



Having Your Say: The Social Organisation of Online News Commentary

by Allison Cavanagh and Alex Dennis
University of Leeds; University of Sheffield

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Abstract

This paper describes an analysis of poster and recommender activities in an online news forum. Quantitative analyses of patterns of posting and recommending suggest that claims about 'horizontal' and 'online community' are oversimplifications, as there is strong evidence to suggest that the *actual* workings of networked discussion communities incorporate a wide range of competing and mutually-contradictory orientations, activities and strategies. A qualitative analysis of particular posters' rhetorical strategies provides evidence for the argument that an orientation to conventions (in particular using a dialogical mode of address) is more important than actual opinion or semantic content in gaining popularity. The implications of these findings, and some suggestions for how this work might be developed, are discussed.

Keywords: *Opinion, Media, Technology, Internet, News Commentary, Debate, Interaction, Online Forums*

Introduction

1.1 Online news has been the subject of intense professional and academic scrutiny over the last fifteen years. While the nature of online news provision has been in a constant state of flux, the academic response to it has become more settled as core problematics have become entrenched. Studies of online news have come to be dominated by a focus on citizen journalism, understandably,^[1] since the development of online news was closely tied to the developing ability to use ordinary people as witnesses and sources of data. Allan (2006), for example, cites the Oklahoma city bombing in 1995 as a 'tipping point' when online news moved from being a simple regurgitation of print materials already in circulation to acting as a hub for situated, real-time testimony and reaction (Allan 2006: 16).

1.2 Journalism's response to the internet – still fancifully referred to as 'cyberspace' and theorised through the tropes of science fiction – became fixed around these affordances. Citizen journalism was 'about' immediacy, co-presence, multiplicity of perspectives and a street-level view of unfolding events. Just as the professionalised newspaper journalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was organised around the image, if not always the reality, of the investigative reporter, for a new media a new journalism, emphasising novel values and practices, emerged. Whereas the journalism of the print era professionalised the role of the journalist through the segregation of fact and opinion, emphasising the work of news *gathering* (Schudson 1978), new media journalism redefined this role into one of the mediation, collation, corroboration and explanation of citizen testimony – and, increasingly, media materials gathered and produced by citizens themselves. It is claimed that a new journalistic landscape has emerged, one which advantages those existing large-scale news providers with the resources to undertake the job of gathering, curating and editing these new forms of news material.

1.3 From here on, the academic responses to online news were equally fixed. By and large, the history of online news has been written as the history of crises and scandals. Studies tend to take agenda-defining moments – such as the Louise Woodward trial in 1997, the London bombings or Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or, of course, the Web's 'Watergate' moment, the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 – as their points of departure. More recently this trend has continued into analyses of social media, including high-profile events such as the Wikileaks affair, the Arab Spring and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011.^[2] The temperature of online news is, however, only taken when its fever is peaking. While the focus

remains on the spectacular – on crises and scandals – the routine, everyday aspects of online news 'produsage' (Bruns 2008) will go largely unexamined in favour of the more heroic surges and bursts emphasised by academics and bloggers alike. Studies of online participation by news consumers, rather than 'producers' (Bruns 2008), have tended to focus on its more spectacular manifestations, in the practices of trolling (posting insulting, threatening or provocative messages on a public forum or site), flaming (sending insulting and provocative messages to an individual or a public forum to incite a response) and cyberbullying.

1.4 This study addresses the more mundane forms of interaction around online news by examining the routine use of the BBC's 'Have Your Say' (henceforth HYS) system as a means of discussing news stories online (McNair 2009; Allan & Thorsen 2010). This system allows for readers to comment on BBC news stories, to engage in dialogue by commenting on one another's comments, and to evaluate the comments of others by 'recommending' them.^[3] Provided they have a BBC ID (available free), these comments appear in near-real time. A logged-in user writes his or her comment, which is then moderated – checked for libellous, inflammatory or discriminatory content – and posted to the story's website. Logged-in users then can recommend others' posts. These activities map onto different ways of viewing the comments as a whole: at any time one can view comments in temporal order (those posted most recently appearing above older ones) or, crucially, in order of popularity (those which have been recommended most appearing at the top of the list, those recommended least at the bottom). For those viewing the comments using the latter method, it is likely that less-recommended comments simply do not appear: it is unlikely that any reader will go through hundreds of comments, but many will read the first three or four pages. This means that those comments that have already received multiple recommendations will tend to stay 'high' on the list, as they will remain more visible to subsequent readers who may then add their own 'recommendation' as they read. The quite restricted technical capacities of HYS then allowed us to undertake a set of quantitative analyses of patterns of activity in the system, and to identify particular posters and recommenders for further qualitative analysis.

