

Drowning Out the Message Together: Analysis of Social Media Comments on a Political Sex Scandal

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This study content analyzed online comments on Fox News and CNN's YouTube platforms related to news stories on the 2017 special election for the U.S. Senate in Alabama. Republican candidate Roy Moore attracted widespread media attention one month prior to the election – after being accused of sexual misconduct for alleged relationships decades before his run for U.S. Senate. Comment threads were polarized on the two ideologically different forums (CNN and Fox News) as well as within these forums. The latter indicated a crossover effect or the tendency of social media users to leave comments on an ideologically opposing forum. Regardless of being

“native” or crossovers, commenters tended to drown out reporters' messages by introducing new discussion topics. Through the examination of the most popular comments, this study argues for the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding audience gatekeeping in today's polarized media environment. The article highlights the importance of monitoring online comments to understand the power of the audience to exercise control over the direction of social media commentary.

Keywords: gatekeeping, journalism, online comments, polarization, drowning effect, YouTube

The digitalization of news prompted such a form of audience feedback as comments on articles and videos (Lee & Tandoc, 2017). Online commenting on news gives an important glimpse into the dynamics of public thought on a controversial issue and provides evidence of news consumers supporting or battling the partisanship of the mainstream media (Erzikova & Simpson, 2018). However, while verbally reacting to news, digital commenters often depart from the main theme of a story rather than discuss the original message (Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014; Lee & Tandoc, 2017; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013). For example, in an ethnographic study, Wolfgang (2018) found that while commenting on an online story about feeding children, a commenter mentioned Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. In this sense, online media-stimulated communication about news content resembles face-to-

face communications and is prone to frequent topic shift (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013).

Collectively, these studies suggest that news stories might trigger conversations about issues that are semi-relevant or not relevant to the topic addressed by a reporter. Grown in volume, these conversations can drown out the initial message (Erzikova & Simpson, 2018).

This study examined online comments on official YouTube channels of CNN and Fox News TV networks regarding a controversial issue that arose during an election campaign, with an eye on a possible drowning effect. The ability to leave comments under an article or video makes social media platforms gatekeeping channels. By analyzing the power of the online audience to shape a socially-important conversation through the lenses of the audience gatekeeping framework (Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, & Wang, 2010; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), this study gives better understanding of the ways individuals – the so-called gated (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009) – participate with online news in the polarized media environment, specifically during a political sex scandal.

Roy Moore Case

On November 9, 2017, *The Washington Post* published a report in which sex allegations were made against the former chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court and Republican Senator nominee Roy Moore (McCrummen, Reinhard, & Crites, 2017). These initial allegations, spanning from the 1970s into the 1980s during Moore's career with the district attorney's office, were made by four women. The youngest of these women, Leah Corfman, was 14 when, as she stated, Moore, then 32, attempted to initiate sexual contact (McCrummen et al., 2017).

Following these allegations, new accusers came forward stating Moore sexually assaulted them in the 1970s and 1990s (Remkus, 2017; Vollers, 2017). Moore denied the charges, and continues to deny them. In December 2017, Democrat Doug Jones won Alabama's Senate election. Moore refused to concede and threatened a recount, but Jones' 1.5% victory margin was too large to force a recount under Alabama law (Chandler & Peoples, 2017). This was the first U.S. Senate special election since 2010 to change a seat to another party (Desilver, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

News organizations use social media as a cost-effective way to promote content, increase audience reach and brand loyalty (Hermida, 2012; Lawrence, Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2018). In fact, a majority of Americans (68%) use social media to consume news and 21% of U.S. adults go to YouTube, a video-sharing site, to get their news (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Even though a majority of users (57%) were concerned with accuracy of news on social media, these news consumers still reported the coverage was helpful in their understanding of current events (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Importantly, more Republicans stated they felt negative about the news on social media than Democrats did (Matsa & Shearer, 2018).

Political polarization in the U.S.

Democrats and Republicans have been sharing an increase of unfavorable opinions and distrust toward the other party's members (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). In fact, 53% of U.S. citizens viewed talking about politics with someone they disagree with as stressful and frustrating (Pew, 2018a). Online discussions about a political issue turn into intense (and often uncivil) arguments (Graf, Erba, & Harn, 2017) and this is one of the reasons reporters are inclined to censor reader comments (Loke, 2012). Partisans call each other "trolls," even though the opponent's argumentation is not necessarily trolling behavior (Sanfilippo, Yang, & Fichman, 2017). In fact, typical independent and hired trolls are "engaging in polarizing behavior as they seek to foment discord and cause emotional distress" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 22).

Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker and Bonneau (2015) argued that the degree of political segregation on social media might have been overestimated. Analysis of retweets showed ideological asymmetry in online political communication: Liberal-minded individuals were more likely than conservatives to engage in cross-ideological retweeting (Barberá et al., 2015). Contrary analysis of Facebook posts revealed the reverse effect: conservatives tended to share ideologically crosscutting posts more than liberals did (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Beyond revealing increases in unfavorable opinions toward the other party and a lack of tolerance toward an opposing view, political polarization seems to influence trust in the media. A Gallup/Knight Foundation study (2018) found that participants with strong political views (e.g., very liberal or very

conservative) were more biased and more distrustful toward the media than participants with moderate views. The study also revealed that a lack of source attribution in a story led to a greater degree of trust toward content, meaning “source attribution functions as a heuristic that provides a cognitive shortcut about what content to trust” (p. 6).

A recent poll revealed that Republicans and Democrats differed in attitudes toward a party member involved in a scandal, including a sexual misconduct: Republicans were more likely than Democrats to forgive a misbehavior (Manchester, 2019).

