

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: WHAT'S IN A "LIKE"?
INFLUENCE OF NEWS AUDIENCE
ENGAGEMENT ON THE DELIBERATION
OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE DIGITAL
PUBLIC SPHERE.

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Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

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This dissertation is a mixed methods study of the influence of the “like” feature on how people discuss and understand online news. Habermas’s notion of the public sphere was that an inclusive, all-accessible and non-discriminating forum enables participants to deliberate on topics of concern. With increased interactivity and connectivity introduced by new media, commenting features have been heralded as a means to expand and accommodate discussions from audiences. In particular, by allowing people to provide feedback to each other’s ideas via “up-voting” and indicating popular “top” comments, the “like” button shows promise to be a quick and convenient way to increase participation and represent public opinion.

This dissertation, however, questions whether this is true. It raises concerns about the new media landscape, asking whether the resulting digital culture helps in the proper functioning of the public sphere. To address these questions, this dissertation adopts a mixed methods approach consisting of the following: 1) Framing analysis of “top” comments and sub-comments that were posted in response to articles about recent

presidential elections, examining how audiences' framing of issues influences discussions and what strategies were used to increase "likable" traits; 2) ranking analysis of chronological order, testing whether chronological order of comments is a significant factor for number of "likes," regardless of content; 3) controlled experiment, testing assumptions about cognitive and behavioral responses from individuals regarding the "like" feature and how they perceive public opinion; and 4) focus group sessions with college student news audiences and interviews with media professionals, making in-depth inquiry about people's attitudes and perceptions of "likes." Furthermore, this dissertation paid attention to cultural differences, and compared the U.S. to Korea, with its advanced information technologies and highly utilized online commenting forums.

Findings from each of the four methods as well as triangulation of the results showed that "likes" and "top" comments influence people's perceptions of public opinion. The problem was that these "top" comments were "liked" due to certain "likability" factors that had nothing to do with substantive issues and contributed little to the discussion. Also, avid commenters and "likers" tended to hold more extreme viewpoints, therefore promoting skewed perspectives. Moreover, the "top" comments may suggest priority of the ideas promoted in those top comments over others, thus hindering a full deliberation on topics in the public sphere. Across the findings, intercultural differences in both perspectives and behaviors were observed between U.S. and Korean data. Specifically, Korean participants showed higher susceptibility to "likes" and various characteristics regarding "likable" factors as well as "top" comments.

The ideals of the public sphere can and will be important for how public opinion can be garnered in the digital setting. Nonetheless, this dissertation posits that the public sphere

functions differently in the digital environment and thus its parameters and concepts need to be rethought. Because the public sphere is an abstract ideal, it lacks practicality and adaptability; it requires additional theorization based on cultural differences, various contexts under which audiences' new engagement take place, and rapidly changing technologies and modes of usage within digital culture.

**WHAT'S IN A "LIKE"?
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DELIBERATION OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC
SPHERE.**

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014

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Acknowledgements

A scholar's life is mostly ridden in lone, long pondering of things—an endless intellectual journey that often leaves one helpless and without direction. To me, a doctor of philosophy signifies that there was something that the individual was able to contribute to the knowledge of mankind. And throughout my doctorate studies, in those lonely and long nights, I have doubted myself numerous times for what I am capable of contributing to the world. If it weren't for the devoted individuals around me who guided me in right directions and motivated me to continue, I would not have been able to complete this specific journey. At times they showed me the goal and pushed me there, but most of the time they held my hands and walked with me.

First of all, I would like to express gratitude to the committee members. Dr. Steiner was the reason I chose to attend the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, and she is the reason I was able to graduate from the college with a Ph.D. She was there from the very beginning, and right there to the very end. I cannot thank her enough for what she's done for me, and I will always remember her advice, both academic and about life in general, wherever I go.

I jokingly call Dr. Chadha the older sister of all Ph.D. students at Merrill. She understands so well what we need in different stages of graduate student life. She is always there for support and she never declines to help you, no matter what you need help in. Every time I met with her, I came back with new ideas and perspectives.

Dr. Yaros was perhaps the biggest supporter of my ambitious dissertation. As a mixed methods scholar himself, he understood what I was going through and always gave me timely advice on how to sufficiently move on to the next stages.

Dr. Xiaoli Nan and Dr. Sahar Khamis from the Department of Communication were two outside members that provided me with knowledge at the highest level from two different academic traditions. The combination of the two professors and their rigorous training allowed me to take steps further and constantly polish my work.

Although not in my committee, Dr. Beasley, Dr. Oates and Dr. Chinoy always left their doors open for me. In every aspect of Ph.D. life and beyond, I received guidance and support from these mentors.

Second, I would like to thank my family and friends. My wife, Hyun-ju Choi, has come all the way here to the U.S. just for me—she has become my family, my best friend, and the biggest supporter of my work. The way she was able to give up everything she had only to start a family with me is amazing, and I thank her every morning and every night for that.

In addition, she is now the mother of our son Hayden, who we love more than anything. Hayden was born in my first year here, and so has been almost like a representation of my doctoral studies. As he grows, I grew. When he turned three, I was a third-year. I secretly compared my development to his, and he was the biggest motivation anyone could get. I just hope that I was a good father to him during this process.

I also would like to thank my family in Korea. My father, who is a scholar himself, and my mother, who taught at university and later supported my father throughout his doctorate, know exactly what we are going through. No matter what they stood there like a rock for me, and remembering that always gave me inner peace. Hyun-ju's family in

Busan was also extremely supportive, and again I cannot sufficiently express my appreciation for how much faith they had in me all throughout this process.