1.5 HYS has a number of features that make it an attractive source of data for this kind of analysis. It attracts a very wide range of readers in Britain and abroad, rather than seeking to appeal to a particular demographic. The BBC is formally editorially independent: as part of its Charter and as a result of political pressure, the BBC is obliged to provide a platform for a diversity of opinion in reportage.^[4] HYS is, furthermore, a very structured system: all comments are fully moderated in-house by BBC staff, reducing the amount of inflammatory or offensive material posted and thus keeping debates within relatively clear parameters. HYS was at this time one of the most heavily-used online news commentary forums: the forums were busier and posts were recommended more than on any other comparable British online news site. Finally, the HYS system allowed for a clean and uncluttered quantitative analysis: posts could only be recommended by readers, not 'disliked'. This means that a post with a 'score' of zero recommendations clearly did not receive any recommendations. A post with a score of zero on other news sites, for instance the *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, may have received any number of 'likes' as long as it also received an equal number of 'dislikes', thus rendering quantitative analysis a much murkier business. For our purposes, too, the fact that only registered users can recommend others' comments facilitated an examination of the activities of recommenders as well as of posters, which – we will argue – is an important and neglected aspect of online debate and discussion.

News commentary in the modern world

2.1 At its most basic, as Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has argued, the history of the press is also the history of epistolary conversations between the press and their public. Modern response forums like HYS are the successors to the Letters to the Editor, long lauded as a key site of political discussion and one which 'has given a voice to everyone from the most powerful individuals in society to those at the margins, whose concerns otherwise remain unheard' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007: 29; see also Cohen 1972; Moses 2005; Thompson 1980; Chambers et al. 2004; Royle 1990; Jones 1990). The relationship between journalism and the publicly expressed opinion of readers is a mutually constitutive one, and one in which technological developments play a transformative role.

2.2 The boom in journalism in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, dependent as it was on improved production techniques, faster distribution networks, and the subsequent rise of the penny press, made possible the mass production of news. This in turn brought about a profound shift in the relationships between editors, journalists and the public. Initially, publications were entirely made up of letters, with no differentiation between 'lay' and 'professional' contributions. The divisions between journalists and the public were subsequently clarified and reinforced by journalistic professionalisation (Schudson 1978), as the work of commentators and amateurs was differentiated from news gathering as a distinctive craft in its own right. It is against this background that the nature of opinion in news shifted (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007). Letters to the editor became relegated to a confined area of the paper, serving more of a customer service function than a truly deliberative one.

2.3 Habermas' (1989: 247–8) 'recession of the public sphere', and its degeneration into a theatre of publicity can be seen in this shift. Many hoped the rise of the internet would act as a natural palliative to this communications bias. The hope was that – as a medium which, unlike its predecessors, is easily accessible and entails few of the prohibitive production costs which limit participation in other media – the internet would provide all citizens with a voice. Citizen journalism came to be seen, by some, as the natural successor to professional journalism, signalling a fundamental shift in the way information is produced and circulated, whether this was seen as a cause for celebration (Gilmour 2006) or suspicion (Meyer 2004). High hopes attached to the arrival of electronic public journalism in the 1990s (Poster 1995; Friedland 1996) were succeeded by equally hopeful prognoses locating the 'new' public sphere in the work of bloggers (Blood 2002; Jenkins 2006). More recently, social networking and microblogging sites

such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr have been the subject of similar optimistic commentary, in particular with respect to the popular uprisings and anti-austerity protests of 2011 (e.g., Bennett 2003; Garrett 2006; Zhuo et al 2011; Mason 2012).^[5]

2.4 Such independent forms of participation, however, suffer the difficulties of gaining a critical audience mass, something which – in an internet environment that can be regarded as an 'attention economy' (see below) – is a scarce and hard-to-manufacture resource. The internet sites of well-established and respected news organisations are, however, more promising venues for the emergence of genuinely democratic and socially effective debate. Through these forums users can potentially gain a large audience for their views and enter into genuinely interactive debate with others.

