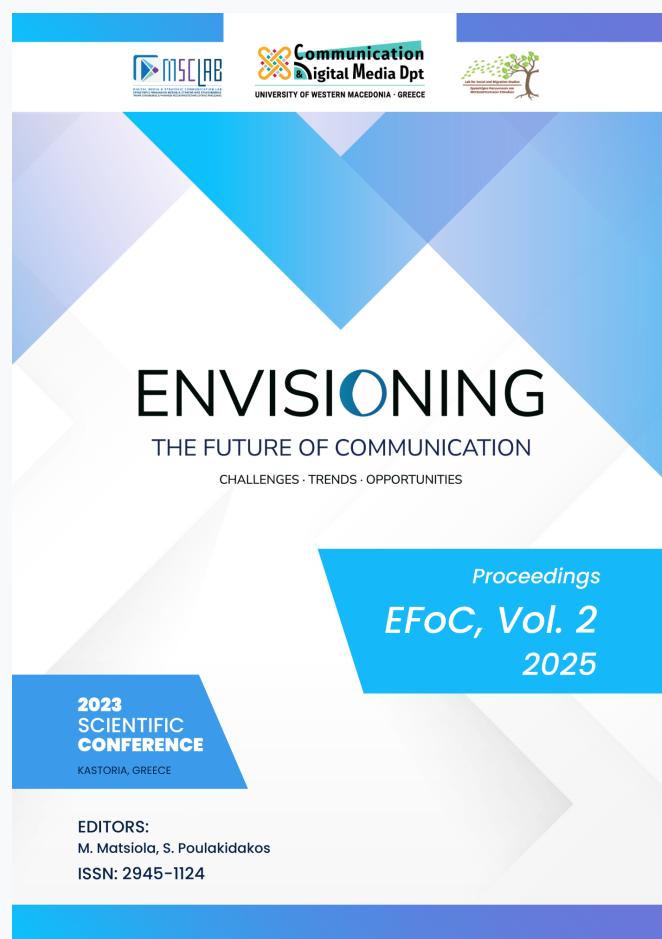


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The Online Communities & the sense of belonging in Digital Journalism

Eva Karolidou*

Abstract

In recent years, the landscape of traditional journalism has undergone significant transformation due to the rise of the Internet and the advent of Web 2.0. This transformation has led to the emergence of novel modes of communication and interaction, facilitating greater participation of reader-users in the news production process. These new communication avenues, often referred to as "online communities," have gradually gained prominence, reshaped established patterns of digital communication, and altered the dynamics of information consumption, production, and distribution. Scientific inquiry into these online communities, which often accompany news websites as an additional feature, focuses on the shared interests that unite members worldwide, transcending geographical boundaries. In Greek literature, there is limited exploration of successful Greek-speaking online communities that have arisen through news platforms. This study aims to shed light in this area through a case study that was conducted via a semi-structured interview with the creator of the highly acclaimed column "A, Mpa" on LiFO and founder of the feminist-oriented platform "Womanlandia," which actively encourages reader participation in commenting and selecting article themes. This research focuses on initially understanding the landscape through the insights of the interviewee. Analysis revealed that user-generated comments play a vital and organic role in shaping articles. Additionally, the article format can be described as "alternative," as there is a deliberate effort to balance news content with reader commentary, aiming to establish a community-driven platform featuring diverse articles. This approach sets initiatives like "Womanlandia" apart from traditional media companies.

Keywords: Online communities, digital journalism, communication, interaction, new media, case study, interview.

Introduction

The term "online community" encompasses various research domains in literature, reflecting the diverse array of online communities that are present today. These communities include educational platforms, business or service promotion forums, and platforms dedicated to raising awareness about environmental or social issues. Each online community caters to a specific audience, operates with its own communication objectives, covers distinct subject matters, and provides unique incentives for participants.

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This study explores the development of online communities within the realm of digital journalism, as well as the emergence of a sense of "belonging." This research is based on a case study; data collection was performed via the method of expert interviews which was conducted with Lena Foutsitzi, the creator of the highly acclaimed column "A, Mpa" on LiFO and the founder of the feminist-oriented platform "Womanlandia". Experts interviews as employed method is widely utilized in theoretical sciences for its capacity to yield firsthand information (Dorussen, Lenz, & Blavoukos, 2005). Specifically, for the purposes of the study the semi-structured interview technique was utilized.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows, initially the literature review is introduced, then the methodology employed is analyzed and the results of the research are presented. Consequently, the conclusions of the study are discussed aiming to deliver meaningful context to the readers.

