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Media Audiences' Engagement with Social Issues:
A content analysis of online daily newspaper articles and audi-
ence comments

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of Missouri – St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the require-
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Abstract

This study examines how articles covering social issues are highlighted on top online daily newspapers' websites and how that influences the audiences' emotionality and willingness to help the corresponding social issue as identified in the websites' comment sections. The articles have been gathered from five of the top online daily newspaper media outlets: *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Houston Chronicle* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. Three social issues are highlighted as key topics that are relevant to today's American society and typically require a need for orientation: gun control, cancer and animal rights. The method for conducting this research is a quantitative content analysis of 200 online daily newspaper articles containing audience comments. This content analysis reveals that the negative emotions of anger and anxiety relate significantly to the commenters' tendency to express an intention to act in favor of a social issue. Articles covering the issues of gun control and animal rights had more expression of the emotion of anger in the comments than articles covering cancer. However, the data revealed that no significant relationship is present between the three social issues and the number of engagement or action comments. Surprisingly, this content analysis reveals that the placement of an article on an online daily newspaper does not relate to media audiences' level of engagement as identified by the number of audience comments.

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Chapter One: Introduction

During the Chapel Hill, North Carolina election in 1968, a small group of undecided voters identified issues that they regarded as most important that were then compared to the specific news coverage these voters used to follow the campaign. Results showed the issue agendas prominent in the news became prominent among the public, which is now referred to as the process of agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005). First-level agenda-setting is described as the transfer of object salience (e.g. groups of people, companies, issues, individuals) from one agenda, such as that of the media, to another agenda, such as that of the public. The media play an important role in agenda-setting, “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang & Bae, 2014, p. 193).

Since the theory was first developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, agenda-setting has expanded to include online news sources, such as online versions of daily newspapers. The Internet is now the latest media entity being researched with regards to agenda-setting theory since the Internet has drastically shaped the communication behaviors of audiences and makes the ever-growing number of media agendas readily available to audiences (McCombs, 2005). The Internet has also proved to be an emerging topic of interest among researchers, as this media platform allows for two-way communication between the media outlet and the audience. This two-way communication can influence reverse agenda-setting where the media audiences project what the media outlet should include in their agenda. Unlike prior media sources, the Internet provides a media outlet

with real-time audience feedback on a particular topic. This real-time audience engagement is made available by several different avenues, such as discussion boards, comment sections, social media, and video chat, among others. This relatively new multi-platform media environment has influenced media audiences' relationship to news as becoming personalized, portable and participatory.

To a great extent, people's experience of news, especially on the internet, is becoming a shared social experience as people swap links in emails, post news stories on their social networking site feeds, highlight news stories in their Tweets, and haggle over the meaning of events in discussion threads.

(Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosensteil & Olmstead, 2010, p. 2)

It is important to understand demographics related to Internet use, as this two-way communication medium is becoming increasingly more popular and has recently emerged as a topic of interest among researchers. Understanding who makes up the Internet user population can provide greater insight on Internet trends and behaviors. For example, Internet users tend to represent a young age profile (ages 18-29), which could indicate that Internet usage will continue to be a common behavior for quite some time and therefore, denotes Internet usage an important area of study for researchers (Rainie, 2013). Online news users can be broken down even further to include a sub-group of "on-alert" users.

A third of the on-the-go news user group is constantly 'on alert' for updates and headlines. Within this active group of on-the-go news consumers is a super-intense group of newsies-those who not only use their phones to get news,

but also have news alerts and updates sent to their phones.

(Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosensteel, & Olmstead, 2010, p. 38)

These on-alert news users are likely to be more engaged and participatory with the news a media outlet shares, as well as with fellow members of the media audience who are also being exposed to the same news content. These on-alert news users see themselves as having a duty to stay informed by the latest news. “Compared with other on-the-go news consumers, this on-alert group is even more likely to feel they have a social or civic obligation to stay informed (80% v. 61%)” (Smidt, 2012, p. 38).

This research will evaluate media audiences' comments posted to online daily newspapers' discussion boards in effort to determine how media audiences respond to specific social issue topics. Social issues and responsibility related to social issues are prevalent with media audiences. “Surprisingly, the most popular reasons for following the news do not relate to personal entertainment or professional motivations. Instead, they have to do with social interaction and/or a sense of civic responsibility” (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosensteel, & Olmstead, 2010, p. 15). Three social issues will be highlighted as key topics that are relevant to today's American society and typically require a need for orientation: gun control, cancer and animal rights. The articles covering these three social issues have been gathered from five of the top online daily newspaper media outlets as identified by Burrelles: *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* (See Appendix A). It is important to note that although the outlet titles contain names of specific states or cities, the outlets are still established as national media outlets due to their distribution and audience numbers.

These online daily newspapers have been chosen for analysis due to their reputation for credibility and national level of reporting. In effort to remain consistent and streamline the study, online outlets affiliated with television, radio or independent news sites will not be examined in this particular study.

Audience Response to News Content

Media audiences often articulate their responses to online news content via the comment sections provided below articles. Ziegele and Quiring define online audience comments as a “media stimulated interpersonal communication that is published directly below news items on news websites or on news media presences within other online communication services” (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013, p. 1,134). According to a 2010 survey, it appears as if media audiences are active in the comment sections of online news articles and find the opportunity to provide feedback on online articles appealing. “With regard to actual participation, a survey of the Pew Research Center found that 25% of adult U.S. Internet users have already commented on online news or news blogs at least once, and that 37% appreciated the comment function” (Ziegele, Breiner & Quiring, 2014, p. 1,111). In their research of user-to-user interactions within online article comment sections, Ziegele, Breiner, and Quiring found that the position of the article on a website, the specific outlet and the news story topic increased media audience participation within the comment sections. In this research, the position of an article on a website will be referred to as, “prominence” and is defined as an article appearing on the “top”, “middle” or “bottom” of a webpage. The section in which an article appears will also be

taken into consideration when determining prominence. Sections are defined as “breaking news”, “top news”, “editors picks”, “home page,” or “second-level page”.

Action Tendencies

Action tendencies refer to an individual communicating their willingness to help or communicating to others that something specific should be done in effort to address the issue at hand. In this research, willingness to help a social issue will be identified by “action-oriented” comments, comments that explicitly note some level of action must be taken in order to improve the issue at hand. Comments that are not identified as action-oriented will be identified as expressing a level of “engagement”, comments that evoke interest in the topic at hand and do not indicate that any action should be taken, or “unrelated”, comments that do not relate to the issue at hand.

Action tendencies and the participatory nature of media audiences can be influenced even before they've had a chance to read the content of an article, as the placement of an article on a website can communicate an article's importance. “Research on news value theory has shown that secondary factors - such as the visibility of news items - moderate the influence of news factors on the news selection of media users” (Ziegele, Breiner & Quiring, 2014, p. 1,112). Media can enable action tendencies in audiences through a simple call-to-action present in news content. “A call to action was defined as any additional information readers could use to facilitate personal action” (Kensicki, 2004, p. 59). Researchers have identified the presence of a “call-to-action” being associated with the audiences' willingness to assist with a social issue.

It has been argued that such 'mobilizing information' is fundamental in enabling and empowering the public to act (Lemert, 1984). Kensicki suggested that when media do not discuss how problems can be solved, they promote public apathy due to lack of connection between social problems, nonprofit or government organizations, and individual action. (Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 220)

McKeever discusses the importance of including a 'call-to-action', specifically with the social/health topic of autism.

Media framing of the causes and solutions of autism may affect public perceptions of the problem, whereby focusing on solutions may influence people to actively seek or facilitate change. Similarly, calls to action may provide individuals with the specific information they need to act or get involved with a cause. (Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 220)

Members of the media even note the importance of calls-to-action with regards to a social issue and how this might influence the audiences' tendencies to act.

Columnist Molly Ivins has argued that news articles need more calls to action, such as a simple contact phone number, so individuals can use the information that they have learned through the news. The public could presumably become engaged if clear relationships are formed in the media among individual action, problems in society, and nonprofit citizen organizations working to combat them (Kensicki, 2004, p. 56).