Political sex scandals in the U.S.

Political sex scandals have become a staple of news coverage since President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinski (Apostolidis & Williams, 2004). However, sex scandals did not appear to substantially harm politicians’ careers, compared to, for example, tax evasion misconduct (Barnes, Beaulieu, & Saxton, 2018; Doherty, Dowling, & Miller, 2014). As an explanation, voters separate private life and public performance of elected officials (Basinger, 2013).

The timing of a political bombshell is crucial. The decision of when to release compromising material to disgrace an opponent is strategic (Gratton, Holden, & Kolotilin, 2018). In the Moore controversy, Roy Moore announced his candidacy on April 26, 2017, and sexual accusations did not surface until November 9, 2017 (Booker, 2017), a month before the United States Senate special election in Alabama.

Apostolidis and Williams (2004) conceptualized a scandal as “a discursive construct, a story that is told and may be retold by a variety of different narrators” (p. 23). Yet, as Puglisi and Snyder (2011) found, the narratives might be biased. Their study demonstrated that politically left-leaning publications dedicated more attention to scandals involving Republican politicians than scandals involving Democrats, while right-leaning news media did the exact opposite. Selective approach to reporting on scandals is evidence of gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping and online audiences

Gatekeeping, a human or technological process used to control the information flow, is judgment about what information should be gathered, evaluated, and shared (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The traditional – journalism-based – gatekeeping

model was driven by the process in which reporters and editors selected what would become news.

The digital environment prompted subsequent theory development to re-conceptualize gatekeeping as a process that includes not only news selection but also news shaping and presenting. A reformatted framework acknowledges the role of networked publics or the gated – those who are affected by gatekeepers' decisions (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Yet, by allowing the gated to produce online content, new technologies “empower the gated with greater autonomy, and change the interplay of gatekeeper-gated” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1500).

For the purpose of this study, gatekeeping is considered a mechanism of audience behavior and online commenting is defined as a written reaction to a news story within a network of unknown people (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Lee & Tandoc, 2017). Commentary is one of the mechanisms through which the gated interact with gatekeepers (journalists) and each other. In fact, a study found that online users choose particular websites because of both content and audience (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017). Further, social media news users reported enjoying interacting with other readers through discussing news stories and learning others' opinions (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). As Reich (2011) argued, comments might be as interesting and informative as journalistic texts that prompted the commentary. The opportunity to deliberate on the news makes comment fields a sort of a micro-public sphere (Graham & Wright, 2015). While commenting on a news story, the gated communicate its value to reporters and thus, impact gatekeepers' decisions (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Equally important, commenters directly engaging with journalists hold them accountable for their reporting (Graham & Wright, 2015).

Studies (Hong & Cameron, 2018; Liu & Shi, 2019; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013) suggested that online comments have a certain persuasion effect. Hong and Cameron's (2018) experiment showed that online comments changed readers' crisis responsibility attribution. In addition, the readers perceived posts with large number of “likes” as more credible than comments with low numbers of “likes.” In other words, the number of “likes” signals perceived endorsement by other online users and serves as a heuristic cue that stimulates bandwagon perceptions (Hong & Cameron, 2018) and thus, serves as a gatekeeping mechanism.

Barnes (2018) argued that the majority of online readers are “lurkers” or those who read – not write – comments. Yet, even simply reading comments makes users vital members of the online community, and even if they do not leave written comments, they still “develop an affective relationship with both the website and other commenters, similar to the relationships between fans, the objects of their fandom and fan communities” (p. 7). Given the increased presence of social bots or computer programs mimicking humans (Keller & Klinger, 2019), it is logical to presume that online readers might treat bot messages as human-created messages. In other words, they respond to a message, not a creator. A recent study showed online users do not distinguish between content distributed by humans versus social bots (Shao et al., 2018), and there are no software packages that accurately discern social bots as non-human agents (Keller & Klinger, 2019).

Comments remain the major method of engaging with and reacting to others in the online space (Barnes, 2018). YouTube’s participatory culture is regarded as its core business (Burgess & Green, 2018). YouTube enables networked gatekeeping by allowing the audience to comment on a video and like, dislike or reply to other users’ comments on the video. In the terms of Shoemaker and Vos (2009), YouTube users are “having their own gates” (p. 124) and thus, YouTube comment fields are suitable for studying comment gatekeeping. Many prominent YouTubers respect commenters’ “gates” and are reluctant to moderate comments, seeing this kind of feedback as valuable for participatory culture (Burgess & Green, 2018).

Drowning Effect

Barzilai-Nahon (2009) urged researchers to further investigate the ways the gated control information within the network. This study attempts to answer her call by exploring a “drowning effect,” or a social media feature when an actor’s message is being “drowned out” because of increasing public discourse surrounding the actor (Gandy & Erzikova, 2017).

In an investigation of a 2012 presidential candidate, Herman Cain’s social media strategies before and during the sexual harassment scandal revealed that tweets written by the general Twitter community were more popular than tweets written by Cain

himself. During the crisis, tweeters rather ignored Cain and conversed with each other. Gandy and Erzikova (2017) called this outcome a drowning effect.

Further, Erzikova and Simpson (2018) examined online readers' comments about Anthony Weiner's sexting scandal and found that "readers mainly used the online comment sections as a prompt to launch judgements about the issues and personalities swirling around the subjects of the stories, rather than to respond or react to the news presented to them" (p. 1153). As in Gandy and Erzikova's (2017) study, the commenters preferred to respond to each other rather than the actor who initiated conversations. The tendency of news consumers to introduce new discussion factors on comment fields (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013) manifests comment gatekeeping, which is part of audience gatekeeping defined as the process in which news consumers "pass along already available news items and comment on them" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 113).