My friends—there are so many that I cannot write everyone's name down—were also a part of my journey. I would especially like to thank my fellow cohort members for some wonderful memories and the academic excellence we were able to produce in synergy. There were many that I strived to follow, some others that provided support wherever they were, and those who always cheered me up. But the important thing is that I was always a lucky man to have them by my side. Thank you all.

And finally, I would like to thank God for the strength and wisdom that was given to me in completing this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, people around the world expressed their woes and talked about the tragedy; many did so on the internet. People visited these online news articles to find out more about the issue and shared their thoughts by leaving comments. Responding to a recap of the tragedy that was published on the *Yahoo! News* website on April 15, the day of the bombing (Bailey & Goodwin, 2013), a commenter said: “Be safe everyone. Love and support from Paris. We are all with Boston on this sad day” This comment was received well by readers, garnering over 2,700 “likes.” It was the second most “liked” comment of the 14,436 left on the article. However, it also received 101 “dislikes.”

Perhaps this comment received many “likes” because it was representative of how the rest of the world felt about the bombings, and in times of despair such a considerate comment would be supported through “likes” from other people. But why would this seemingly innocent and caring comment receive any “dislikes?” Is it because some questioned the sincerity of the commenter? Did people doubt whether the commenter was really from Paris? Or were there just hundred or so people who would express their “disliking” of another’s comment no matter what? Furthermore, given the popularity of the comment, could such disapproval among readers alter discussions about the topic?

Also, a different case: in September 2013, Gabriella Hernández Guerra, a student in Mexico, posted on Facebook a selfie showing hers in tears and with a bed sheet tied around her neck. She left a message saying: “Goodbye to all, I don't have anything now, I don't have anything. Julio I love you, never forget it. I'm leaving with a smile because you made me very happy while this lasted. To my family, I ask for your forgiveness.

Love, Gabi.” She had broken up with her boyfriend and was apparently in distress. Her comment and the photograph hinted that she was on the verge of committing suicide (Valdez, 2013). Her post went viral as some of her Facebook “friends” started sharing the disturbing image.

In a matter of days, the post was shared 12,500 times and received 10,200 comments. The post also received 20,800 “likes.” The fact that the “like” button was a main response to this post hints that people may have been expressing sympathy toward Guerra. Also, perhaps we can understand that the “like” buttons were used heavily because Facebook only provides three options: to comment, share, or “like” (there is no “dislike” button). What was surprising was that the majority of the comments expressed taunts, insults or sarcasm. This didn’t stop with only the Facebook post; people left insulting comments on other platforms that shared the story, including news articles (Redaccion, 2013). Even worse, many of the insulting comments also received many “likes,” both on Facebook and the news websites. Considering the high number of “likes” that accompanied these negative comments, it may be possible that people were also pressing “likes” on the original Facebook post as an insult (e.g., “I ‘like’ the fact that you are sad and miserable”). A possibility is that opposite to the comments, the “likes” were a way for people to show sympathy. But with the overwhelming negativity in the comments and many “likes” that were given to such comments, the real reason behind this magnitude of “likes” becomes difficult to grasp. All in all, the inexplicable increase in “likes” continued even after this story ended tragically: Guerra was found dead, indeed having committed suicide.

Consider yet another example, this one from Korea: during the 2002 presidential elections, allegations were made that the Grand National Party, the leading conservative party in Korea, hired so-called “cyber warriors” to manipulate public opinion online (H. Shin, 2004). These cyber warriors visited web forums and wrote posts and/or comments that criticized the opposing candidate. Then they shared the “coordinates”—which refer to the web addresses of the post/comment—with other cyber warriors. Groups of warriors would go to the links to press “likes” or leave sub-comments that agreed with the original comment. As a result, the cyber warriors’ comments appeared to gain popularity with all the “likes” and thus became a “top” comment for others to see. Similar operations were found from the opposing party: The United Progressive Party used online teams tactically to promote their own comments or posts (Herald.com, 2013). One of its operations was called the “beple” project—“beple” is a combination of “best” and “reple (Korean way of saying ‘reply’),” which are the “top” comments in a forum that has the most “likes.”

Manipulating comments and “likes” has allegedly been so prevalent in Korean online news that people sometimes doubt comments to be intentionally devious, as shown in the case of a news article about a contestant on a popular Korean TV audition program who claimed that the show was “fixed” (Hwang, 2013). In this instance, at first comments in general expressed agreement. However, in a few hours, some comments were posted that refuted the contestant’s claims and praised the TV program. Upon seeing these comments, other users criticized them as being posted by the media company that airs the TV program. Many even mentioned that they “disliked” the comment. Nevertheless, these comments received many “likes” in a matter of minutes

and became “top” comments. Eventually, however, the number of “dislikes” caught up with the “likes” and those comments were taken down from the “top” list.

In this TV program case, whether the positive comments about the show were really written by someone at the media company is not known. However, these Korean cases show that Koreans think that “likes” have great influence. The “like/dislike” feature is utilized in a battle for dominance of ideas in the online forums. So, could it be assumed that people pay close attention to the “likes” and resulting “top” comments, and that they are indeed influenced by the number of “likes” or “top” comment status?

What do the “likes/dislikes” and the comments in the examples above tell us about people on the web today? What do people mean when they “like” something? And aside from their “liking” something, what is the influence of “likes” on them? That is, what do people perceive when they see content that was “liked?” These are some questions the researcher explores in this dissertation.