Issue relevancy presented by the media to the target audience also influences audiences' willingness to act. "When readers are exposed to environmental information that discuss-

es actual losses to the current generation, there is a sharp rise in intent to participate environmentally responsible behaviors, such as conservation and recycling” (Kensicki, 2004, p. 65). However, if the audience does not feel connected to the issue or has difficulty understanding the connection between the issue and the organization that assists with a particular issue, the audience may not act to help the issue. “Those who read about these social problems may not have been inclined to become involved in any larger movement or citizen organization simply because they were not making the cognitive link between the problems and those organizations” (Kensicki, 2004, p. 66).

Emotionality

Many news articles, specifically those that cover the topics of social issues, may influence media audiences to respond to content in an emotional manner. According to *What Makes Online Content Viral?*, media audiences may focus on the emotional aspects of media coverage and react in an emotional manner in effort to make sense of the issue at hand, reduce dissonance and deepen their social connections with other audience members (Berger & Milkman, 2011). Media content has the ability to evoke specific emotions and, in turn, encourages their audiences to act.

In addition to being positive or negative, emotions also differ on the level of physiological arousal or activation they evoke. Anger, anxiety, and sadness are all negative emotions, for example, but while anger and anxiety are characterized by states of heightened arousal or activations, sadness is characterized by low arousal or deactivation. (Berger & Milkman, 2011, p. 2)

Particular emotions have the capability to influence action-related behaviors, whereas other emotions influence non-action oriented behaviors.

Arousal is a state of mobilization. While low arousal or deactivation is characterized by relaxation, high arousal or activation is characterized by activity. Indeed, this excitatory state has been shown to increase action-related behaviors such as getting up to help others and responding faster to offers in negotiations. (Berger & Milkman, 2011, p. 2)

It is interesting to note that although several different discrete emotions are deemed negative, including both sadness and anger, they do not all relate to audiences' behavior in the same way. The level of activation associated with the emotion must also be taken into account to determine how an individual may respond or act. For example, anger is characterized as high activation and will likely encourage action-oriented behaviors, whereas sadness is characterized as low activation and will likely encourage non-action oriented behaviors. Positive emotions can also arise when being exposed to media content that covers social issues, such as awe. "Awe is characterized by a feeling of admiration and elevation in the face of something greater than oneself (e.g. a new scientific discovery, someone overcoming adversity)" (Berger & Milkman, 2011, p. 3).

The level of emotionality found within each comment, besides unrelated comments, will also be evaluated in the research in effort to associate specific emotions with specific social issues. Comments will be identified with associating with one of five emotions or lack there of: anger, anxiety, awe, sadness or neutral.

This research has the potential to assist organizations that represent these particular social issues to understand the level of importance media coverage plays with regards to engagement with the issue and actual willingness to help with what the corresponding organizations support. In turn, this may assist in evaluating future investments in media buys, public relations and various campaigns.

Hypothesis

In effort to evaluate article placement, as well as media audiences' comments posted to online daily newspapers' discussion boards and how media audiences respond to specific social issue topics, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H1: Articles covering social issues that are displayed more prominently on an online daily newspapers' website will have a higher proportion of action comments and engagement comments than articles covering the same social issues that are placed less prominently on the website.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The press no longer holds all of the power in setting the public's agenda. "The key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about" (Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 236). Audience members are now communicating what is important to them and the masses via the Internet due to the ease and accessibility of contributing to news content (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, & Bae, 2014). "The notion of reverse agenda-setting meant simply that journalists may be responding to actual or perceived public interests and thus the public agenda could be seen as preceding and influencing the media

agenda” (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, & Bae, 2014, p. 195). Nigeria’s model of the participatory cross-media value chain displays a recent framework for the process of creating and receiving media messages (see Appendix B). It is interesting to note the influence media audiences have over various stages of media message curation, which signifies the impact media audiences have on the type of messages they receive.

Intermedia agenda-setting or the homogeneity of news agendas was found not only in the Chapel Hill study, but also among today’s current media outlets. Online news agendas display a great homogeneity amongst each other since many online agendas match those of their traditional media counterparts and even their online competitors. Media outlets may report on a topic in the same manner as their competitors, but cite the original source so as not to be on the receiving end of negative comments from special interest groups.

A number of studies attribute intermedia communication processes to common interests and sources among journalists as well as news organizations’ willingness to ‘report on a report’. Especially when reporting sensitive issues that might offend interest groups (e.g. advertisers), news agencies often cover the issues by citing the original report to make themselves appear relatively neutral.

(Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, & Bae, 2014, p.195)

With regards to social issues, researchers have identified control of agenda-setting as a goal of many activist groups in effort to gain advocacy for the particular cause (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010).

More recently, media advocacy has been described as consisting of three steps:

(a) setting the agenda, (b) framing the issue, and (c) advancing a solution. Thus, media advocacy encompasses the ideas of both agenda setting and framing by activating forces in a social system (that is, media coverage) to help stimulate public concern and action. (Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 215)

The Internet serves as a useful platform for activist groups. For example, civic groups in South Korea in 2000 and 2004 developed a “blacklisting campaign” to bring down politicians who were identified as incompetent. The agenda-setting prominence of this particular issue can be attributed to the groups’ use of publicizing and organizing supporters via the Internet platform (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010, p. 563). According to PEW survey research, the characteristics of an activist using the Internet as a platform include being young, well-educated, well-to-do, liberal rather than conservative and heavy consumers of news in all forms (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010).

Agenda-setting effects - the transmission of object and attribute salience from the press to the public about issues, political figures and other topics - have significant consequences for people’s attitudes and opinions. This stage of agenda-setting theory has identified three distinct consequences of agenda-setting for attitudes and opinions: forming an opinion, priming opinions about public figures through an emphasis on particular issues and shaping an opinion through an emphasis on particular attributes. (McCombs, 2005, p. 549)

Framing

The media has the potential to influence thousands of audience members at one time through the manner in which they frame a news story and ways they encourage the

audience to think about the topic. "News is an authoritative version of reality" (Kensicki, 2004, p. 54). Second level agenda-setting refers to how a particular issue is framed and which attributes of the issue are emphasized. Attributes function to describe and define the objects present in agenda-setting. Robert Entman defines framing as:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (McCombs, 2005, p. 546).

According to McKeever, frames are specifically designed to speak to the target audience and not necessarily the masses, "encouraging target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way" (Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 218). Due to the influence of priming by media sources, audiences and even society as a whole may have particular impressions about a social issue. "The media priming hypothesis addresses the effects media may have, suggesting that by focusing attention on certain issues and overlooking others, news media have the ability to influence the standards by which public policies are judged" (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 2).

Framing can be identified as a "packaging process" that allows the audience to better understand the issue at hand.

News media seek to reduce the complexity of issues by presenting them in easy-to-understand interpretive packages. Framing serves as a packaging process, which involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient, while leaving other aspects out of the package. (Ragas & Kioussis, 2010, p. 565)

Researchers also believe that, in some cases, framing can shape the perceptions of what certain individuals cannot experience directly. "Consequently, public understanding of social issues derives from a construction provided by media over time" (Kensicki, 2004, p. 54).

Framing Social Issues

With regards to social issues, the media play an important role in defining the actual issue. "The media frame a issue in a certain way, telling the audience what is important to know about and how to think about it" (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010, p. 563). Researchers, Kim and Willis also discuss the media playing an important role in the process of defining a social issue.

The media have the power to select certain issues for social attention and thereby set the agenda for policymakers and the general public. News media also 'frame' an issue in a certain way, telling the audience what is important to know about the issue. (Kim & Willis, 2007, p. 360)

Beyond object salience, "what to think about", the media may also influence attribute salience, "how to think about objects" (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010, p. 563). Framing and highlighting particular attributes help draw attention to the perspectives of the audience, as well as the entity or person doing the communicating. According to McCombs, certain characteristics of an object or issue may resonate well with an audience and increase salience of the issue overall. Researchers have also discovered that the coverage of issues in a positive tone decreased issue salience, whereas coverage of issues using a negative tone increased issue salience (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). Perhaps this could account for the

media's reputation of reporting stories in a negative manner and the passion ensued by audience members around negatively presented issues.

Media have the choice to frame issues as episodic or thematic where episodic framing involves the element of storytelling with an individual context and thematic framing places a topic at a larger, more abstract social context.

It is in episodic presentations that the media mistake important social issues for little human-interest stories. Problems are seen as personal in nature and disassociated from larger social, political, and economic factors. Most causes instead are found irresponsible or unfortunate individuals.

