

Final report for the Press Council of Australia

Comment threads in online publications

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Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to examine current policies and practices of selected local and international news organisations concerning comments made to published online articles. We examined comment threads in a selection of news articles published during a randomly chosen week in April 2014 in two local news outlets, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and News Corporation Australia's general online site, news.com.au, and in two international outlets, *The Guardian* online and *The New York Times* online.

Analysis of the comment threads points to two primary findings:

1. It is possible for a minority of commenters to dominate comment threads but that this rarely happens to the extent that a discussion is fundamentally thrown out of kilter. In the sample week there probably was only one clear case of a commenter dominating a comment stream and that was by a person using the moniker, "Hacka", on www.smh.com.au;
2. Different news websites have different approaches to hosting discussion on their comment streams, ranging from *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom, which actively encouraged commenters, and News.com.au, which opened relatively few comment streams.

Our analysis yielded a further two secondary findings relating to comment thread design:

1. The layout and design of comment threads has an effect of the impact of individual commenters in the comment thread. Nested comment threads – where replies to earlier comments produce a subsidiary thread, as used by *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* in this study – in effect 'quarantine' individual comments, which reduced the relative influence of individuals on entire threads.
2. The layout of the www.smh.com.au comment threads, where comments appeared in the comment thread in straightforward chronological order, meant that a small proportion of early commenters could 'dominate' comment threads by what is known as 'gaslighting', which is the practice of posting deliberately inflammatory comments so as to spark a response.

The sample consisted of every article published through the websites of four news-based media outlets over seven days and every comment made to these articles. In total, across the four sites there were 6816 articles with 2635 of the articles having commenting enabled. There were 298472 comments made to these 2635 articles, resulting in an average of 113.2 comments per article. The distribution was not equal, however. The most heavily commented site was the Guardian with an overwhelming majority of comments; 249619 comments (83.6% of total sample) to 1673 articles (63.5% of total sample). The Guardian also had the highest average number of comments per article with 149.2, compared to New York Times at 69.6, Sydney Morning Herald at 61.1 and News.com.au at 4.25 comments per article. The qualitative differences between each sample from the news-based media outlets are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Four Different Approaches to Commenting

For at least the past decade print-originated media companies have been using comment streams linked to the online articles they publish as a way of engaging more fully and directly with their readers. They have done this partly because the online medium provides the space for readers to comment immediately, whether directly to the journalist or to others who post comments. They have also done it as a way of responding to the rapid and far-reaching changes to media wrought by the rise of new communication technologies. Comment streams in online articles have provided news organisations with problems as well as opportunities: should comments be moderated or is a greater level of freedom of expression part of the online culture; if comments are moderated, should that happen before or after publication, and so on.

Different news organisations both in Australian and overseas have grappled with these issues, and have developed a range of policies and practices. It is fair to say that there is only limited agreement of views about these issues. Earlier this year a substantial internal review of how one of the world's most prestigious news organisations, *The New York Times*, was struggling with this issue was leaked. *The New York Times* 2014 Innovation Report (NYT Report) frames this challenge in a way that is familiar:

Of all the tasks we discuss in this report, the challenge of connecting with and engaging readers – which extends from online comments to conferences – has been the most difficult, But the best practices have merged on these fronts, as well, and many of our competitors are experimenting aggressively and pulling ahead of us.

[Our] main platform for engaging with readers is moderated comments, a forum that is respected for its quality but does not have wide appeal. Only a fraction of stories are opened for comments, only one percent of readers write comments and only three percent of readers read comments. Our trusted-commenter system, which we hoped would increase engagement, includes just a few hundred readers. That has prompted business-side leaders to question their value and newsroom leaders to wonder whether those resources could be better used elsewhere.¹

How can we understand comment threads from a journalistic perspective? *The New York Times* Report frames their approach to comments in notions of journalistic quality: “Our brand promises readers that everything they [engage with] has been carefully vetted. We are one of the few outlets where even comments meet this standard.”² The problem for the newspaper's editorial and community managers is that as a platform for discussion and community their site is being thoroughly trumped by their competitors. As will be explored in detail below, *The Guardian*, which reaches “similar audiences” according to the NYT Report, attracts many times more comments.

The research contained in this report aims to provide a snapshot of who leaves comments on stories posted on news websites and whether the resultant series of comments (threads, streams) are dominated by certain key individual commenters. **Our first finding**, drawn from an analysis of comment streams in selected mainstream news media outlets over the period of a week, is that, yes,

¹ New York Times Innovation Report, 2014, page 49.

² New York Times Innovation Report, 2014, page 51. In the direct quote, '[engage with]' is a typographical error as there is a word missing from the original sentence.

sometimes a minority of commenters can dominate comment streams but that this rarely fundamentally imbalances the discussion. **Our second finding** is that different sites have different approaches to ‘hosting the discussion’. Just as there are different editorial approaches to the question of editorial judgement, so a sense of judgement is expressed in different comment threads. All of the mainstream news media outlets that were sampled and analysed for this research consultancy have a sense of editorial judgement in not only cultivating specific comment threads for specific articles, but also encouraging a culture of engagement across articles on each of the news websites.

Daily Totals of Articles and Comments for Each Website in Sample

Guardian	8/04/2014	9/04/2014	10/04/2014	11/04/2014	12/04/2014	13/04/2014	14/04/2014	Week
Articles	343	396	438	498	297	208	382	2562
Articles with Commenting	223	264	294	312	185	139	256	1673
Comments	37684	39154	40439	40504	24257	27442	40139	249619
New York Times								
Articles	281 (851)	306 (921)	337 (970)	365 (924)	194 (448)	306 (667)	258 (786)	2047 (5567)
Articles with Commenting	90	108	97	95	34	47	79	550
Comments	5988	6565	5461	6233	4927	4979	4137	38290
Sydney Morning Herald								
Articles	163	193	187	210	242	274	159	1428
Articles with Commenting	22	25	34	24	14	9	27	155
Comments	1372	1297	1637	1232	355	1087	2489	9469
News.com.au								
Articles	122	147	133	124	51	78	124	779
Articles with Commenting	47	59	47	37	16	21	30	257
Comments	179	310	394	57	0	13	141	1094

Table 1. The number of articles, articles with commenting and comments per day for each of the news websites. NOTE: The NYT figure in brackets is every piece of content returned by the API, not all of it is useful for this analysis as some articles (agency/wire copy) never have commenting. The smaller number is more useful for the purposes of comparison.

Samples for four news websites were captured over the week of 8-14 April 2014. The first sweep of the news sites produced a sample of all articles published across the news sites and comment counts (if applicable) for each of the articles. The sample represented in Table 1 consists of every news article distributed via all published RSS feeds for the given site or every piece of content available via the news website’s API. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is a ‘feed’ of all the stories and meta-data produced by a website. An API is an Application Programming Interface. An RSS feed does not normally have an ‘archive’ and it is not designed to be ‘queried’ in the same way as an API. Samples for *The Sydney Morning Herald’s* smh.com.au (SMH) and News Corporation’s news.com.au

(NCA) were captured via RSS feeds. Samples for *The Guardian's* guardian.com (G) and *The New York Times's* nytimes.com (NYT) were accessed via their APIs.³

The four websites are surprisingly different. A direct comparison between the four news websites is only useful to the extent that it clearly indicates different strategic approaches for incorporating reader comments into the respective publishing platforms. After analysing all of the content for each site it is clear a number of editorial and commercial decisions have been taken so that they are platforms encouraging their audiences to produce different kinds of social relationships to the respective news websites' content. A multitude of issues and variables are in play here but we are mainly concerned with editorial decisions designed into the platforms and enacted through editorial moderation and readers' participatory practice.

There is a spectrum of user participation across the different platforms. *The Guardian* UK and *The New York Times* sit at either end of this spectrum with smh.com.au and news.com.au somewhere between them. The NYT treats its comment threads as part of the editorial product; readers are invited to participate in the topic of the article or blog post and must prove themselves of sufficient calibre to be published. In most circumstances, the GUK treats articles as a catalyst for a community discussion, with content designed to inform and guide an already existing set of discussions. The different editorial approaches represent platforms built with a range of participatory models in mind, from closely controlled and vetted participation to a broader community-driven model.

Both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* platforms allow users/readers of their respective platforms to 'recommend' comments made by other commenters. This introduced a mechanism by which commenters could express their judgement regarding the relative quality of comments. *The New York Times* also used a related mechanism of editorial judgement called 'NYT Picks', where some comments were judged by moderation staff as being of a high quality. Interestingly, this mechanism is in place for *The Guardian* platform but it was not used in any of the articles in the sample. Recommend counts are used in this report as a proxy for what users/readers of the news platforms judged to be quality comments.