2.5 There are, however, difficulties with the more optimistic arguments about the participatory possibilities opened up by these new technologies. Arguments concerning resource scarcity are particularly problematic. In the past high production and operating costs, restrictions in the number of outlets (due to bandwidth in the case of broadcast media), national and international regulation, laws concerning defamation and libel, and a range of other factors led to a marked asymmetry between producers and audience in the mainstream media: a small number of 'speakers' address a large, and largely mute, audience. The assumption, then, has been that simply levelling this playing field would facilitate the provision of a platform for all. The internet, however, demonstrates that overabundant supply is as restrictive to genuine debate as scarcity: the possibility of free participation opened up by internet forums often leads to a fragmented cacophony in which debate and discussion take place against a background of 'interactional noise' (Cavanagh 2007). High levels of topic 'drift' combined with low levels of interactional feedback tend to render online discussion forums:

... in general home to an array of overlapping, short-lived conversations, usually among like-minded individuals. Sustained deliberation is rare ... which means that ... they may not be effective sounding boards for solving problems, engaging in collective action, and articulating issues to be addressed by government (Wilhelm 2000: 11).

The dictum of the internet age seems to be that, where everyone can speak, no one is listening.

2.6 As far back as C. Wright Mills (1956), sociologists have argued that the ability to achieve true communicative interactivity distinguishes the emancipated society of publics from its repressive cousin, the society of masses. In the former, communications are organised so that as many express opinions as receive them; there are readily-available means of providing replies to statements; broadly-supported opinions can be converted to action; and there are clear lines of demarcation between public communication and the state. A society of masses, on the other hand, reverses these characteristics, sowing the seeds of future repression. This distinction is ever more relevant today, where 'a tiny minority have the right to speak in public and the vast majority are at best consigned to the role of audience' (Sparks 1998: 112).

2.7 Understanding the nature of audiences for new media, then, is central to understanding and contextualising claims for the affordances and possibilities of the technology. These issues, however, have often been bracketed or addressed in predominantly theoretical terms.

Participation, interactivity and opinion

3.1 Studies of the internet, whether academic or industrial in origin, have an exclusive focus on the poster of opinion and comment as the key unit of analysis. In both academic and professional discourse, analytical priority is given to those members of the public who make a visible contribution to textual or other materials. The assumption of many studies is that these original contributions are the only matters to 'count' in online participation.

3.2 There are of course good reasons for this. Methodologically, only online activities that result in the production of 'content', of whatever form can usually be observed. It is rare to find the activities of others leaving much in the way of intelligible traces, with the exception of enigmatic patterns of clickstream data. Moreover, 'participation' has become incorporated into the more problematic category of 'interactivity'. Interactivity is often vaunted as the key difference demarcating 'old' mass media from the new electronic media, most often by those for whom 'old' and 'new' media are politically loaded terms. Interactivity is, however, also a commercially loaded term, which stands as a cipher for the 'added value' of internet media when used by new media producers. The term itself may tell us much about the values and aspirations of site owners and developers, while occluding more than it reveals about the behaviour of users.

3.3 'Interactivity', then, is a deeply problematic concept. In the first instance it is neither a design feature of a medium nor a function of the simple ability of readers to post contributions. Much analysis of internet forums has pointed to the fact that interactivity is better considered as a spectrum of behaviour rather than a feature. Schultz (2000), for example, argues that genuine interactivity must be contrasted against mere reaction. In the event that messages posted on online forums are highly related to those that came before, message thread can be seen as an index of interactivity and shows the existence of an online community. In the event, however, that there is a wide drift over time then we are seeing a form of communication which falls short of interactivity. As noted above, where contributions are disconnected from each other, online discussions become disjointed, degenerating into irrelevance and becoming politically ineffective. As Schultz argues:

... the formal characteristics of fully interactive communication usually imply more equality of the participants and a greater symmetry of communicative power ... The achievement of

democratic consensus is related to opinions that are not merely announced but also discussed openly and free from distortions (Schultz 2000: 210).

3.4 Furthermore, the activities by which 'interactivity' is measured are often associated with the outlook and orientation of a specific, perhaps unrepresentative, segment of the public. It has been argued (Poster 1995) that the rise of the internet as a medium correlates with the development of a new class, brought together around activities and values associated with the 'creative industries'. The online interactions between members of this group, and its members' participation in broader issues and debates, come to represent 'interactivity' and 'participation' *tout court*.

3.5 Insofar as the activities of the larger proportion of the online audience are overlooked, there is a risk of occluding what we hope to reveal, namely a richer understanding of the mechanisms of opinion generation. Public opinion does not rest on what is *expressed* but rather on what is *supported* and then comes to be *accepted as received wisdom*. It is hardly sufficient, then, to observe that certain opinions are held by a vocal group in society; if we wish to ascertain the nature of 'public opinion' we must also measure the extent to which particular views gain popular currency and approval.