This paper builds on previous work by applying audience gatekeeping theory to understand the dynamics of online discussion forums on YouTube. The choice of the ideologically different networks—CNN and Fox News—was guided by premise that "comparisons not only uncover differences between social entities, but reveal unique aspects of a particular entity that would be virtually impossible to detect otherwise" (Mills, Van de Bunt, & De Bruijn, 2006, p. 621). The following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Did the general characteristics of CNN and Fox News YouTube channels differ and, if so, how?

RQ2: Was a drowning effect evident? If yes, through what themes did it manifest itself?

RQ3: What general factors contributed to the comments' popularity, as measured by the number of likes?

METHODS

Videos that included the keywords, Roy Moore, were identified and downloaded from the official YouTube channels of CNN and Fox News, which are part of the "Big Three" cable outlets. Data included a total of 197 (CNN= 66 and Fox News=131) videos. Next, an online YouTube comments scraper (Klostermann, 2015) was used to collect

comments related to the videos posted between November 9 (the day the news about alleged misconduct broke) and November 17, 2017. The downloaded data included the text, the day and time of the comment and number of likes.

Taking into consideration the persuasion effect of the number of “likes” (Hong & Cameron, 2018), only popular (defined as most liked) comments were included in the analysis. To assure that only top comments were sampled, the following approach guided the decision-making. If the most popular comment on a particular video had more than 1,000 likes, all comments that had at least 100 likes were sampled. Likewise, in the case of 500-999 likes for the most popular comment, the cut-off for all other comments was 50 likes. If the most popular comment on a particular video was in the range of 200-499 likes, all comments that had at least 25 likes were sampled. In the case of 25-199 likes, the cut-off for all other comments was 10 likes. As a result, 2,844 comments (CNN=1,864 and Fox News=981) were included in the final analysis.

The unit of analysis was each individual comment. A codebook was developed based on a coding scheme used in Erzikova, Gandy, Hall and Kuntz’s (2016) study. The codebook included 17 categories (Appendix). To code the variable, Drowning Effect, coders watched a YouTube video to determine whether a comment attempted to “drown” the main message of the news story.

Two graduate students had a series of training sessions before manually coding 10% of posts. They reached acceptable intercoder reliability using Cohen’s Kappa that ranged from .72 for Drowning Effect to 1.00 for Trump’s name mentioned (Cohen, 1960). All disagreements were discussed and the lead author made final decisions; the discussion served as an additional training session. Next, the coders split the comments included in the data analysis and coded them independently.

A total of 1,754 comments that fell into the category, “a drowning effect,” were used for textual analysis that “allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 241). The goal of textual analysis was to identify and examine themes through which a drowning effect was manifested. First, researchers read and re-read comments independently to detect and examine patterns in collected comments. Second, they discussed notes and compared, clarified and categorized emergent themes. The researchers met four times during one

month before finalizing the core patterns (Charmaz, 2006) and relating them to the research questions and the literature review.

Operational definition

For the purpose of this study, a “drowning effect” is defined as a process through which themes divergent from the main topic of a news story gain prominence on a social media forum. A drowning effect manifests in individuals’ inclination to create their own narratives and divine their own meaning through participating in the conversation associated with a news story, in effect “drowning out” the intent of the original creator and the gatekeepers (Erzikova & Simpson, 2018).

RESULTS

RQ1 asked whether and how general characteristics of YouTube’s CNN and Fox News forums on the Moore controversy differed. Data were analyzed using the Chi-square test with Yates correction. The analysis revealed significant differences of all content categories (Table 1). Fox News comments (98.7%) tended to express personal opinions more often than CNN posts (93.2%). A higher percentage of CNN comments were factual in nature (4.6%), compared to Fox News posts (1.2%).

The Fox News and CNN forums differed regarding opinions about Roy Moore. A higher percentage of Fox News comments mentioned the Republican Senator nominee’s name (59.2%) and these posts were supportive of Moore (47.6%); 17.7% of comments expressed a negative attitude toward him. In contrast, a smaller percentage of CNN comments mentioned Moore (35%) and only 2.3% supported the nominee, while almost a third (29.7%) of CNN posts attacked him.

A significantly higher percentage of Fox News comments (21.9%) expressed anger toward that TV network in general or its anchor/reporter than did CNN posts (6.1%). In contrast, more CNN comments (22.9%) conveyed humor than Fox News posts (16.5%).

A higher percentage—almost double—of Fox News comments (39.3%) mentioned a sex-related crime, compared to 20.5% of CNN posts. A slightly higher percentage of Fox News (2.9%) comments conveyed a racist remark than CNN posts (0.5%). Offensive language was used less often in CNN comments (13.1%) than in Fox News posts (19%).

A higher percentage of Fox News comments (84.9%) were more negative than CNN posts (74.4%). A substantially higher percentage of CNN comments (16.4%) were neutral, compared to 0.2% of Fox News posts. A slightly higher percentage of Fox News comments (12.1%) were positive, compared to CNN posts (9.3%).

Approximately the same percentage of Fox News comments were pro-Republican (59.3%) and anti-Democrat (58.7%), while only 0.3% of CNN posts were pro-Republican and only 1.4% of CNN posts were anti-Democrat. CNN (6.5%) and Fox News (6.8%) had approximately the same percentage of anti-Republican comments. Only 1.1% of CNN posts were pro-Democrat, compared to Fox News' 5.7%.

Table 1
Comparison between comments on YouTube channels of CNN and Fox News (df=1).