(Kim & Willis, 2007, p. 361)

Iyengar discovered that when television news stories on crime were framed in an episodic manner, audiences would attribute responsibility on the individual level, whereas stories framed in a thematic manner led audiences to attribute responsibility to society (Coleman, Thorson & Wilkins, 2011). Another discovery from Iyengar shows how audiences understand and potentially act with regards to health issues.

More recently, an experiment involving media framing of lung cancer and obesity confirmed that thematic framing is the most effective way to help people understand society's role in solving problems, which might inspire collective public action, while episodic framing might inspire individual action.

(Shehata & Stromback, 2013, p. 219)

Media tend to frame social issues in an episodic manner, as a thematic based story typically involves more background research for the practitioner and stories with an individ-

ual context result in larger audience numbers for the media company. Evidence is found in the research presented by Coleman that “public health issues are rarely described thematically in news stories” (Coleman, Thorson, & Wilkins, 2011, p. 943).

The media select specific frames when presenting a particular issue. For example, social norms/cultural values, individual/social level and organizational pressures/constraints can all be factors that are considered when deciding upon the manner in which to frame a situation. Researchers have found that Americans prefer social issues, such as health issues, to be presented on an individual level rather than on a social level, as audiences want to believe their social systems are fundamentally sound. As a result, media tend to present social issues on an individual level in news coverage (McKeever, 2012). Media tend to present social issues on an individual level rather than on a social level for several reasons. The individualized American culture, societal approaches being seen as too radical and episodic framing are highlighted as being the reasons for the media's individual level of social issue representation (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). Kim and Willis also point out the trepidation for news organizations to report on social issues at a societal level, rather than an individual level. “Because many societal solutions can be considered too radical either politically or economically, they may be rejected in news coverage in favor of less drastic measures” (Kim & Willis, 2007, p. 373). Typically, media will frame issues to attract a large audience due to the organizational pressures of attaining high audience numbers. “News organizations are for-profit organizations; the items that attract larger audiences become a regular choice. Likewise, framing a story in a way that attracts large audiences may become necessary when journalists consider which frames to

use” (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010, p. 564). The researchers point out several elements of a story that attract large audiences: “drama, conflict, good and evil” (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010, p. 564). Media may even report on social issues in a disproportionate manner in effort to appeal to cultural norms.

Research examining media coverage of social problems has typically focused on false assumptions and stereotypical portrayals of those affected. For example, poverty has been disproportionately portrayed as an African American problem even though African Americans make up less than one-third of the poor, but one out of every three poor persons in the media is African American.

(Kensicki, 2004, p. 54)

Specific Social Issues

The social issues of gun-control, cancer and animal rights have been identified by the University of Maryland as being among the list of “Social Problems & News Topics in the Twenty-First Century.” Due to these three social issues being identified as topics of interest to Americans and those that allow space for greater understanding by media audiences, these three social issues have been included in the study.

In addition, media socially construct social movements for their audiences. The issues and the actors are presented in ways that may influence the public’s opinion and/or action. Media accounts may be especially influential for the individuals who have little other information on the subject being discussed. The way in which the message is presented may thus be of great importance.

(Kruse, 2001, p. 67)

Gun Control

Gun control serves as a popular issue topic in the media's agenda. Shocking events, such as school shootings, tend to receive extensive national and local media coverage. These individual events involving guns build to represent the overall topic of gun control in media coverage and tend to evoke strong opinions or dramatic responses from those who feel victimized. "These shooting events are examples of second prominent media storyline on guns and gun control, event-driven news stories reporting on dramatic instances of gun violence that often occurred within schools" (Smidt, 2012, p. 76). As a result of the frequency in school gun violence with shootings at Columbine and a shooting at a Florida school the following May, The Million Mom March grassroots organization received extensive media coverage. Typically, grassroots organizations lacking prominent political figures do not rank high in the media's agenda. However, The Million Mom March organization research reveals that a grassroots organization that lacks a strong political actor can receive extensive media coverage if timed appropriately. This organization emerged as President Clinton was addressing gun violence and multiple school shootings had occurred in a short period of time. Another factor involves President Clinton's strong partisan stance and The Million Mom March having a more general appeal to media audiences with its less partisan approach.

Health Issues/Cancer

Health related agenda-setting research first emerged in the 1980s, examining the mass media's role in influencing action among media audiences for the issue of smoking.

Perhaps the earliest evidence of research that attempted to establish the agenda-setting role of the media regarding health behaviors was conducted by Pierce, Dwyer, Chamberlain, Aldrich, and Shelley, who noted the 'possible importance of an agenda-setting role for the mass media in promoting change' among smokers targeted in an anti-smoking campaign. Summarizing, Rogers specifically noted the importance of the 'media agenda-setting process for health issues'. (Jones, Denham, & Springston, 2006, p. 97)

This research reveals the important role mass media plays with regards to health issues and how agenda-setting theory proves to be an applicable theory with regards to attitudes and behaviors. This provides a strong basis for this new research in examining the influence of agenda-setting on audiences' willingness to help a social issue. Cancer has proven to be an important topic covered by the mass media, as the American Cancer Society has reported that several hundred thousand people will die each year due to cancer (Jones, Denham, & Springston, 2006). Manganello and Blake noted that the topic of cancer was one of eighteen health categories that should be further explored by researchers.

Researchers have noted that the presence of personal health stories within a news article, influences the audiences' perceptions and actions towards the health issue.

It seems likely that including anecdotes about individuals dealing with health issues may encourage comparisons between the self and featured individuals, thereby altering responses to messages. This type of effect may vary based on individual differences in the tendency to engage in social comparison, and in the degree of perceived similarity to exemplars. (Hoffner & Ye, 2009, p. 190)

Media coverage of cancer, among other health related topics, has been criticized as a result of inaccurate reporting.

Media observers such as Paulos have also discussed how anecdotes and reporting practices can lead news consumers to make false inferences of risk. Critics have observed that many journalists have not had training in statistics and probability, and thus journalists sometimes cannot adequately scrutinize information supplied by news sources before conveying such information to mass audiences.

(Jones, Denham & Springston, 2006, p. 95)

Animal Rights

The social issue of animal rights has been an important issue to media audiences during the last quarter century and became an increasingly prominent topic with the release of *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer in 1975 and the formation of the organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in the 1980s. The scientific community, in particular, has come under tremendous scrutiny by animal activists for testing products or medications on innocent animals. Others take an opposing view, that scientists must test products or medications on animals before exposing them to humans (Kruse, 2001). Animal rights media coverage tends to focus on the “actor” related to the issue, rather than the issue itself.

Although the actions of the actors are not truly relevant to the validity of the issue at hand, those actions are still ‘news.’ In fact, it could be argued that the attention focused on the actors opens the door for discussion of the issues. However, this attention may color our perceptions of those issues. (Kruse, 2001, p. 74)

Not only does coverage of animal rights focus on the “actors” involved, but also tends to focus on dramatic events, such as a lab break-in. This finding may reveal that this particular issue of animal rights will result in more audience comments as compared to the issues of gun control and cancer.

It is certainly reasonable to suggest that the pro-experimentation forces have an easier time promoting their frames to the media because, in the United States, a dominionistic ideology is to great extent hegemonic. The necessity of animal-based research combines with deeply embedded utilitarian views of animals to form a combination that is difficult to trump. (Kruse, 2001, p. 82)

Emotional Response to Media Coverage

Although media frames have been proven to influence audiences' perceptions of a social issue, it is important to note that individuals can react differently to the same media exposure despite the frame. This notion of differences between emotions of the same valence is referred to as the discrete-emotion perspective.

In the media context, people experience different emotions when reading the same article partially due to the information and beliefs accessible to them, as well as their assessment of whether the situation presented in the story violates values or a pursuit of a goal. (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 5)

The discrete-emotion perspective can be taken into consideration when examining audiences' comments on online daily newspaper articles. These varying emotions are argued to have a distinctive motivation or goal when reacting or the tendency to act.