3.6 Sociologists have commonly viewed influence in structural and positional terms (e.g., Parsons 1951; Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955),^[6] but in the world of social media such concerns appear to have been overwritten by the more brutally plebiscitary logic of the technology itself: the measure of acceptance and success becomes *numerical* insofar as there are few cultural arbiters or intermediaries online who could reproduce the function of a 'kingmaker'. Quantifying levels of support gives us little purchase on how that support is generated, however: the fact that a blog posting receives 400 'likes' through Facebook while another receives 20 may allow us to place them in rank order, but it is unclear whether this ordering reflects a consistent or stable scale.

3.7 The division between structural explanations and numerical facts-on-the-ground is, however, an artefact of the ways particular views of opinion formation have come to dominate media sociology. A range of theorists from Parsons to Gladwell have recognised the necessity of teamwork and purposive co-operation in relation to trend formation, but neither make these central to their explanations: they are the means by which structural forces manifest themselves. Teamwork has, however, been given a much more central role in the work of Becker's (1974) on the production, dissemination and reception of 'art'. Becker's primary concern is in the division of labour in art production, and how participants generate distinctions between artistic production and support work: what work gets done, for example, to make the director of a film an 'artist' but the camera crew 'operatives'? Consensual definitions *within* particular fields of art determine what 'counts' as the 'quintessential artistic act' (Becker 1974: 769), in contrast to the other essential activities that are required for the production of a 'work'. Becker emphasises the importance of *conventions*, which are used to manage co-operation and provide for the consensual division of labour that co-operation relies upon. Participants in an 'art world' orientate to the 'template' for artistic production these conventions support, while their creative and other activities may shift and develop the nature of the conventions themselves. Hierarchies are based on, and change through, these activities.

3.8 As Becker goes on to argue, his analysis can be applied to other phenomena. Indeed, his method is applicable to any event produced by collective, routine, activities:^[7]

We can focus on any event ... and look for the network of people, however large or extended, whose collective activity made it possible for the event to occur as it did. We can look for networks whose co-operative activity recurs or has become routine and specify the conventions by which their constituent members co-ordinate their separate lines of action (Becker 1974: 775).

3.9 Becker's work, then, provides a methodological starting-point for explicitly focusing on the production of opinion in terms of 'teamwork', to see it as a social, *collective* activity which relies upon the co-ordination and consensual co-operation of a variety of actors taking on specific roles in a division of labour. Such an analysis requires an understanding of the way that conventions of participation, what counts as a contribution, are developed. The first task, then, is to describe the workings of the network under investigation, how particular individuals and ideas come to be popular.

'Have Your Say' as a perspicuous example

4.1 HYS is a perspicuous example of the kind of network Becker describes: its workings are relatively transparent and the activities of both posters and recommenders are available through an examination of its underlying database. Our data were organised from this database in two sets: one for 'posts' and another for 'recommendations'. The former provided us with the following variables:

'MESSAGEID': the identification number of the message being posted.
'USERID': the identification number of the HYS user who posted the message.
'POSTTIME': the time at which the message was sent.
'MODTIME': the time at which the message was published following moderation.

The 'recommendations' data set provided us with three variables:

'MESSAGEID': the identification number of the message posted.
'RECUSERID': the identification number of the HYS user who made the recommendation.
'RECTIME': the time the recommendation was made.

4.2 Because only logged-in users can post or recommend, HYS acts as a closed system: those who post or recommend can be identified, and it is possible to determine the activities of a particular user over a period of time, across different news forums, and in relation to different co-users, opinions, positions, and so on.

4.3 For the purposes of our analysis, we examined the activities of HYS users across six forums, active across a six-day period. Because the forums were operative at the same time, it is likely that prolific users would read, post to and/or recommend across each. The forums were as follows:

Should 20mph zones be extended?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?forumID=7334&edition=1&t1=20120118133731>
Was it right to change the child vetting rules?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?sortBy=1&forumID=7339&start=360&tstart=0&edition=2&t1=2009101611312285>
Do you prefer to buy from a British firm?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?sortBy=1&forumID=7340&start=300&tstart=0&edition=2&t1=2009101611312285>
How should we fund the Afghan war?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?sortBy=1&forumID=7345&start=135&tstart=0&edition=1&t1=2009101611312285>
When does self-defence go too far?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?sortBy=1&forumID=7346&start=270&tstart=0&edition=1&t1=2009101611312285>
Are airbrushed adverts misleading?
<http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol/thread.jspa?sortBy=1&forumID=7348&start=0&tstart=0&edition=2&t1=2009101611312285>

4.4 These data allowed us to examine some key questions raised by our analyses of news commentary, participation and interaction. By examining the extent to which posting and recommending activities are related we were able to consider the extent to which networked technologies facilitate the operation of Mills' 'society of publics'. If those who post also recommend, this indicates a horizontal and conversational orientation to information and debate. The technological affordances of the HYS system would, in such a case, facilitate the kind of broadened participation authors such as Poster (1995) and Blood (2002) celebrate. If, however, posters and recommenders tend to be different people, the more sceptical views of Cavanagh (2007) and Wilhelm (2000) might seem to be better descriptions of the social uses to which these technologies are actually put.

