CommentIQ: Enhancing Journalistic Curation of Online News Comments

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ABSTRACT

National news outlets routinely publish articles that attract hundreds and even thousands of user comments. These comments often provide valuable feedback and critique, personal perspectives, new information and expertise, and opportunities for discussion (not to mention profanity and vitriol). The varying quality of comments demands a high level of moderation and curatorial attention in order to cultivate a successful online community around news. Amongst publishers there is a growing awareness that finding and publicly highlighting high quality comments can in turn promote the general quality of the discourse. Further journalistic value can be gleaned by identifying and developing new sources of information and expertise from comments. In this talk I will present an editorially-aware visual analytics system called CommentIQ that supports moderators in curating high quality news comments at scale. The possibilities and ramifications of algorithmically infused social media moderation will be discussed in terms of journalistic ideals and norms of free speech and inclusion.

Keywords
Computational Journalism, News Commenting, Comment Quality, Comment Moderation, Visual Analytics

1. INTRODUCTION
Comments are a feature offered by many U.S. news publishers on their websites. A survey in late 2013 found that 100% of top national news outlets and over 90% of local news outlets allowed for users to write comments that are published below a news article [5]. Comments provide an outlet for users to both share and receive additional information, develop opinions, be entertained, and form social bonds through interactions around the news they consume [2]. Yet there are ongoing concerns over the at-times vitriolic and otherwise low-quality discourse in online comments, with several recent closures of comments by news sites.

Moderation efforts have traditionally focused on identifying and filtering out low quality comments [10], or in detecting individuals that exhibit trolling behavior [1]. Moderating online news comments is a particularly challenging task due to the overwhelming volume of content, as well as the nuance and context that moderators sometimes need to understand and consider when dealing with sensitive or political issues.

Comment moderation must cope with immense *scale* – there are far too many comments in comparison to the time and attention that moderators can give to them.

In this presentation I will discuss an approach to managing online discussion based less on identifying and removing low quality comments as on identifying and highlighting high quality comments that can in turn set the tone and expectations for quality commentary on a site. This approach towards improving discourse quality is supported by mounting evidence suggesting the effectiveness of signally norms and expectations for behavior in online commenting [6,8,11]. There are a range of journalistically interesting editorial criteria that can be applied to identifying quality comments including everything from relevance and argument quality, to readability, personal experience, thoughtfulness, novelty, and others [3,4]. The challenge thus becomes one of identifying and surfacing the best and highest quality contributions from a comment stream, at scale, in a way that respects such journalistic editorial criteria. These goals are reified in a visual analytic tool that we have designed called CommentIQ [9].

CommentIQ supports comment moderators in interactively identifying high quality comments using a combination of editorially inspired comment analytic scores as well as visualizations and flexible UI components. The system was evaluated with professional comment moderators working at local and national news outlets in the U.S. Our findings highlight the potential and utility of the approach and uncover new scenarios and use cases for comments to inform journalistic processes such as reporting and sourcing new information, while also underscoring the limitations of quantification and the various metrics that we developed. In this presentation I will also discuss opportunities for the application of the quality metrics developed in CommentIQ to other automated forms of journalistic curation, such as in News Bots [7].

2. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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