The advent of Web 2.0 has brought about significant changes in the field of journalism, both academically and professionally. This shift has created a highly competitive online environment, compelling news websites to explore new methods of engaging readers (Podara, Matsiola, Maniou, & Kalliris, 2019). One interactive approach to achieve this goal, while also promoting participatory journalism and diversity of perspectives, is to encourage reader participation in news production through commenting. Indeed, the comments' section fosters increased interaction between internet users—readers—and journalists and editors, a dynamic that was much more intricate during the traditional era of newspapers (Ksiazek, 2018). Drawing on literature, the concept of "participatory journalism" aligns with the active involvement of readers in the news process. Moreover, a primary objective of participatory journalism is to foster meaningful dialogue among readers.

In the early years of the previous decade, there was considerable enthusiasm surrounding participatory styles of journalism and the integration of content generated by users. This trend was fueled in part by aspirations for a more democratic and inclusive approach to journalism, aiming to incorporate input from "the people," as well as by the financial aspirations of media executives. Online news outlets engaged in numerous experiments with different methods of user involvement. Concurrently, there was a sense of both detachment and anticipation within journalism research circles, prompting discussions about reimagining the nature of public communication and the field of journalism studies (Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2019).

Literature review

Discussions regarding current events occur within the framework of news media, both in public forums and institutional settings, traditionally recognized as integral to the public sphere. As per the Habermasian perspective, the public sphere denotes the domain of civil society grounded in normative principles (Habermas, 1965). Primarily perceived as a national arena for civic deliberation and the shaping of public opinion, the public sphere encompasses

governmental structures and associated entities where individuals engage in discourse through tangible or intangible public forums. Consequently, mass media has historically served as the primary vehicle for public discourse. Various viewpoints are pivotal in delineating the essence of modern public discourse, encompassing the notions of the public sphere and the influence of mass and social media.

Commenting in online discussions fails to foster a universal and shared comprehension among participants, as reactions are influenced by the diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and values of individuals inhabiting their own private spaces. Instead, the divergence of conflicting and polarizing opinions arises from the heterogeneous nature of engagement within discussion platforms and other forms of social interaction. Marwick and Boyd (2011, p. 123) argue that both traditional and social media platforms lack the capability to facilitate nuanced negotiations, leading to what they term "context collapse" – the blending of distinct social contexts. Participants operate as isolated entities within their everyday environments, promptly responding to news events and issues in their vicinity. Nevertheless, news discussions unfold as scripted social exchanges occurring within institutional media platforms, prompting intriguing comparisons with discussions on social media (Johansson, 2017).

It's important to note that the accuracy of news is essential for establishing trust between a media platform and its readers, who are more likely to engage in online discussions when they feel confident about the information presented. This dynamic can be viewed as a form of reciprocal exchange, facilitating the development of a relationship between readers and the news platform, grounded in credibility and impartiality (Fletcher, & Park, 2017). Therefore, fostering an environment of free expression in comments fosters increased participation, interaction, and diversity of viewpoints, which are highly valued by numerous online media websites (Marchionni, 2015). Allowing individuals the freedom to express their opinions in their own way is crucial for fostering trust between news organizations and their audiences.

The community's perception of newspapers' connectedness to the community largely hinges on their institutional reputation (Toff et.al., 2021). When it comes to online platforms, users tend to assess credibility based on content rather than the medium itself. Consequently, the credibility of online publications is often associated with the publication rather than any specific journalist (Hajli, Sims, Featherman, & Love, 2015). Moreover, public perception of the media is more positive when people are familiar with it. Readers are more inclined to participate in interactive features, like submitting letters to the editor or news tips, when they have a strong relationship with the news organization. However, this does not mean individual reporters are insignificant in influencing the public's engagement with online news. A reporter's personal expertise adds a layer of credibility that complements the institutional credibility of the

publication. Journalists' engagement with the public fosters a stronger sense of community and encourages greater participation in discussions (Breiner, 2016).

Participatory journalism involves citizens actively contributing to news production alongside professional journalists. This collaboration occurs both within mainstream media platforms and through the integration of user-generated content acquired from sources outside traditional media channels. At the core of conventional definitions of participatory journalism is the engagement of the public within the structured environment of professional journalism. According to Borger (2016), this professional journalistic context refers to journalists operating within established standards and protocols, with hierarchical structures or training, employed by reputable news organizations, and compensated for their contributions (Saridou, 2022).

These contributions, along with the discussions happening on a news website, promote freedom of thought and expression, while also serving as a hub for users who share similar perspectives. Conversely, aggressive, or offensive comments discourage reader participation, as they may feel directly or indirectly insulted or threatened. However, in contemporary discourse, there's a dilemma regarding whether and to what extent it's appropriate to delete malicious comments. This dilemma arises because deleting comments can protect readers, but it also raises concerns about censorship.

