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Deliberating Issued or Discharging Feelings? A Closer Look at "Below-the-line" Reader Comments on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute

JIN YANG
University of Memphis

ABSTRACT: The study addresses a concern over the quality of online news reader comments. Specifically, it examines how online reader comments contribute to deliberation from cognitive and interactive perspectives. The results of content analyzing, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the comments from an online publication The Diplomat suggest that comments were mostly deliberative and serious, and they were more neutrally oriented than degrading in terms of feelings. There was some association between reasonings and feelings but not very strong. The study concludes that comment fields can be a good platform for participatory journalism and enrich deliberation on issues.

Keywords: Comment Fields; Reader Comments; The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute; User Generated Content (UGC); Analytic Process; Social Process; Public Deliberation

Introduction

News consumption such as newspaper reading and TV news watching has been found to have a positive effect on political knowledge (David, 2007) and civic participation (Norris, 2000). Besides, news consumption may frame how audiences perceive what they read (Lecheler, Keer, Schuck & Hanggli, 2015). However, news consumption, in general, is a passive process during which its audiences don't have any means to interact with news, even though media organizations' interest in audience participation dates back to when the media were founded (Williams, Wardel & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011).

News media across western democracies have been historically adopting some participatory forms of journalism to encourage citizen participation. The early practice of publishing readers' letters to editors in newspapers (Nord, 2001), the radio phone-ins (Loviglio, 2002) and television talk shows (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994) were ways of involving citizens in the news-making. The early 1990s rise of public journalism motivated newspapers to experiment with ideas of seeking participation from community members in shaping the news agenda (Nip, 2008; Shepard, 1994). Such experiments of engaging citizens were encouraging but very limiting because traditional media are by nature weak for citizen participation.

The development of online journalism brings in newly minted forms of participatory journalism such as newsgroups, blogs, Wikipedia, forums etc. Among others, one form, "below the line" comment fields, i.e., reader comments, attached to the end of news stories or news articles, is especially interesting and promising.

Graham and Wright (2015) noted that the rising practice of reader comments, as one type of user generated content (UGC), is changing the journalism field significantly. Reich (2011) pointed out the practice may make a positive impact in journalism due to its capacity of adding perspectives and contributing to public discourse, but the poor quality of comments can only tarnish a journalism organization' reputation. As a matter of fact, several news organizations such as The Verge, Popular Science, Recode, USA Today's FTW, The Week, Mic and Reuters phased out reader comments fields in 2014 due to the newsroom struggle with the moderation burden especially in managing the issues related to anonymous readers (Ellis, 2015). NPR closed the comment fields in 2016 (Kovacs, 2020).

Dr. Jin Yang is a Professor of Journalism & Strategic Media at University of Memphis. Please address all communication to the author Jin Yang, Department of Journalism & Strategic Media, University of Memphis, 3720 Alumni Ave, Memphis, TN 38152. Email: jinyang@memphis.edu

However, the New York Times expanded its comment fields in 2017 by utilizing artificial intelligence technology to manage inflammatory or inappropriate comments, and the South Carolina newspaper, The State, also implemented AI to detect and remove toxic comments (Kovacs, 2020). These various approaches in practice warrant another closer look at the issue seriously.

The mixed views on comment fields by professionals and the industry are also reflected in research findings by scholars and researchers. Ruiz, Domingo, Mico, Diaz-Noci, Meso & Masip (2011) analyzed five different online newspapers of the New York Times (USA), The Guardian (U.K.), Le Monde (France), El Pais (Spain) and La Repubblica (Italy). They concluded that comments on the publications of the Liberal model (i.e., as represented by the New York Times and the Guardian) consolidated the democratic process but the comments on the publications of the "Polarized Pluralist" model (the remaining three) tended to foster more polarization.

Hence, the in-depth research on audience participation on online publication platforms needs more solid findings. Second, theories on the user generated content are still in the early development stage, and those that are applicable to news content need to be updated. Most important of all, research on reader comment fields will not only address the quality concern over user generated content but also facilitate the understanding of the contributions of reader comment fields to the public deliberation. Deliberation as a theoretical concept has been explored in multiple disciplines of political science, and communication including journalism. But in the context of comment fields, it may have some added value because online deliberation processes may dictate the future of a staple of news consumption.