³ Fairfax and News Corp have been experimenting with APIs in 2014 so future research may be able to use all APIs. News.com.au content was made available through the API through the months of May, June and July 2014: <http://data.sa.gov.au/dataset/news-corp-australia-journalism-api-pilot/resource/a2635b7b-9be7-427a-8766-b88af7f2dd23>

The Sample: News Events and Comment Threads

Rather than comparing articles across the websites by number of comments, we took a different approach grounded in the news events of the week. As each website has a different approach to commenting, design and moderation, comparing ‘news events’ allows us to get a sense of the relative value of comments and the number of comments for each site. After all articles were captured in the sample and counts carried out, clusters of editorially prominent stories were chosen for comparison. Individual stories on their own can provide some insight, but the context of broader website-wide conversations can only be understood across related stories.

News Events	Articles	Comments
Guardian		
Ukraine	31	22972
Maria Miller	29	9556
New York Times		
Ukraine	5	1589
Obama/Health	6	2082
Sydney Morning Herald		
Abbott in Asia	3	854
Sydney as City	5	891
Bob Carr Diary	5	637
Hockey Pension Age	5	1343

Table 2. The news events selected from each news websites overall sample with article and comment counts.

Contextual information about the sample as outlined in Table 2 (above):

- All comments, commenter names, dates and times, social media shares (if applicable) and ‘recommends’ (if applicable) for all articles in the above selection were captured as part of the ‘news event’ sample for analysis. Not all of this information is used in this report but has been captured for possible future comparative research and modelling of ‘engagement’.
- News.com.au was not included for analysis at this level because there were no suitable news events included in News.com.au. The only possible suitable news event concerned coverage of the television show “The Block: Fans vs Faves” as noted in the next section.
- The ‘Ukraine’ for both GUK and NYT refers to geopolitical tensions triggered by regional conflict between Ukraine and Russia.
- ‘Maria Miller’ refers to the resignation of the Conservative government’s Culture Secretary, Maria Miller, after disclosure of an expenses scandal.
- ‘Obama/Health’ refers to the resignation of Kathleen Sebelius, the Health and Human Services secretary, of the Obama administration.
- ‘Abbott in Asia’ refers to Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s diplomatic and trade visits to the Asian region. ‘Sydney as City’ refers to stories about the Botanical Gardens and Sydney’s second airport. ‘Bob Carr Diary’ refers to the publication of a diary of his time as Foreign Minister during the Gillard government. ‘Hockey Pension Age’ refers to Treasurer Joe Hockey’s suggestions that the pension age be raised to 70.

Sydney Morning Herald (smh.com.au)

A select sample from the larger SMH sample of four major groups of 18 articles was identified: “Abbott in Asia” (AIA), “Hockey Pension Age” (HPA), “Bob Carr Diary” (BCD) and “Sydney as City” (SAC). The article headlines, authors, dates of publication, vertical, news event, and comment counts for the sample are shown in Table 5 (below). ‘Vertical’ is an admittedly messy way to refer to what is normally understood to be a ‘vertical’ in a newspaper context (a distinct editorial section), but appears here as part of the website architecture through which SMH.com.au is organised and coded.

Date	Vertical	News Event	Title	Reporter 1	Comments
8/04/2014	Federal Politics	AIA1	Tony Abbott's speedy free-trade deal with Japan deserves praise	Peter Hartcher	145
8/04/2014	Comment	SAC1	Why Sydney is on course to lose its status as Australia's biggest city	Matt Wade	254
8/04/2014	Federal Politics	AIA2	Tony Abbott opens door for Korean funds bonanza	Mark Kenny	125
9/04/2014	Federal Politics	BCD1	'I'm the best chairman I know': Bob Carr's Diary reveals former foreign minister's diva demands	Tom Allard	111
9/04/2014	Comment	SAC2	Royal Botanic Gardens masterplan: a vision not so splendid	Paul Keating	113
10/04/2014	NSW	SAC3	Labor MP's plan for new city to rival Parramatta derided as 'stupid idea'	Nicole Hashan	157
10/04/2014	Federal politics	BCD2	I am not a snob: Bob Carr defends his diaries	Steve Lillebuen	107
10/04/2014	Comment	BCD3	Bob Carr: a triumph of self over selflessness	Editorial	129
11/04/2014	Comment	BCD4	Bob Carr's 'Israel lobby' claims inaccurate, bizarre	Mark Leibler	182
11/04/2014	Comment	HPA1	Joe Hockey signals raising pension age, more means testing of welfare	Peter Martin	412
12/04/2014	Comment	SAC4	Sydney not yet a true global city	Matt Wade	124
12/04/2014	Comment	BCD5	Bob Carr, former Minister for Nothing	Peter Hartcher	108
13/04/2014	Federal Politics	HPA2	Joe Hockey confirms pension age could rise to 70	Gareth Hutchens	186
13/04/2014	Federal Politics	AIA3	Tony Abbott slumps in polls despite best week yet	Mark Kenny	584
14/04/2014	Comment	HPA3	Anyone for Hockey? Not this future pensioner	Diana Elliot	135
14/04/2014	Federal Politics	SAC5	Badgerys Creek to be named as Sydney's second airport	James Massola	243
14/04/2014	Federal Politics	HPA4	Pension age rise: Australians to become some of the oldest workers in the world	Lisa Visentin	384
14/04/2014	Comment	HPA5	Why our pension scheme is too generous	Peter Martin	212

Table 5. SMH: Date of publication, vertical, news event, first by-line report/author, and comment count.

Analysis of the comment threads to all articles in the sample indicated there was a consistent set of commenters participating in the comment threads to the two federal politics thematic groups “Abbott in Asia” (AIA) and “Hockey Pension Age” (HPA). Manual counts of the number of comments and number of mentions in comment threads were carried out.

Commenter	AIA Total	Mentions total	AIA 1	AIA 1 mentions	AIA 2	AIA 2 mentions	AIA 3	AIA 3 mentions	HPA Total	Mentions total	HPA 1	HPA 1 mentions	HPA 2	HPA 2 mentions	HPA 3	HPA 3 mentions	HPA 4	HPA 4 mentions	HPA 5	HPA 5 mentions	Total Comments	Total Mentions
A country gal	20	2	6	0	1	1	13	1	33	3	19	1	2	0	2	0	10	2	0	0	53	5
Adam	17	3	0	0	2	2	15	1	35	7	14	3	6	2	0	0	15	2	0	0	52	10
jofek	17	12	4	2	11	10	2	0	15	11	3	3	5	3	0	0	7	5	0	0	32	23
Hacka	24	122	0	0	11	28	13	94	7	21	0	0	0	1	0	2	7	18	0	0	31	143
Jump	16	2	3	1	4	1	9	0	13	4	5	2	5	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	29	6
Ross	13	7	0	0	8	4	5	3	14	10	3	3	6	5	0	0	2	0	3	2	27	17
Buffalo Bill	14	1	1	0	7	0	6	1	9	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	0	0	23	2
JT	3	6	0	0	0	0	3	6	18	21	13	20	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	27
Shane in QLD	6	1	0	0	0	0	6	1	13	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	19	2
mh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	19	0	0	11	15	0	0	0	0	6	4	17	19
Smack	12	14	0	0	12	14	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	14	14
Redsaunas	14	5	3	0	4	3	7	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	5
Lesm	7	8	4	3	2	3	1	2	7	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	2	0	14	8
Stewie Griffin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	1	0	0	0	0	13	1	1	0	0	0	14	1
Tristan	3	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	10	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	3	0	0	0	13	2
Rod	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	10	2	5	1	2	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	13	2
PB	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	6	5	2	1	0	7	4	0	0	0	0	13	6
Get Real	7	6	2	2	2	3	2	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	11	6
Paul D	3	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	8	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	4	11	5
What jobs?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	7	0	0	11	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	7
BC	5	1	0	0	0	0	5	1	5	1	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	2
Flanders	10	14	7	4	1	10	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	14
davros	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	8	5	2	0	6	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	5
Lady	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	1	8	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	10	1

Table 6. Manual counts of all comments by those who made comments as well as mentions of commenters by other commenters with more than 10 comments. The count of the contributions to the article comment thread AIA3 by commenter “Hacka” and responses to “Hacka” are highlighted in yellow.