Therefore, if a media platform establishes trust with its audience, it becomes easier to foster an engaged community of readers who actively participate by sharing their viewpoints. This forms a mutually beneficial cycle of actions for both the news outlets and the readers. Constructive engagement through commenting facilitates interaction and the exchange of new information, which can serve as valuable material for future reporting. For instance, in "Womanlandia," community members/readers can propose topics of interest, guiding the editorial direction.

Another significant area of concern revolves around the removal of user comments and the potential equivalence to censorship. User-contributed comments present a dual-edged dynamic: While they enhance user engagement, foster online community building, and can offer valuable content to both readers and journalists, not all comments hold the same merit. Some comments may lack quality in terms of language, tone, or accuracy, potentially deviating from the standards upheld by the news outlet. Thus, while there's merit in incorporating reader comments into online articles, moderation becomes essential to ensure that published comments align with the outlet's guidelines.

Filtering out low-quality comments only tackles part of the issue; reputable news publishers also aim to highlight high-quality comments that effectively contribute to the article's discourse and uphold the site's ethos. However, employing crowdsourced approaches comes with its own challenges: They lack editorial oversight, potentially leading to biases, and fail to ensure balanced representation. Managing and moderating online news comments proves challenging due to the sheer volume of content and the need for moderators to grasp nuanced contexts, especially when dealing with sensitive or political topics. Various strategies, such as post-

moderation, have been implemented to address scalability concerns, as leaving comments unmoderated can swiftly lead to degradation in quality (Park, Sachar, Diakopoulos, & Elmquist, 2016).

The concept of news-mediated public discourse refers to the platforms provided by news organizations for public engagement on issues arising from news events. The evolution of participatory journalism has transitioned from traditional gatekeeping roles of journalists, such as managing letters to the editor, towards a more inclusive approach that considers factors like civility and decency. However, diverse stakeholders have contrasting expectations regarding the norms governing these discourse spaces. Reader's view comment sections as arenas for exercising free speech, where mutual respect and self-regulation could enhance the quality of interactions. Commenters advocate for more community-driven moderation tools, rather than relying solely on journalists as gatekeepers, while also expecting respect, credibility, and transparency from fellow participants. Journalists perceive the audience as a community and often use comment volume as an indicator of community quality and engagement. They value comments that engage with journalistic content or contribute additional information beyond the story (Podara et al., 2021). Ideally, journalists prefer commenters who adhere to rules, stay on topic, make genuine efforts, and defer control of the space to the journalistic authority (Wolfgang, 2016).

Research methodology

Since the subject under study, to the researcher's knowledge, is not yet investigated in the Greek media reality, it was decided to start the exploration with a case study with a very significant online community that was a pioneer in the area. Therefore, in order to enhance and complement the information derived from the literature, it was deemed necessary to conduct an interview with Lena Foutsizi, owner of the "Womanlandia" platform and creator of the renowned "A,Mpa" community on LIFO. It should be noted that this is the first in a series of interviews that will be conducted to draw secure conclusions regarding how online communities develop in digital journalistic environments, what their advantages and disadvantages are, what motivates users to participate, and how the concept of belonging emerges in relation to the existential human need to belong to a social group.

"Womanlandia" hosts a plethora of articles with a feminist orientation, while also strongly encouraging reader participation to build a robust community. The interview focused on the creation of "Womanlandia," the potential challenges that arose, the significance of participation, the interaction among users, as well as between users and writers. Finally, questions were raised regarding the management of aggressive or abusive comments.

The semi-structured interview was selected as the methodological tool since the point was to let the interviewee deploy her aspects while also signifying the research points of interest. The interview with Lena Foutsizi comprised 13 inquiries, categorized into sections. The

methodology, the objectives, and the principles behind establishing the online platform "Womanlandia," were the initial questions since it was deemed necessary to understand the challenges faced and the way they were addressed. Furthermore, the financial aspects and the sustainability of the endeavor were asked since it is crucial to comprehend how financial stability may be achieved while running a participatory medium. Finally, the feeling of inclusion experienced by members, and strategies for handling malicious comments and the approach in such situations were inquired.

The interview was transcribed and thematically coded following the sections of the questionnaire. As it is an initial case study, the researcher's interest lays in mapping the field under investigation, thus, the analysis performed was focused on the correlation of the answers to the existing literature.