Tiedens argues that 'people who are induced to feel angry make snap judgments on the basis of salient characteristics, general knowledge structures, or their personal scripts.' When manipulating a story about a student cheating with the inclusion of the phrase 'a well-known track-and-field athlete on campus' to describe the suspect, angry participants relied more on stereotypes than did sad participants. (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 5)

The emotions of anger and sadness are typically associated with social issues, resulting in different beliefs and reactions. "Priming anger tends to lead to more causal attributions than an emotion such as sadness given its relation to the core themes of justice and blame" (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 5). An individual who experiences emotions, such as sadness/sympathy or anger may not necessarily react to a situation in the same manner as another individual who experiences the same emotion. "In sum, research on discrete emotions suggests that even emotions of the same valence are likely to result in different cognitive processes and different attributions, thereby making the specific emotion experienced an important processing variable to consider in media effects research" (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 5). If social issues are presented in a manner that is intended to evoke certain emotions, the media could potentially influence society's beliefs and actions about the issue as a whole. "If media persistently present an issue in a way that is biased toward certain emotional reactions, this could influence both policy and punishment preferences" (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011, p. 14). With regards to punishment preferences, the researchers believe that particular emotions will result in the way audiences prefer to deal with the perpetrator of the social issue. This particular research will discov-

er any patterns of biased emotions in online daily newspaper articles, as well as the comments associated with the articles.

Research Questions

As noted above, many news articles, specifically those that cover the topics of social issues, may influence media audiences to respond to content in an emotional manner. Media audiences make sense of an issue, reduce dissonance and deepen their social connections with other audience members by focusing on the emotional aspects of media coverage and reacting in an emotional manner (Berger & Milkman, 2011). Media content has the ability to evoke specific emotions and, in turn, encourages their audiences to act.

In addition to being positive or negative, emotions also differ on the level of physiological arousal or activation they evoke. Anger, anxiety, and sadness are all negative emotions, for example, but while anger and anxiety are characterized by states of heightened arousal or activations, sadness is characterized by low arousal or deactivation. (Berger & Milkman, 2011, p. 2)

Particular emotions have the capability to influence action-related behaviors, whereas other emotions influence non-action oriented behaviors.

Arousal is a state of mobilization. While low arousal or deactivation is characterized by relaxation, high arousal or activation is characterized by activity. Indeed, this excitatory state has been shown to increase action-related behaviors such as getting up to help others and responding faster to offers in negotiations. (Berger & Milkman, 2011, p. 2)

It is interesting to note that although some emotions are deemed negative, such as sadness and anger, the level of activation must be taken into account to determine how an individual may respond or act. Based on the above research that indicates specific emotions influence media audiences' tendency to act or express the need for action, along with the curiosity to uncover what drives media audiences to act with regards to particular social issues, the following research questions has been developed:

RQ1a: Will negative emotional responses by audience members relate to a stronger willingness to act in positive favor of the social issue being discussed than positive emotional responses?

RQ1b: Will the level of emotionality in the comments vary across articles that deal with different social issues?

An audiences' willingness to act can be influenced by the relevancy of the issue presented by the media. "When readers are exposed to environmental information that discusses actual losses to the current generation, there is a sharp rise in intent to participate environmentally responsible behaviors, such as conservation and recycling" (Kensicki, 2004, p. 65). However, the audience may not act if they do not feel a strong connection to the social issue. "Those who read about these social problems may not have been inclined to become involved in any larger movement or citizen organization simply because they were not making the cognitive link between the problems and those organizations" (Kensicki, 2004, p. 66). Based on the research noted above that indicates action-oriented attitudes and behaviors can vary depending on media audiences' connection with the topic being discussed and the curiosity to identify how media audience engagement varies with certain topics, the following research question has been developed:

RQ2a: Will the proportion of engagement and action-oriented comments vary across articles that deal with different social issues?

Chapter Three: Methodology

The current study conducted a quantitative content analysis of 200 articles obtained from five top online daily newspapers: *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Houston Chronicle* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. These online daily newspapers were identified by BurrellesLuce as being among the top online daily newspapers in the country based on circulation numbers (BurrellesLuce, 2014). Several of these online daily newspapers required a basic online membership, which proved sufficient since the basic memberships allowed access to all articles available on their websites. *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* were excluded from the study due to limited article accessibility available through the basic membership offering.

The 200 articles covered the topics of gun control, cancer or animal rights. These three social issue topic areas were identified by the University of Maryland as being among the list of “Social Problems & News Topics in the Twenty-First Century” (Chadley, 2014). Gun control, cancer and animal rights serve as three separate social issues, which aids in the study’s ability to generalize about the media coverage of social issues as a whole.

A sample of 200 articles was determined after reviewing similar content analyses (Berger & Milkman, 2011) and scaling the number accordingly given the time and resources available for this particular study. The number of comments to be analyzed was not predetermined. However, an informal analysis was conducted to determine the aver-

age number of comments posted to an online daily newspaper's article comment/discussion section. This informal analysis was conducted by scanning top online daily newspapers, besides the online daily newspapers that were to be used for the study, for articles covering the three social issues and determined 33 comments to be the average. As a result of this analysis of 30 online daily newspaper articles, collection of the sample and coding protocol specified that articles to be used for the study must contain at least one comment and a random sample of 33 comments must be taken when the article's comments exceed 33. The number of audiences' comments were capped given the time and resources available for this study.

A coding scheme was developed in effort to determine any links between article prominence or the social issue being covered and level of audience engagement identified via audiences' comments. The coding scheme was built in order to identify the total number of comments prior to any random sampling of 33 comments, identify the level of engagement for each comment (engagement, action, or unrelated), identify the level of emotionality for each comment (anger, awe, sadness, anxiety, or neutral) and identify any presence of heightened emotion for each comment (presence of exclamation points, all-capped words, repetitive letters, or words one right after the other). The name of coder, article title, article date, online daily newspaper, social issue (gun control, cancer or animal rights, placement on website (top, middle or bottom) and section (breaking news, top news, editor's picks, home page or second-level page) were provided to coders via a spreadsheet. The level of engagement were exclusive in that a comment could either be identified as engagement, action or unrelated and not a combination of the levels. The

level of emotionality was also exclusive in that a comment could either be identified as anger, awe, sadness, anxiety or neutral and not a combination of levels.

Once the coding scheme was developed, two coders (Coder A/Primary Coder & Coder B/Volunteer Coder) reviewed a preliminary sample of 50 articles spanning the five online daily newspapers and covering one of the three social issues and coded the sample in effort to establish inter-coder reliability. Coder A trained Coder B by reviewing a detailed code sheet with additional training emphasis placed on the emotions variables. Once inter-coder reliability was established, Coder A and Coder B moved on to code the full sample of 200 articles. These 200 articles were collected from January 1, 2015 to February 28, 2015 adhering to the same collection standards as the preliminary sample in effort to test the hypothesis and investigate the research questions. Ten percent of the final sample was coded by both Coder A and Coder B in effort to establish inter-coder reliability once more.

Preliminary Sample

Reliability tests were conducted on a preliminary sample of 50 articles with 319 audience comments, which is approximately 25% of the final sample of 200 online daily newspaper articles. The preliminary sample was gathered during a three-month time frame during 2014: September, October and November. The month of December was purposefully left out of the preliminary sample and final sample of articles due to the possibility that coverage in December would differ from that of the rest of the year due to the holiday season. December would, therefore, not provide a true representation of media coverage provided throughout the year. The preliminary sample was designed to mim-

ic the final sample in effort to generalize inferences from one sample to the other. The preliminary sample was pulled from the five online daily newspapers and covered articles with the three social issues.

Establishing Inter-Coder Reliability in Preliminary Sample

Inter-coder reliability was established using Cohen's *kappa*, where reliability reported at $k = .75+$ is considered "excellent agreement beyond chance" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 143). All variables requiring a judgment call returned reliability scores exceeding $k = .75$, indicating high levels of agreement between Coder A and Coder B.

Variables measuring any presence of engagement or action-oriented verbiage in the comments, along with identifying any comments that appeared unrelated to the issue at hand, returned reliability scores equal to or exceeding $k = .90$. These variables were calculated at the article level where the number of engagement comments, action comments and unrelated comments were evaluated for each article.

Engagement Comments: $k = .96$

Action Comments: $k = .92$

Unrelated Comments: $k = .90$

Variables measuring the presence of specific emotions reported lower reliability scores, yet still maintain scores exceeding $k = .75$. It can be inferred that coding specific emotions of individuals based on typed comments is more difficult and therefore, results in more error. Although these specific reliability scores reveal a degree of error, the scores exceed $k = .75$, which still indicate a strong agreement.