There are a number of ways a single commenter could ‘dominate’ a comment thread. First, by posting a multitude of comments and, second, a commenter could dominate a comment thread through what is termed ‘gas lighting’. ‘Gas lighting’ is the practice of posting deliberately inflammatory comments so as to spark a response. It is clear from the SMH sample that no one commenter dominated the conversation in a numerical sense. It is equally clear, though, that at least one commenter, calling themselves “Hacka”, probably did dominate the comment threads for a number of articles in this sample of stories.

Take, for instance, the article AIA3 “Tony Abbott slumps in polls despite best week yet” from 13 April. At 584 It had highest number of comments for the SMH in this sample; 13 comments were by “Hacka”, and of the remaining 571 comments, approximately 94 (16.5%) responded to or mentioned “Hacka”. Put another way, including the comments made by “Hacka”, 18.3% of the comment thread was explicitly organised around “Hacka’s” commenting. How did “Hacka” dominate this comment thread?

“Hacka” made the first comment (6:49am) and it seems to have set the tone for the comment thread:

Let’s not get too excited about the result - sometimes polls go against expectations. Remember when Gillard gave the misogyny speech and got a poll bounce? Sure, it was balanced out pretty quickly, but not before a few people claimed it as the beginning of the resurrection.

What's astonishing is that in a poll where the Coalition numbers took a dive, ALP numbers also suffered. When was the last time such a big drop didn't benefit the other major party?

The electorate doesn't seem too impressed with the changes to 18c, but apart from that there wasn't too much to pin the result on. Coupled with the Greens numbers, which clearly don't reflect the actual Greens support, there's possibly some margin-of-error issues coming into play. Last week's Newspoll suggested that Sinodinos and Knighthoods didn't play a major role in voters' thinking.

Overall the government won't be too concerned (maybe George might), and with Linda Reynolds some 10,000 votes ahead in the WA Senate vote, with a bit of luck there could be some more good news on the horizon for Abbott this week.

Responses to "Hacka" indicated that other commenters were aware of "Hacka's" apparent political position supporting the Liberal-National Coalition government. The fifteenth comment, by "Duncan" at 7:35am, expresses this sentiment clearly: "Ahhh Hacka....the political pirate...only ever looking through one eye! Constant partisan rubbish!" Furthermore, other commenters referenced "Hacka" even when "Hacka" had not made a comment to an article, such as "Riddley" who was the first commenter to Diane Elliot's comment piece headlined "Anyone for Hockey? Not this future pensioner" (HPA3, 14 April):

Great article (sic) Diana - funny - loved the Stay Puft Marshmallow man analogy - "like the innocuous-turned-evil Stay Puft Marshmallow Man in Ghostbusters, the teddy bear Treasurer has morphed into the stuff of our nightmares"!!

I am also hoping that I beat Hacka in being the first to post...

'Gas lighting' a comment thread seems to be the method by which commenters dominate comment threads on SMH. For example, a similar situation emerged in the article with the second largest comment thread, an opinion piece by Peter Martin headlined "Joe Hockey signals raising pension age, more means testing of welfare" (HPA1, 11 April). This comment thread was kicked off by "Kingstondude" (7:05am): "How about reducing the number of disability pensioners. Make the requirements more stringent." He received an immediate negative response from a number of commenters, which triggered another much longer comment from "Kingstondude":

12 Million Working Australians pay \$160 Billion in Personal Tax. The Welfare bill is \$130 Billion. Those that have paid tax all their lives and retire now get less, when after 40 years of supporting pensioners. Many disabled pensioners are considered disabled due to alcoholism or illicit, or prescribed substance abuse. We now have a society where a young person has a viable choice, party hard, don't gain skills and the Govt. will pick up the pieces, provide you with a pension, and public housing. Lower paid workers who only make enough to make ends meet can't retire because of the allocation of public housing to those disability pensioners. And now, getting old age pension is getting harder.

It is possible to define 'engagement' purely in terms of the frequency of comments (or clicks, reads, views, shares or mentions) – as is common practice in media companies that produce internal or external metrics and analytics reports using methods derived from marketing – but without an appreciation of the qualitative character of this engagement, the numbers are bereft of context. For

example, there was a qualitative difference in the character of comments responding to article AIA3 compared to article HPA1. On the one hand, the comment thread to AIA3 played out as a debate about the possible reasons for Tony Abbott’s poor polling performance. Commenters followed the implicit invitation to participate in speculative political commentary and isolate possible reasons for the poor performance. On the other hand, the comment thread to the HPA1 article played out as a partisan debate about the socio-economic costs and benefits of the welfare state apparatus. The comment thread contains political commentary about the proposed policy idea, but unlike the comment thread to AIA3, the commenting in this thread was largely organised around anecdote, prejudice and personal experience dealing with government agencies. Commenters were critiqued not because they offered obviously subjective responses, but because the subjectivity was not leavened by other sources of information. For example, “Eyeswideopen” (7:26am) in response to “Kingstondude”:

Seriously? Do you have even a skerrick of knowledge around what sort of assessments people wanting to claim the DSP have to go through? I would say no given your throw away statement. How about you ask the Noalition why they plan to keep the payouts to offset the mining tax and the CTS after they do away with both come the senate changeover? Or why they see the need to hold onto an incredibly unaffordable PPLS or why they will not look at closing the loophole in the FBT that allows workers who don't use a vehicle for employment to get all the benefits and rort the taxpayers of this country?

As well as individuals dominating comment threads, groups of commenters can repeatedly comment in such a way that it is largely a discussion being carried out among themselves. For example, across the eight AIA and HPA articles of the larger 18 article SMH sample, there is a series of discussions in which a small number of commenters engage with each other. Table 7 (below) shows that from the total number of comments made by this group of commenters (136) a relatively large number of comments (66, or 48.5%) mentioned another commenter in the group listed in the table. Most of the discussion between these commenters was critical of contributions made by another commenter. Put another way, the engagement between the commenters sought to highlight how a given comment fit a certain partisan position and pattern of partisan responses. For example, the commenter “jofek” is clearly on the other side of the political fence to “Hacka”, “Smack” and others.

Commenter	Comments	Mentions
jofek	33	16
Hacka	33	18
Buffalo Bill	26	9
Smack	21	11
mh	17	7
Molotov	6	5
Totals	136	66

Table 3. SMH: Counts of comments and mentions of each commenter by others.

News.com.au

A sample was created of all content distributed through all RSS feeds of the News.com.au (NCA) site, but a decision was soon made not to carry out the same analysis of this site as the others because there were far fewer articles and comments in the NCA sample compared to the other three news websites' samples. An analysis of its comments shows that it does not host a discussion in any meaningful way. This is even more pronounced when you look at the number of comments made about political stories compared to sports and entertainment. The most popular stories on NCA come from the sport and entertainment sections.

	Lifestyle	News	News-Lifestyle
Articles	466	382	82
Comments	763	182	149

Table 4 NCA: News vs Lifestyle articles and comment counts.

Table 3 (above) represents counts for the different types of journalistic content published through NCA for the sample period. "Lifestyle" is a category used by NCA on their website, but it is more commonly used to refer to news content that has a 'softer' style. "News" conforms to the conventional understanding of 'hard' news. The majority of stories were published through the Travel (27), Entertainment (132), Lifestyle (58) and Sport (249) sections while the conventional news sections of National (193), Business (26) and World (164) had fewer articles. Complicating the NCA analysis were categories of content that had elements of both 'hard' and 'soft' news; the Money (21), Real Estate (17) and Technology (44) sections had a mixture of 'Lifestyle' and 'News' reporting. The headlines of the top five stories with the most comments from NCA are:

"Fan debate: has the AFL become boring?" (147)

"Did the wrong couple win The Block? Fans suggest Steve and Chantelle won because they went last" (96)

"Video appears to show surfing legend Kelly Slater ride dangerously close to a shark in Western Australia" (85)

"'Skinny model' debate hits Mercedes Benz Fashion Week again" (70)

"Why Joshua Clottey will send Anthony Mundine into retirement tonight" (45)

Arguably, the only discussion that NCA hosted over the course of the sample concerned the television show *The Block: Fans vs Faves*. One article about it appeared in Real Estate and the other three in Entertainment:

Date	Title	Reporter	Commenting	Comments
9/04/2014	Has Twitter predicted the winner of Nine's The Block: Fans v Faves?	Charlotte Willis	Yes	11
10/04/2014	Did the wrong couple win The Block? Fans suggest Steve and Chantelle won because they went last	Alison Stephenson	Yes	96
10/04/2014	Steve O'Donnell and Chantelle Ford win The Block: Fans v Faves	Colin Vickery	Yes	39
10/04/2014	Brands such as Mitre 10, The Good Guys, Suzuki and iSelect were the real winners of The Block: Fans v Faves	Wenlei Ma	Yes	38
10/04/2014	Who is Frank the mysterious bidder on The Block?	Alison Stephenson	No	
			Total	184

Table 5. NCA: The Block: Fans vs Faves articles with number of comments if commenting enabled.