Results

The rapid growth of the "Womanlandia" online community is likely attributed to its founder herself. Specifically, Lena Foutsitzi was initially the creator of perhaps the most popular Greek-speaking online community, "A,Mpa" on LIFO (<https://www.lifo.gr/>), which also serves as a well-known media outlet. Specific feature of "A,Mpa" was its humorous yet realistic perspective on every issue under discussion, gradually resulting in a huge audience: the "Ampaholics". Therefore, the notable popularity of "A,Mpa" served as the driving force behind a new platform with a feminist approach: "Womanlandia". Therefore, the members of the newly established community were familiar with and sought out this type of interaction.

The concept of the online community in "Womanlandia" began with comments, with the founder herself describing them as "jewels." Gradually, through the contribution of readers/members, the community expanded more and more. Therefore, at some point, public participation became crucial for the existence of this online community itself to such a great extent, as well as the articles. It is worth mentioning that there is trust between the writers and the readership audience, so opinions are shared in the comments without, however, undermining the work of the respective writer or attempting to discredit it.

After the interview was completed, certain conclusions emerged regarding the existence of an online community in a digital journalism environment. Every online community, as previously noted, possesses distinct features and communication objectives. Given this, Lena Foutsizi's explanation was deemed essential in elucidating why "Womanlandia" qualifies as an online community:

"The inception of the "Womanlandia" online community was sparked by remarkably relevant comments. Presently, comments have become indispensable alongside articles; they complement each other seamlessly. Many individuals visit primarily for the insightful discussions in the comments section. [...] Encountering numerous like-minded women and experiencing a sense of connection is truly

enchanting. Reading comments that resonate deeply with your thoughts and feelings creates a comforting warmth. I gain valuable insights from the comments I peruse daily”.

Regarding the participation of readers/users in an online community, this choice likely stems from the existential need of individuals to be part of a social group, even if it now develops within the realm of the internet. In this way, the sense of "belonging" is constructed. A collective sense of identity and interpersonal connections can contribute to fostering a feeling of "belonging," a significant motivation for individuals engaging in online communities. Smaller groups may find it easier to establish a cohesive shared identity compared to larger ones, although larger groups' increased activity levels may enhance the likelihood of receiving responses and feeling acknowledged. It's worth noting that smaller communities excel in fostering connections among users, as the same individuals are more likely to interact repeatedly, thus creating opportunities for deeper social and interpersonal relationships (Hwang & Foote, 2019).

Furthermore, within online communities like "Womanlandia," tends to be initiated a shared philosophy and empathy that emerges among members. This often transforms mere coexistence in the online space into social connections or even friendships in many instances. Moreover, with the imminent rise of Web 2.0, every tool and form of social assembly became integrated into the digital public sphere. From this perspective, the need for digital interaction among people who share common interests, perceptions, or concerns naturally transferred to the internet, potentially evolving into human relationships or friendships later. The importance of engaging in an online community, rather than solely consuming or sharing articles was further discussed with Lena Foutsitzi:

“For some individuals, merely consuming content or expressing their views suffices. However, I believe the desire to belong to a community is one of the strongest urges we experience—it's existential. Without being part of a group where we feel empathy and connection, we face profound rejection. Imagine someone who lacks a sense of belonging to a community—it's the loneliest state. We crave being part of something larger than ourselves; it provides immense support and companionship. Very few can thrive in isolation”.

Through the comments, readers engage in productive dialogues, identifying with, agreeing, or disagreeing within the framework of interest of the respective article. Most of the time, disagreements occur at healthy levels, without insults and obscenities. In short, such a reality could easily be likened to the way every social setting operates, where dialogue takes place, there is room for every opinion, and there is always something beneficial from interacting with

fellow citizens. It's more of a kind of informal learning, exchanging knowledge and opinions, through which, ultimately, everyone evolves to a greater or lesser extent.

In terms of aggressiveness in the comments, there have been instances in "Womanlandia" where members of the online community made aggressive or offensive comments, creating a polarized atmosphere in the environment. In these cases, as well as more generally, filtering comments becomes an urgent necessity to effectively protect the remaining members of the community. Moreover, it is neither pleasant nor constructive for certain opinions to be met with gunfire and insults, given that the purpose of the online community is pluralism and democracy, without, however, being abused by some malicious users. The discussion addressed the occurrence of rage, anger, and/or aggressive behavior that occasionally surfaces within comments:

"We've addressed instances of comments that weren't politically correct. The most significant occurred between two elections, sparking a sharp political divide. Disagreement is expected in debates. Presently, such comments are infrequent, often veering towards passive aggression. Online communities tend to attract aggressive users in general. Anonymity often leads to altered behavior; a pseudonym can sometimes evoke negative traits. Internet frustration is a widely studied global phenomenon".