Furthermore, the main focus of this dissertation is to apply these questions to news and its audiences. As shown in the first two cases above, people’s “liking/disliking” behavior and resulting influences are difficult to understand. And as discussed in the third example, it potentially becomes even more significant a problem if “liking/disliking” influences people’s perceptions of issues that are crucial to society—including issues covered in the news that are of concern to the public. Therefore, this dissertation examines potential problems of “likes” for how news is understood and discussed. To elaborate, the big question is whether this emerging “liking/disliking” behavior aids or hinders the public’s interpretation and discussion of news topics. The process of interpreting and discussing news is referred to as *news engagement* in this dissertation.

Furthermore, the Boston bombing case shows that some people responded to a seemingly heartfelt comment with a “dislike.” Granted, the number of “dislikes” (101) is far smaller than the “likes” (2,700); it would be an overstatement to say that the “dislikers” were significant. However, enough “dislikes” were registered for readers to take notice and respond to the “dislikes.” As evidenced by the “replies” (sub-comments specific to the original comment), some readers questioned the comment or mentioned a “dislikable” aspect of the comment. As a result, ensuing discussions in the sub-comments deviated from the supposedly genuine intentions of the commenter as well as the news topic (the bombings) at hand.

In this specific case, one word in the comment, “Paris,” was received with most skepticism. Of the 167 replies (sub-comments) to the original comment, nearly thirty criticized the French. One commenter simply said, “France sucks.” Another ridiculed, “Learn how to speak English you French dumb*** - you forgot a period at the end!” One commenter had an agenda-- to criticize the French for not supporting the U.S. strongly after 9/11: “I thought French people loved tolerating Islam countries.” Not only did the “disliking” individuals reject the condolences of the commenter, but they also took the discussion on a tangent about French-American relationships.

Notably, sub-commenters were paying attention to the “dislikes”: over twenty readers, instead of responding directly to the original comment, expressed disbelief at the presence of “dislikes” (e.g., “How can there be a ‘dislike’ on a comment like this?”). This example shows that although the ratio of “dislikes” on the comment was not significant, how people “replied” to the original comment had greater influence —many of them responded with the same negativity toward the commenter or chose to talk about the

“dislikes” as opposed to the original commenter’s statements. Whether this is because negativity brings more participation is not known, but the public’s interpretation and discussion regarding the important news topic (Boston bombing tragedy) and the commenter providing solace was not aided, if not hindered, by their perceptions of the “dislikes.”

The Guerra Facebook case is similar. The nature of the comments and “likes” on her post demonstrates a problem where the public’s active engagement became extremely negative as comments and “likes” were accumulated. Public increasingly acted as a collective when the post became viral—the negative sentiment about Guerra could not be overturned once it was established by the series of comments, and potentially, the “likes.” Perhaps the voices of concern about Guerra were outspoken in the midst of the same “like” button used by the attackers. As a result, her story was criticized in discussions. The wave of “likes” and negative comments seized the potential for meaningful discussions about a poor girl who was (or seemed) on the verge of taking extreme measures.

Lastly, in the Korean example, people apparently regard “likes” and “top” statuses as factors for how public opinion is perceived by others. The problem is that such ideas led to people employing “likes” for persuasive purposes, or manipulating popular opinion. This phenomenon is amplified in news discourse because that is where the people who are interested in the issue will gather. If it comes to a point where more and more “top” comments are manipulated, then there will be no credibility in what the “likes” mean, much less what the comments say. As a result, the public’s perceptions about news topics and the public’s opinions about the topics based on “likes” and comments.

1.1. Public sphere

In order to situate these potential problems within a theoretical framework, the researcher employs the notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1974, 1989) to discuss how people's discussion of news topics may have a significant influence on society, in the sense of potential impact on how people understand issues of concern to society.

The public sphere is a desired state of social life where individuals come together to freely discuss and identify social problems (Habermas, 1974, 1989). In the public sphere, at least in the idealized conception of Habermas, participants "use language to discuss matters of mutual interest and, when possible, reach an understanding or common judgment" (Hauser, 1998, p. 86) about issues of concern. This is also called "communicative action" in the public sphere (Asen, 1999; Habermas, 1990, 1998, 2006). Therefore, the public sphere is referred to as a realm of social life in which *public opinion* can be formed through communicative action. Communicative action in the public sphere refers to the process through which participants communicate by using language to reach a mutual understanding and coordinate their actions (Habermas, 1990; Stromer-Galley & Mhulberger, 2009). Individuals within the public sphere utilize communication to engage in social action (Habermas, 1998) and rational discussions (i.e., the "ideal speech situation"), which synergizes with decision-making abilities of the public to coordinate public opinion, and also through educating each other (Thomas, 2004).

Due to this effective deliberation function, the public sphere represents an ideal state of civic engagement. First, the public sphere requires that all willing individuals be able to participate in deliberative actions. Habermas observes that the concept of the public sphere was nearly non-existent in the days of monarchs and noblemen, because

public opinion was never discussed by people, but the rulers passed ideas down to the ruled. Technological advancements increased the wealth of ordinary people, enabling them to become a part of the public that generated public opinion (Habermas, 1989). These individuals with both the means and intentions to be a part of the public gradually participated deliberations. Habermas's notion of the public sphere was based on the free exchange of ideas in salons around Europe after industrialization. It was an ideal state of public deliberation in practice: discrimination was non-existent and everyone's opinion was equally valued.