The Guardian

The first and most striking thing about the comment threads for *The Guardian* is the sheer number of comments compared to the other three news websites. The NYT sample is largely comparable to the SMH sample, but *The Guardian* sample is an order of magnitude larger. This presented its own problems when carrying out detailed empirical analyses of comment threads. Two news events were isolated from the entire *Guardian* sample.

	Ukraine	Miller	Total Guardian
Articles	31	29	1673
Comments	22972	9556	249619
Mean Comments	741	365.7	298.8
SD Comments	781.2	139	149.2

Table 6. GUK and GM: Counts of comments and mentions of each between commenters.

The possibility of conflict between Russia and Ukraine triggered global geopolitical tensions that were represented in *The Guardian* sample by 31 separate articles and almost 23 thousand comments. The average (mean) number of comments in the sample was a relatively high 741 with a standard deviation of 781. This is a relatively high standard deviation, which means there was a high variation in the range of the number of comments made to each article. The article (GUK 11) with the largest comment thread – 3115 comments – is just over three standard deviations from the Ukraine sample’s mean average and 18.8 standard deviations from the average number of comments for articles in the entire *Guardian* sample. Clearly, this geopolitical issue triggered a particularly ‘engaged’ response from readers.

The Maria Miller news event refers to the resignation of the Conservative government’s Culture Secretary on the 9 April (second day of sampling). Although the Miller news event sample has a slightly higher mean average of comments per article compared to the rest of the *Guardian* sample, the standard deviation was slightly less than the entire *Guardian* sample. The Miller sample is useful for being closer to *The Guardian*’s overall mean average number of comments per article and standard deviations compared to that of the Ukraine news event sample.

The Guardian - Ukraine

The patterns of commenting to the articles in the Ukraine sample reveal two possible reasons why it has such a large number of comments compared to the larger *Guardian* sample. The first concerns the slightly conspiratorial view that circulated within a number of comment threads that different ‘sides’ of the Ukrainian dispute, which largely aligned with geopolitical positions, had paid representatives making comments as part of a ‘propaganda war’ (see Table 9 below for an example). *The Guardian* published a range of perspectives and positions through its op-ed Comment is Free section, including a comment piece by Dmitry Kiselev, head of the Russian state-owned news agency *Rossiia Segodnya*. In the piece Kiselev admits he has been described as “Putin’s chief propagandist”. His general approach is suggested by the piece’s headline: “Russia and the west are trading places on freedom of speech”. The comment thread to the Kiselev piece becomes an ideological battle between supporters/detractors of Russia and/or the West reminiscent of the Cold War. The commenters are largely organised around this deep-seated antagonism, but there are moments where practical examples are provided. For example the very first comments present counter-

examples to Kiselev's argument and refer to allegedly murdered Russian journalists in the context of Russia's poor standing on the Press Freedom Index. The below graph is a representation of all the recommends for the comments about Kiselev's comment piece.⁴ It shows a number of ways that this particular comment thread is appreciated by readers and other commenters.

Commenter	Date (AEST)	Recommend	Comment
nazcalito	10 April 2014 (4:14am)	310	Why has the Guardian turned off comments on most of the Russian articles? The comments are more fun to read than the articles.
vivianvivian	10 April 2014 (4:26am)	249	Completely agree with you. The comments are more informative and more insightful than the articles.
panpipes	10 April 2014 (4:39am)	22	As much of the commentary has turned into tit-for-tat accusations of being paid shills for one side or the other, I don't find them all that informative.
laguerre	10 April 2014 (4:51am)	62	As much of the commentary has turned into tit-for-tat accusations of being paid shills for one side or the other, True, but you can see it was a deliberate move by US troll central. Response accusations were only inevitable. It is not like it came equally from both sides. It was a deliberate move in the western propaganda war.

Table 7. GUK: An example of the 'propaganda war' rhetoric found in the article "Vladimir Putin professes high hopes for Ukraine summit" (GUK6, 9 April).

The second reason why the Ukraine sample had many more comments relative to the rest of *The Guardian* sample is in the way conversations ebb and flow within a single comment thread. At first glance there appears to be a pattern of overall declining engagement across every comment thread.⁵ This can be inferred by the decline in reader attention to a given comment thread as indexed by the 'recommend' count (see Table 10 on the next page for an example of the recommend count for a single comment thread).

Commenters have the capacity to 'recommend' a comment and it can be considered the analogous with 'liking' or 'up-voting' on other platforms. Hence, the 'recommend count' is an indicator that may reflect the relative quality of a given comment. It is not an absolute measure of quality because there is no way to gauge the criteria by which a commenter recommends another's comment. There is a clear pattern of spikes that often, but not always, indicate comments that serve as a trigger for another 'conversation thread'. There is an overall decline in the number of recommends in this comment thread. One way to interpret the declining trend is that commenters' interest in the comment thread declines except for the most committed, but this is not necessarily what happened in all cases.

⁴ Individual commenters on *The Guardian* site have the capacity to 'recommend' individual comments as a kind of 'up-voting' mechanism. As well as recording all commenters and comments for *The Guardian* stories, all 'recommend' values were recorded as part of the sample.

⁵ Commenting on articles published in *The Guardian* is broken up into multiple separate 'conversation threads' below each article. Each 'conversation thread' begins whenever a new comment is made in 'reply' to the original article. If a commenter replies to an existing comment then their comment joins in the 'conversation thread'. When discussing *Guardian* commenting we will talk about 'comment threads' to refer to all comments below an article, 'conversation threads' to follow *The Guardian's* own preferred usage and 'comment' to refer to individual comments.

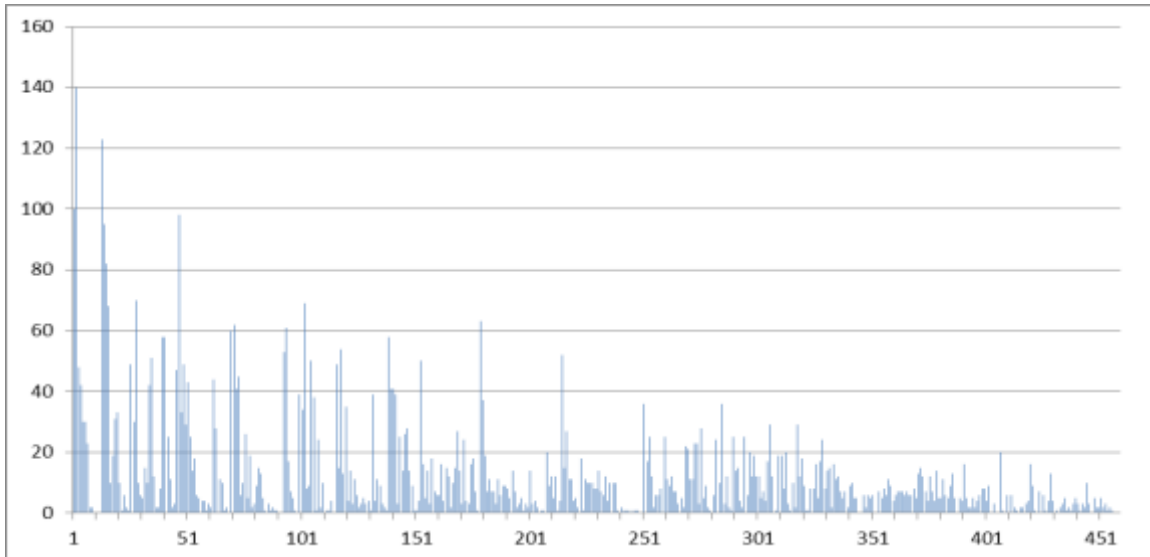


Table 8. GUK: Recommend count for each comment to the article “Russia and the west are trading places on freedom of speech” (GUK9, 10 April).

The number of recommends per comment in Table 10 above or Tables 12, 12 and 13 below shows recommend count per comment on the vertical axis for each comment, with the position of the comment in the thread indicated by the horizontal axis. Table 10 shows ‘Recommends’ as high as 140 for comment 2 and represents each recommend count for each of the 459 comments for this article. Tables 11, 12 and 13 capture the recommend counts for each comment for each article that have a certain range of comments. For example, Table 11 below represents recommend counts per comment for each article with 1000-2000 comments and includes stories on the Ukraine from the Guardian that we have coded 23, 6, 15 and so on. There is a much greater concentration of ‘recommends’ for comments in the first 300 comments in the very large comment threads of Table 11 (below).