Presence of Anger in Comments: $k = .88$

Presence of Anxiety in Comments: $k = .82$

Presence of Awe in Comments: $k = .78$

Presence of Sadness in Comments: $k = .78$

Presence of Neutral Emotion in Comments: $k = .83$

As a result of awe and sadness reporting the lowest reliability scores, special attention was paid in training Coder B on these emotions prior to coding the main sample.

Finally, the presence of heightened emotion as indicated by specific characters and typefaces, reported a high reliability score.

Presence of Heightened Emotions in Comments: $k = .90$

Establishing Inter-Coder Reliability in Final Sample

A final reliability test was conducted on 10% of the final sample in effort to further validate the study. Variables measuring any presence of engagement or action-oriented verbiage in the comments, along with identifying any comments that appeared unrelated to the issue at hand, returned reliability scores reporting at or exceeding $k = .75$.

Engagement Comments: $k = .75$

Action Comments: $k = .87$

Unrelated Comments: $k = .96$

Variables measuring the presence of specific emotions also reported reliability scores at or exceeding $k = .75$.

Presence of Anger in Comments: $k = .91$

Presence of Anxiety in Comments: $k = .75$

Presence of Awe in Comments: $k = .95$

Presence of Sadness in Comments: $k = .86$

Presence of Neutral Emotion in Comments: $k = .75$

Lastly, the presence of heightened emotion as indicated by specific characters and typefaces, reported the highest reliability score.

Presence of Heightened Emotions in Comments: $k = .98$

In instances where Coder A and Coder B did not agree in the final reliability test, Coder A's answers were entered into the final data set due to Coder A serving as the primary coder.

Procedure & Measures

Articles were identified by manually reviewing each of the five online daily newspapers each day from January 1, 2015 to February 28, 2015. Articles were identified as fit for inclusion if they covered one of the three social issues, were found on one of the five online daily newspapers and had at least one comment present in the comment sections of the articles. Articles were collected roughly within the first three days of its initial posting to the website and articles' comments were collected within one to two days after the articles' initial posting to the website. Both articles and audiences' comments were captured within a short timeframe in effort to identify the articles' initial placement on the website and audiences' initial reactions to the articles' content/social issue.

A codebook was developed in effort to assist Coder A and Coder B (See Appendix C). Coders were asked to identify the total number of comments prior to any random sampling of 33 comments and identify the level of engagement for each comment (engagement, action or unrelated). An audience member's willingness to help a social issue was identified by the presence of any action-oriented comments, such as, "We need to do something about this issue." Beyond audiences' willingness to act and help a social cause, audience comments were also measured on engagement, quantifying how many audience comments reference the issue at hand, but do not explicitly point out that they or

someone else should help the cause. Disengaged comments were quantified as the number of comments where individuals were speaking of unassociated or unrelated topics.

Coders were also asked to identify the level of emotionality for each comment (anger, awe, sadness, anxiety or neutral) and identify any presence of heightened emotion for each comment (presence of exclamation points, all-capped words, repetitive letters or words one right after the other). Berger and Milkman identified the emotions of awe, anxiety, sadness and anger as ones that are most commonly represented by media audiences and as a result, are evaluated in this study (Berger & Milkman, 2011). Definitions of awe, anxiety, sadness and anger in relation to media audiences' comments were adapted by the work of Berger and Milkman. Awe was defined as "A combination of wonder and subjection or falling under the control/spell of a positive event." and a comment example of "Wow, this is terrific!" was given to the coders. Anxiety was defined as "An element of fear or caution is present" and a comment example of "I hope this doesn't happen in my neighborhood, scary" was given to the coders. Sadness was defined as "Unable to maintain possession of a pleasurable object" and a comment example of "I feel so bad for all of the individuals who have suffered from this" was given to the coders. Anger was defined as "Person is conscious of being unable to attain a goal, due to some unexpected blockage; Action to remove the source of the goal blockage; Desire or the tendency to aggress against the agent who is blamed for what has happened" and a comment example of "This is ridiculous! I cannot believe someone hasn't done anything about this" was given to the coders. Neutral was defined as "Provides unbiased comment and does not

contain any of the above emotions” and a comment example of “I read this article in its entirety” was given to the coders.

Name of coder, article title, article date, online daily newspaper, social issue (gun control, cancer or animal rights), placement on website (top, middle or bottom) and section (breaking news, top news, editor's picks, home page or second-level page) were provided to coders via a spreadsheet.

Chapter Four: Results

Initial Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the full sample of 200 articles in order to determine the average number of comments, the level of emotionality in the comments and the pattern of placement of articles on the websites. The initial descriptive statistics run for the number of audience comments revealed an outlier with 2,392 comments. This was much higher than the mean ($M = 61.87$, $SD = 14.27$), and twice the second-highest number of comments. Given the potential of this unusual case to skew the results, it was removed from the analysis. Descriptive statistics were then calculated on the 199 remaining articles, which revealed a more accurate mean statistic ($M = 50.16$, $SD = 8.20$) where 9,982 represented the total number of comments.

A descriptive analysis was conducted in effort to determine the mean number of comments that were coded per article ($M = 16.97$, $SD = 12.67$) and where 3,379 represented the total number of comments coded across all the articles. An additional descriptive analysis revealed the proportion of engagement comments ($M = .82$, $SD = .17$) outweighed the proportion of action comments ($M = .15$, $SD = .16$) and unrelated comments

($M = .01$, $SD = .05$). Further descriptive statistics were calculated to reveal the level of emotionality and heightened emotion found within the proportion of comments. The average proportion of anger comments ($M = .56$, $SD = .27$) was higher than the proportion of awe comments ($M = .02$, $SD = .11$), sadness comments ($M = .06$, $SD = .14$), anxiety comments ($M = .12$, $SD = .16$), and neutral comments ($M = .21$, $SD = .23$). The presence of heightened emotion ($M = .12$, $SD = .12$) was also analyzed in effort to determine frequency within the comments.

Frequencies were calculated to determine the proportion of articles on each of the three social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights. The analysis revealed the greatest number of articles associated with the social issue of gun control (155, 77%), followed by the social issues of animal rights (26, 13%) and cancer (18, 9%). The social issue of anger resulted in 8,491 total comments, 2,759 coded comments and an average of 54 comments per online daily newspaper article. The social issue of animal rights resulted in 1,344 total comments, 481 coded comments and an average of 51 comments per online daily newspaper article. The social issue of cancer resulted in 147 total comments, 139 coded comments and an average of eight comments per online daily newspaper article.

Frequencies were calculated to establish how often articles appear on the top, middle or bottom of a webpage. The analysis revealed the middle of a webpage (91, 45.7%) as most frequently populated with articles, followed by the top of the webpage (88, 44.2%) and the bottom of the webpage (20, 10.1%), resulting in the least populated area of the webpage.

Answering Hypothesis

Hypothesis, H1, predicted that articles covering social issues that were displayed more prominently on an online daily newspaper's website would have a higher proportion of action comments and engagement comments than articles covering the same social issues that were placed less prominently on the website. A one-way ANOVA was calculated to determine if there were any significant relationships present between the number of audience comments and the article's location on webpage: top ($M = 51.09$, $SD = 107.30$), middle ($M = 49.29$, $SD = 127.27$) bottom ($M = 50.00$, $SD = 99.65$). The analysis revealed no presence of a significant relationship ($df = 2$, $F = .005$, $p = .995$). Another one-way ANOVA was calculated to determine if there was a significant relationship present between the number of audience comments and the website section (breaking news, top news, editors picks, home page, second level page) in which the article appeared. For analysis purposes, breaking news, top news, editor's picks and home page categories were combined into one category. These categories were combined due to their similarity in appearing on a website's homepage. The number of audience comments on a home page ($M = 66.43$, $SD = 215.98$) was compared to the number of audience comments on a second level page ($M = 43.62$, $SD = 131.21$), but revealed no significant difference ($df = 1$, $F = .407$, $p = .524$). Based on these analyses, the hypothesis was not supported.