As such, successful deliberation requires three institutional criteria. First of all, there must be a domain of common concern about which all members involved in the deliberation process understands the issue and are willing to participate. The second criterion is inclusivity, which guarantees that new members can freely join the conversation. Finally, status must be disregarded; specific traits of the individual should not be the basis of discrimination, other than the quality of ideas and opinions expressed in public deliberation (Habermas, 1989; McKee, 2005).

The question is the extent to which this historical account by Habermas can apply to contemporary society. Habermas posits that the conditions of the public sphere were created by early modern capitalism (Beers, 2006; Habermas, 1989). Such conditions included rise of private property, literary influences, the availability of public gathering places (salons, coffee houses), and the dominance of a market-based press. However, instead of allowing a public sphere for open debate, powerful corporate interests took over and an increasingly commodified mass media became a force for manipulating the public and manufacturing consent (Curran, 1991, p. 83). However, as Kellner (2004)

states, Habermas's arguments actually serve as an ideal of the mass media (and furthermore, news media) in the public sphere. Today, mass-mediated communication is the focus of public debate and information. The public is more capable than ever to participate in communicative action for deliberation. More information than ever can be material for discussion. As a result, if the media can enhance this debate, the public sphere could function. Deliberation is improved by "subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication that are fulfilled by professional communicators who disseminate the best available information to large audiences or citizens" (Bohman, 2004, pp. 141-142). Furthermore, at least some scholars say, these professional communicators enhance the democratic ideal of the public sphere, a space where citizens interact, study, and debate on the public issues of the day (Beers, 2006, p. 116). This rationale for the role of professional communicators in the public sphere applies well to journalism and news media, because as discussed above, the news media provide citizens with the newsworthy information and ideas they need to make decisions.

Habermas later added that mass media could be the key to enhanced public deliberation. He posited that mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimization processes in complex societies (Coulter, 1997; Habermas, 2006). For this, two conditions must be met: "A self-regulating media system is independent from its social environments and anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society" (Habermas, 2006, p. 411). That is, as long as the news media could remain diverse and independent, they could be an essential component of democracy and the public sphere (Beers, 2006).

In this regard, the news media have the potential to serve the public sphere. They provide the grounds for common understanding so that people can gather (virtually as well as literally) to share ideas on issues of concern. In particular, journalism plays an integral role because news coverage leads and accommodates communicative actions regarding these issues of concern. Mass distribution of news topics enables the public to acquire common access, which makes the process of public opinion formation more effective.

Furthermore, journalists' efforts to cover and interpret the news accordingly influence the public sphere. In addition to setting the agenda regarding what issues to discuss (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2008), journalists portray or "frame" issues in particular ways (Entman, 1993). Journalists focus attention on certain events and then place them within a field of meaning. Thus, a 'frame' refers to the way media organize and present the events and issues they cover. Frames influence the perception of the news of the public; this form of shaping ideas not only tells what to think about, but also how to think about it (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). As a result, journalists are able to influence people's general interpretations of what they are provided with.

This is possibly both an advantage and a hindrance for the public sphere. Effective discussion requires a certain level of common understanding of topics and what issues are at stake. Granted that journalism maintains its motives for public service and strives to supply what is common good (Haas, 2007), the so-called 'starting point' of the deliberation process in the public sphere can be advanced to a certain stage, as opposed to always having to start from scratch. Journalism carefully picks and digests the information so that the public can engage in cohesive and focused discussions about the

issue in the public sphere. As long as journalism maintains its key principles such as autonomy, credibility and objectivity (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), it may aid the public sphere in accommodating the effective coordination of public opinion.

However, news media do not always determine what is common good, nor do they always function according to normative principles (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This may be due to innocent misunderstandings by journalists of public needs. But often the news media can be accused of intentionally exploiting the public with its agenda setting and framing powers (Herman & Chomsky, 2006; Lippmann, 1965). Journalism, as the institution obligated to monitor news events, dominates access to raw events as well as mediation of those events, as Habermas pointed out (Habermas, 1990, 1998). The danger here is that journalists could abuse this power to manipulate viewpoints. The influence could come from other powerful institutions in society, such as the political and commercial sector. When news media works in conjunction with these dominant entities, it serves the “dominant elite” to stifle dissent (Herman & Chomsky, 2006). Or, more realistically, news media for reasons such as ownership bias or profit-related objectives may strive to promote a specific side of the issue. Manipulation, however minor, undermines the public sphere. The Habermasian public sphere emphasizes that there must not be any discriminating factors such as acknowledgement of differences among members or any type of prejudice about the topic under discussion (Habermas, 1989; Holub, 1991; McKee, 2005). Public opinion conceived in such settings has little value, because full and earnest deliberation for and by the public is necessary. Moreover, decreasing perceptions of media credibility may deter the public from willingly accepting what the news media has to offer. The relationship between journalism and the public is

strongest when mutual, as each entity is able to pay close attention to the other in order for deliberation to be effective in the public sphere (McNair, 2000).

This problem regarding the relationship between journalism and the public sphere arises because of dynamics in power. While it may be construed that the public with its sheer number potentially holds more power, the mass communication model of a dominant message transmitted from sender to receiver indicates otherwise (Bastos, 2011; Pitout, 2009). The sender may be a mere communicative agent for transmission of dominant ideas (Carey, 1983) shaped by few decision-makers who control information. As a result, the media as decision-maker arguably always holds more power than receivers, who remain passive. In addition, having professional training in handling mass media tools gives senders an edge over receivers. In (old) conventional mass communication, the receiver has not choice other than to be bound to the sender's tools and messages. This passive public at the receiving end was treated as a singular group of people called "the audience" (Livingstone, 2003).