Content Category	CNN		Fox News		corrected, χ^2
	#	%	#	%	
Opinion	1737	93.2	967	98.7	36.057**
Fact	85	4.6	12	1.2	21.180**
Drowning effect	1185	63.6	569	58.1	4.624*
Moore mentioned	653	35.0	580	59.2	202.024**
Moore supported	43	2.3	466	47.6	959.021**
Moore attacked	554	29.7	173	17.7	48.733**
TV channel/reporter attacked	113	6.1	215	21.9	155.102**
Trump mentioned	653	14.4	580	11.4	4.973*
Humor used	427	22.9	162	16.5	16.473**
Racist comment	9	.5	28	2.9	25.814**
Sex-related crime mentioned	383	20.5	385	39.3	131.958**
Offensive language	244	13.1	186	19.0	16.613**
Negative Sentiment	1385	74.4	686	84.9	35.225**
Neutral Sentiment	305	16.4	2	0.2	169.438**
Positive Sentiment	173	9.3	119	12.1	5.339*
Post is pro-Republican	6	.3	581	59.3	2065.092**
Post is anti-Republican	123	6.5	67	6.8	7.872*
Post is pro-Democrat	20	1.1	56	5.7	91.570**
Post is anti-Democrat	26	1.4	575	58.7	2001.926**

Note. ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$.

RQ 2 asked whether a drowning effect was present and if so, through what themes was the effect manifested. Overall, 1185 CNN comments (64%) and 569 Fox News comments (58%) fell into the Drowning Effect category. The average length of a CNN post was 19 words and the average length of Fox News posts was 26 words. A number of shared and forum-exclusive themes emerged during analysis.

Moore antagonists' shared themes

On both forums, Moore antagonists were calling out public officials and groups, including 1. Roy Moore himself (“stop it moore you lost! It's time to grow up”)(CNN); 2. GOP (“The GOP welcomes racists, traitors, Nazis, bigots and now paedophiles...come one come all...” (CNN); 3. Trump (“Trump bragged about grabbing pussy! No wonder he supports Moore!”) (Fox News); and 4. Moore supporters (“Lots of Russian bots and pedophile supporters in the comments”) (Fox News). Overall, comments that fell under the calling out theme were openly confrontational, hostile, and combative. Ultimately, these calling out comments showed a lack of willingness for ‘political discussion’ with supporters of Moore (and/or Trump).

The second theme shared on both forums among Moore antagonists was celebrating justice. For example, a CNN post referring to Moore’s loss said, “Evil loses!” These posts regarded the Roy Moore loss as triumph of democracy and decency. Comments celebrating justice revealed in the loss of this political figure as though he was found guilty by a jury. These shared themes (calling out and celebrating justice) among Moore antagonists revealed a crossover effect or the situation when opposing camps visited each other’s forums to leave angry and sarcastic statements. For example, a comment on the Fox News forum said, “Pedophiles for Roy Moore 2017!” A post on the CNN forum said, “Communist News Network.”

Overall, Moore antagonists demonstrated a firm belief in the guilt of Roy Moore as expressed in their thematic calling out and celebrating justice comments. Beyond Moore’s guilt, Moore antagonists took to the platform to call out his defenders and supporters, who they seemed to perceive as uneducated and close-minded individuals.

Moore supporters' shared themes

Analysis of comments generated by Moore supporters on both forums also revealed a crossover effect. These shared themes included 1. Law violation (“It's supposed to be

innocent until proven guilty. It's a smear campaign. Fuck you, McCain!") (Fox News); 2. Conspiracy ("MORE FAKE NEWS! And she waited for over 40 years to make the accusation? SHE'S A FRAUD) (CNN); and 3. Finger pointing ("cnn covers this unverifiable fake accuser story but the confirmed out of court pay off of a women that accused bill Clinton of abuse gets absolutely zero coverage") (CNN). In general, Moore supporters' comments manifested unwavering beliefs in the Republican candidate's righteousness and innocence and non-negotiable loyalty. This was revealed in comments attempting denial of or shifting the guilt toward other parties and individuals such as Democrats, Clinton, or CNN.

The crossover effect signaled a diverse political discourse on a platform that might have been conveniently perceived as a hub of ideological harmony, or an online space for gathering of like-minded individuals. In other words, the crossover effect revealed that online consumers might not only expose themselves to counter-attitudinal messages but also weigh into the discussion.

Exclusive themes on CNN and Fox News forums

In addition to the shared themes, analysis showed forum-specific topics generated by Moore antagonists on the CNN forum and his supporters on the Fox News forum. Exclusive themes on the CNN forum included celebration of victory (BLACK WOMEN SAVED THE DAY YET AGAIN!!!) and call for empathy to victims ("I was molested as a child, I know many women think they would tell immediately, trust me you would not. I waited for years before I opened up").

Comments from Moore supporters on Fox News forums included exclusive themes of (1) betrayal of a "true independent" by the elites ("This is obviously a smear job by the elite establishment. They tried this with Trump and now Moore. Everyday more evidence is showing the accusers to be liars") and (2) racial and gender discrimination ("WE the normal WHITE folk [not the blackcockworshipping blackbabyraising infertile white cuckolds] fully support Judge Moore. This is a democrat and RINO hit job. This type of cuckoldry usually comes from the like Schumer and McCain. I wish those two old apes will go away. MAGA TRUMP Putin").

Table 2

Examples of polarized discussion of same themes by Roy Moore antagonists and his supporters on the CNN forum.