This below-the-line comment research paper chooses the online publication of The Diplomat to conduct the empirical inquiry on readers' comments on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute for two reasons. This online news magazine has firmly established itself as a leading voice on Asian affairs with solid content from respected writers and experts, and it has no clear affiliation with any country. Second, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute stirred up heated debates and arguments due to its historical sovereignty controversy among readers of many ethnic backgrounds. The platform and the event provided an optimal opportunity to study the deliberation process from the participation perspective.

Literature Review

Deliberation as the Theoretical Framework

Deliberation is one of the core principles of democracy. Researchers have been asking whether the Internet, as a public sphere, offers an ideal platform for free, equal, and open deliberation among citizens (Graham, 2008). Based on Schneider (1997), Jensen (2003) and Dahlberg (2004), Graham (2008) identified six normative conditions of the process of deliberation: the process of achieving understanding; structural equality; discursive equality; structural autonomy; discursive freedom; and sincerity. Among them, achieving understanding is the most important and relevant normative condition for this study.

Graham (2008) noted that the process of achieving understanding is composed of four aspects: rational-critical discussion, reciprocity, reflectivity, and empathy. Rational-critical discussion, as the basic foundation for understanding, drives all the deliberative talks where participants voice their views and opinions with relevant evidence and solid points. The aspect of reciprocity emphasizes that participants first listen and then respond to others' claims and opinions, but reflectivity is about participants processing claims or arguments internally. Lastly, participants go through empathy to put themselves into others' shoes to fully understand what is under discussion. These four aspects form a full cycle of understanding in deliberation.

While Graham's conceptualization of deliberation encompasses a comprehensive undertaking of the interplay among individuals, society, and systems, other researchers focus on the process itself. Manosevitch and Walker (2009) defined deliberation in an ideal situation as composed of two processes occurring simultaneously: analytic process and social process. While the analytic process of deliberation refers to the substance of the issue being discussed and involves the creation of an information base incorporating variables of narratives, facts, sources, values, positions, and reasons plus testimonies of personal experience (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009), the social process of deliberation involves addressing other comments and commenters, posing questions, addressing the article content (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). If the analytic process is more about the cognitive dimension of the discussion that targets the intellectual part of issues, the social process is more about the interaction among participants that values and respects other parties by conforming to social etiquettes. This two-dimension deliberation model was tested on two U.S. regional newspapers' reader comments (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009), and was found to be sound and solid in identifying the dynamic process the readers engaged in.

Graham's (2008) and Manosevitch and Walker's (2009) conceptualizations overlap significantly. Graham's (2008)'s rational-critical aspect and reflectivity are similar to Manosevitch and Walker's (2009) analytic process as they involve reasoning, reflections or the cognitive dimension of deliberation. And the aspects of reciprocity and empathy by Graham (2008) give prominence to interactions and mutual engagements among participants, which is what Manosevitch and Walker (2009) defined as the social process, the interactive dimension of deliberation.

"Below the Line" Comments or Reader Comments as UGC

Though online discussion forums, popular in the 1980s and 1990s, gradually faded, its core principle of sharing based on user generated content (UGC) survived and expanded (Hopp & Santana, 2012). While some online companies relied on UGC exclusively such as Facebook, twitter and Youtube, other online news media incorporated UGC to engage loyal readers (Hopp & Santana, 2012). Reader comment fields are debate spaces opened up below news articles and blogs that allow audiences to discuss news content with each other and with journalists (Graham & Wright, 2015). Unlike news stories, which live on newspaper websites for months, years, and even indefinitely in online archives, reader comments are usually an ephemeral part of a newspaper's content; they can appear and disappear while the original story remains on a newspaper's site (Santana, 2014). This practice makes the research on reader comments challenging. The moderation of comments varies by newspapers, and comments often post immediately with auto filters generally disallowing vulgar language (Santana, 2014). Seen as blurring the boundary between formal content and UGC, comment fields provide opportunities for journalists to rethink their stories by reflecting on their writing, testing their points, receiving feedback, sometimes getting new leads (Graham & Wright, 2015). From the business perspective, comment fields may generate revenue by maintaining an engaged community and increase visibility in search engines by keeping the website "hot" (Graham & Wright, 2015).