Traditionally, the news audience was the portion of the public that was limited to few sources of information. As members of the public with knowledge about issues of common concern (as supplied by news media), the news audience should be able to participate in the public sphere. However, their passive role in the mass communication chain raised questions about the integrity of public opinion emerging from the public sphere (Bastos, 2011). In order for the public sphere to effectively shape public opinion, the audience must actively engage with news information and participate in discussions becomes a crucial matter. Therefore, examining the relationship between journalists and

audiences, determining whether news audience can actively engage with news is important.

1.2. News engagement

News does not exist by itself, but gains meaning through communicative actions. News must first be communicated to others, who have to pay attention to it. More importantly, however, people must interpret news in some way because it allows them to understand better the world in which they live. And as social beings, people discuss their understandings of news with others by communicating about them. These communicative actions by people might be called engagement with news. In other words, news engagement (as opposed to mere news consumption) requires meanings made from news and communicating those meanings with others.

The term *news engagement* is perhaps the most crucial in this dissertation, because the researcher defines this concept specifically to refer to *people's communicative actions with others as a result of making meaning of news*. To operationalize the concept as such may not be perfectly aligned with the full range of definitions of the word. Some researchers may argue that communicative actions for engagement include intrapersonal communication where the individual contemplates news topics within one's self (Beckenbach & Thompkins, 1971). This dissertation argues that exchange of meanings made by people after receiving news is essential to the concept of *engagement with news* because news is a social construct (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009; Shoemaker, 2006). Since news provides information regarding social phenomena, for news to have significance, members of

society must interact with news and with others about it (Papacharissi, 2009; S. S. Sundar, 2008).

Some may use the term *interaction* to describe exchange of ideas and perspectives among people. However, in the literature, interaction refers to a different notion. For example, Rafaeli (1988) defines interactivity in two ways: exchanging action with other humans at psychological and behavioral levels or utilizing technological tools to interact with machine interface. This dissertation takes issue with using this term to describe news engagement because conventional definitions of interaction only emphasize instantaneous action and reaction. The researcher argues that news engagement goes beyond immediate interactivity and should also include long-term involvement through communicative actions that influence people's perspectives and practices regarding news (Greenwald & C., 1984; S. H. Kim, 2009; McCombs, Holbert, Kioussis, & Wanta, 2011).

For the public sphere, news engagement as expanded communicative action is important because it shows people's receiving and understanding significant happenings or issues of common concern in society. Informed citizenship is crucial for individuals in making decisions and functioning as a member. And news provides relevant and up-to-date information about these topics that are useful for informed citizenship (Curran, 2005; Patterson & Seib, 2005). Furthermore, as democracies become consolidated, informed citizenship shows active participation in discussions about significant issues in society—participation in what may be called deliberation processes for public opinion (Im, 2004). These deliberation processes are arguably what Habermas posited as desired forms of discussions in the public sphere.

Therefore, the researcher arrives at some assumptions: First, news is important because it provides information about significant issues in society. Second, while people can merely interpret the information on their own, their further communicating their perspectives with others is crucial for deliberation in a democratic society. Third, deliberation in a democratic society benefits from these communicative actions because it enhances public opinion.

To expand on these assumptions about journalism, democracy and the public sphere, we can examine how people function as a part of the deliberation process. They are the informed citizens of a democracy, the participants of a public sphere, and audiences of news. Their participation in communicative action is based on how they understand the information. Furthermore, their means to engage with news have evolved into many different ways with developments in communicative technologies and how people adapted to them (Orbe, 2013, p. 237).

At first, news engagement as communicative action in the public sphere was understood to occur only in face-to-face situations. This was because the “medium of the talk” was the only communicative tool available for people (Fraser, 1990). While news media had the tools (e.g., newspapers, broadcasts) to reach the mass public, its audience could not actively participate in the public discourse regarding news topics. News media were still dictating how news discussions occur at a “mass” or “public” level (Blumer, 1939).

This traditional relationship between journalism and its audience was arguably a hindrance for the public sphere. In the public sphere, communicative actions are ideally inclusive of all those in society (Adut, 2012; Beers, 2006; Fraser, 1990); in reality, only

the chosen few (i.e., journalists) decided what triggered discussions. To function properly, the public sphere needs a platform or tool that enables people to interact with the public.

In time, however, the audience's capability to engage in mass communication began to change. Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) introduced a new communication medium that provided both interactivity and accessibility to audiences. The internet, by allowing content to be generated and shared by anyone with the right tools, granted communicative power to users. As a result, the audience began to have an influence in how news topics were discussed in society. Individuals who were "formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2008) now had the ability to provide feedback, generate content and engage in conversations with other individuals—wherever they may be, as long as they, too, have access to the same communicative platforms.