CNN Moore antagonists	CNN Moore supporters
Allegations made by several women	
Forget about the yearbook, dumbass, count all the women who have accused him. Are all lying, or are you just blindly in love with Moore?	What happened to innocent until proven guilty
Religion/ Righteousness	
Roy Moore is fundamentally a bad person. Conservative Christian is an oxymoron.	A man is innocent until proven guiltythis is a WITCHHUNT for a man of GOD why did this old hag wait this long to say something .maybe because she was paid to lie..please the great people of Alabama don't let this WITCHHUNT discourage you from voting against a win for this Man of God, Roy Moore ...
Trump	
Look at this crazy racist pussy grabbing factless and clueless orange orangutan lie to the public on a daily basis. Why isn't he impeached?	Great to have a real President unlike that limp wristed fag Obama
The media	
Brilliant interview. What a breath of fresh air to hear top notch journalism in this day and age. How you kept your cool despite this ass laughing at cases of pedophilia was highly professional. Good job CNN.	CNN most desperate fake news propaganda in the entire world
Race politics	
The black vote, baby. THANK YOU...WE LOVE YOU. AMERICANS APPRECIATE YOU SAVING US FROM MOORE.	How many millions of dollars and manpower did they spend on trying to get two black men that support Trump in the same room.
GOP	
republicans love pedophiles.....thats a fact	There is a sorry SICK news media that isn't able to talk about a REPUBLICAN unless they are bashing them. OH YA THATS little cnn.THE FAKE NEWS STATION N

Polarization within the forums

Further analysis revealed political polarization within the two forums. Commenters' opinions clashed on such issues as the allegations of sexual misconduct made against Roy Moore, religion, President Trump, the media, the role of race and gender in politics, and GOP. The presence of the two opposing camps within a single forum

provides evidence of ideologically crosscutting activities of online news consumers (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá et al., 2015). Simply, the platforms represented a political battleground over scandal, justice, righteousness (who was right and who was wrong) as well as media coverage of scandal in politics. This study found that language of Moore supporters on CNN and Fox News forums was similar. Moore antagonists also used the same arguments regardless of forum. Table 2 and 3 display differences in the discussion of same topics by Moore antagonists and his supporters on CNN and Fox News forums respectively.

Table 3

Examples of polarized discussion of same themes by Roy Moore antagonists and his supporters on the Fox News forum.

Fox News Moore antagonists	Fox News Moore supporters
Allegations made by several women	
Jail time for Moore the Whoore.	yearbook was faked - Moore wins in a landslide
Religion/ Righteousness	
"Christian" conservatives are now at the point where they are using the Bible to justify relations with underage girls.	I'm praying for him. The man risked his career to keep the 10 Commandments up. I'd vote for him over and over.
Trump	
Trump bragged about grabbing pussy! No wonder he supports Moore!	11 women accused Trump, where are they now??? Democrats are the lowest scum of the earth, they are out to destroy the world.
The media	
Fox News: Where Old white pedophiles go for Fake News and a Sanctuary Space outside of the Church.	Fox News, the controlled opposition, sure did its part at the behest of the globalist elites, including Rupurt Murdoch's liberal sons who now control Fox, to derail and destroy Roy Moore.
Race politics	
The party of deplorable racist hate loses once again	WE the normal WHITE folk (not the blackcockworshiping blackbabyraising infertile white cuckolds) fully support Judge Moore. This is a democrat and RINO hit job. This type of cuckoldry usually comes from the like Schumer and McCain. I wish those two old apes will go away. MAGA TRUMP Putin
GOP	
Damn the most republican state was won by a democrat! This is a big blow for the GOP and this makes Trump look even worse! This is a huge win for America!	There is no evidence at all for this accusation. Spineless GOP RINOs like McStain and McConnel will never be forgiven for abandoning their own.

RQ3 focused on factors that contributed to comments' popularity based on the number of likes (a dependent variable) (Table 4). Multiple regression analysis was used to identify the predicting factors. All three regression models were statistically significant: F(19, 1867)=5.645, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .054$ (both CNN and Fox News); F(16, 384)=29.084, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .548$ (CNN) and F(18, 1467)=3.016, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .036$ (Fox News).

Four out of 17 variables were predictors for both CNN and Fox News forums. Humor and Positive sentiment appeared to contribute to a comment's popularity, while Drowning effect and TV channel attack seemed to decrease the popularity. On the CNN forum alone, Drowning Effect also had a negative effect. Any sentiment – positive or negative – toward the Republican Party decreased posts' popularity. Such variables as Fact, Positive sentiment and pro-Democrat sentiment appeared to be strong predictors of popularity, along with the mentioning of sex-related crime and the use of offensive language. On the Fox News forum, Humor and Positive sentiment predicted comments' popularity, while attacks on Fox News decreased the popularity.

Table 4

Summaries of multiple regression analyses with a number of likes as a dependent variable for CNN and Fox News individually and CNN and Fox News combined.

Model	b	SE-b	p value
Channels (CNN and Fox News)			
Constant	92.957	34.945	.008
Drowning effect	-16.126	7.947	.043
TV channel attacked	-26.969	11.112	.015
Humor conveyed	26.668	7.936	.00
Positive sentiment	35.135	10.994	.001
CNN			
Constant	96.120	12.648	.000
Fact	283.967	27.391	.000
Drowning effect	-13.393	3.508	.000
Sex-related crime mentioned	5.913	2.020	.030
Offensive language	6.802	3.164	.032
Post is pro-Republican	-74.548	27.782	.008
Post is anti-Republican	-290.058	25.197	.000
Post is pro-Democrat	228.885	27.339	.000
Positive sentiment	16.778	3.813	.000
Fox News			
Constant	94.027	18.872	.000
TV channel is attacked	51.804	17.212	.003
Humor conveyed	27.831	9.508	.003
Positive sentiment	43.056	14.445	.003

DISCUSSION

This study was guided by the framework of audience gatekeeping to examine commentary on YouTube forums as spaces, where citizens' voices are heard (Reich, 2011). Analysis of Roy Moore supporters and antagonists' comments on CNN and Fox News coverage revealed that lack of centralized management (gatekeeping) of content by journalists might lead to a drowning effect or the process of moderation by community members. The power exercised by this online audience demonstrates the value of participatory culture for mediated political discussions. The following findings are worth discussing.