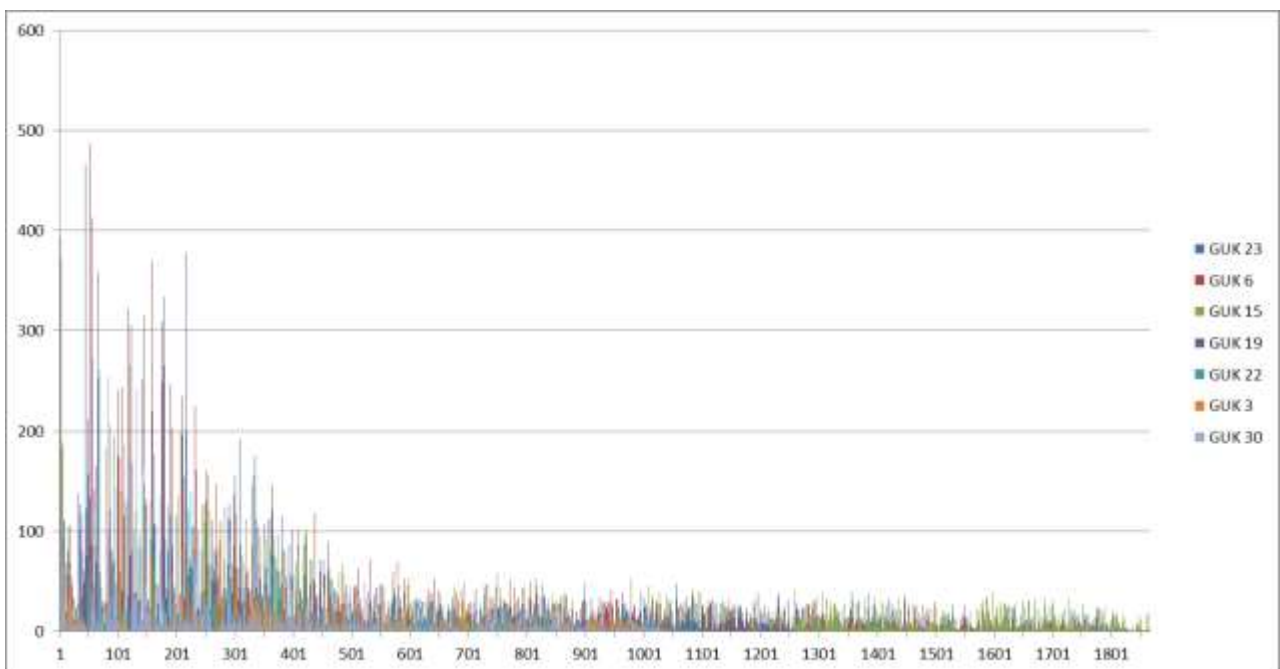


Table 9. Recommend counts for GUK articles with 1000-2000 comments.

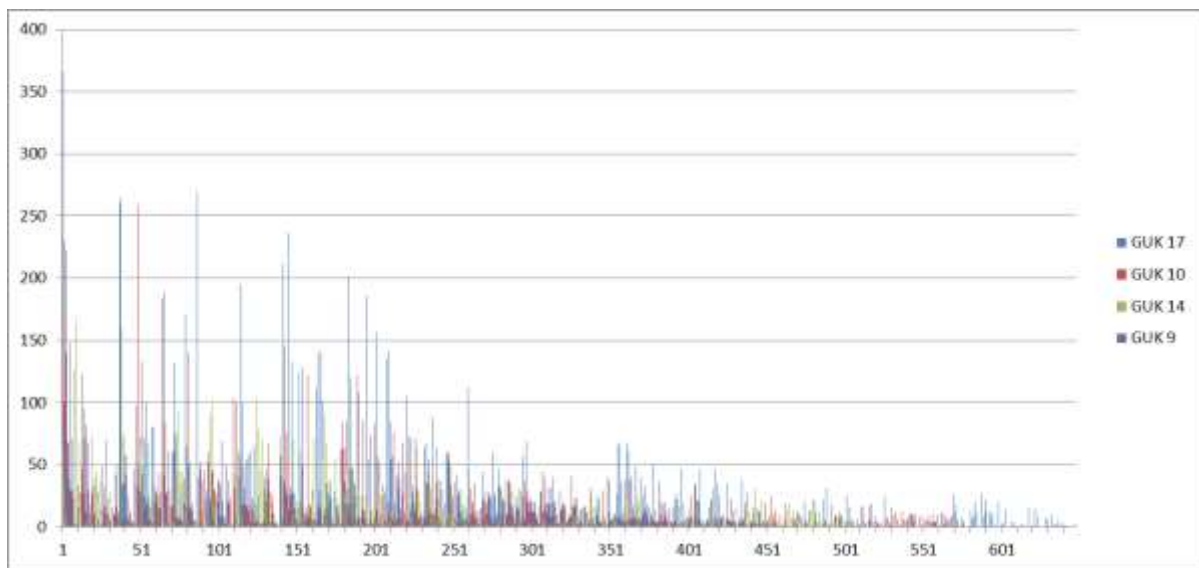


Table 10. GUK: Recommend counts for GUK articles with 400-700 comments.

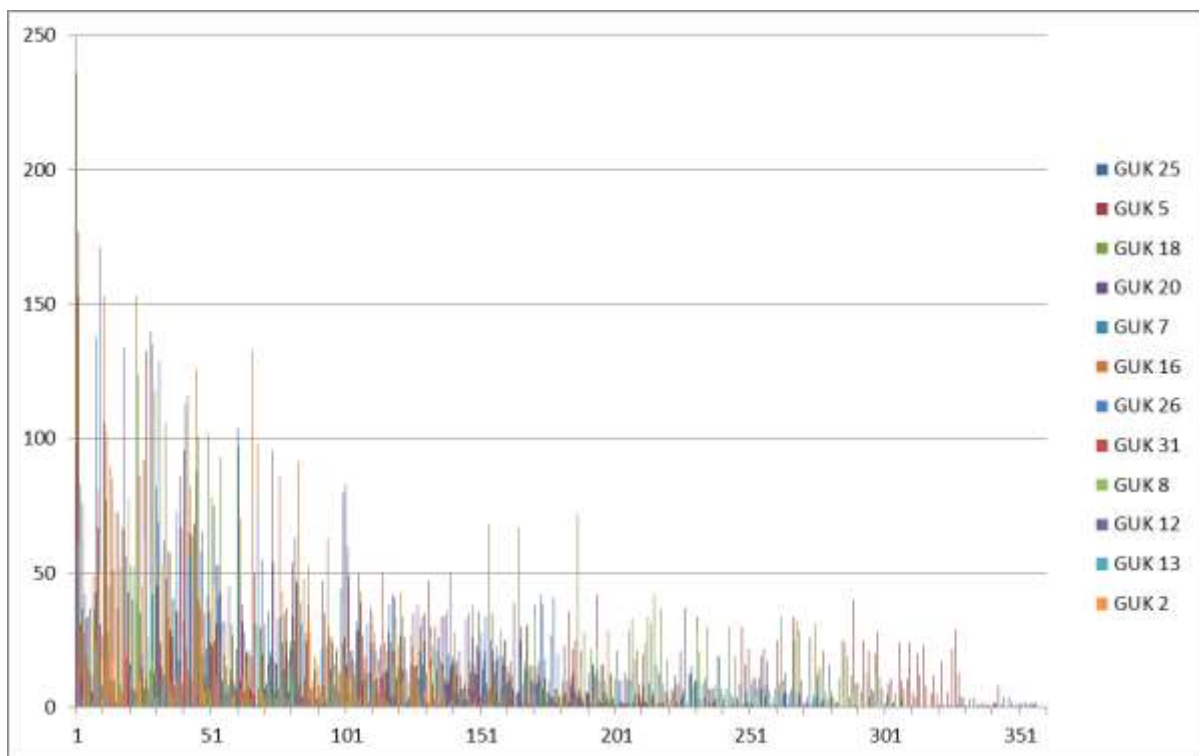


Table 11. GUK: Recommend counts for GUK articles with 150-400 comments.

The two tables above show a sharp decline in the number of commenters to a comment thread. At first glance, this could be interpreted as a decline in interest in the comment thread. However, we suspect a more complex pattern of engagement between different levels of relative engagement between commenters.