This empowerment of the audience has great significance for the public sphere: increased interactivity means people can freely participate in public discussions (Bohman, 2004; Jenkins, 2003; Jin, 2011). These new, active audiences became a part of the new digital public sphere that saw little boundaries or limitations in people participating in deliberative processes. The digital public sphere is an advanced form of the original notion of the public sphere due to its increased fluidity in terms of access (to discussions), accommodation (of perspectives), location (without limits), interactivity (among participants), and speed (of information flow). All of these are key elements of the original notion of the public sphere that are enhanced with new technologies. Habermas posited a freely accommodating and accessible domain whereby participants interact with each other in real time to deliberate on issues of common concern (Adut, 2012; Habermas,

1974, 1989; McKee, 2005). The internet enabled an even more accessible domain that accommodates willing participants regardless of location, while maintaining an instantaneous interaction among people via virtual forums.

1.3. New modes of engagement

In the digital public sphere, user comments and “likes” are a prominent mode of communicative action. High levels of speed, connectivity and interactivity provided an advanced communicative platform in user comments, allowing people to express their opinions and discuss issues through user comments more than ever (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; S. S. Sundar, 2008; Velasquez, 2012; C. Y. Yoo, 2011). These user comments function in virtual spaces, which further allowed people to communicate with anyone who has access. With such advantages, people have been increasingly adopting user comments as a prominent mode of online communication (Li & Sung, 2010; Reich, 2011).

As user-generated comments garnered popularity, a new feature called the “like” button was introduced. The “like” button, which is shown with each comment or posting, gives people an option to express their “liking” toward those comments or posts. The “like” button was first introduced by Facebook in the U.S. in 2009, at which time users utilized the button to flatter their “friends” on the social media website (Kincaid, 2009). With the success of Facebook’s “like” button, other websites followed suit and employed similar features. Some adaptations included the “thumbs up” button or “dislike/thumbs down” buttons that could be used to evaluate user-generated content or web posts. Such features became popular—a study found that the “like” feature got high usage because it

required less effort compared to actually writing a comment or post (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). On average, the number of “likes” exceeded the number of user-generated comments and “liking” has become perhaps the most popular mode of user activity in the online landscape (Stroud, 2013).

News media online also have adapted to the growing popularity of these features, first enabling comment sections and later incorporating the “like/dislike” voting systems. Commenting systems came first and achieved success and became an integral part of the audience news communication “experience” (McCombs et al., 2011, p. 146). Journalists acknowledged the importance of user feedback and paid close attention to the comments (Dong, 2012). Members of the audience, after reading or viewing the news story, were able to leave real-time feedback in the form of comments at the end of each story. When user comments were posted and made visible to others who visited the story page, audiences could start a thread in this virtual online forum. Online commenting became the mode of news-related discussions. People participated by evaluating the quality of reporting and providing information about story development. This was a groundbreaking factor that brought a high level of interest to what online journalism can accomplish with the help from its users. More importantly, audiences used comments to also indicate their level of interest and perspectives on the topic and commented on each other’s ideas (Reich, 2011). Moreover, user comments provided evidence of news engagement from the audience in the most tangible and direct ways (Domingo, 2011).

The platform granting interactivity and access had finally arrived—people’s discussions regarding news perhaps had never been better available and more useful. In other words, the deliberation process in the public sphere was greatly enhanced with the

emergence of user comments because a larger number of willing participants (with increased access) were able to share and view opinions (with tangible records of discussions) about issues of common concern (with a shared virtual domain provided by news media) more often than ever (with increased interactivity). Hence, user comments had the potential to lead to ideal circumstances set forth by the notion of the public sphere in the online new environment (Reich, 2011; Yun & Park, 2011).

However, this increased potential of user comments has met with some significant challenges. First, user comments were not always deemed useful for news discussion purposes, especially from the journalists' standpoint (Domingo, 2011; Heinonen, 2011). Some comments seemed to be detrimental to the news media's role of providing relevant news and fostering discussions about the topic, because they seemed to be irrelevant "babbling" about anything and everything (Reich, 2011). Also, user comments and their potential to reach a larger audience was a good opportunity for businesses wanting to exploit the forum for commercial purposes. Similar was the case for political activists, who out of eagerness to push their agendas posted propagating statements on popular news story pages (E. Park, 2012). Journalists' hard work in carefully choosing news topics of the day and providing coverage of those issues was supposedly dampened by what seemed like irrelevant, ignorant or profit-minded responses from the audience. Perhaps for to these reasons, increasing numbers of news publications are deciding to shut down their online comments sections (A. Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; LaBarre, 2013).

Still, in principle, user comments were considered by journalists and audiences alike to be more helpful than not for online news. Thus, since the mid- to late 2000s,

news organizations in the U.S. and other technologically advanced countries began looking for ways to manage audiences' comments, such as pre-moderation (e.g., language filtering systems) and post-moderation (e.g., evaluating the usefulness of comments after they are posted by analyzing their content) by the media (Domingo, 2011; Reich, 2011). Through such efforts, they found that user moderation features such as “like,” “dislike” and “flag” buttons could be used as a way to receive help from audiences. The crowd was the moderator—the “liked” comments would bring forward the useful and relevant comments, bringing them to the top of the list, hence giving them the name “top” comments or sometimes placing them on a list called “trending” comments. On the other hand, the “dislike” or “flag/spam” buttons would allow audiences to either remove irrelevant or undesired comments or make them remain at the bottom of the list.

Two birds with one stone—news media professionals must have thought, because by merely enabling these active audiences to engage with user comments, news-related discussions are not only initiated but also sustained and moderated through the participation of audiences themselves (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Furthermore, all of the necessary ingredients, or what Habermas calls “institutional criteria,” of the public sphere (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991) were now more available than ever: discussions about significant topics were made possible by journalism, an institution tasked with providing newsworthy information (domain of common concern). Audiences of journalism freely participate in discussions with their increased interactivity (inclusivity), and more accessibility to these forums means public deliberation of these issues where any willing individual has an equal voice, regardless of one's socioeconomic status or

who they are in real life (regardless of status). Most importantly, moderation of comments through the act of “liking” and moving them to the “top” or “trending” comments category enable the establishment of public opinion.

