Springer, N., Engelmann, I, Pfaffinger, C (2015) User comments: motives and inhibitors to write and read. *Information Communication and Society* 18(7): 798–815. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2014.997268.
57. Stroud, NJ, Van Duyn, E, Peacock, C (2016) Engaging News Project News Commenters and News Comment Readers. Available at: <https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ENP-News-Commenters-and-Comment-Readers1.pdf>
58. Tandoc Jr, E. C., & Thomas, R. J. (2015). The ethics of web analytics: Implications of using audience metrics in news construction. *Digital Journalism*, 3(2), 243-258.
59. Teresa K. Naab, Dominique Heinbach, Marc Ziegele & Marie-Theres Grasberger (2020): Comments and Credibility: How Critical User Comments Decrease Perceived News Article Credibility, *Journalism Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2020.1724181
60. Thurman, N. (2008). Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media. *New media & society*, 10(1), 139-157.
61. Tong, J. (2015). Chinese journalists' views of user-generated content producers and journalism: a case study of the boundary work of journalism. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 25(6), 600-616.
62. Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & health sciences*, 15(3), 398-405.

63. Wang, S. (2020). The Influence of Anonymity and Incivility on Perceptions of User Comments on News Websites. *Mass Communication and Society*, 23(6), 912-936.
64. Wang, S. (2021). Moderating Uncivil User Comments by Humans or Machines? The Effects of Moderation Agent on Perceptions of Bias and Credibility in News Content. *Digital Journalism*, 9(1), 64-83.
65. Ziegele, M., Breiner, T., & Quiring, O. (2014). What creates interactivity in online news discussions? An exploratory analysis of discussion factors in user comments on news items. *Journal of Communication*, 64(6), 1111-1138.
66. Ziegele, M., Quiring, O., Esau, K., & Friess, D. (2020). Linking news value theory with online deliberation: How news factors and illustration factors in news articles affect the deliberative quality of user discussions in SNS'comment sections. *Communication Research*, 47(6), 860-890.
67. Ziegele, M., Weber, M., Quiring, O., & Breiner, T. (2018). The dynamics of online news discussions: Effects of news articles and reader comments on users' involvement, willingness to participate, and the civility of their contributions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(10), 1419–1435.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1324505>