The benefits of having comment fields on news websites are multiple. Some researchers suggest journalists' relationship with comment fields begin to change (Robinson, 2010; Loke, 2012). Integration of user generated content within professional journalism space creates a new platform for citizens to get engaged with news, affect public agenda, and contribute to public discourse and opinions (Tumber, 2001; UGC, 2012). Graham and Wright (2015) found that comment fields contribute to deliberation because the discussions are typically rational, critical, coherent, reciprocal, and civil. Gao and Koo (2014) pointed out online users have more freedom to express themselves and discuss issues raised by the media. Liu and Fahmy (2011) found that due to the anonymous nature of posted comments, the online setting may reduce the effect of the spiral of silence which is helpful in decreasing users' fear of social isolation.

However, UGC has created a range of tensions and problems that need journalists to rethink traditional values of quality, impartiality, and balance with audience participation (Harrison, 2010). Ellis (2015) noted the closure of comment fields by well-known news organizations was attributed to moderation difficulties and legal challenges resulted from anonymity. Finley (2015) concurred that the pains and difficulties of moderating reader comments are not worthy of the time and efforts invested. Gillmor (2004) observed that news organizations are slow in adopting new things but quick to give up. Most mainstream media generally hold the view that they are the professionals who know the ins and outs of how to practice the business of news gathering (Thurman, 2007). However, the public participation in the process of news development can add extra value to traditional professional journalism.

Public Participation in News

Bowman and Willis (2003) defined participatory journalism as "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (p. 9). Engesser (as cited in Frohlich, Quiring & Engesser, 2012) highlighted the importance of active audience participation in content production on the public media platform. Two common points emerged here: one is the development of conversations by non-professional citizens and the other is the creation of a dynamic and egalitarian platform (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Conversations produced in such a form are available for all community members to see, and the corresponding debates are open for public scrutiny, which is significantly different from traditional news media that are set up to filter information before public can see it. If traditional news media were more like a closed system, the practice of below-the-line comment fields makes it more open.

However, to what extent do readers make significant contributions to debate and to deliberation intellectually and interactively? Do those comments left by readers deserve serious readings or simply register as some light entertainment for spectators? In essence, the

question on whether reader comments are deliberative deserves asking.

Using the analytical and social process for deliberation (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009) together with the four aspects of achieving understanding (Graham, 2008) as the theoretical foundation, this study sets about to investigate how online news readers responded to the articles on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute published in The Diplomat online news website. The mixed research method of content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, is used to address three research questions.

RQ1. To what extent do reader comments contribute to deliberation on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute from the analytic process perspective?

RQ2. To what extent do reader comments contribute to deliberation on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute using the social process perspective?

RQ3. What is the relationship between the analytic process and the social process in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute deliberation?

Method

Population

The international online news magazine The Diplomat, headquartered in Washington, D.C, provides analysis and commentary on events occurring in the Indo-Pacific region (Wikimedia Foundation, 2021.) . According to Media Bias /Fact Check website (Zandt, 2010), The Diplomat, owned by Trans-Asia Inc. an international translation service, covers politics, society, and culture in the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, The Diplomat was rated the least biased with its straightforward news reporting and minimal left-right bias (Zandt, 2010). While most of the "below-the-line" research findings were based on samples from well-established traditional news organizations, this study attempts to broaden the sample spectrum by covering a non-traditional but dedicated current affairs-oriented online publication. Readers of various backgrounds are more likely to visit The Diplomat as it has no clear affiliation with a particular country, which is important because it would generate a diverse discourse for analysis.

Sample

Online news readers comments were sampled from articles on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute from April 2012 to December 2013. April 2012 is when Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara proposed to purchase the islands from the private owner and Dec. 2013 is when Japan decided to increase its defense budget amid tensions with China. However, when the online publication The Diplomat was contacted for access to the comments posted on the related articles, the publisher of The Diplomat, J. Pach (personal communication, May 21, 2016) replied, "...we no longer have reader comments on the site -- precisely because like many other sites we found that readers' comments made no useful contribution to the public debate. The comments for that particular article are no longer accessible." Therefore, the Wayback Machine, a digital archive of World Wide Web and other information on the Internet by a non-profit organization named the Internet Archive was consulted to access reader comments. The service enables users to see archived versions of web pages across time via a "three dimensional index" (Wayback Machine, n.d.). The problem with relying on the Wayback Machine to access reader comments is that researchers had to enter accurate dates to retrieve those reader comments. But there was no way to predict how long The Diplomat had kept an article open for readers to post comments, the dates entered were mostly, at best, an educated guess. The following is on how 103 comments were secured from the Wayback Machine. First, a list of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute articles was compiled within the specified 20-month-long (from April 2012 to Dec. 2013) time frame from The Diplomat online publication. Second, the articles without reader comments were eliminated, and those articles with reader comments were kept and their dates were recorded and compiled as a new list. Third, based on this list, the Wayback Machine was used to retrieve pages associated with those dates. And in order to maximize the number of reader comments, the researcher also purposefully entered a date that was several days later than the publication date of the article assuming that the article was still kept alive and open several days later. This technique found that some articles were kept open for four days, some for two days. Fourth, once the Wayback Machine provided the URLs to the articles on The Diplomat's home page, they were clicked and saved as pdf files and printed for analysis. Overall, 103 comments were obtained by using this technique.