Answering Research Questions

Research question, RQ1a, asked if negative emotional responses by audience members would influence a stronger willingness to act in positive favor of the social is-

sue being discussed than positive emotional responses. A correlation analysis was conducted in effort to identify the presence of a relationship between the proportion of comments that had different emotions and the proportion of action comments. The analysis revealed that the proportion of anger comments were correlated with action comments, $r = .19, p < .01$. The analysis also revealed the proportion of anxiety comments were correlated with action comments, $r = .14, p < .05$. However, the analysis also revealed that the proportions of comments associated with the different, discrete negative emotions were correlated with each other. The higher the proportion of comments that showed anger, the lower the proportion of comments showing anxiety, $r = -.36, p < .01$, and the higher proportion of comments that showed anger, the lower the proportion of comments showing sadness, $r = -.29, p < .01$. Therefore, a regression analysis was carried out, in which variables representing the proportions for each of the negative emotions were entered as independent variables predicting the proportion of action comments. The results found that anxiety ($df = 3, \text{Beta} = .241, p = .002$) and anger ($df = 3, \text{Beta} = .277, p = .001$) had significant independent effects on the proportion of action comments, but that sadness ($df = 3, \text{Beta} = -.026, p = .721$) had no relationship to action comments once the other variables were controlled for.

RQ1b asked if the level of emotionality in the comments would vary across articles dealing with different social issues. A one-way ANOVA analysis revealed that the proportion of some of the emotions comments varied significantly depending on the social issue. There was a significant difference across topics in relation to anger $F(2, 197) = 7.24, p = .001$, and a difference that approached significance in relation to anxiety, $F(2,$

197) = 3.0, $p = .051$. The proportion of anger comments were highest among the gun control articles ($M = .59$, $SD = .24$) followed by those related to animal rights ($M = .56$, $SD = .29$) and those related to cancer ($M = .34$, $SD = .33$). The post-hoc tests with Bonferroni corrections indicate that the proportion of anger comments were significantly different between cancer articles and both gun control, $p < .001$, and animal rights, $p < .03$. However, the proportions in relation to gun control and animal rights were not significantly different from each other, $p = 1.00$. Cancer articles tended to have the highest proportion of anxiety comments ($M = .17$, $SD = .28$), followed by gun control articles ($M = .13$, $SD = .15$), and animal rights articles, ($M = .06$, $SD = .09$).

Research question, RQ2a, asked if the proportion of engagement and action-oriented comments would vary across articles that dealt with different social issues. This research question was not answered and analyses revealed no significant relationship between the number of engagement comments or action comments and social issues. A one-way ANOVA was calculated to determine if there was a significant relationship between the number of engagement comments and the social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights. This analysis revealed no significant relationship $F(2, 197) = 1.210$, $p = .300$ between the number of engagement comments and social issues. Another one-way ANOVA was calculated to determine if there was a significant relationship between the number of action comments and the social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights. This analysis also revealed no significant relationship $F(2, 197) = 1.185$, $p = .308$ between the number of action comments and social issues.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In today's society, the ever-changing and advancing medium of the Internet has proved to be a popular field of study for researchers (McCombs, 2005). With the majority of Internet users scaling young in age, one could infer that the Internet will continue to advance and remain a top news medium of choice for society (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosensteel, & Olmstead, 2010). The Internet has evolved to allow for a two-way communication pattern between the sender and receiver of messages, which allows for an interactive experience and two-way exchange pattern of information. Due to media audiences' attraction to this two-way communication experience, many other mediums have evolved in an effort to have a presence on the Internet. News mediums, in particular, utilize the Internet to provide their media audiences with additional sources to obtain the news they share. Most U.S. TV news programs have expanded their digital presence to the Internet and most newspapers, both national and local, have evolved beyond a print presence.

Besides the receiver or media audience obtaining the news messages, many times audiences have the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings on the news coverage they come across. One popular avenue media audiences can utilize to share feedback on a particular news story is through online discussion boards or comment sections. These spaces allow audience members to publicly share their opinion and discuss the topic at hand with others. Beyond the media audiences having the ability to share thoughts and discuss topics with others, the media entity (online daily newspaper, national news station website, etc.) has the opportunity to gain information based on their media audiences' commentary. Media entities are able to track the level of engagement particular news sto-

ries receive, which could potentially influence the likelihood that a story covering a similar topic will be covered by the media entity. For example, if a particular news story covering topic A receives hundreds of audience comments and another news story covering topic B does not receive any audience comments, the media entity may choose to feature more topic A stories in the future compared to topic B stories.

Another way media entities deem news topics relevant to their media audiences is to identify topics that audiences may not be too familiar with and where their audiences may have a specific gap in their knowledge on a particular topic. Part of the media entity's role is to fill that gap in knowledge for their media audiences. One could infer that the more often a media entity can fill a media audiences' gap in knowledge, the more reliable the media entity appears to the media audiences. Social issues have proved to be an emerging topic of interest among media audiences. In particular, the social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights have shown up as areas of concentrated interest to media audiences.

As one might expect, the coverage of news topics that serve as a gap in knowledge for media audiences could evoke debate and conversation among audience members, thus eliciting specific emotions from individual audience members. The emotions of anger, awe, sadness and anxiety have been identified to be most prevalent among media audiences (Berger & Milkman, 2011).

This quantitative content analysis provides generalizable evidence for the relationship between online daily newspapers' coverage of social issues and the level of media audiences' engagement, identified via media audiences' comments. In particular, this

content analysis identifies media audiences' willingness to act in support of three social issues: gun control, cancer and animal rights.

Initial descriptive analysis revealed that the number of engagement comments outweighed the number of action comments followed by the number of unrelated comments. This proves that audience members were more willing to engage in debate or conversation about one of the three social issues and were not as inclined to express their willingness to help with one of the three social issues. The analysis also revealed that anger was the most prevalent emotion found in the comments, which proves that most audience members engaged in aggressive debate when discussing one of the three social issues. Awe proved to be the least prevalent emotion found within the comments, which reveals that most audience members engaged in negative or neutral conversation.

The analysis revealed the greatest number of audience comments associated with the social issue of gun control, followed by the social issue of animal rights and lastly, cancer. The high number of audience members commenting on the social issue of gun control could explain the high number of audience members expressing the emotion of anger in the comments. In contrast, the low numbers of audience members commenting on the social issue of cancer could explain the low number of audience members expressing the emotion of awe in the comments.

The data revealed that most articles within the sample of 200 articles appeared in the middle of a webpage, followed by the top of a webpage and lastly, bottom of a webpage. Contrary to what had originally been predicted, an article's placement on a website does not influence the level of engagement or number of audience comments. Based on

experience in the public relations industry, the original hypothesis predicted that as an article's placement became more prominent on a webpage, the greater the number of audience comments there would be. This content analysis revealed that this hypothesis is not supported and the placement of an article on a webpage does not influence the audience's level of engagement. A follow-up analysis was conducted to determine if the section in which an article appeared in would influence the level of engagement by audience members. For analysis purposes, breaking news, top news, editor's picks and home page categories were combined to reflect one section. These categories were combined due to their similarity in appearing a website's homepage. The number of audience comments on a home page was compared to the number of audience comments on a second level page, but revealed no significant difference. Therefore, this analysis further supports the hypothesis not being supported.

Previous research conducted by Berger and Milkman indicated that the expression of high arousal negative emotions will evoke the expression of more action-oriented behavior compared to the expression of positive emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2011). The findings of the current study in relation to RQ1a were consistent with this research: anger and anxiety were found to be related to the expression of action-oriented behavior by media audiences. It appears that the aggression and worry associated with the emotions of anger and anxiety provoke media audiences to want to act in effort to help with the social issue at hand.

In relation to answering RQ1b, this content analysis revealed a significant relationship between the emotion of anger and the social issues of gun control and animal

rights. Since the emotions of anger and anxiety have been shown to provoke media audiences to want to act in effort to help the social issue at hand, the social issues of gun control and animal rights will most likely elicit more action-oriented behaviors with media audiences. These significant relationships prove that the social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights are of high issue relevancy to media audiences so much so that media audiences are willing to act in support of the social issues.

This analysis revealed no significant relationship between the emotion of sadness and the social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights. Based on this finding, it can be inferred that although sadness is considered a negative emotion, it is less likely to provoke someone to express their willingness to act in effort to help one of the three social issues. The analysis also revealed that the positive emotion of awe is most closely associated with the social issue of cancer, but does not necessarily elicit the audience to express their willingness to help the social issue.