Comments on CNN and Fox News forums manifested political polarization

The results showed that while discussing accusations against Roy Moore, CNN commenters did not convey loyalty to Democrats or hatred toward Republicans. As for the Fox News forum, loyalty to the Republican Party and animosity toward the Democratic Party was well manifested. Overall, the temperament of Fox News debates was much stronger ("feverish") compared to CNN discussions. Only two of the Fox News comments were neutral in sentiment, while a substantial number of CNN posts were neutral. This neutrality was also reflected in CNN comments on the Moore controversy – he was not mentioned as often as on the Fox News forum and attacks on him were not prevalent. The Fox News commentary showed a stark contrast while being supportive and not as judgmental as CNN commentary. A Fox News comment said, "This is stupid. Roy will win. Do the right thing Alabama. Vote for Roy Moore. Drain the swamp!" By comparison, a CNN post said, "Hahahahaha! Roy Moore is acting like a 14-year-old girl."

The fact that Fox News commenters perceived a larger stake than CNN commenters did might explain evidence of the high level of dissatisfaction with media coverage of the Moore case. Importantly, both Moore supporters and his antagonists attacked the Fox News channel, but for different reasons. Anti-Moore comments tended to ridicule Fox News ("Who else comes to fox news channel to get a good laugh") while pro-Moore posts tended to call the network out ("FOX news is smoking dung again. They should go to work at CNN"). Moore supporters commonly compared CNN and Fox News, seeing the conservative channel as a traitor.

Overall, the two polarized media forums demonstrated ideological fragmentation in interpretation of the Moore case. Strong beliefs and strong disbeliefs in accusations against Moore were driven by political worldviews, and comments were intense and often offensive (Graf et al., 2017). Lack of civility and/or professionalism agitates journalists who believe commenters should behave under established rules or code of ethics. Indeed, audience gatekeeping perspectives represent a challenge for reporters who think of themselves as “hosts” and commenters as “guests” (Loke, 2012). By allowing comments, news organizations are destined for concern about the quality of posts.

At the same time, as this study found, commenters might act as quality control agents by questioning news reporting that, for example, appeared to be partial. In the Moore controversy, commenters confronted both networks for not zooming in on the reason(s) for why accusations (suddenly) surfaced one month before the elections. Clearly, this mass-mediated scandal showed that if online users sense a media bias, they would (likely) call the media out of defensiveness and anger. This demonstrates a relatively new power for a previously silent audience to articulate “feedback” on a political issue and its coverage by the media. A drowning effect is (arguably) part of the feedback process, where commenters support or critique and expand the theme/original message by bringing up various perspectives that may have been intentionally ignored or accidentally overlooked by professional journalists. Since these commenters are not trained media professionals, their posts may lack civility and/or professional tone. The posts may also use humor or sarcastic appeals to get greater attention and popularity evident through “likes.” In fact, Papacharissi (2009) argued that humor or sarcasm are valuable forms of political communication on YouTube.

A majority of comments appeared to drown out the initial message through shared and exclusive themes

The results show a significant drift in the commentary away from the central theme/message of the news story, a key indicator of the power of the audience to exercise comment gatekeeping. Importantly, a drowning effect was evident on both platforms, supporting Wolfgang’s (2018) argument about commenters seeing an online discussion forum as a “separate production space” (p. 5). The drowning effect was manifested through a number of shared and exclusive themes. The presence of the shared themes revealed a

crossover effect where opponents would push their party's stances on "enemy" territory. This "exchange" showed the dynamics of online commenters' behavior that is distinct from previous theory of trolling (trolls attempt to emotionally hurt other online users) (Tucker et al., 2018). In this study, crossovers were not motivated by satisfaction or *schadenfreude* (pleasure of witnessing misfortune of others) (Phillips, 2015). Instead, social media users (crossovers) who left comments on an opposing forum tended to visit that forum out of curiosity driven by desire to "share the truth."

Compared to trolls, crossovers do not usually attempt to hurt opponents but to educate them on an issue, often times using an emotionally-laden tone. This finding supports an earlier study that argued for a more discerning interpretation of social media deviant behaviors before labeling any deviance as trolling (Sanfilippo et al., 2017).

Exclusive themes found on the two platforms appeared to be polar. First, while CNN commenters celebrated the victory of Doug Jones, Fox News commenters lamented the defeat of Roy Moore. Second, when CNN community members were expressing sympathy to alleged victims, Fox News members were showing signs of prejudice toward the alleged victims and minorities. Importantly, voters who are hostile sexists are more likely to demonstrate a sexual double standard – they "are also more likely to punish women than they are to punish men for sex scandals" (Barnes et al., 2018, p. 15). Exclusive themes indicated important differences between segregated participatory cultures.

The presence of both Moore antagonists and supporters on a single platform resulted in overarching themes discussed distinctively. Tables 2 and 3 provide examples of these polar views. Overall, this study showed that regardless of their ideological preferences, online news consumers tended to engage with other gated with similar or opposing opinions, rather than discussing messages disseminated by professional journalists.