Measures

Graham (2008) and Manosevitch and Walker (2009) provided theoretical guidance in designing the study's measurements. Specifically, deliberation, conceptualized from analytic process consisting of rational-critical and reflectivity aspects and social process consisting of reciprocity and empathy aspects, guided the development of six variables: theme

relevance, reasoning, facts, sources, interactions, and emotional discharge.

The study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to these six variables first. Specifically, an in-depth reading of all the comments was initiated to identify categories and codes. The theme relevance variable started with deciding the themes of news articles first. Defined as a central message, a theme is mostly implied in the article, and researchers had to dig out the theme through multiple rounds of reading. Once the articles' themes were identified and laid out, all the comments were read and compared to the corresponding articles' themes. If the comments were in line with the themes, they were assigned yes. If the comments were not in line with the themes, they were assigned no.

Reasoning, defined as the process of thinking in a logical way in order to form a conclusion or judgment, facilitates making sense of things, establishing facts and justifying practices. The qualitative reading of the comments focused on how the conclusion was drawn by examining the process of thinking. Basically, the point made in the comment was compared to the main point made in the article. Therefore, the articles' main points had to be identified first and served as the baseline for comparison. The main point refers to what the article is all about or the main idea. It works similarly as identifying the subject in a passage. Second, every comment posted after each news article was read and coded based on whether it 1) challenged or criticized the main point in the article; 2) supported or concurred or agreed to the main point in the article; 3) provided an alternative view to the article; or 4) offered no reasoning at all.

Facts is to examine whether the commenter includes factual information or not. This round of reading of comments included identifying hard facts such as statistics, years, specific laws or regulations or treaties, and generating a list of hard facts. Then comments were read one after another to see whether it had those facts. Lastly, yes and no values were assigned.

Sources are operationalized as whether or not the comment per se included the references (direct quotes or indirect quotes) by experts, scholars, websites, or historical documents. Again, the list of sources was generated by a close reading of all the comments. Then each comment was read and coded with yes for having one of those sources or no for without any sources.

Interaction is about what or to whom the comment was written to respond. Each comment was carefully read to find out what or who was the intended addressee. The careful reading of the comments generated a list of target addressees: news article per se, the author, and other commenters. Based on this list, each comment was coded accordingly with three categories.

Emotional discharge is defined as whether or not the comment revealed strong feelings such as anger, irrationality, frustrations as the sovereignty over territory topic usually leads to such strong feelings. Comments were read from the feeling perspective and evaluated. Those which aimed to lower others in character, quality, esteem or rank via ad hominem attacks were summarized as degrading, while those comments which included no such feelings were summarized as neutral. The reading didn't reveal any positive or encouraging or praising feelings, which seems unusual. Therefore, the code for emotional discharge was set at the binary level: degrading or neutral.

In sum, the process of analysis followed four steps. First, all the news stories were read for theme and main points identification, this qualitative process deals with news articles. Second, comments were read and compared to the themes and main points lists and codes were assigned based on comparison. Third, comments were analyzed qualitatively for facts, sources, interaction and emotional discharge respectively, and a list of corresponding categories were identified. Lastly, based on the list, codes were assigned for every comment and recorded in an Excel spread sheet. A graduate student was trained for the quantitative part of the content analysis.