Below is a table of comments per day for commenters with five or more comments made in the thread to GUK9 (the number of recommends per comment in the comment thread to GUK9 is represented in Table 10, above):

Number and frequency of comments to *The Guardian's* story GUK9

Commenter	Comments 10 April	Comments 11 April	Comments 12 April	Comments 13 April	Total Comments Thread	Total Comments GUK Sample
Simon211	36	3	0	0	39	74
NY1985	26	0	0	0	26	80
tonkatsu	15	6	0	0	21	21
alterismus	14	6	0	0	20	44
ManWhoFellToEarth	13	0	0	0	13	15
RussianFriend	13	0	0	0	13	22
Anothervertonian	9	0	0	0	9	23
Finn_Nielsen	8	0	0	0	8	8
Orphadeus	0	7	0	0	7	26
Velska	6	0	0	0	6	6
JonDess	6	0	0	0	6	20
PaperEater	6	0	0	0	6	24
mm58347	6	0	0	0	6	7
Craig Riley	6	0	0	0	6	32
andresh	6	0	0	0	6	26
Caroline Louise	4	1	0	0	5	211
AlecMacpherson	0	3	0	2	5	6
Mandrake7	5	0	0	0	5	7
martyjar	5	0	0	0	5	174
buryavpustyne	4	1	0	0	5	5
LaAsotChayim	4	0	1	0	5	270

Table 12. GUK: Comments per day for commenters with five or more comments made to the comment thread for the article "Russia and the west are trading places on freedom of speech" (GUK9, 10 April). We have highlighted three commenters' total comment counts in the sample as discussed below.

Table 14 (above) shows that early commenters to the thread rarely comment again after the first day, which leaves a much smaller number of commenters continuing with the thread or entering it for the first time. The "Total Comments GUK Sample" column on the right hand side is the total number of comments made by each of the commenters in the Guardian Ukraine sample and we have highlighted three commenter's total comment counts. Even though they only made five comments each in this particular comment thread, "LaAsotChayim" was the second most prolific commenter in the Ukraine sample, "Caroline Louise" the fourth and "martyjar" the ninth.

Table 15 below represents comment counts for each of these commenters across each article of the entire Guardian Ukraine sample. What emerges from these comment counts is that different commenters participate in different ways. "Caroline Louise" participates in 23 of the 31 comment threads, "LaAsotChayim" in 29 and "martyjar" only 14. They all have a similar number of comment thread contributions of ten or more comments, with "Caroline Louise" having six comment threads

of 10 or more comments, and “LaAsotChayim” and “martyjar” with seven each. This indicates that some commenters, such as “Caroline Louise”, make contributions to a large number of threads while other commenters, such as “martyjar”, contribute a greater number of comments to a fewer number of comment threads.

Number of comments by regular commenters on *The Guardian’s* Ukraine stories

GUK Sample	Date	Caroline Louise	LaAsotChayim	martyjar
1	8 April	7	1	0
2	8 April	0	9	0
3	8 April	35	50	0
4	9 April	0	5	0
5	9 April	12	4	0
6	9 April	0	26	29
7	10 April	4	6	10
8	10 April	8	5	10
9	10 April	5	5	5
10	10 April	6	2	8
11	10 April	23	21	44
12	10 April	0	8	6
13	11 April	0	0	0
14	11 April	8	7	0
15	11 April	4	36	17
16	12 April	0	0	0
17	12 April	10	3	0
18	13 April	8	3	6
19	13 April	1	3	0
20	13 April	5	4	0
21	13 April	2	1	1
22	13 April	26	10	7
23	14 April	3	5	10
24	14 April	0	1	0
25	14 April	3	2	0
26	14 April	4	3	0
27	14 April	18	27	19
28	14 April	0	2	0
29	14 April	4	2	0
30	14 April	8	17	2
31	14 April	7	2	0

Table 13. GUK: Each row refers to an article in the Ukraine sample with our story code (1-31), the publication date of the article and comment counts for each of these specific commenters for each article.

A simple numerical count of the number of comments made per commenter is inadequate for understanding the character of their engagement in a qualitative sense. For example, at first glance “LaAsotChayim” in some comments appears to demonstrate a keen appreciation of the particular ‘plight’ of Ukrainians and primarily wrote comments that rejected the perceived ‘meddling’ of European Union and American interests. When all of the 270 comments from “LaAsotChayim” are isolated, however, it is apparent that “LaAsotChayim” posts multiple versions of the same comment.

Carrying out a wildcard search for the first 40 characters of each comment across the 270 “LaAsotChayim” sample and then manually checking, only 221 are identifiably unique, 48 are

repeated between two to 10 times and five have been removed by *Guardian* moderators.⁶ Arguably, “LaAsotChayim” does not ‘dominate’ comment threads so much as exploit the particular features of *The Guardian* commenting platform. Should we consider the repeated posting of the same comment as ‘spamming’? Certain comments are repeated in such a way that specific comments did not look out of place in individual comment threads, which therefore did not make other commenters apparently suspicious enough to report “LaAsotChayim” to moderators. Nor did this practice raise the suspicion of moderators themselves. Seeing as at least one fifth of the comments are repetitions, the conclusions to draw from this are only suggestive. What is clear, though, is that by repeating multiple comments across multiple comment threads “LaAsotChayim” is not engaging with the substance of the actual article or the actual comment thread but is instead making generic points in ‘meta-discussions’ across multiple comment threads. By ‘meta-conversation’ we mean a conversation that commenters are having with each other across multiple articles about a single topic. No other comments or commenters were identified as repeating comments.

“LaAsotChayim’s” Duplicated Comments across different articles published in *The Guardian*

Count	Comment
10	I was always wondering how come any thread related to Russia/Putin or Ukraine is quickly swamped by a very substantial number of anti-Russian posters spewing the same Cold War style propaganda again and again.;As it turned out the US military budget goes to finance the keyboards warriors too...;http://www.usmessageboard.com/current-events/298822-us-military-thugs-with-keyboards-to-spread-propaganda.html
6	Lets me get this straight.., the democratically elected government of Ukraine is overthrown and the citizens of
5	We can only imagine the Western outcry if something like the raid on the Guardia by GCHQ happened in Russia.
4	he seizure of power in Kiev by a tiny minority of extremist Galician (Uniat Ukrainians from the far west, formerly
4	The amount of poor brainwashed soles that believe in imminent Russia invasion on this thread is staggering!;It's
4	The myth being propagated by the ignorant Western media and politicians at present is that the Ukraine is a
4	While US ally Egypt puts 500 activist to death, without a word of condemnation from ether the US or EU, or their
3	The Ukrainian Junta "government", who are Western Ukrainians, are concerned about loyalty to Kiev of those
3	Ukrainians are standing up against fascism all over the country, not just the East. The US (with its 5 billion

Table 14. GUK: Repeated comments by commenter “LaAsotChayim” with three or more repetitions. Only the first line is included for each repeated comment, except for the most repeated comment that is (ironically) about “keyboard warriors” allegedly financed by the US military.

The Guardian – Maria Miller

The Miller (GM) sample consists of 29 articles with commenting closer to the overall *Guardian* per-article averages and standard deviation compared to that of the Ukraine sample. The main event was Miller’s actual resignation after intense public and political pressure stemming from revelations in *The Daily Telegraph* showing that she had over-claimed MP expenses by many thousands of pounds. This article prompted 1540 comments, the highest number of comments in the Miller sample. From an editorial and journalistic perspective, the story developed across the week-long sample, which affected whether a given comment thread was kept open by moderators. Compared to the Ukraine sample that only had two articles where the comment thread was closed after a fresh article superseded the previous one, *The Guardian* Community Moderators closed five comment threads in the Miller sample. On two of these occasions it was apparent that the comment thread was closed at night, with the suggestion from moderators that comment threads would be opened

⁶ This searches the comment field for partial matches against every other comment up to the first 40 characters. It was noted that there are minor variations introduced into some comments. For our purposes these minor variations do not count as a ‘unique’ comment.

in the morning, from which we can infer that the moderators did not want comments posted without the possibility of moderation. *The Guardian* site is mostly post-moderated, and when a comment is removed by a moderator, a note is left in its place to inform others that a comment has been removed. In the much larger Ukraine sample 465 comments (2.0%) were removed compared to the Miller sample where 546 comments (5.7%) were removed. This indicates that the comment threads to the Miller sample of articles were at risk of not meeting *The Guardian's* 'community standards' which are already very tolerant.