4.5 Secondly, these data allow us to consider the relationships between participation and interactivity across a community. We are unable to determine how many people read or use HYS as a whole, or what the relationships might be between its readers, those with BBC IDs and those who actively participate in the site through posting and recommending. For those who *do* participate actively, however, we can examine the extent to which 'participation' is either democratic and horizontal or concentrated and striated. If people tend to post and recommend more or less as much as one another, this would suggest that the community of active users is taking advantage of the possibilities the system opens up 'fairly'. The system would exhibit the characteristics of Schultz' (2000) 'greater symmetry of communicative power'. If, however, only a small number of users post prolifically, and/or a small number of users make highly-recommended posts, we would have evidence for arguing that a 'posting elite' exists, reflecting the structural and positional arguments of Parsons (1951) and his followers.

4.6 Finally, patterns of recommending tell us something about the nature of opinion sponsorship. If highly-recommended posts are so recommended by an unrepresentative group, rather than by HYS users more generally, the plebiscitary logic of the technology will have to be questioned. It is possible, in short, that – without communicating directly with one another – individuals who use the HYS system may have relationships to one another *as recommenders* that make them indistinguishable from the kinds of opinion sponsors traditional sociology has identified in other spheres.

4.7 Additionally, by examining the content of posts, and the broader output of posters and recommenders, it is possible to provide a qualitative aspect to our analysis: the variables 'MESSAGEID' and 'USERID' can be used to examine the content of particular posts and the overall contributions of particular posters respectively. Furthermore, the activities of those users who are quantitatively exceptional (highly-recommended posters, prolific posters or recommenders, etc.) can be examined qualitatively to determine more about them and their online contributions.

4.8 Our methods are, clearly, limited by a number of factors. Firstly, we are only examining a small number of news stories, which may not be 'representative' of commentary more broadly. Secondly, we are only using one online source for our data – again, this may not be representative of public opinion more broadly or of the ways news commentary gets done elsewhere. Finally, our analyses are necessarily speculative and exploratory: we are looking for patterns, regularities and areas of overlap or contradiction rather than seeking a particular, known, pattern, regularity or area. Our 'variables' are being made up as we go along, and are largely determined by the ways the BBC's database is organised.

4.9 We believe this study is worth undertaking *despite* these limitations for two reasons, though. Firstly, *any* empirical investigation of the kind we are undertaking will have to address such issues early on. We have sought to make these limitations as explicit as possible, and to ensure that our claims are modest in accordance with the tentative nature of the investigation. Secondly, our main contention is that much of what is settled theoretically in the literature can, and should, be determined through empirical study. Even though this investigation is tentative and our findings preliminary, our aims are to show that this kind of

study *can* be done – and can do work which has previously been settled by theoretical *fiat* – and that better ways of doing further studies will emerge through a consideration of its findings and reflection on its limitations.

Quantitative analysis

5.1 Correlating the number of times users post and the number of times they recommend provides us with an initial way of considering the relationships between these two activities. A strong negative correlation would indicate that users divide into two categories: posters and recommenders. This would give a preliminary indication that the HYS forums do not provide for democratic, horizontal communication. A strong positive correlation, on the other hand, would indicate that users tend to be poster-recommenders, both producers and active consumers of content, supporting the arguments of Poster (1995) and Blood (2002). Kendall's *tau* coefficient was used as the data were not normally distributed, revealing a correlation of $\tau = -0.157$. This suggests a reliable tendency for posters not to recommend and recommenders not to post. The weakness of the correlation, however, suggests that there are more complex relationships here, which we pursued in subsequent qualitative analyses (see below).

5.2 Optimistic and utopian views of new media use suggest that the development of 'online communities' allows individuals to engage with one another through democratic and horizontal interactions as part of their membership of those communities. This would further suggest that users would orientate to the HYS system as a whole – as a community of posters and recommenders – rather than simply to particular topics that are raised within the system. Our analysis did not bear this out. Posters overwhelmingly posted to just one (61.9%) or two (20.8%) forums of the six we examined, while recommenders tend to reflect that behaviour in their recommendations: 54.5% recommended in just one forum, and 22.1% in two. These data suggest that a minority of users do orientate to the system as a whole, but an overwhelming majority approach it on a topic-by-topic basis. This opens up for investigation the nature of those different kinds of users.

5.3 If some users orientate to the system as a whole, rather than to particular topics, it might still be the case that they have a disproportionate impact on the organisation of HYS as a whole. If they were able to elicit more recommendations than their less prolific counterparts, it could be argued that their interventions are more effective overall. Indeed, it is possible that some could develop a following of their own – as some professional commentators do – which transcends the particular issue they are posting about. Our analysis did not bear this out, however. The relationship between the number of forums posted to and the number of recommendations elicited is negligible, $\tau = 0.092$ ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that there is no noticeable effect, in terms of gaining recommendations, from being a prolific poster: although some users are opinionated about more topics than others, they do not – simply by virtue of being more opinionated – gain traction as a consequence. We develop this analysis in our qualitative work (see below).

5.4 Finally, we sought to examine whether there are particular 'audiences' for the more popular posters. If such posters rely on particular recommenders for their popularity, it would indicate that commentary systems like HYS can spontaneously generate 'star' commentators with a loyal following. While this would not in itself disprove the arguments for greater horizontality in online interaction, it would provide compelling evidence for the 'network effect' not being as simple as is sometimes argued. Such relationships were not, however, in evidence. Comparing the recommenders for users with posts appearing in the top 30 recommended posts across more than one forum with the recommenders for all other posters provides a strong and reliable positive correlation: $\tau = 0.404$ ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that there is little loyalty to particular posters, and that there is little evidence of collusion whereby posters illegitimately solicit recommendations from others known outside the system.

5.5 These results are, of course, suggestive rather than definitive. They do, however, point towards the picture of online participation being far more complex than theoretical takes on the subject would suggest. The field is not divided purely into posters and recommenders, but equally there is no evidence to support the idea that all participants both 'speak' and 'listen'. Online forums seem to be neither societies of masses nor societies of publics, to use Mills' formulation, but rather are heterogeneous and complex combinations of users operating with different orientations. Few users orientate to HYS as a community, and those that do, do not seem to gain any measurable benefit by doing so. Finally, there seems to be strong evidence from this analysis that recommendations are primarily made on the basis of the manifest content of posts, as opposed to being the result of individuals developing individual followings (or 'rigging the system' by seeking to generate such followings illicitly).

Qualitative analysis

6.1 To develop a working hypothesis about what might make some posts more attractive to recommenders than others, we isolated two prolific posters who represent the extremes of received recommendations. 'Rufus McDufus' made 16 posts and received 213 recommendations ($x = 16.4$ recommendations per post), while 'MrWonderfulReality' made 16 posts but only received 7 recommendations ($x = 0.4375$ recommendations per post). The former made 470 posts between 8 May, 2009 and 24 March, 2010 ($x = 1.468$ posts per day), the latter 1,672 between 7 May, 2009 and 24 March, 2010 ($x = 5.209$ posts per day). The two posters differ clearly in style and mode of address. 'Rufus McDufus' adopts a mediatory role in debates, using a dialogical mode of address, whereas 'MrWonderfulReality' employs a monological one. The former's posts are characteristically informational or humorous, the latter's didactic and assertive.

6.2 Taking this observation as a starting point for further analysis, outlier cases in a range of categories

were examined in more detail to ascertain whether quantitatively unusual posters and recommenders have distinguishing styles of posting that might explain their outlier statuses. As well as the quantitative distribution of their contributions (across, within and between forums), the content of their posts were examined to ascertain the following:

1. Whether they use a dialogical or monological mode of address, for example whether they use quotations from other posters.
2. What their 'tone' was, for example discursive-rational (using principled justifications to support an argument), informational (using facts to support an argument) or purely assertive (making unsupported claims).

Table:

User name	Posts	Recommendations
High posters and recommenders		
Reality Check_No PC	10	375
Rufus McDufus	13	213
General_Jack_Ripper	9	343
Low posters and high recommenders		
Amelie Wright	1	417
Liberty_Rose	2	365
Pamela Scott	0	302
High posters and low recommenders		
Aaron C Reskew	19	23
MrWonderfulReality	16	7

6.3 We identified users who were prolific poster/recommenders, prolific posters/low recommenders, and prolific recommenders/low posters. It was found that those who are prolific posters and recommenders utilise a variety of strategies. 'Reality Check_No PC' posts on the majority of forums, deploying a discursive and rational tone. 'Rufus McDufus', on the other hand, uses a more informational style. On the forum 'How should we fund the Afghan war?', for instance, this user posted:

Could save at least £20bn by cancelling the orders for further Eurofighters. The MoD has only decided to buy the 'air-to-air-combat' specification rather than the 'medium-range-bomber' specification. Problem is air-to-air combat went out of fashion around about the time of the Korean war so these planes will be next to useless.