Intercoder Reliability

To increase confidence in the quantitative findings, an intercoder reliability test between the graduate student and the researcher was conducted on 10% of the sample. Three rounds of coding were administered until intercoder reliabilities on all the five nominal-level variables (theme relevance, reasoning, facts, interaction, and emotional discharge) reached Scott's pi coefficients of .8. The first round used 30 comments, and the second round used 15 comments, and the third round 15 comments.

Results

The study analyzed 103 comments, and the average number of words per comment is 88 with the minimum of 4 words and the maximum of 636 words. While 72% of the comments are independent posts, 28% are replies to posts. There are two peaks of reader comments in the time frame: Nov. 23, 2013 (with 44 comments) when the article was about the establishment of ADIZ on the East China Seas and Nov. 26, 2013 (with 42 comments) with the published article Getting Senkaku History Right.

RQ1. To what extent do reader comments contribute to deliberation on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute using the analytic process?

The answer to this RQ1 is based on the assessment of four variables: theme relevance, reasoning, facts and sources.

For the theme relevance, the list of four themes was generated from the initial reading of the news articles: 1) The diplomatic relationship between Japan and China gets more tense as the anniversary of Senkaku/Diaoyu islands approaches; 2) Chinese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands didn't hold up well; 3) The U.S. is in a delicate and vague position on the sovereignty of the islands; 4) The tension over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands escalates due to China's establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone. Then each comment was read and compared to the four themes to decide whether it was in line with the theme or not. The study found most commenters made an effort to read the article and made very specific comments to be relevant. For instance, responding to a November 26, 2013 news article Getting Senkaku History Right, a comment by a commenter named JDenverPeace reads: "This article contains just too many errors and willful omissions, which is more an opined piece of propaganda than a balanced review of all the facts...." And with a New York Times article link, JDenverPeach continued to point out that the New York Times article was more "professional to ask for reviews and comment from Japanese sources." But the study did find some comments which were not related to the article theme. An example of such, as a reply to another commenter who used "LOL" to challenge the article author's credibility, reads like this: "Right, because people can't think objectively on issues outside of their nationality. Save your 'LOLS' for Facebook and allow adults to talk." A rely to the above comment seems to be even more irrelevant, "Where are your parents then, Bmc? What handles are they using?"

Overall, the study found that the majority, i.e., 87%, of the comments, were related to the theme of the article while 13% was not related. The chi-square goodness of fit test (χ^2 (1)= 57.6, $p < .001$) was significant.

For reasoning variable analysis, a close and thorough reading of news articles identified four main points: 1) China and Japan both take actions to escalate the tension; 2) China's claims to the islands are not legitimate; 3) Japan started the crisis but China made the crisis worse and the U.S. attempted to balance between them; 4) China's ADIZ strengthened its sovereignty claim and attempted to change the status quo. Then each comment was read and compared to the main points of the news articles, and assigned values from 1 to 4 representing criticizing, alternative, supporting, and no reasoning categories. A comment of criticizing nature is exemplified in this comment by Keys dated Nov. 28, 2013, at 16:10: "Good post. No well-educated or informed readers will take the Japanese excuse seriously. Japan has a long, infamous record of revisionist practices in its school textbook editing. The US also has an similar, more nuanced approach in dissemination of biased, colored, incomplete, and false information / news through its mainstream media, especially when it comes to China and Russia." Keys not only strongly criticized Japan's act of not admitting what it did to China in WWII but also criticized the U.S. media in failing to report events more comprehensively. The "criticizing nature" comments formed the majority of the comments: 42.7%. The following is an example of "no reason" nature: "The world under the leadership of US is A DOUBLE STANDARD WORLD" by FJ0903 on Nov. 24, 2013 in response to the article titled China Imposes Restriction on Air Space Over Senkaku Islands. Such a comment simply put down an opinion without explaining the rationale at all and this kind of no reason comments took a quarter of all comments. A supportive comment can be found in this line by Zed on Nov. 27, 2003: "...Some of you criticize the writer of this article for being Japanese, thus making this pro-Japanese-claim article automatically illegitimate. Does that mean that a Christian book about the pros of Christianity or a Muslim book about the importance of Islamic tradition is automatically 'baseless'? That logic makes no sense..." Zed's comment lent a strong support to the news article author's stand on issues and such similar supporting comments constituted 11.7% of the comments. Lastly, an alternative comment is exemplified by Yi Ding's comment on November 28, 2013: "The article by Prof. Tadashi Ikeda is interesting and lays out the Japanese case for the islands very clearly. Of course, as part of laying out the Japanese case he also basically disregards or minimizes any evidence for the Chinese case for the islands. I think this kind of exposition is a good thing, and it's important for people from both sides the argument to express their views clearly and in the media so that viewers can review the evidence and make their own decisions." Such a comment attempts to tell that while it is good to hear the Japanese side of story, it is also very important to tell the Chinese side so that the readers make an informed decision on their own, which formed an alternative view to the main argument made in the story: Japan had the legitimate sovereignty claim to the islands. These alternative reasoning comments took 20.4% of all the comments.

