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HOW USER COMMENTS ON A NEWS SITE AFFECT PERCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISTIC QUALITY. AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY USING STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING

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User comments: Relevance and influence

Commenting articles is by far the most widely used form of user participation on online news sites (cf. Hermida, 2011; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). Even though user comments usually appear “after most if not all of the journalistic decision have been made” (Reich, 2011, p. 96), they are not only of high relevance to (perceptions of) online journalism but also challenge our understanding of theorizing media effects. News articles and user-generated information—like user comments or metrics about sharing and ratings—are inseparable in modern-day online journalism. Media effects research has to take these interdependencies into account and not only focus on the media content itself but also on its wider embedding.

Although previous studies have shown that only relatively few online users regularly comment on news articles themselves (e.g. Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; for Germany see EC Public Relations GmbH, 2014), user comments are generally appreciated and read quite frequently (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Hence, albeit only representing a limited amount of viewpoints, comments bear the potential to provide other readers with additional information and opinions that can serve as cues when assessing public opinion (E.-J. Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter, Rossmann, & Keyling, 2014). After reading others’ comments to a news article, people might infer public sentiments and thus perceive the covered issue or the article itself differently than in a ‘cue-free’ environment.

Researchers have just begun to study the effects of user comments on individual and public perceptions. Existing studies have shown distinct effects and indicate that comments can influence perceived media bias (Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011), inferences about public opinion (E.-J. Lee, 2012), impressions of political candidates (J. Lee & Lim, 2014) and even risk perceptions (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, &

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Ladwig, 2014). Our goal is to look at a possible outcome that was not investigated yet—the influence on perceptions of journalistic quality. This offers an interesting field of study for two main reasons: First, if comments indeed affect quality perceptions, this has implications for media image and, more generally, trust in media outlets. Second, quality assessments also influence the (future) selection of media. As suggested by the *Theory of Subjective Quality Assessment* (TSQA, cf. Wolling, 2009), selection decisions are based on perceived features of the media product. Quality assessments can be one of the features that decide whether users are willing to give their attention to a certain media product—or ultimately refuse to do so.

Method

To examine the effects of user comments on perceptions of journalistic quality, we used a 2 × 4 between-subjects experimental design and exposed German participants (n = 224) to an online news article and corresponding user comments. While all participants received the same news article, the user comments varied in terms of (I) *support for the issue described in the article* (military intervention of the German armed forces against ISIS) as well as the (II) *addressing of journalistic quality criteria*. Support was varied on two factor levels, differentiating between endorsing and refusing the military intervention, whereas the comments focusing on journalistic quality criteria either positively or negatively addressed the *impartiality* of the article or positively or negatively addressed its *accuracy*. In this paper, we only focus on the effects of the second factor, i.e. the addressing of journalistic quality criteria in user comments.

While there is little research on journalistic quality criteria at an international level, German researchers have addressed it rather extensively (e.g. Arnold, 2008; Jungnickel, 2011; Pöttker, 2000; Schatz & Schulz, 1992; Urban & Schweiger, 2013; Wellbrock & Klein, 2014). Analyzing this literature, we have identified five dimensions that are—albeit sometimes differently labeled—part of every catalogue of journalistic quality criteria: *relevance*, *comprehensibility*, *diversity*, *impartiality* and *accuracy*. In our study, we focused on the last two criteria, because preliminary analysis of user comments revealed that most criticism was actually centered on these aspects.

Participants were first asked to read the news article that was supposedly published on the German news website *Spiegel Online*. This site was chosen, because it is not only highly frequented but also perceived as particularly credible (YouGovPsychonomics AG, 2009). Afterwards, they were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions and exposed to a set of five varying user comments.¹ Participants' perceptions of journalistic quality were assessed by presenting them statements from previous studies investigating news quality (cf. Jungnickel, 2011; Urban & Schweiger, 2013), to which they responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Measures also included assessment of involvement and knowledge about the issue in question, internet and user comment usage as well as various sociodemographic variables.

¹ Two of the five comments addressed the *issue* of the article, both either endorsing or refusing it, two comments addressed *journalistic quality criteria*, both either praising the article's impartiality or accuracy or both criticizing its impartiality or accuracy. One comment was irrelevant and only added to increase external validity.