Comments and number of recommendations for *The Guardian's* articles about Maria Miller

Username	Date And Time	Recs	Comment body
JacktheNat	09 April 8:09am	1043	Not before time. But what a reflection on the judgement of the Prime Minister.
clarkwgriswold	09 April 8:09am	977	Can we have our money back now?
voix	09 April 8:12am	860	Now the attention turns to Cameron, quite right too, he has shown, time and time again, a complete lack of judgement in backing losers, and he's the top guy! Why is another loser in charge of this country?
stuartMilan	09 April 8:10am	607	the last sentence of her letter to the PM reads "I owe them all a great deal." still taking the mickey, eh?
basicvoice	09 April 8:38am	602	She was pushed before PM question time, but the real questions should be raised by the police and HMRC. Otherwise she will be allowed to sit on the back benches on full pay whilst charging us the commute to her fantastic house all paid for by working people. Meanwhile the poor who can't afford to pay for empty rooms are thrown onto the streets.
andyandy	09 April 8:10am	497	At last! But where exactly was DC during the past 5 days? Can he even make a decision? More importantly when will the money be paid back and when does the criminal redress begin?
WellMexico	09 April 9:33am	464	It's almost as if you are suggesting that Cameron is a bluffer with no eye for detail and making it up as he goes along. Oh.
voix	09 April 8:09am	448	And about time too! No shame shown at anytime during this tawdry affair.
ukPoliceState	09 April 2:59pm	429	Why are these serial, self confessed thieving fraudsters not being arrested, charged & put before a jury of 12 honest citizens, and if found guilty banned from public offices forever & subjected to the same sentence as someone who just stole the equivalent in benefits? Why are these serial, self confessed thieving fraudsters not being arrested, charged & put before a jury of 12 honest citizens, and if found guilty banned from public offices forever & subjected to the same sentence as someone who just stole the equivalent in benefits?
simonsaint	09 April 2:05pm	417	Sorry to be a pain, but he's defending the indefensible
jodro	09 April 10:19am	412	Frankly I don't care that Cameron got the public mood wrong, and I'm not sure why several articles in The Guardian focus primarily on this. I care about the fact that Cameron got his ethics wrong. Again. And again. And again. And again...
Strummered	09 April 2:05pm	408	It was already tarnished, it's putrid now.
ClemAttleesPipe	09 April 8:11am	407	Cameron. And his government.

Table 15. GM: All comments with more than 400 recommends in *The Guardian* Miller sample.

Rather than the thematic 'conspiracy theory' meta-conversations in the Ukraine sample (about the role of paid commenters reflecting ideological positions), two major meta-conversations emerged across the Miller sample. By far the dominant meta-conversation in the Miller sample was actually about David Cameron and how he had handled the scandal. This is clearly represented in Table 17 (on the previous page) that represents all comments posted on the day of Miller's resignation that received more than 400 recommendations.

A search of all 9556 comments in the 19-article Miller sample show that the name "Cameron" was mentioned 1097 times, "David" 303, "PM" 330, and "DC" on 58 occasions. Allowing for some repetition of keywords, at least 15% of all comments engaged in the meta-conversation concerning David Cameron's performance and/or standing. The second meta-conversation is about the legality and/or ethics of the affair which is usually couched in a class-based criticism. This can be seen in the above table of the top 13 recommended comments in comments 2, 4, 5, 6 and 9. This concern was articulated in a few different ways that were not as straightforward as the first meta-conversation, which focussed squarely on David Cameron. The first articulation concerned the misuse of taxpayers' money and how it was an example of the Conservative government being out of touch. "Money" is mentioned 567 times in the sample. The second articulation focussed on the need for appropriate legal punishment of Miller, including the need for a police investigation and the prospect of a gaol sentence. "Fraud" is mentioned 279 times, "police" 185, "jail" 103, "charged" 42.

The New York Times

The overall NYT sample is closer in its consistency to *The Sydney Morning Herald* sample than that of *The Guardian*. The NYT publishes a very large number of agency or wire stories through its website, none of which carry comments. In fact, the number of articles or blogposts with commenting open is relatively small at 550 of 2047 articles (or 5567 articles in total, including agency/wire stories). This is approximately 32% the number of stories with commenting open (discounting wire/agency copy) compared to *The Guardian*, but with only 15% of the comments compared to the number received by the *Guardian*. This means that *The Guardian* has twice the number of comments on its site compared to the NYT.

The smaller news event sample consists of two news events, the first is on the Ukraine (NYTUK) and the second is on 'health care' (NYTH) in domestic United States politics. Unlike *The Guardian* sample, and closer to *The Sydney Morning Herald* sample, the overall NYT sample consists of only 13 articles, seven in NYTUK and six in NYTH. Not only is the sample size of articles much smaller, the range of authors of these articles is also relatively restricted. NYT Europe bureau chief, Andrew Higgins, has three bylines and op-ed columnist, Thomas Friedman, has two in the NYTUK sample. Op-ed columnist and resident NYT economics blogger, Paul Krugman, is the author of three of the six pieces of content in the NYTH sample.

NYT Health sample (NYTH)			
Date	Headline	Byline	Comments
9 April	For Obama Presidency, Lyndon Johnson Looms Large	PETER BAKER	236
11 April	Health Care Nightmares	PAUL KRUGMAN	929
11 April	Sebelius Resigns After Troubles Over Health Site	MICHAEL D. SHEAR	582
11 April	Health Reform and Affinity Fraud	PAUL KRUGMAN	62
14 April	In New York, Hard Choices on Health Exchange Spell Success	ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS	113
14 April	Obamacare, The Unknown Ideal, Continued	PAUL KRUGMAN	160
		Total	2082
NYT Ukraine sample (NYTUK)			
Date	Headline	Byline	Comments
8 April	A Familiar Script in Ukraine	THE EDITORIAL BOARD	298
9 April	U.S. and NATO Warn Russia Against Further Intervention in Ukraine	ANDREW HIGGINS and DAVID M. HERSZENHORN	373
9 April	Playing Hockey With Putin	THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN	225
10 April	Russia Plotting for Ukrainian Influence, Not Invasion, Analysts Say	NEIL MacFARQUHAR	209
10 April	Despite Criticism	ANDREW HIGGINS	62
13 April	Go Ahead, Vladimir, Make My Day	THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN	189
14 April	Ukraine Forces Storm a Town, Defying Russia	ANDREW E. KRAMER and ANDREW HIGGINS	233
		Total	1589

Table 16. NYT: Publication date, article title, author and comment count for both 'news events' in the NYT sample.

The New York Times – Recommends

The NYT samples followed a similar pattern to the number of recommends per comment as that found in *The Guardian* sample, where the number of recommends declined over the course of the comment thread (see Table 19 below). We begin with the number of recommends because it is clear from an overview of the top commenters that their comments are largely valued by the rest of the

NYT commenting community. There are far fewer ‘recommends’ per comment for the NYT sample compared to the Guardian sample, however. Any comparison between the two samples on the basis of ‘recommend’ count would be of limited use because of the different approaches to commenting.

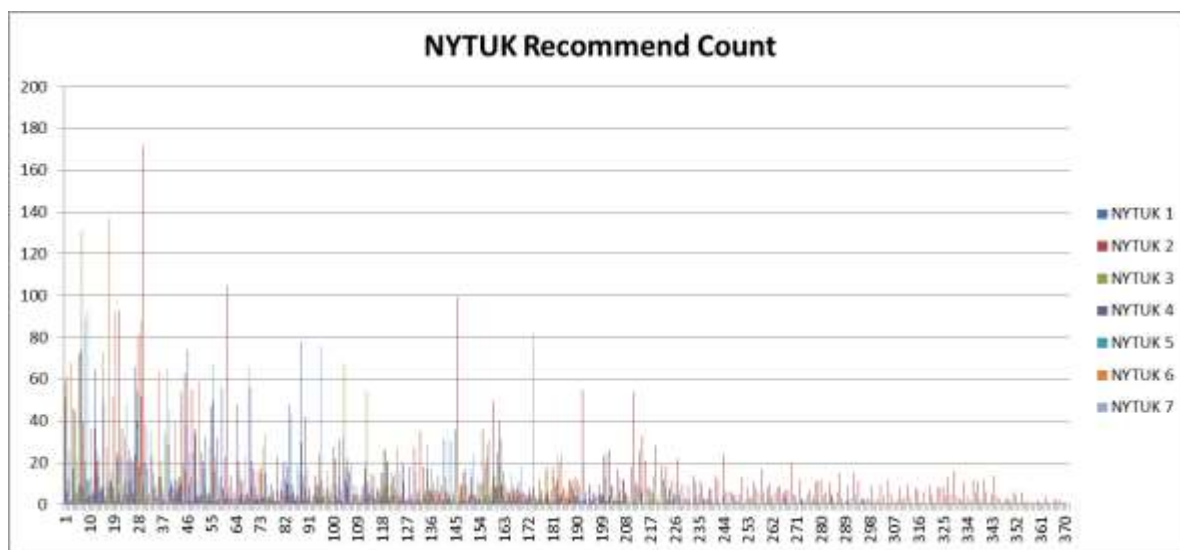


Table 17. NYTUK: Recommend counts for all NYTUK articles.