The chi-square goodness of fit test on the four categories of criticizing, alternative, supportive, and no-reasoning produced a significant result (χ^2 (3)= 21.2, $p < .001$). Basically, 42.7% of the comments were of a criticizing nature, around 25% contained no reasoning at all, followed by 20.4% of alternative comments and lastly, it was 11.7% for supporting reasoning.

The facts list, obtained by a thorough reading of all the comments, was summarized as having statistics, years (including decades, centuries), laws, regulations, treaties, URL references, specific document titles and related references. Then each comment was examined by comparing it to this list, and assigned yes or no values. An example illustrating fact use was found by a commentator named Igor on Nov. 28 at 19:17 "...At least, to refresh your memory, Zhou Enlai has protested against US control of Ryukyu (Okinawa including Senkaku/Diaoyu) in the 50s, after WWII, and repeated that Ryukyu islands, including Senkaku islands, were an 'indivisible' part of Japan and have 'never been separated' from Japan. Please refer to Zhou Enlai speech of 1951 about San Francisco Treaty. His stance was reiterated in (the very official) People Daily (8.01.1953, again in 26.03.1958)." And a non-fact comment read like this: "Zero trust in Chinese historical revisionists, often sponsored and directed by the Chinese government. All freedom loving people in Asia and their US ally must join together to oppose Chinese imperialism and naked aggression." Such comments provided no facts, or no statistics, no numbers, no URL references, and no documents to back up the claim in the comment. And the comments providing facts or new information took a predominate majority: 70.9%, and 29.1% offered no new information but simply a repetition of information, and the chi-square goodness of fit test found the two categories to be very significantly different (χ^2 (1) = 17.95, $p < .001$).

Again, the list of sources was generated by a close reading of all the comments and it included the references by experts, references by scholars, website URLs and historical documents naming, and no references at all. Then each comment was read and coded with yes for having sources or no for without any sources. Comments with sources usually provide a link or at least a document name for readers to refer to. This is an example using links as sources by Yi Ding on Nov. 28: "If people are interested in the Chinese viewpoint on these islands, this article lays it out quite comprehensively as well: http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2012-09/14/content_26520374.htm." And this is another example of using a document name as a source by Michael Turton on Nov. 27 "... Search for my piece 'Constructing Chinese claims to the Senkakus' here at the Diplomat. The Japanese author here is quite correct in his view that the Chinese claim is of recent vintage." However, no-source examples constituted the bulk of the comments with no links and no document names. Take a look at this example by Brian on Nov. 27 to illustrate a typical no-source comment: "'If you look at a map, these islands are closer to China than Japan. Obviously they are Chinese territory.' By this same logic, all Japan needs to do is claim Guam since its closer to them than it is to the United States. This line of reasoning is comical." And no-source comments took an overwhelming 89.3% of all the comments probably because the comment fields posts didn't look like having much space to cite sources. Overall, the sources variable was found to be significantly different (χ^2 (1) = 63.70, $p < .001$) meaning that "not using sources" category (89.3%) was much more than "using sources" category (10.7%).

RQ2. To what extent do reader comments contribute to deliberation on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute using the social process?