However, the researcher argues for a different angle on the effectiveness of news audiences’ engagement through “likes”/ “dislikes” in the commenting forum. The researcher believes that these features may pose significant issues for the digital public sphere’s desired function in society. Four factors represent the problem: 1) The online commenting and “like/dislike” feature does not accommodate concurrent exchange of ideas in shared domains, which may result in dominance of ideas merely based on chronological order; 2) with the plethora of information and various forms of communicative actions within the commenting forum, “likes” in the commenting sphere may hinder coordination of public opinion among as many willing members of the public with as much relevant available information as possible; 3) “likes/dislikes” may be pre-determining factors that hint some ideas are more superior than others, making the digital public sphere prone to bias occurring before the discussion even takes place—this is potentially detrimental to an ideally-functioning public sphere; 4) the digital public sphere is not a fixed domain, but characterized rather as discursive manifestations of online communities and cultures that come and go rapidly, which means that the public sphere as the aggregate of these communities and cultures are also discursive. Aside from the four problems above, the researcher notes the following about “likes”: we do not know what it really means for one to “like” or “dislike” a comment, much less what the motivating factors are for these actions; because we do not know what this behavior

really means, attempts to understand each other in the digital public sphere may be misguided.

By identifying the issues above, this dissertation explores problems with “likes” for online news engagement and the digital public sphere. On face value, the “top” comments feature is seemingly an effective way of reaching an agreement regarding public opinion. However, various aspects of new media and peculiarities of the online news audience may work against the rosy outlook for the digital public sphere. As Deuze (2009) observes, audiences in digital culture act in unpredictable and sporadic ways. Citizenship in digital culture, though more interactive and accessible than ever, may be deterrents in the formation and perception of public opinion.

Thus, this dissertation examines the commenting culture in online news, with emphasis on the influence of user “likes” and “top” comments. What is in a “like?”—that is, what do people mean when they “like” a comment on news articles? What constitutes a “likable” comment? How do people perceive highly “liked” comments or the act of “liking” a comment? Furthermore, what is the influence of these “liked” comments on perceived public opinion and the procedure through which public opinion is garnered?

1.4. Overview of the dissertation

This dissertation discusses theoretical frameworks and employs methods aimed at addressing the abovementioned problems. *Chapter 2: Audiences* discusses conceptions of audiences, who are the participants in communicative actions in the public sphere. Audiences and their news engagement practices are discussed from theoretical perspectives of the behaviorist/media effects and the receptions studies (meaning-

making) perspectives. Further, audiences of the contemporary media environment are described as “*converged*” audiences who are members of the newly emerging digital public sphere. This discussion points to how online news audiences in particular engage with news and their implications for the digital public sphere.

Chapter 3: User comments and “likes” focuses on new means of audience engagement with news, user comments and the “like/dislike” features. These features of online news are applied to the notion of the digital public sphere, where problems are identified. Moreover, this chapter examines these problems from an *intercultural perspective*, taking into account how the problems regarding “likes/dislikes” for news engagement and public opinion could take different shapes and form based on cultural differences. Korea was selected (i.e., in addition to the United States) because of its rich development in user comments and “likes” and possibly higher susceptibility to the problems associated with “likes,” as illustrated in the example above.

Chapter 4: Methods makes clear research questions and hypotheses along with operational definitions of key terms, and the research methods employed in this dissertation. This dissertation used a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009) consisting of four mutually beneficial research phases that comprehensively examines the current state of “liking” and its influences on public deliberation about issues of concern, which is crucial for journalism and society alike. The methods chapter offers a justification of the mixed methods approach, followed by an explanation of the four methods that were used for the dissertation research: 1) Framing analysis of “top” comments and their sub-comments; 2) Statistical analysis of the chronological order of comments; 3) Controlled experiment; and 4) Focus groups / interviews.

Subsequent chapters report findings from each research phase. *Chapter 5: Analysis of “top” comments* identified three themes of reframing emerging from the “top” comments and two framing strategies they employed in order to make their frames salient. *Chapter 6: Findings on “likes”* reports findings from the analysis of sub-comments and Wilcoxon signed-ranks test of chronological order and the number of “likes.” Analysis of sub-comments of the “top” comments found factors that make a comment more “likable” or “dislikable.” Four “likability” factors and “three” dislikability factors were drawn from the analysis. Also, from the statistical test the researcher found that chronological order of comments is a significant indicator of a comment’s receiving more “likes.” *In Chapter 7: Experiment*, participants who were exposed to a condition where the number of “likes” and “top” status were visible showed a higher tendency to perceive public opinion in the same ways as the comments. This implies that “likes” and “top” comments are indeed influential for how one perceives public opinion. *Chapter 8: Focus group / interviews* reports data from online news users and media professionals questions about their habits and attitudes regarding “likes.” Findings from this research phase suggested that audiences use “likes” in many different ways, but regardless they noticed a strong influence of “likes” for how people perceived public opinion.