Comments' popularity factors differed on CNN and Fox News forums

The study confirmed that the nature of comment gatekeeping and comment perceptions by fellow commenters might be different on distinct platforms. When grouped for analysis, CNN and Fox News data showed that humorous and positive comments

contributed to posts' popularity, and a drowning attempt and attacks on TV networks decreased the popularity (Table 4).

Analyzed separately, the two data revealed different outcomes. On CNN, social media users liked posts that conveyed facts and did not like posts intended to drown out reporters' messages. In addition, the CNN community disliked posts with any mention of the Republican Party, either supportive or antagonistic. At the same time, the community liked posts that openly supported Democrats. This is likely because the victory for Doug Jones would prevent Roy Moore, a questionable figure for them, from winning office. Oddly enough, such different categories as positive sentiment and offensive language were both positive predictors. The fact that the mentioning of sex-related crimes was also a positive predictor implies that the CNN community appeared to support commenters who continually jabbed Roy Moore. To summarize, CNN commenters liked posts that (1) used facts; (2) mentioned sex-related crimes; (3) favored Democrats and (4) were either positive or offensive or both.

Only three factors informed the popularity of comments on the Fox News forum. As with the CNN community, Fox News commenters liked posts positive in nature. In addition, Fox News community endorsed posts that expressed humor. Yet, Fox News commenters did not react well to posts that attacked TV networks. Further investigation is warranted to examine degrees of the complexity of comment gatekeeping depending on a mass medium and situation (e. g., winning elections vs. losing elections). As these results showed, commenters on distinct comment fields might vary in their reactions to the content and nature of the posts. Presumably, by clicking the "like" button after reading positive and humorous comments, Fox News commenters coped with the loss of the Republican candidate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study found a prominence of polarization between Fox News and CNN forums, where the worldviews of opposing audiences were expressed with deeply rooted righteousness. A prime example is the dueling perspectives of Moore's guilt versus his innocence. The study's findings further previous research of political polarization and the increasing rift in U.S. politics as evident through online commentary.

In addition to revealing differences in worldviews between online consumers of CNN and Fox News stories, this research found differences between comments even within the same forum. For example, this study showed a significant number of attacks on current Republican politicians in Fox News “designated” forums. This finding demonstrates the possibility of a “crossover effect,” where opposing audiences invade opponents’ spaces to “call out” presumed errors of the opposing side. This practice is different from trolling behavior, as crossovers tend to educate rather than cause emotional distress. Their educational attempt can be multidirectional meaning it is driven by various (individual) perspectives on what is important and/or pressing. The variety of outlooks explains, to a degree, an avalanche of (distinct) semi-relevant and not relevant topics introduced by active users. Some comments might be so far from the original news topic that doubts arise if commenters actually viewed a news story. Another explanation is that topics introduced by fellow commenters were so highly appealing, timely, engaging and/or biased that they eclipsed the message sent by a reporter.

In expressing readership worldview, a clear majority of comments digressed from the main topic of news coverage. Yet, as this study demonstrated (Table 4), such a departure from the trajectory outlined in a news story might not be welcomed by online news consumers at some forums and/or at certain times. Does it mean that those reporters whose audiences generally stay on topic should celebrate a professional victory? While following the outlined direction might be desirable (as it was the intention of message producer – to create a discourse around a specific event), a focus on a single message might mean that several discussion routes never would be traveled, and reporters would miss potential leads for future stories.

The concept of comment gatekeeping is invaluable for interpreting the behavior of online news consumers. Arguably, commenters with passion about the issue at hand might ignore what a news story says and instead, push ideas and views that they perceive as more urgent and/or valid. As an example, commenters reminded others about sex scandals that involved other politicians in the past—Bill Clinton, Anthony Weiner, and Donald Trump. As another implication for journalism practice, unbiased coverage may mean little to some commenters. This study showed that commenters attacked the news

channels regardless of the objectivity of the Roy Moore controversy coverage. Even a simple mention of a scandal provoked commenters' fierce criticism and accusation of bias.

This study revealed interrelationships among social media platform (YouTube), CNN and Fox News coverage, participatory culture of comment sections, on-topic commentary (the commentary that did not diverge from the main topic of news stories), and a drowning effect (both internal and external/crossover) (Figure 1).

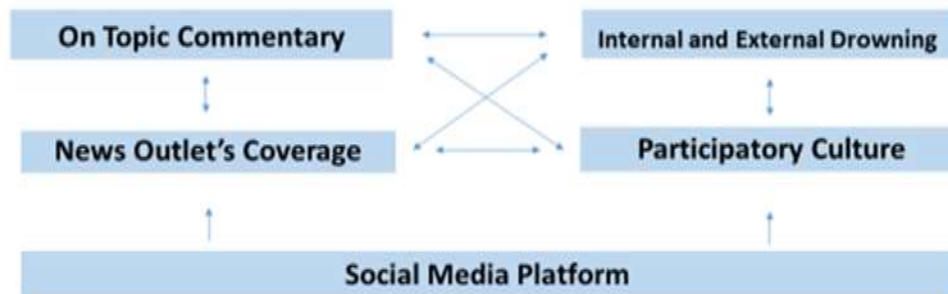


Figure 1. *Interrelationships among Social Media Platform, News Outlet's Coverage, On Topic Commentary, Participatory Culture, Internal Drowning and External (Crossover) Drowning.* Note: Internal Drowning and External (Crossover) Drowning are part of comment gatekeeping.