A final analysis was run to determine if engagement comments or action comments had significant relationships to any of the three social issues in effort to answer RQ2a. The analysis proved that this hypothesis was not supported, as there was no significant relationship between engagement or action comments and any of the three social issues. Based on previous analysis conducted on the level of emotionality present within each of the social issues, one could infer that the issue of gun control elicits more action-oriented expressions from audience members due to anger being the most prevalent emotion compared to the other social issues of cancer and animal rights.

The results of this quantitative content analysis could assist activist groups or non-profit organizations with a public relations strategy and help them to identify the proper stories to share via online daily newspapers. Many activist groups or non-profit organizations rely on community members for funding and developing a public relations or media outreach strategy can significantly influence the amount of awareness and funding these organizations could receive. The data gathered from this content analysis suggests that these organizations could see more action-oriented behaviors by community members if they share stories with the media that elicit the emotions of anger and anxiety. Although the emotion of awe can raise the awareness of social issues, this content analysis suggests that anger and anxiety will result in the expression of media audiences' willingness to help a social issue.

One surprising finding this content analysis revealed was that the placement of an article on a daily newspaper's website does not influence the level of engagement or the expression of audience members' willingness to help a social issue. This finding reveals that not much energy should be devoted to placing an article more prominently on a daily newspaper's website, such as working with the editor to ensure a story is placed on the homepage of the website. Along with adjusting a public relations strategy, activist groups or non-profit organizations will need to adjust their expectations on where a media story appears on an online daily newspaper and understand the impact they are striving for (awareness and funding) is likely not influenced by the placement of an article.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study involves the manner in which the sample of 200 articles was collected, as the entire sample was collected using a manual process. The sample of 200 articles was collected over a two month time period by manually scanning each of the five online daily newspapers for the coverage of the three social issues. Online daily newspapers were primarily scanned between 6:00pm and 9:00pm CST each night in effort to gather a consistent sample of articles. Comments by audience members were collected in conjunction with the collection of articles, which could impact the level of audience engagement provided in this study.

Another limitation of this study involves evaluating the perspectives of only those media audience members who choose to comment on the social issues covered by online daily newspapers. Since this study does not account for the perspective of those who chose not to comment, the generalizations found in this study may be limited. For example, media audience members may read an online daily newspaper article focused on the social issue of animal rights, verbally express the need to help the social issue at hand and simply may not choose to post a comment to the article's discussion board.

Future Research

Future research should implement an automatic process for collecting the sample of articles and the sample of audience comments. This collection process should also span different times of the day in effort to determine if the time of day influences audience engagement and/or article placement.

Future research could also look at different social issues and provide further generalizations about specific social issue categories. The social issues of gun control, cancer and animal rights were chosen based on relevancy to today's society and a need for greater understanding. Social issues chosen for future research should model this process of issue relevancy and a need for greater understanding in effort to observe high levels of audience engagement. One could infer that issues having the characteristics of low relevancy and not providing a need for greater understanding would result in low engagement levels from media audiences compared to those issues of high relevancy and a need for greater understanding.

Research could also expand this study beyond national online daily newspapers and look at low circulation, local online daily newspapers or perhaps look at the online presence of television news programs. It would be interesting to determine if media outlets' circulation numbers plays a factor in the level of engagement by media audiences. It would also be interesting to identify engagement differences between audiences of online daily newspapers and the online presence of television news programs.

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Appendices

Appendix A



2014

Top Media Outlets: Newspapers, Blogs, Consumer Magazines, Broadcasters, Websites & Social Networks

No one knows the media like BurrellesLuce. Updated whenever significant, new information becomes available, "Top Media Outlets" shows the leading traditional and social media outlets in the United States based on circulation, visits, authority, market share, or DMA. This practical, at-a-glance reference can help you plan effective media relations campaigns by helping you target your audiences more precisely. BurrellesLuce offers a full range of media outreach, monitoring and reporting services for PR, communications, and marketing professionals.

Call 866.636.8004 or visit www.BurrellesLuce.com/topmedia2014.