In the NYTUK sample there were 16 commenters with more than 10 comments and 56 of five comments or more, 267 made two or more comments, with 755 separate commenters making 1589 comments in total. Table 20 below lists the 16 commenters with 10 or more comments in the NYTUK sample. These top 16 commenters produced 314 of the 1589 comments in the sample or just fewer than 20% of the total.

Commenter	Comments	Avg Rec	SD Rec	NYT Picks
Mark Thomason	46	13.8	19.5	3
Judyw	34	9.4	8.8	0
lou andrews	31	5.9	7.9	1
KJ	29	3.8	2.7	0
joftoronto	20	3.8	2.5	0
Chris	19	12.1	18.6	1
David	18	11.9	10.9	0
Serge	17	10.1	7.4	0
Roger Binion	17	6.8	3.3	1
Bill B	14	2.2	1.5	0
Dan Stackhouse	14	9.5	15.1	0
George Xanich	12	8.5	7	0
Patricia	12	7.9	11.5	0
Don Williams	11	4.2	2.9	0
Paul	10	4.4	3.4	1
Yurko	10	6.7	4.6	0

Table 18. NYTUK: Recommend count, average recommends per comment and standard deviation of recommends per comment for the 16 commenters that posted 10 or more comments.

Top commenter “Mark Thomason” had an average recommend count per comment of 13.8 (SD 19.5) which was the highest of the top 10 commenters in this sample. Judging by the recommendation count, there is no correlation between the number of comments made by a given commenter and the relative value of that comment as judged by other readers/users of the NYT site. The NYT also has an editorial selection mechanism called ‘NYT Picks’; these are comments recommended by the NYT community moderators. *The Guardian* has a similar mechanism in place, but it was not used in any of the comment threads in the Ukraine or Miller samples. The NYT uses its ‘NYT Picks’ editorial selection mechanism regularly.

Beyond the numeric recommend counts, an analysis of the commenters with low recommend counts, such as “KJ”, “joftoronto”, and “Bill B”, shows that they generally engaged in reactive discussions with other commenters in a similar fashion to “Hacka” from the SMH sample. In the NYTUK sample such reactionary commenters were not valued as highly by their peers. For example, “Mark Thomason” made three quarters as many comments as the combined total of these three (“KJ”, “joftoronto”, and “Bill B”) combined but had four to six times the average number of recommends. It is unclear if “Mark Thomason” could be said to ‘dominate’ comment threads, but if he does then it is evidently a good thing in terms of comment thread quality.

The New York Times – Authors

As indicated before, not only is the NYT sample size of articles much smaller, the range of authors of these articles is also restricted. NYT Europe bureau chief, Andrew Higgins, has three bylines and op-ed columnist, Thomas Friedman, has two in the NYTUK sample. Op-ed columnist and resident NYT economics blogger, Paul Krugman, is author of three of the six pieces of content in the NYTH sample. The NYT has previously stated that their columnists, bloggers and op-ed writers are some of their major assets. In the three Krugman-authored and two Friedman-authored pieces there are a number of comments who respond to the respective authors as if the commenter is having a personal conversation with the author (where they use his first name and are mostly polite) or an impersonal conversation (where they use the author’s last name and are sometimes disdainful, almost impolite). Andrew Higgins (“Andrew” and “Higgins”) is not referred to in any of the comments to his by-lined articles at all.

	Comments	“Paul”	“Krugman”	“you”
NYTH2	929	42	104	381
NYTH4	62	2	7	26
NYTH6	160	3	17	65
	Comments	“Thomas”	“Friedman”	“you”
NYTUK3	225	3	56	59
NYTUK6	189	5	41	71

Table 19. NYT: Mentions of author name and second-person pronoun references to the author in comment threads.

The NYTH sample captured an article about the resignation of Kathleen Sebelius as Health and Human Services Secretary and it garnered the second highest number of comments in the Health

sample. Unlike *The Guardian* Miller sample where most if not all comments were consistently negative about Miller’s capacities and prime minister Cameron’s leadership, the comments to the Sebelius article were a mixture of mostly explicit support for Sebelius with a minority of comments expressing partisan criticism. Many comments expressed their thanks (keyword: “thank”) to Sebelius for overseeing a complex task in a hostile political environment.

	Comments	“thank”	“success”	“congress”	“million”
NYTH3	582	60	32	33	78

Table 20. NYTH: Keyword search of comment thread to article “Sebelius Resigns After Troubles Over Health Site” (NYTH3, 11 April)

The other three keywords “success”, “congress” and “million” are all evident in comments that debate the relative success of the Affordable Care Act in the face of an obstructive congress and whether the legislation was successful in reaching its target of 7.5 million beneficiaries. Of the 19 comments with recommends of 100-plus, including one comment with 614 recommends (which is more than the number of comments to the article), 17 of them express a variation of the ‘congratulatory thanks’ comment. The majority of the lengthy comments with no recommends are negative or critical of Sebelius or Obama. Also worth noting, the pattern of a gradual decline of recommend counts further along a comment thread was not necessarily reflected in this particular comment thread. The majority of recommended comments with 100-plus recommends were still in the first 100 comments, but they were evenly spread out. There were four comments (at 119, 152, 307 and 388 respectively) that also had more than 100 recommends. These outlier comments were all of the ‘congratulatory thanks’ type.

Commenter	Comments	Avg Rec	SD Rec	NYT Pick
Bill	21	33.6	74.3	0
Lonely Pedant	19	4.8	3.2	2
John	17	6.9	4.5	1
upstate NY	16	2.4	1.8	1
Paul Klemencic	15	16.8	23.3	0
Zzz05	15	1.9	1.5	0
Tony	11	3.7	2.6	1
John LeBaron	11	7.1	15.7	0
Michael F	10	1.2	0.4	0
David	10	15.6	16.1	0
tom	10	12	10.5	0
AACNY	10	6.5	5.6	0
Meredith	10	28.4	56	1

Table 21. NYTH: Commenters with above 10 comments with average number of recommends, standard deviation of recommends and number of 'NYT Picks'.

Similar to the NYTUK sample there was no apparent link between the number of comments and the quality of comments as indicated by the number of recommendations. Due to the low overall number of comments, a small number of comments that garner very high numbers of recommendations have the potential to sway the overall sample. For example the two commenters

with the highest average number of recommendations per comment as represented in Table 23 of the 13 commenters with more than 10 comments in the NYTH sample – “Bill” and “Meredith” – both have relatively large standard deviations, which means there was a large degree of variation in the range of recommendation counts for their comments. The other end of the spectrum is significant however, “Zzz05” had the lowest average recommendation count and this commenter was clearly an antagonist to the main conversation threads in the various articles. “Zzz05” often appeared to be a crypto-racist in the character of their comments being various denunciations of civil rights. Interestingly, there was little correlation between the popular judgements indicated by the value of recommend counts compared to the editorial selections in the NYT Picks count.

The combination of the NYT commenting platform, pre-moderation of every comment and a community of users/readers who are signed in to recommend comments has two effects compared to the other news website commenting platforms. Firstly, it seems to be the most effective out of all the combination of platforms and communities for any of the news websites for reducing the impact of ‘gas lighting’ commenters (such as “Hacka”) and there is no evidence in the two samples collected of duplication of the same comment across articles (such as “LaAsotChayim”). Secondly, if the quality of commenters can be inferred from the recommendation counts of each of their comments, then high quality commenters (such as “Mark Thomason”) are being encouraged to engage with the NYT content. This is supported by a manual analysis of commenters with high average recommendation counts per comment. There are comments that receive high counts of ‘recommends’ on *The Guardian* website but the character of discussion is qualitatively different. Instead of engaging with the article or comment piece, commenters mobilise to engage with each other so as to reproduce ideological points or invoke meta-conversations that often drift into ‘pet hate’ or ‘conspiracy theory’ territory.