Of course, comment moderation also presents a series of challenges for those working within the online community, as the lines between expressing an opinion and becoming aggressive or offensive are very thin. Therefore, the deletion of comments continues to concern both industry professionals and the scientific community to this day, as it remains uncertain whether such actions constitute censorship or protection of the online community from the toxicity of some users. A primary reason why conflicts may arise among members of an online community is when some of them misunderstand the purposes and philosophy that permeate the community. Consequently, a negative reaction from these users is possible. Additionally, aggressive tendencies may arise because of major socio-political phenomena, as anything happening in a country cannot leave citizens unaffected. So, a significant portion of them may express their accumulated anger in cases where they feel shielded by the anonymity provided by the internet:

"People often interpret what they read based on their own experiences and assume it's directed at them, even when it's not. Consequently, this can lead to responses that might be hurtful or upsetting. Learning to navigate this is crucial, and many individuals are now engaging with online platforms and writing with this awareness in mind."

"We maintain moderation to safeguard our readers, who are also stakeholders by virtue of their financial support. This prevents unwarranted attacks from outsiders targeting those who contribute."

Subsequently, the method of creating and operating an online community like "Womanlandia" was discussed. According to Lena Foutsitzi, this was a significant investment of time, human,

and financial resources, as a platform of similar scale offers many different functions, provides a payment system, personal data security, etc. The chosen business model was subscription-based, a rather original choice for Greek standards at least, as most of the similar digital journalism websites secure their economic sustainability through advertisements of other companies. However, the subscription-based model may potentially strengthen the construction of a robust online community because only those users willing to dedicate their time and money will participate. At the same time, this business model directly impacts the quality of articles precisely because they are aimed at a specific community of people with common interests, problems, and expectations, without desperately seeking to attract companies for advertising.

Finally, discussion was deployed about the journalistic approach of "Womanlandia". What sets it apart is the fact that it doesn't simply stick to the bare recording or transmission of news. It doesn't try to offer a news feed, broadcasting news in real-time. In fact, the news is presented from a different perspective, while efforts for interpretation and analysis are made and society's needs are always at the center. In this way, fertile ground is provided for conducting discussions, while simultaneously ensuring the uniqueness of the content.

Discussion

Although the data from the mentioned research aligns with existing bibliographic references (Foote & Hwang, 2021), (Johansson, 2017) further comprehensive studies are required within Greek-speaking online communities. This is necessary as there is a lack of confirmed scientific conclusions in this specific thematic area. It is important to further study, on a scientific level, the "sense of belonging" that arises from participation in an online community and how this characteristic aligns with participatory journalism in digital environments. What is certain is that both journalism and the existential need of individuals to belong to a social framework are constantly evolving based on notable technological advancements. The imminent rise of Web 2.0 has caused fundamental changes at all levels, dragging along what was once called social interaction, immediate information, interaction, and expression of opinions.

Although the public sphere of the internet enhances pluralism and democracy, as it accommodates every perspective on every issue, many questions arise about how frequently aggressive behaviors occur, thus undermining the credibility of an online media outlet on the one hand and discouraging other users/readers from participating in public discourse on the other. Of course, managing this issue requires increased attention, as comment deletion may be considered strictly authoritarian practice, constituting censorship. On the other hand, if a particular digital media outlet remains indifferent, it may encounter unpleasant surprises, with a flood of toxic comments that question the painstaking journalistic work, offend, and denigrate other readers, etc.

Apart from that, critical discourse analysis unveils how community members express their views and opinions on various topics. Understanding which comments are retained and which

are deleted after evaluation provides valuable insights into community norms and moderation practices. Identifying potential misconduct within online communities is essential for maintaining a healthy and inclusive environment. By recognizing manifestations of misconduct, such as harassment or trolling, community managers can implement effective strategies to address these issues and uphold community standards. Finally, the possibility of propaganda and misinformation spreading through user-generated content is a pressing concern. Understanding how misinformation spreads and its impact on online communities can inform strategies for combating false information and preserving the integrity of online platforms.

Limitations and Future work

One primary constraint of the study is the limited number of Greek online communities currently evolving within journalistic websites. Nevertheless, this constraint does not necessarily impede the acquisition of valuable data for research advancement. Several crucial parameters to address for the continuation of research include: First, what drives individuals to engage in online communities is a topic of interest. Understanding the motivations behind participation can shed light on the dynamics of virtual communities and inform strategies for fostering engagement. Also, examining the impact of online community involvement on social dynamics reveals intriguing insights. Participation may facilitate networking opportunities, but it also has the potential to contribute to feelings of isolation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing supportive online environments.

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