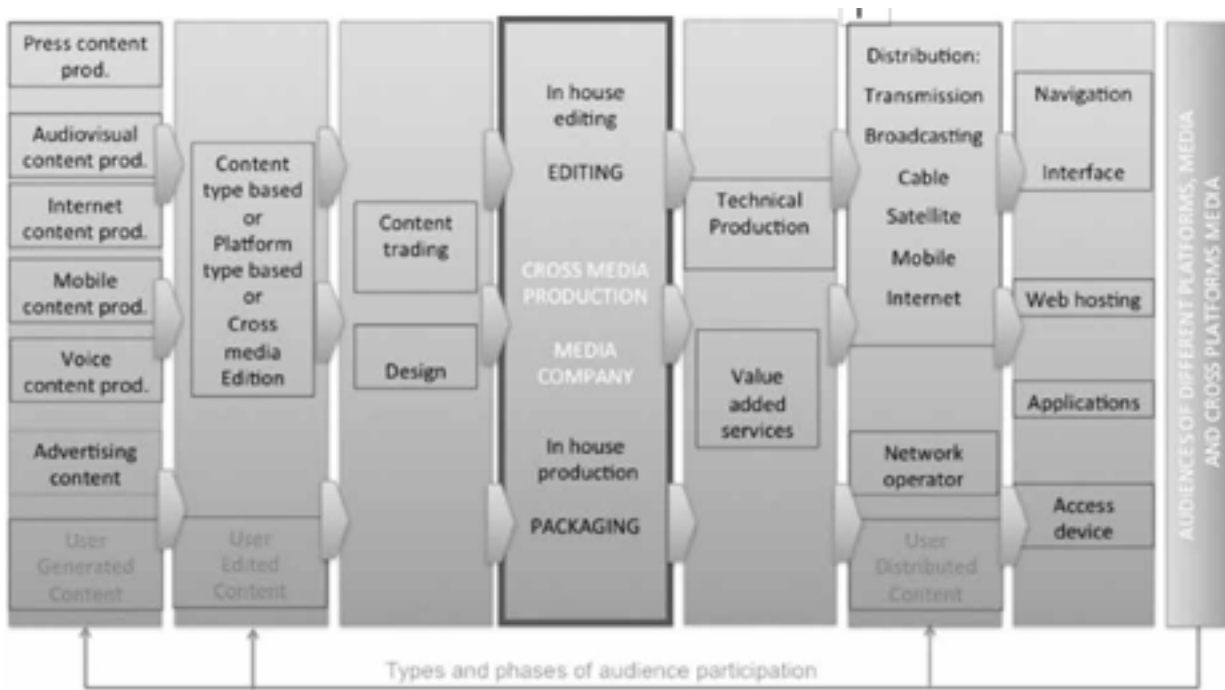
Rank		Daily		Sunday		Rank		Daily		Sunday	
1	USA Today	2,876,586	▲	N/A	51	The Columbus (OH) Dispatch	121,236	▲	246,844	▲	
2	The Wall Street Journal	2,273,767	▲	N/A	52	Austin American-Statesman	120,457	▲	102,870	▲	
3	The New York Times	1,897,890	▲	2,391,986	▲	53	San Antonio Express-News	120,019	▲	343,883	▲
4	Los Angeles Times	671,797	▲	963,757	▲	54	The Miami Herald	120,007	▲	191,329	▲
5	New York Post	578,711	▲	525,796	▲	55	Charlotte Observer	120,346	▲	182,111	▲
6	San Jose Mercury News	546,282	▲	700,487	▲	56	Omaha World-Herald	121,470	▲	157,375	▲
7	Daily News (New York, NY)	467,110	▲	587,068	▲	57	The Courier-Journal (Louisville, KY)	124,628	▲	225,047	▲
8	Chicago Tribune	413,567	▲	867,189	▲	58	The Virginian-Pilot (Hampton Roads, VA)	124,380	▲	153,787	▲
9	Newsday (Long Island, NY)	437,457	▲	496,496	▲	59	The Hartford Courant	124,076	▲	184,445	▲
10	The Washington Post	411,321	▲	822,643	▲	60	The Press-Enterprise (Pomona, CA)	124,051	▲	146,129	▲
11	Chicago Sun-Times	418,364	▲	391,471	▲	61	La Jolla	118,469	▲	36,616	▲
12	The Dallas Morning News	411,929	▲	723,915	▲	62	The Cincinnati Enquirer	117,754	▲	233,515	▲
13	The Denver Post	403,099	▲	618,571	▲	63	News & Observer (Raleigh, NC)	115,017	▲	168,289	▲
14	Daily News (Los Angeles, CA)	399,626	▲	510,873	▲	64	The Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK)	112,225	▲	165,910	▲
15	The Orange County (CA) Register	363,242	▲	396,785	▲	65	The Detroit News	108,317	▲	N/A	▲
16	Houston Chronicle	326,367	▲	961,387	▲	66	The Providence Journal	108,403	▲	101,810	▲
17	The Philadelphia Inquirer	310,032	▲	463,835	▲	67	Denver News-Sun (Lake City, UT)	106,426	▲	183,229	▲
18	Star Tribune (Minneapolis St. Paul, MN)	302,495	▲	582,096	▲	68	Baton Rouge Advocate	103,990	▲	122,453	▲
19	Tampa Bay Times (St. Petersburg)	296,980	▲	325,852	▲	69	Richmond Times Dispatch	99,379	▲	146,068	▲
20	The Star Ledger (Newark, NJ)	285,240	▲	395,725	▲	70	Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)	96,957	▲	151,905	▲
21	Honolulu Star-Advertiser	263,096	▲	222,487	▲	71	The Fresno Bee	96,287	▲	146,326	▲
22	The Boston Globe	253,379	▲	394,931	▲	72	The Blade (Toledo, OH)	95,039	▲	127,360	▲
23	The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	248,590	▲	667,135	▲	73	Dayton Daily News	95,282	▲	163,029	▲
24	The Arizona Republic (Phoenix, AZ)	245,133	▲	474,375	▲	74	The Tennessee (Nashville, TN)	94,363	▲	218,491	▲
25	The Seattle Times	241,820	▲	363,078	▲	75	Salt World	91,810	▲	126,347	▲
26	Las Vegas Review-Journal	233,526	▲	180,949	▲	76	Daily Herald (Arlington Heights, IL)	91,740	▲	100,313	▲
27	The Oregonian (Portland, OR)	223,868	▲	284,806	▲	77	Abu Dhabi Press	89,888	▲	133,290	▲
28	The San Diego Union-Tribune	222,541	▲	381,303	▲	78	The Des Moines Register	89,684	▲	187,004	▲
29	The Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH)	212,870	▲	427,662	▲	79	The Commercial Appeal (Memphis, TN)	89,654	▲	124,128	▲
30	San Francisco Chronicle	212,179	▲	431,203	▲	80	Boston Herald	88,252	▲	71,918	▲
31	Pittsburgh Tribune-Review	199,360	▲	232,252	▲	81	The Palm Beach Post	87,699	▲	110,989	▲
32	Runyon Press (St. Paul, MN)	197,727	▲	282,776	▲	82	Northwest Indiana Times	86,549	▲	91,102	▲
33	Detroit Free Press	196,985	▲	381,689	▲	83	Abu Dhabi Journal	82,416	▲	102,548	▲
34	Midwestern Wisconsin Journal Sentinel	194,321	▲	318,711	▲	84	The Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville, FL)	82,340	▲	128,378	▲
35	The Sacramento Bee	190,204	▲	328,196	▲	85	Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, WI)	81,108	▲	102,288	▲
36	The Tampa Tribune	187,589	▲	255,704	▲	86	Greater Philadelphia Newspaper Group	80,095	▲	107,294	▲
37	Star-Breeze (Fort Worth, TX)	172,283	▲	291,814	▲	87	Arizona Daily Star (Tucson, AZ)	77,947	▲	123,162	▲
38	Kansas City Star	169,896	▲	254,111	▲	88	The Post and Courier (Charleston, SC)	77,418	▲	96,219	▲
39	El Nuevo Dia (San Juan, PR)	168,274	▲	196,945	▲	89	The News-Journal (New Castle County, DE)	76,185	▲	107,276	▲
40	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	161,349	▲	461,239	▲	90	The Akron Beacon Journal	75,672	▲	107,345	▲
41	The Salt Lake Tribune	161,338	▲	162,090	▲	91	Intelligence Journal (Lancaster PA) New Era	74,625	▲	N/A	▲
42	Investor's Business Daily (Los Angeles, CA)	156,119	▲	N/A	92	Telegram and Gazette (Worcester, MA)	73,969	▲	77,344	▲	
43	The Baltimore Sun	153,352	▲	275,782	▲	93	Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader	73,276	▲	96,733	▲
44	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	153,078	▲	276,765	▲	94	El Paso Times	72,517	▲	135,013	▲
45	Orlando Sentinel	152,929	▲	258,797	▲	95	Knoxville News Sentinel	72,350	▲	100,175	▲
46	Sun-Sentinel (St. Lauderdale, FL)	151,413	▲	226,175	▲	96	The Morning Call (Allentown, PA)	72,866	▲	114,729	▲
47	The Record (Hackensack, NJ)	148,267	▲	182,466	▲	97	Rockford Register Times (Rockford, IL)	69,253	▲	88,728	▲
48	The Indianapolis Star	147,862	▲	279,915	▲	98	New Haven Register (New Haven, CT)	68,148	▲	78,136	▲
49	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)	146,282	▲	213,881	▲	99	The News-Tribune (Tacoma, WA)	67,135	▲	113,284	▲
50	The Buffalo News	142,309	▲	212,737	▲	100	Times Free Press (Chattanooga, TN)	66,473	▲	85,707	▲

U.S. Daily Newspapers

Source: Alliance for Audited Media, formerly Audit Bureau of Circulations, September Report for the month ending 9/30/14
 ▲ increase in circulation for the period 10/1/13 - 9/30/14
 ▼ decrease in circulation for the period 10/1/13 - 9/30/14
 - did not appear on list of top 100 daily newspapers 10/1/13



Appendix B



Appendix C

CODING PROTOCOL

Coder:

Article Title:

Publication Date:

Publication Name (circle one)

- A. USA Today
- B. The Washington Post
- C. The Wall Street Journal
- D. Houston Chronicle
- E. San Francisco Chronicle

Section (circle one)

- A. Breaking News
- B. Top News
- C. Editor's Picks
- D. Home Page
- E. Second Level Page (indicate category)

Placement (circle one based on best guess)

- A. Top of Webpage
- B. Middle of Webpage
- C. Bottom of Webpage

Social Issue (circle one)

- A. Gun Control
- B. Cancer
- C. Animal Rights

Comments Instructions:

If article contains more than 33 comments, randomly sample the comments by choosing every other comment to code. For example, choose the first, third, fifth comments and so on.

Number of Initial Audience Comments; prior to random sample of 33:

Number of Engagement Comments (discusses issue, but does not include action comments):

* Non-verbatim examples:

- “This is such a sad story.”
- “What an amazing triumph!”
- “I don’t agree with you, that’s stupid.”

Number of Action-Oriented Comments (discusses helping the issues at hand):

* Non-verbatim examples:

- “We should all donate to this cause.”
- “The police need to lock him up!”

Number of Unrelated or Unassociated Comments:

* Non-verbatim examples:

- “It’s raining outside.”
- “Check out my video blog!”

Indicate presence of any of the following emotions that the writer/media audience member evoke in the comments. Tally the number of instances each emotion is evoked in the article’s comment section.

Anger:

Definition: Person is conscious of being unable to attain a goal, due to some unexpected blockage; Action to remove the source of the goal blockage; Desire or the tendency to aggress against the agent who is blamed for what has happened; May also be presented as sarcasm

Non-Verbatim Example:

“This is ridiculous! I cannot believe someone hasn’t done anything about this.”

Awe:

Definition: Fusing the basic emotions of wonder and subjection or falling under the control/spell of a positive event; Expression of happiness and/or sincere gratitude; Does not include presence of sarcasm

Non-Verbatim Example:

“Wow, this is terrific!”

Sadness:

Definition: Unable to maintain possession of a pleasurable object

Non-Verbatim Example:

“I feel so bad for all of the individuals who have suffered from this.”

Anxiety:

Definition: An element of fear or caution is present

Non-Verbatim Example:

“I hope this doesn't happen in my neighborhood, scary.”

Neutral:

Definition: Provides unbiased comment and does not contain any of the above emotions

Non-Verbatim Example:

“I read this article in its entirety.”

Presence of Heightened Emotions (Tally each instance of heightened emotions and indicate which specific emotion is being elicited in the comment):

* Use of bolded, fully capitalized, underlined or italicized words; Use of “!”