This user posts on the majority of forums, generally commenting more than once on those he contributes to, and shows an orientation to HYS as a discrete entity, making multiple references to the nature of HYS and its audience. Thus, for example, on the forum 'Should parents let their children drink?', he posts:

I expect we'll have lots of comments from well-meaning parents saying they give their young teenagers the occasional glass of watered down wine

and, in a separate post:

Yet again with a HYS, what I read here and what I see with my own eyes are two different things.

What is interesting here is that this user orientates to HYS as a community, but one which is systematically wrong about things. He is one of the most highly-recommended posters, as shown above. It seems to be the case, here at least, that an orientation to HYS as a community chimes with many other users, but those users are dissatisfied with its composition and opinions. The irony that this dissatisfaction seems to elicit more recommendations than either a pro-HYS line, or an obliviousness to the system's members as a group, seems to be lost on such users. It does, however, provide us with more evidence against the argument that online forums are comparable with communities and other social systems.

6.4 Another user, 'General_Jack_Ripper', also shows this pattern of commentary, posting multiple comments on some forums. The tone of this user's comments, unlike those of the previous two examples, is disputatious, characteristically responding to other user's posts with an objection. It is interesting to note, however, that all three users in this category used a dialogical form of address, extensively quoting other posts in their own, although none drew direct quotes from the main news item itself. In some cases, these users show an orientation towards actively orchestrating debate. For example 'Rufus McDufus', in one post, quotes from another 'quoting' poster to characterise the debate and position his contribution:

Absolutely not! No one should drink alcohol, you only need to walk down any high street in the country to see how alcohol is ruining not only childrens lives but adults too!
—Mohammed Begum, Birmingham
Ever heard of moderation?

—Tom Ramsay, Portishead, United Kingdom
Mohammed makes a valid point though. There isn't much moderation on the high streets of Britain late at night either. Whilst I don't agree with banning, we need to do something about the alcohol problem.

6.5 'Amelie Wright', 'Liberty_Rose' and 'Pamela Scott' were representatives of the low posters/high recommenders category of users. Of these users only 'Amelie Wright' used a dialogical mode of address, 'Liberty_Rose' preferring a simple assertive style. Beyond this, however, little can be ascertained about these users as they post so infrequently. It is interesting to note, however, that these three users are the only ones that emerged from the quantitative analysis as suitable for qualitative analysis with explicitly feminine user names. This may imply a gendered division between those who post and those 'lurkers' who primarily recommend (see, for instance, Tannen 1990), but further analysis would be required to provide more weight to this possibility.

6.6 'Aaron C Reskew' and 'MrWonderfulReality' were deemed to exemplify the category of high posters and low recommenders. Interestingly, neither user frequently quoted other materials in their posts, either from other posters or from the main news items. 'MrWonderfulReality', who identifies himself in one post as being from Doncaster, South Yorkshire, adopts the same strategy as high posters—high recommenders by posting many times on the same forum, but he does not comment on every forum. 'Aaron C Reskew', by contrast, seems to post only once in each forum, even if only to dismiss the topic's importance, as in his contribution to the forum 'Your reaction to the latest Dr Who regeneration':

Not something I watch so it makes little odds to me

6.7 We can tentatively conclude, therefore, that there are some differences in styles and modes of address between posters in the different categories. Certainly high posters—high recommenders show a marked preference for a dialogical mode of address, which is only partly shared by those in other groups. A more sustained analysis, however, is required to determine whether these provisional results hold across the broader spectrum of HYS users, and on other forums.

Conclusion

7.1 The results presented here are necessarily suggestive rather than conclusive. Clearly further investigations will allow for more definitive findings, and to that end we are developing the technique used here to allow for comparative analyses between different comment-publication technologies and across different media outlets. We do, however, feel tentatively confident in making two claims.