Results

We used structural equation modeling to address our research question with the model offering an acceptable fit for the data (see Figure 1): $\chi^2 = 10.147$, $df = 5$, $p = .071$; SRMR = .032; RMSEA = .068; and CFI = .978. All standardized path coefficients are statistically significant and provide strong evidence for the influence of user comments on quality assessments. If user comments praise the impartiality of the article, participants indeed perceive the article as being more impartial and neutral ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$). Vice versa, participants perceive the article as being more accurate if user comments positively address the article's accuracy ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). However, the model also indicates that the analytical separated quality dimensions do not affect perceptions exclusively. Praising the article's impartiality in the comments also leads to a better evaluation of its accuracy ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$), while praising its accuracy leads to a better evaluation of its impartiality ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$).

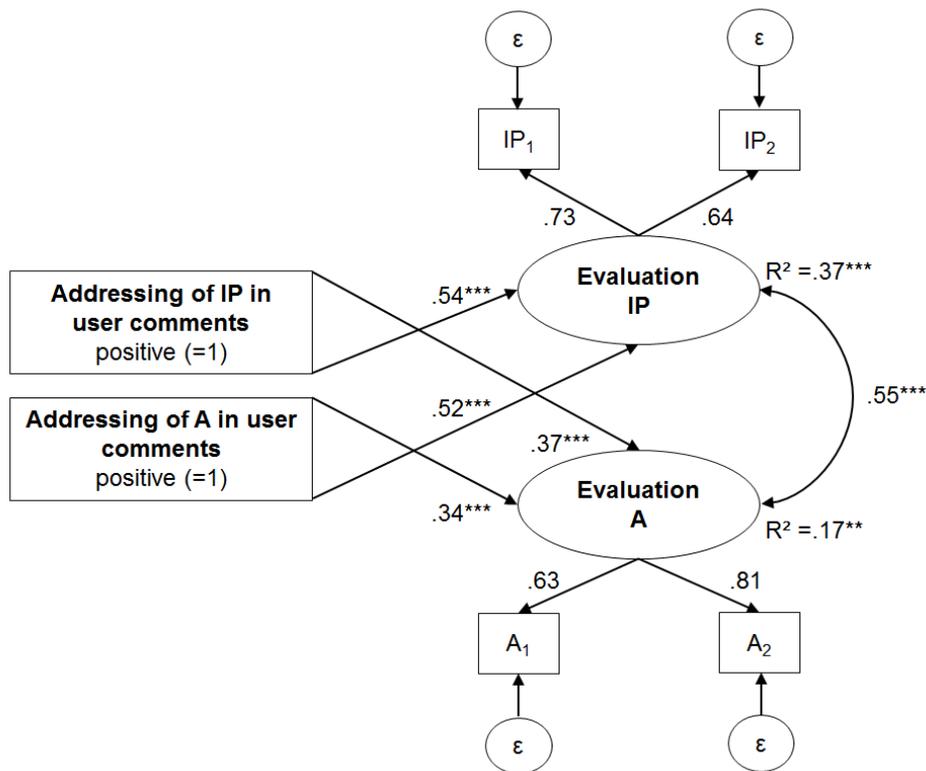


Figure 1

Observed structural equation model. IP = Impartiality; A = Accuracy; standardized path coefficients: ^{***} $p < .001$; ^{**} $p < .01$; ^{*} $p < .05$.

Discussion

Overall, the results provide evidence that comments left by anonymous users on news websites can serve as cues for people's own assessments. They shape personal perceptions and thus definitely have a say when it comes to the evaluation of journalistic content online. Hence, our study not only contributes to the understanding of media effects in an online environment but is also relevant for journalists and media outlets. If journalistic work can be distorted or degraded by negative comments, it seems increasingly crucial for online editorial departments to develop strategies for moderating and dealing with user comments. One approach might be to actively participate in user discussions. Meyer & Carey (2014) have shown that having an active moderation in the comment section actually *increases* users' willingness to post comments. At the same time, this offers the possibility for journalists to respond to criticism early on and to "take 'emotional and physical ownership' of the online environments they control" (ibid., p. 225).

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