Interaction was identified after qualitative reading of all comments to have three levels: interaction with content, with fellow commenters, and with journalists. Commenters tended to more likely respond to the main point made in the news articles or address issues or concerns raised in the news articles. For instance, a commenter named Kanes responded to the article Getting Senkaku History Right by making this comment: "So the islands emerged from the sea only in 1895? If that was so Japanese claims are true. But these islands were in use by the Chinese since times ancient." This kind of interaction with the content of the news articles taking 56.3% of the comment space demonstrated the commenter's seriousness in reading and digesting the content and efforts in deliberating the point. The second type of interaction with the author can be an overall evaluation of the article from the writing style perspective (e.g., "The article contains just too many errors and willful omissions....") or an effort to responding to a particular line from the article (e.g., " 'Now China is trying to create new facts in the air.'.... So in other words, they're being proactive in their territorial claims and responding to escalations by opposing sides? Wow, so insidious, how dare they."). Such interaction was very rare and took only 3.9% of the comment space. The third type of interaction with commenters was the second most common taking about 39.8%. A typical example was to use the reply function on the site to generate or maintain a thread of comments. There were other commenters who didn't use the reply function but instead used the twitter style of responding by using the @ followed by a commenter's name or simply type "to" followed by a

commenter name as an indication that the comment was meant to address the commenter. In sum, the study found a significant result among the three categories of interactions (χ^2 (2)= 44.4, $p < .001$) and the interactions with content (56.3%) were significantly much more than the interaction with fellow commenters (39.8%), and the interaction with the author or the journalist (3.9%) who wrote the story was the lowest.

The emotional discharge types included lowering others in character, quality, esteem and rank that were obtained from reading the comments one after another. Degrading comments were not only strong but also very negative, and neutral comments were more objective and detached. For instance, on November 24, 2013, a commenter named Observer responded to the article of China Imposes Air Space Over Senkaku Islands by claiming that China and Chinese people were "pathetic": "Keep on dreaming comrade. Oh, while you are at it, keep yelling 'historic evidences' out loud over and over to make you feel better from all the shame and humiliation...LOL. So sad and pathetic. Great day to be a chinese, eh?" Another case of using degrading comments was from YiJiun who posted three consecutive degrading comments on the same day. The first one read: "Weak Zone and self-crippling...So, this is only what Xi could do?" Then YiJiun posted second comment that included "...you just slapped yourself in the face!" The third one read: "But, I think Xi might still be correct on this...because China doesn't want to be buried with the lunatic to its East...Not worthy, just locked him up first :)." Fortunately, these degrading comments were only a smaller portion of the comments (27.2%). Most comments (72.8%) stayed neutral and objective and focused on issues and topics. Examples such as this kind of comment abound: "This is going to escalate and is akin to flicking a lighter while pumping gasoline. The inevitable challenge by either Japan or Taiwan will be the snap that sends financial markets tumbling. The middle east also heating up, these rifts have the same look as the world prior to WWI, and the potential to be far worse." Quantitatively, a significant result (χ^2 (1)= 21.5, $p < .001$) was found. The neutral feelings (72.8%) were significantly much more dominant than the degrading emotion (27.2%).

RQ3. What is the relationship between the analytic process and the social process in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute deliberation?

Multiple chi-square tests of independence were run between the analytic process' variables and the social process' variables. Most of the tests turned out not to be significant. The only significant result was found between the reasoning variable and the emotion discharge variable (χ^2 (3)= 9.7, $p < .05$). To be specific, comments with alternative arguments were more likely to be neutral (95.2%) than being degrading (4.8%). The alternative-argument comments may be made via thinking outside of the box and providing a constructive suggestion to the point made in the article. The commenter's focus would have to be on reasoning rather than on feelings. That might explain why such comments tended to be neutral rather than degrading. Here is an example of a comment by a commenter named ACT on Nov. 24, 2013 in response to the article China Imposes Restriction on Air Space Over Senkaku Islands. "This has also been posted as a significant story on the Guardian; as far as i'm concerned, this is about as significant of an incident as the incident where a PLAN destroyer locked its radar onto a Japanese ship. In other words, this move –while understandable on the part of the PRC – just increased the risk of conflict tenfold, and all but ensures that the PRC will be firing the first shots of any conflict." While the news article emphasized the point that China strengthened its sovereignty claim over the islands via the ADIZ establishment, the commenter pointed out China brought the crisis to the breaking point and predicted China would fire the first shot. This alternative view, however, was presented in a calm and objective manner without resorting to any strong emotional word.

Criticizing reasoning, supportive reasoning, and no reasoning did not produce any significant relationships with either degrading or neutral feelings.

