Online reader comments can provide valuable feedback to news sites

July 2 2015

For years, news organizations that post content on the Internet have allowed readers to leave comments about stories. Often, these readers' comments become a forum for political debates and other communication that the news organizations do not consider important to their journalistic practices. Now, researchers from the University of Missouri School of Journalism have found that editors and owners of news organizations may want to pay more attention to what their readers are saying about their news stories in order to better serve their consumers. Timothy Vos, an associate professor of journalism studies at MU, says that readers value different journalistic traits as well as hold other expectations for journalists.

"Traditional journalistic values include traits such as objectivity, truthfulness and accuracy," Vos said. "Although most journalists were trained and brought up valuing these ideals, we found that many readers have an additional list of traits that they value in their news reporting. Although [news organizations](#) don't necessarily need to readjust what ideals they find important, they should at least understand what their readers value, not only to serve them better, but also to maintain viability."

For his study, Timothy Vos and Stephanie Craft, an associate professor at the University of Illinois, and David Wolfgang, a doctoral student at MU, examined thousands of reader comments on ombudsman columns of three national online news publications: The New York Times, Washington Post and National Public Radio (NPR). They found

reoccurring comments calling for journalistic ideals outside of traditional values, such as transparency.

Vos also found that readers often hold journalism outlets to basic social standards that are better applied to individuals rather than corporate entities. He found multiple occurrences of such adjectives as sanctimonious, self-absorbed, judgmental, inhumane, and lazy to describe entire news outlets. Vos says leaders of news outlets should be aware of how their organizations are being judged by readers.

"News organizations, like all businesses, are seeking to establish and build their identities," Vos said. "In doing so, it is important to know how people view their brand and what standards they hold for you. News leaders need to understand how readers are anthropomorphizing their organizations by applying human adjectives to non-human entities. Understanding this phenomenon can help news organizations better evaluate and address how to best present their brands to the public."

This study was published in *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia