The Online Comment: A Case Study of Reader-Journalist-Editor Interactions

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The comment boards of online news organizations allow readers the chance to hold the journalist more accountable than was the case in print media days through publicly posting feedback on the same page as the news story. While journalists self-report this greater accountability and interactivity with readers, current research lacks specific description and analysis of these interactions. Disparate perceptions of the purpose of the comment board among readers, journalists, and public editors become apparent through this case study, an analysis of reader comments on and journalistic and editorial responses to a breaking *New York Times* story. The study finds that readers tended to post feedback holding the publishing institution accountable, not necessarily the journalist. These results are important because better understanding how the comment board is perceived and utilized will help news organizations to attract and retain readers in the competitive world of online journalism.

On 25 January 2012, three months after Yale quarterback Patrick Witt announced his decision to play in a Harvard football game instead of participating in a Rhodes Scholarship interview scheduled at the same time, Richard Pérez-Peña of the *New York Times* revealed previously unknown details surrounding Witt's decision. Pérez-Peña's article, "At Yale, the Collapse of a Rhodes Scholar Candidacy," cited anonymous sources to report that Witt chose the football game not because of his dedication to the team, as had been originally assumed, but because an alleged sexual assault charge had suspended his Rhodes candidacy. On the online story's comment board, a space for publicly posted reader feedback on the same page as the news story, 283 readers posted about Witt's decision and the ethics of reporting alleged sexual assault charges with anonymous sourcing. Interestingly, reader comments held the editor and the *Times* responsible for the information reported in the article, rather than the journalist. This finding is surprising, considering that the comment board is meant as a means for readers to post feedback directed toward journalists and that Pérez-Peña should be considered at least partially accountable for the content of his news story.

Even though readers were reluctant to direct their comments toward the journalist, responses from Pérez-Peña and public editor Arthur Brisbane promoted greater accountability and interactivity between readers and journalist. Pérez-Peña published a series of articles with additional sourcing information within a week and a half of the breaking news story; however, he was up against reader feedback on the board expecting a response from the institution and the editor in addition to structural and institutional barriers on the comment board. The public editor's reply countered these obstacles, but complex layers of accountability and disparate perceptions of the function of the comment board appeared to remain among reader, journalist, and public editor.

Commenting is a new form of reader feedback that is not yet fully understood. Interactions in Pérez-Peña's coverage of the Witt story suggest that there are different perceptions of its purpose among users and producers of the comments. So far, journalism scholarship views the comment board as a means for readers to hold the journalist more accountable (Cenite and Zhang; Hayes,

Singer, and Ceppos; Singer and Ashman). This view is shared by the *Times,* which welcomes readers' advice and criticism as well as their "unique insights into the issues of the day" on the comment board (*New York Times*). While recent journalism scholarship and the *Times*'s policy stress the added accountability and interactivity allowed by the comment board, the Witt story provides a much-needed case study of a breaking news story with reader comments plus journalistic and editorial responses, giving us an opportunity to consider how expectations of the purpose of the comment board are actually playing out. The results of a case study such as this are important, in part because the comment board might be used to help attract and retain readers in a hyper-competitive online journalism environment.

This article considers reader comments to "At Yale, the Collapse of a Rhodes Candidacy" in relation to highlighted comments in the "*NYT* Picks" section of the board and responsive articles by journalist Pérez-Peña and public editor Arthur Brisbane. I pay special attention to ostensible perceptions of the comment to consider how different types of responses might impact relations between reader, journalist, and editorial staff. Among these actors, I ask: What types of responses establish more interactive and accountable relationships and which ones are distancing? I argue that different constituencies in the commenting process embody different perceptions of the purpose of the comment; reader comments hold the institution and editor accountable for the reporting, not the journalist, while the journalist and the public editor respond to the comment by establishing greater accountability and interactivity between reader and journalist.

Literature Review

Prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, newspaper readers primarily relied on indirect ways of keeping journalists accountable. Even though it was possible to contact the journalist by phone, readers who wanted their feedback to be public wrote letters to the editor that received responses and were in some cases published—daily, weekly, or monthly, depending on the news organization. Journalists received less reader feedback less often prior to the Web. In the days of print media without the Web, decisions about how breaking news stories developed were made in newsroom conversations between journalists and editors more than in interactions between journalists and readers (Santana 70).

With the development of new publishing platforms on the Web, readers are given the chance to hold journalists more accountable for the information they report through posting feedback more frequently and more directly. Today, readers interact with journalists in a greater variety of ways, including message boards, online polls, email, blogs, and the commenting board. Email, a popular form of feedback from the journalists' perspective, was viewed as a means to facilitate conversation with readers in Shultz's 1998 research poll of journalists at the *Times* (qtd. in Santana 68). As one reporter claimed in that poll, email from readers was useful in determining possible story ideas and story development.

Most news organizations with an online presence began including comment boards for online news stories in the late 2000s to give readers a greater chance to play a participatory role in journalism (Santana 67). Many news organizations provide commenting boards as another means by which readers can hold journalism accountable and as a way to build community (Cenite and Zhang 293, 297). Although structural features of comment boards vary across news organizations (for instance, whether real names or pseudonyms are used), most boards share an important feature: they allow more users than ever the chance to publicly post feedback on the same page as the journalist's reporting (293). At the *Times*, they are included in most breaking news stories as a way to invite reader advice and criticism (*New York Times*).

Many journalism scholars claim that the comment board promotes greater accountability and

tighter interaction between reader and journalist. Some argue that journalists will be more receptive to reader questions and concerns due to the structural features of the board (Cenite and Zhang; Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos; Singer and Ashman). Cenite and Zhang relate greater journalist accountability to structural features that allow reader feedback to appear on the same page as the journalist's story (293). A publication's decision to include a comment board, which provides a space for readers to post and discuss criticisms and concerns regarding the news story, invites an interactive journalistic response (Cenite and Zhang; Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos; Santana; Singer; Singer and Ashman).

Although research on reader perceptions of the purpose of the online comment is lacking, there has been significant research on how journalists perceive the role of the comment, particularly how it shapes their practices and interaction with readers. Journalists report that online comments are leading them to provide additional sourcing information as a way to be more accountable to readers (Santana); also, comments are promoting increasingly interactive responses (Singer and Ashman).

Santana recently conducted a survey of how comments shape journalistic practices and responses at U.S. newspapers with circulations of fifty thousand or more. He found that "commenters have spurred reporters to re-examine the newsworthiness of a topic and have also helped them think of new and different stories to tell while nudging them towards new and different ways to tell them" (77). Of the 1,498 reporters in the survey,

> [m]ore than 23 percent said they contact or include more sources in their news stories; nearly the same amount said they include more facts in their news stories; 12 percent reported that they include more attribution and more than 38 percent said the comments made them more mindful of word choice [than they were when they wrote articles to be printed in the newspaper]. (74)

Allowing readers the chance to instantly approve or criticize the journalist on the same page as the reporting is encouraging journalists to provide more sourcing and facts.

In their survey of journalists at the international British newspaper the *Guardian,* Singer and Ashman report that the comment board leads journalists not only to pay more attention to detail but also to provide interactive responses. In the words of one interviewee, journalists perceive that as a result of the comment board readers "expect more journalists to step out from behind articles, defend, and discuss them" (16).

Although journalistic self-reporting suggests that there is greater interactivity and accountability between readers and journalists, this research lacks specific description and analysis of these interactions as they happen online. While Santana and Singer and Ashman provide journalistic self-reporting on how comments shape journalistic practices and perceptions, they do not consider actual posted comments in relation to journalistic responses. Do readers tend to direct their posts toward the journalist, or do they seem more interested in responses from the institution and the editor? My case study will consider what kinds of accountability, and from whom, readers on the comment board appear to be interested in. In addition, the study will consider journalistic, editorial, and institutional responses in relation to actual comments and structural features of the board. Research exploring the relationships between perceptions of the purpose of the comment is necessary to understand how journalists and editorial staff will need to adapt their responses to develop and retain readers in an online environment with commenting capabilities.

Media Coverage of the Patrick Witt Story

In November 2011 the media extensively covered Yale quarterback Patrick Witt's decision about whether he would play in a game or participate in his Rhodes interview, a decision he was forced to make because both events were to take place on the same day. Media venues like the *Yale*

Daily portrayed Witt's decision as a difficult choice for a scholar-athlete, as Rhodes refused to reschedule the interview (He). A few days before the football game, Witt made a public announcement that he would choose the team over the Rhodes interview. *USA Today* and the *New York Daily News* highlighted Witt's allegiance to the football team and mentioned no word of a possible suspension of his Rhodes candidacy (Janes; Weiss). About two months later, the *Times* published Pérez-Peña's articles covering the Witt story.

Within a week and a half of the release of "At Yale, the Collapse of a Rhodes Scholar Candidacy," Pérez-Peña wrote three follow-up articles. The articles were followed by a response from the *Times* public editor, Arthur Brisbane. On 27 January 2012, one day after the breaking news story, Pérez-Peña wrote "Diverging Stories of a Rhodes Candidacy," in which he included an official statement from Witt's publicist and an analysis of the response. Five days later, he detailed a recent sexual assault policy report released by Yale in "In Yale Report, 52 Complaints of Sexual Misconduct." Finally, on 3 February 2012, he revealed the anonymous source used to report the suspension of Witt's Rhodes candidacy in "Rhodes Trust Gives Account of Quarterback's Candidacy." Brisbane recounted the events reported by Pérez-Peña and evaluated them in light of readers' concerns in "The Quarterback's Tangled Saga," an article released on 4 February 2012.

The Comments

The *New York Times* added the commenting board, included on most breaking news stories, in 2007 (Santana 67). The *Times*'s comment policy welcomes strong, opinionated criticism from readers who are registered with their real first and last names and geographic location and have chosen a screen name for public use. Comments are screened before they are posted to "create a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of [the *Times*'s] news and information." They are posted if they are "articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article" (*New York Times*). After comments are approved, they appear initially in the "All" section and are later ranked in the "Readers' Picks" and "*NYT* Picks" sections based on recommendations they receive from readers or the *Times,* respectively.

In the commenting board for "At Yale, the Collapse," 283 readers posed questions to one another and provided feedback to the *Times,* the journalist, and the editor; they also produced sourcing information and raised concerns related to the article's content. Clear themes emerge in the comment board, in particular, Yale's sexual assault policy and the charge facing Witt as well as editorial decisions associated with the article. Of the 283 comments, 113 mentioned the sexual assault policy or charge (40%) and 87 (31%) mentioned the article's editorial decisions. The remainder of readers posted feedback on issues like academics versus sports, Ivy League sports politics, and Witt's personal character.

Many readers mentioned a host of issues related to sexual assault; considering the "Readers' Picks" section, though (a good place to understand readers' relationships to comments not only through the content of the posts themselves but also by determining the popularity of certain comments), the most prominent concerns were formalities of sexual assault policies at Yale and the status of the charge facing Witt. In the "Readers' Picks" section, eleven of the twenty comments that received fifty or more reader recommendations specifically mentioned these issues. Other related concerns mentioned on the board included personal narratives of experiences filing complaints at Ivy League universities and victims' rights in these sorts of proceedings.

Carolina Cynic received fifty-one reader recommendations for a question related to the informal complaint facing Witt: "Can a person be denied or penalized on the basis of an anonymous complaint?" In reply, Len's comment received the same number of recommendations for clarifying that according to the article, the woman filing the complaint against Witt was not anonymous, even though she went through the informal process. Notice that this comment does not answer whether

or not there are penalties associated with the informal process. Debates like the one between Carolina Cynic and Len are important because they appear to be reflected in Pérez-Peña's later articles. He dedicated his most expansive, focused article, "In Yale Report, 52 Complaints of Sexual Misconduct," to clarifying Yale's sexual assault policies. In "Diverging Stories of a Rhodes Candidacy," Pérez-Peña clarified the status of the complaints facing Witt.

Of the eighty-seven commenters who brought up issues with the article's reporting and editing, about half touched on topics related to newsworthiness, while the other half raised sourcing concerns; some mentioned both. Regarding newsworthiness, commenters responded to the lack of verifiable information known about the situation and the timeline of reporting. In the words of Sinoway: "I am very deeply troubled by the *Times* decision to print this story. This article seriously damages a young man's reputation and future prospects and does so in the absence of specific allegations [and] absence of specific facts." Eloise commented that the *Times* "should not have yet published this story" without more investigation and details of the offense. Sinoway and Eloise, like many other commenters, appeared to want more transparency on institutional publishing decisions and confirmation of the reported events surrounding Witt's decision.

While newsworthiness was prominent on the comment board, sourcing became more prominent as it gained more recommendations in the "Readers' Picks" section. Of the top twenty "Readers' Picks" comments that received fifty recommendations or more, all five that brought up issues related to the reporting and editing of the article mentioned sourcing specifically. The majority of readers who posted about sourcing mentioned the decision to report the sexual assault charge anonymously; others wanted more specific sourcing information from Witt, Rhodes, and/or Yale.

In response to the anonymous sourcing used in the article, ANetliner received sixty-three recommendations from fellow readers for the following comment:

> I hope that this story, which relies on anonymous sources, has been thoroughly confirmed. I have no interest in covering up sexual assault, but if the *Times* is incorrect, the story is terribly damaging to Mr. Witt and to Yale.

A few comments later in the "Readers' Picks" section, MG received fifty-nine recommendations from fellow readers for the following comment:

> To be sure, this story raises a lot of troubling questions and concerns . . . about the ethics of the *New York Times* publishing such a story in the absence of named sources or formal charges.

Interestingly, even though as the named author of the story Pérez-Peña has some accountability for the information reported, readers like ANetliner and MG as well as Sinoway and Eloise held the *New York Times* accountable for relying on anonymous sourcing and ethical decisions surrounding the reportage. Their responses are representative of the way readers tended to view the board: as a tool to hold the institution and editor accountable, not necessarily the journalist.

Of the seventy readers who addressed their comments toward an actor—whether the journalist, the *New York Times,* or the editor—only four mentioned the journalist. Two of the four who mentioned the journalist did not solely address him; rather, they directed feedback toward the journalist *and* the editor. The third comment referred to sports writers broadly, not Pérez-Peña explicitly. The final comment mentioned "a reporter" to highlight journalistic bias. In other words, no reader comments addressed Pérez-Peña specifically and alone.

Even though Singer and Ashman's research indicates that journalists prioritize added accountability toward reader concerns, readers do not necessarily perceive the board as a means to establish greater reader-journalist accountability; however, they do appear to see it as a way to hold the publishing institution accountable. Reader comments that specifically address the editor and the institution represent a preference for a print media–based type of response from these actors.

Accountability is not necessarily greater between reader and journalist in an online environment with commenting capabilities, at least from the reader's perspective; rather, it is intertwined between journalist, editor, and the institution in complex ways.

"*NYT* Picks"—The Institutional Response

The highlighted comments in the "*NYT* Picks" section are a type of institutional response that tells us about relationships between reader, journalist, and editorial staff. The *Times*'s choice to validate certain comments makes clear where consensus between "*NYT* Picks" and "Readers' Picks" lies, especially since these sections are visually juxtaposed. Because it is not clear whether the journalist or editorial staff highlighted the comment, the "*NYT* Picks" may structurally distance reader and journalist. Since the "*NYT* Picks" section does not allow Pérez-Peña to make clear which comments he agrees with, the "*NYT* Picks" response situates the journalist as less accountable to reader concerns. Perhaps the structural nature of the response is one of the reasons readers on the comment board primarily hold the institution and editor accountable for the reporting.

Pérez-Peña's Response

In contrast to the potentially distancing features of the "*NYT* Picks" section, Pérez-Peña's follow-up articles create a more accountable and interactive relationship between reader and journalist. Interestingly, there are some features of his responses that are not documented by journalists in Santana's survey. For instance, Pérez-Peña wrote a series of follow-up articles that are responsive to the most prominent concerns among readers on the comment board. Additionally, after statements were released from Witt's publicist and Eliot Gerson of the Rhodes Trust, he attached their statements to the online news stories and assessed the information they reported.

Pérez-Peña provided accountability in follow-up articles by responding to reader concerns in accordance to their prevalence on the comment board. Pérez-Peña's most expansive article, "In Yale Report, 52 Complaints of Sexual Misconduct," clarified and elaborated upon the informal and formal sexual assault policies at Yale, the most prominent theme in the readers' comments. His response demonstrated accountability to the host of readers who raised questions and concerns on this issue, including Carolina Cynic and Len. Later on, Pérez-Peña was receptive to readers' sourcing requests by attaching an official statement from Witt's publicist to the original news story and one from Eliot Gerson in his final article.

Attaching Witt's publicist's statement to the same page as the breaking news story, "At Yale, the Collapse" is a new type of interactive journalistic response that takes advantage of the comment board's potential. Including the response on the same page provides readers the chance to assess updated sourcing information in relation to how the story was originally reported and comment accordingly. Future visitors to the breaking news story will be able to view both reader comments and journalistic response and have the opportunity to evaluate each to make their own assessment.

In the final news story about Witt, Pérez-Peña attached a statement from Eliot Gerson, the original source he used to report Witt's Rhodes suspension, to confirm the events reported in the breaking news story, and to continue to address reader criticism. The article's frame of the statement as confirmation of the events and timeline originally reported responds to the newsworthiness and sourcing concerns on the comment board. The article's comparison of the timeline and information surrounding Witt's decision (now confirmed by Rhodes) to the events as reported by Witt's publicist is representative of a new type of interactive reply that seems to be in response to the variety of sourcing demands on the comment board.

Public Editor Arthur Brisbane's Response

The public editor of the *New York Times* is part of an internal affairs division: "As the readers' representative, Mr. Brisbane responds to complaints and comments from the public and monitors the paper's journalistic practices." This includes assessing published story content in addition to how well editors and journalists reply to reader criticism. The public editor has access to conversations concerning content and editorial decisions, and he or she is expected to provide information to the public on these issues. Unlike other editors, the public editor does not make decisions regarding the publishing process, but rather responds to decisions made by journalists and editorial staff, assessing responses in light of reader feedback ("Public Editor Biography").

Public editor Arthur Brisbane responded to Pérez-Peña's coverage of the Patrick Witt story: he assessed it in light of reader feedback and provided information on editorial decisions from the managing editor of the *Times.* In a column appearing in the Sunday op-ed section entitled "The Quarterback's Tangled Saga," Brisbane wrote that in response to the lack of sourcing apparent in the original article, "Readers noticed. For some, the *Times* decision to use the sexual assault charge was way out of bounds, especially given the nature of the sourcing and the documentation." With this acknowledgment of readers' complaints, Brisbane's article refers to readers broadly, except for one instance where he cites a specific email from reader Susan Arlington. Rather than pick a reader concern from among the 283 comments or the "Readers' Picks" section to elaborate upon reader concerns, Brisbane instead cites an email.

Even though Brisbane's job description states that he is responsive to reader comments, his decision to refer to readers broadly, an email explicitly, and reader comments not at all indicates an undervaluing of reader feedback on the comment board. By addressing an email rather than the publicly available comments, Brisbane is perhaps resisting interactions with online readers and exhibiting print journalism habits in this online space. This general response shifts the responsibility for specifics on to the journalist—in this case, Pérez-Peña. The effect is a more direct and accountable relationship between reader and journalist and a distancing one between reader and editor.

Conclusion

This case study provides evidence that it is possible for reader feedback on the comment board to have a major impact on how a news story develops; journalistic responses in this case included adding more verifiable sources and evidence. Although reader comments held the institution accountable more than the journalist who wrote the story, the journalist Pérez-Peña responded to their concerns quickly and directly. Journalist accountability to readers on the comment board is enhanced by the public editor's response, which cited reader criticism from an email as opposed to the comment board.

My analysis of comments in relation to Pérez-Peña's responses supports the importance of sourcing in Santana's research findings. In addition, new features of accountable and interactive responses emerge, not previously reported by journalists. Pérez-Peña paid special attention to sourcing information as the story developed: he attached updated sourcing information to the online news stories as it became available. New features and types of responses include: responding to themes in order of their prominence on the comment board, attaching updated sourcing information to the same page as news stories, and assessing updated sourcing information in later articles in relation to how they were originally reported.

Even though the journalist and public editor in this case appeared to be interested in creating reader-journalist relationships with greater accountability and interactivity, readers perceived the comment board as a space to hold the institution and the editor accountable, not necessarily the journalist. The wider implication is that giving readers the chance to post feedback on the same

page as the journalist's story does not necessarily lead them to perceive the journalist as primarily accountable for the information reported in the article. These results are especially relevant for online journalism, since journalism ethics scholars are arguing that journalists should be more accountable for the information they report in response to the new capabilities of the comment board (Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos 269). Specifically, the results suggest ways journalists can craft responses in follow-up stories to breaking news articles, especially where sourcing concerns are prominent.

Why did reader comments in this case refer to the institution rather than journalist in their concerns about the sourcing and newsworthiness of the Witt story? They may have been responding to the anonymous structure of the "*NYT* Picks," or they may be extending their assumptions about interaction from print media into online media. Although they could write specifically to the journalist Pérez-Peña, most of them chose not to, suggesting that readers perceive the board more as a space to provide feedback to the institution and the editor. We might better understand how the assumptions of print media are affecting the potential of online interactivity with more ethnographic studies on how readers perceive the purpose of the comment and the value of reader-journalist interaction. In the meantime, the capabilities are there—the journalist is waiting.

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