7.2 Firstly, the production of 'news commentary' as a social object is the result of complex interactions between different participants. At the grossest level, these participants can be divided into 'posters' and 'recommenders', groups whose members seem to be mutually exclusive. More finely, we find that remarkably stable and consistent patterns of recommendation emerge from these interactions, despite there being no evidence of collusion between participants and no possibility of posters or recommenders determining their activities separately to their actual contributions. Strategic gambits, such as posting many times in a thread or posting to many different threads, do not seem to elicit greater or lesser levels of peer approval. A preliminary qualitative investigation, however, seems to point to rhetorical and discursive strategies being key to gaining recommendations for posts and, thereby, becoming a 'popular' poster. These strategies, therefore, seem to indicate that there are particular normative orientations that 'Have Your Say' participants orientate to, look for in others, and enforce where they are breached. These include using dialogical rather than didactic language, and orientating to the community as generating an ongoing discussion rather than seeking to establish a 'conclusion' about the matter being debated.

7.3 These findings support our contention that overoptimistic *and* unduly pessimistic theorisations of online commentary are unrealistic, and that heavy use of theory in internet studies is a mistake: the story is far more complicated, and taking Becker's more modest orientation to networks, conventions and consensus in the production of social artefacts as a guide to empirical investigation provides a more fruitful approach to the topic.

7.4 Secondly, there may well be a relationship between the HYS system and the nature of its users' orientations to values. The fact that posts can only be recommended or ignored massively limits the number of salient moderating activities available to users – in contrast with, for example, systems in which moderators can give posts marks out of ten or rank posts in order of preference. We would tentatively go further than this. The HYS system seems to us to facilitate elaboration and discussion, as to be 'noticed' one must make a contribution that others will explicitly recommend. This contrasts very clearly with, for example, the organisation of the *Daily Mail's* online news commentary, in which posts can be 'liked' or 'disliked' using green and red arrows respectively (and posts can be viewed in order of 'most popular' or 'least popular' on the bases of these forms of moderation). In this system, posting material likely to be provocative or objectionable to other users is likely to elicit a high number of 'dislikes', placing the comment in the running to be 'most disliked'. Those posts that are *least* visible in this system are those that receive similar quantities of 'likes' and 'dislikes', as they will tend to receive a score approaching zero: the same as that of contributions that no one comments on at all! We would argue that the work of *designers* of these systems, and any relationships between their technological affordances and an explicit desire to elicit particular *kinds* of debate requires further investigation for two reasons. Firstly, this would allow the 'world' of commentary (in Becker's sense) to be expanded out to include the work of managers, editors and interface designers, whose orientations may be completely different to those of users (or, indeed, of commentators like us). Secondly, it would facilitate a more nuanced comparative analysis of online commentary. Those sites, like the *Daily Mail*, which are sometimes disparaged as publishing extremist views, may actually make such views more visible merely as a result

of particular technological design choices. How these choices were reached, and whether or not their potential effects on shaping commentary were taken into account as editorial matters, are clearly pertinent questions.

7.5 This second point – that the relationship between system design and normative orientation is neglected – relates back to our discussion of contemporary debates about the public sphere and news commentary. Neither 'role', 'opinion', 'technology' nor 'editorial decisions' can act as determinants of activities, but rather relationships between these categories are managed *in situ* by users orientating to certain conventions. The idea that a poster's role and status, or the content of his or her contribution alone might determine response is as much an idealist canard as the idea that the ideology or editorial bias of the media outlet shapes what gets discussed. Of course, it is likely that particular groups of people will gravitate towards particular outlets, but this is not always the case. Opinions quite contrary to editorial lines are often highly recommended, and posters who are explicitly critical of the media outlet they are using to comment on are, notably, often most strongly recommended. Users recommend posts that explicitly criticise the community of users, while assertions that would chime with a large number of readers are ignored because their tone and presentation is inappropriate. The centrality of the network means its workings – messy, complicated and paradoxical – require much closer description and analysis before sociologists can make any viable predictions about what kinds of social changes it might be implicated in.

Notes

1. This focus accords with both the priorities of professional news organisations and the self-image of citizen journalists, who tend to be drawn from the same social groups as academics themselves.
2. Interestingly, where the media itself is a player in the news – as in the *Daily Telegraph's* ongoing reporting on MPs' expenses in 2009, or the revelations of widespread phone hacking in 2011, traditional editorial concerns and practices reassert themselves.
3. The HYS system has changed since this study was undertaken, but broadly speaking its affordances remain the same.
4. This has, ironically, led to accusations of bias as marginal special interest groups like the Taxpayers Alliance, minority groups such as climate sceptics and extremist organisations including the British National Party are provided with a platform they would not enjoy elsewhere.
5. These latter analyses have tended to examine such technologies as means of organising activity rather than as 'pure' means of communication 'in their own right', however.
6. It might be argued that more recently structural-psychological approaches, such as those popularised by Gladwell (2000) now serve a similar function.
7. This, of course, means his method is applicable to any social phenomena.

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