A social media platform influences the choice of news (News Outlet's Coverage) and affects participatory culture (in our case, the desire to comment on a news item uploaded to YouTube). Coverage and participatory culture influence each other as a news story sets the direction and tone of discussion, while the discussion monitored by reporters provides them with future story ideas.

News Outlet Coverage

Coverage and on-topic commentary are mutually influenced; a specific story might keep commenters on the topic and thus, prove the right news choice made by reporters. When the news coverage causes an internal or external drowning effect, reporters learn what clues prompted "their" audience to digress from the main topic and what activated intruders or crossovers (those who are unlikely to follow a particular platform) to voice their opinion.

Participatory Culture

The mutual influences between participatory culture and (1) internal (within the platform) and external (outside of the platform) drowning and (2) on-topic commentary are

manifested in the liberty of commenters to introduce new discussion items and staying on the topic. In either case, other participants would let the commenter know – through likes, dislikes or lack of attention – what kind of posts this particular culture rewards.

Finally, on-topic commentary of a news story, whether supportive or attacking, might provoke a desire to drown out the main message of the story. Vice versa, an active drowning might lead to a strong community effort to return the discussion to the primary message.

These interrelationships seem to reflect different classes of the gated (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) or commenters who stay on topic (by selecting and displaying information) and commenters who diverge from the topic (by shaping and manipulating information presented to them). In other words, the gated have different agendas in the process of guarding the gate. Saliency, defined as “the degree to which gatekeepers give priority to competing gated claims” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1493), might explain the intensity of influence the gated impose on traditional gatekeepers.

As this study showed, for many gated, a comment section served as a diving board to submerge into a divergent topic, while for others, the comment section acted as a stage to continue conversation started by the media. A question is whether and how the media prioritize these streams of influence in the process of gathering and shaping news. Participatory culture or the ability of online users to build collectively on news content seems to impact the direction of commentary depending on shared community values. In addition, participatory culture has the potential to shape news coverage when the news media consider a specific online culture as a collective force in the process of audience targeting.

Overall, a news outlet that keeps its commenting section despite negative aspects of audience behavior seems to prioritize participatory culture and user engagement. This decision to provide a space for public debates and pursue marketing goals comes with a price tag (risk of polarization, uncivility). Still, gains (maintained democratic values) are larger than possible losses.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As any study, the current one has some limitations that merit future research. Analysis of comments and factors that contributed to their popularity did not take into account personal characteristics (e.g., motivation, beliefs) of authors as well as users who liked the posts. Future research should explore a possible link between user characteristics and online commenting. For example, given the ever-increasing gender gap between parties with the majority of women identifying as Democrats (Pew, 2018b), it is important to examine whether and how gender influences commentary direction.

Future research should also help better understand drowning and crossover effects based on number of dislikes. Disliking in the same manner as liking (in the social media sense) is the audience's effort to maintain a sound participatory culture through community self-moderation. For a fuller understanding of a drowning effect and its ties to gatekeeping, an examination of the comments that are filtered out (by peers) by clicking a "dislike" button is warranted.

Limitations notwithstanding, this study expands our knowledge of the power the gated exercise to control direction of social media commentary. By drowning out the message communicated to them by professional journalists, online news consumers reshape the concept of media influence and compel researchers to consider media exposure not on its own, but in conjunction with online users' discussions and comments (Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018).

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APPENDIX

Content categories for manual coding, their descriptions and examples.

Content Category	Description	Example
Opinion	Opinion is expressed in comment	We are a nation of idiots.
Fact	Post is factual in nature	Doug Jones won
Drowning effect	Comment departs from the main topic of the video	I was sexually assaulted by Gary Tuchman.
Moore mentioned	Roy Moore's name conveyed/implied	I would still vote for Moore no matter what
Moore supported	Comment supports Moore	Roy Moore is going to win by a landslide. I just sent him a check for \$1,000. Screw you, MSM, and your friends and family, too.
Moore attacked	Moore attacked/criticized	Roy moron likes to whine
TV channel attacked	Attack/criticism is evident toward TV channel, anchor or reporter	CNN real fake news
Trump mentioned	Donald Trump's name conveyed/implied	It is time to get rid of the orange mad king. #MakeAmericaSaneAgain
Humor used	Comment contains a pun, an understatement, a joke, something ludicrous, a satire, irony or intent (Kelly & Solomon, 1975).	What does Roy Moore and blackjack players have in common? They both hit on 14
Racist comment	Post contains words indicative of a racist remark	don't understand how a black man can vote for a blatant racist

Analysis of Social Media Comments on a Political Sex Scandal

Sex-related crime mentioned	Post refers to a sex-related crime	Anybody willing to still defend this pedofile POS needs to be on a sex offender registry.
Offensive language	Offensive language used, implied or abbreviated in comment	Fucking Alabama.
Sentiment	Post reflects a a. positive or b. neutral or c. negative sentiment.	a. Playing Sweet Home Alabama again and again. Great moment for women. Thank you, Alabama, you rock!! b. He did it. c. Most Republicans are old, decayed, racist and still stuck in a 1950 time warp.
Post is pro-Republican	Post reflects a sentiment positive toward Rep. Party	The Republican party needs to stick together or get better candidates we will prevail
Post is anti-Republican	Post reflects a negative sentiment toward Rep. Party	Republican Freak Show. The party of Nazis & Child Molesters.
Post is pro-Democrat	Post reflects a positive sentiment toward Dem. Party	This truly was an amazing victory for Democrats in a DEEP RED STATE! MORE STATES TO TURN BLUE SOON!
Post is anti-Democrat	Post reflects a negative sentiment toward Dem. Party	Democrat's new election strategy - The Republican touched me 40 years ago