Conclusion and Discussion

Against the backdrop of the User Generated Content, this study focused on comment fields from the perspective of deliberation. It found that comment fields are mostly deliberative because they facilitated the analytic process by keeping to the theme of the issue, providing critical reasoning in arguing, contributing new information to help understand the issue, but the use of sources is significantly rare. If we take the reader comment fields as a debating forum, criticizing reasoning dominates the forum which testifies to the usefulness of the platform to voice different views and opinions. For the social process, the interactions are mostly made with the articles suggesting readers pick up points rather than pick on people, and the second frequent type of interaction was with other commenters. On the emotional side, majority of the comments did not carry any emotional words, and only a small portion had some emotional disposition which suggests that most readers are serious in debating issues and remain calm in deliberating. With regards to the relationship between the analytic process and the social

process, most of their pair-wise dual relationships were not meaningful and significant except for the one between reasoning and emotion. In particular, neutral emotions were more likely to be associated with alternative arguments. In other words, alternative-argument (reasoning) comments tend to have more neutral disposition orientations. It may be because alternative argument comments focus on reflecting, thinking, and reasoning to make constructive suggestions. As a result, they tend to be more detached emotionally than criticizing comments and no-reasoning comments. But the overall trend of emotion discharge indicates neutral feeling is much more dominant than degrading emotion in comment fields.

As is discussed in the literature review, public participation in journalism creates a dynamic egalitarian public space where citizens converse for deliberation to achieve understanding of issues. Though there are some criticisms on comment fields in that the quality is poor and the posts are irrational (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011; Reich, 2011), the findings of this study suggest most of the comments are serious and contributing to issue understanding or deliberation, which is in line with the findings by most researchers (Graham & Wright, 2015; Tumber, 2001; UGC, 2012). There is no denying that some comments are emotional or degrading and provide no reasoning in discussing issues, but such comments only constitute a smaller portion of the comment sample.

The originality of the study lies in analyzing reader comments posted on an international online news outlet by applying the deliberation model's two different processes proposed by Manosevitch and Walker (2009) and Graham (2008). Furthermore, the study explored the potential relationship between the two processes. The identified significant relationship between reasoning and emotions indicates that the analytic and the social process are not so independent from each other. There may be overlap between them, and there can be correlations in existence. For instance, what is the role of degrading feelings comments in the criticizing reasoning comments? Does criticizing others always lead to degrading feeling? And does praising or supporting others would always lead to positive and optimistic feelings? This study doesn't have enough data points to analyze this relationship. But it would be very insightful to learn about it in the future research projects.

It may still be too optimistic to conclude that the relationship between journalists and readers has totally changed as suggested by Robinson (2010) or by Loke (2012), but it is true that online news readers have more freedom to express themselves (Gao & Koo, 2014) and the anonymous nature encourages openness and boldness not silenced by dominant opinions (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). Criticizing comments and alternative-view comments in reasoning are found to be significantly more and conductive to deliberation in this case study of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute.

It is very unfortunate that mainstream media are not very receptive to the practice of reader comments either because they believe in "innate conservatism" (Thurman, 2007) or because the moderation of reader comments is difficult and time consuming (Ellis, 2015). However, the benefits of maintaining reader comments outweigh the negatives. It is true that the quality of comments must be improved and moderated, but it should not stop news organization from strategically thinking about participatory journalism and creatively pursuing the greater use of comment fields. After all, as a deliberation space, comment fields offer alternative views and sources, enhance critical reflection on stories and issues and promote democratic values of debating, transparency, involvement, and participation. And it seems that there is hope that the AI new technology can help address the challenge of reader comment moderation. With that in mind journalism professionals may want to consider bringing back comment fields.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study only analyzed one online publication with 103 comments due to the fact that it was extremely difficult to access reader comments. Such a small and convenient sample makes the generalizations about other online publications impossible. The exploratory nature of the study can't draw inclusive conclusions especially about the correlation between reasoning and emotion. Moreover, the study didn't collect information on commenters' background or political views. Therefore, the account on why the commenters made those comments was only speculative at best. Most of the variables such as theme relevance, reasoning, facts, interactions and emotions were measured at the lowest level of measurement, nominal, which limited the statistical analysis and the in-depth quantitative approach to the study. However, this study did attempt to try to sample a non-traditional but dedicated current affairs news website for exploration, and it did provide a snapshot of how online news reader comments manifest and work on an online news publication, and how they relate to the deliberation nature of a controversial issue. The research along the line should be much more, and the relationship between the social process and the analytical process from the deliberation perspective would be a very hopeful field to pursue and theorize.

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