Finally, in *Chapter 9: Discussion*, the researcher triangulates the findings through a comparison and synthesis of each research phase and research question. Then findings are discussed in light of the problems with “likes” for the digital public sphere. The researcher argues that “likes” pose a potential threat for how people adequately understand issues and engage in deliberation processes for forming public opinion. Moreover, the researcher calls for rethinking the traditional notion of the public sphere so

as to embrace the discursive nature of audience engagement practices and cultural differences, and, after explaining the limitations of the dissertation, calls for further studies to situate the ideas in different settings. Finally, the dissertation concludes by reemphasizing the problems and potentials of “likes” for news engagement and deliberation processes in the public sphere. The idea of the public sphere and what it can achieve in society still is valuable, but we must reconsider some traditional notions to properly understand what happens in today’s digitalized public sphere so that it can function better as the forum for people’s deliberation for public opinion.

CHAPTER 2. AUDIENCES

The “audience” as a concept is a product of the mass communication model. Before such a notion, the only significant group of receivers were live spectators of theatre (Livingstone, 2003; Press & Livingstone, 2005) who were present real-time at the site. Due to the mass circulation of books that accompanied cultural innovation of mass education and literacy, people started to form based around common ideas and cultural practices (Stephens, 2007). Book circulation, however, was still sparse and access limited to the elites. With developments with the printing press and a rise in literacy of the public, prints of the top relevant information began to circulate on a regular basis through newspapers (Sloan & Stovall, 2011). Journalism as a profession began to flourish and assumed responsibility for mass communication that now spread across a larger audience. Introduction of broadcast media and the birth of ‘networks’—large media organizations providing central programming to local stations—generated an even more extensive audience that became regular receivers of information provided by media (Dooley, 2007; Hanson, 2014). As technology developed, this audience became even more dynamic in terms of their presence, activities and formation (Pitout, 2009).

2.1. Evolving audiences: From the “affected” to the “active”

Herbert Blumer (1939) was the first to define the mass audience as a type of social formation. The mass audience, unlike small groups, crowds, or the public, is widely dispersed, and its members are usually unknown to each other. As such, the mass audience does not act for itself but “acts upon.” Therefore, the researcher believes that the attitudes and perceptions of the mass could be manipulated via media communication (McQuail, 2010; Perloff, 2009; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990).

Such an understanding of the audience enabled the term to be interchangeably used with the term “receivers” in the mass communication process (source, channel, message, receiver and effect/feedback). This model was understood to be a linear and insular process—journalists were socialized to the news communication scheme as the dominant sources of information that audiences had little role to play other than to be recipients of the news passed down to them (Gans, 1979). Early stages of media research deployed this concept and focused on how messages affect the audience as the passive receiver (McQuail, 2010). As a result, the mass audience was treated as a group of individuals who receive and show some kind of effect from mediated messages. Often referred to as the “behaviorist” or “effects” approach of conceptualizing the audience, this notion of the audience derived from the idea of an all-prevailing powerful media and the easily affected mass (Pitout, 2009; Sullivan, 2013). Effects theories were most helpful in understanding an individual’s psychological response to mediated messages.

Understanding the audience as “the mass that can be manipulated” was convenient for media professionals, including journalists. When necessary, the news media was able to control public opinion with the information they transmitted (Carey, 1986). Different factors such as media ownership, ideological preferences or economic initiatives affected news agendas—because the audience was bound to and dependent upon news media, journalism practices had a strong effect on how the public sphere views the world (Fenton, 2010; McCombs et al., 2011). Political media and public relations influenced public opinion. Journalism in the days of mass communication held dominance over the people for molding public opinion (Hauser, 1998).

For the “mass audience” that could be manipulated, dominance and power are key words in understanding the media-audience relationship for public opinion and the appropriate functioning of the public sphere. Here, what defines dominance in communicative actions with regard to public opinion is the power of meanings conveyed through communication. In other words, if and how the public is able to ‘make meaning’ of mediated messages is a significant question. The concept of meaning making is essential for communicative actions in the public sphere because communication conveys messages that hold meaning. Members of the public sphere contribute to discussions by providing different interpretations of the issue, and others will try to make sense of what is said—this can be broadly understood as meaning-making processes in communication.

The mass audience in the behaviorist tradition accepts the dominant meaning from the media without resistance. The audience conforms to meanings instilled in the message, shaping their views about the world and issues in society. Dominant meanings are also called ‘preferred’ meaning since it is the meaning that the producer prefers to perpetuate for political reasons (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 2003). Political agenda setting and framing motives of the media, as discussed above, results in propagation and powerful influence on perceived meanings of communication, hence affecting public opinion.

Others posit that dominance is sought by the media in their relationships with the audience because the audience, in addition to being the ‘public’ in the public sphere, is the consumer for media as businesses; the audience is a commodity in mass communication. That is, audiences have been understood only to be sources for profit (Napoli, 2003) serving commercial purposes. In this perspective, the audience is still

passive. These people at the very end of the communication chain, as receivers whose only meaningful action is to “choose” one over the other. All in all, however, the possibility of making a choice (e.g., whether to read the newspaper or not) may play a significant role for the media because their uses dictate which content will bring revenue. Thus, media relies on the power of message effects and uses a variety of advertising techniques to manipulate people’s behavior for profit gain (Diggs-Brown, 2011).

Such an approach to audiences raises a complex problem about dominance and power in communication because the consumer’s act of “choosing” one piece of media content (product) over another is never fully independent, but affected by the media. The audience’s selection of media is influenced by many aspects including individual preferences, social/cultural norms, wants and needs, and most importantly, what meanings the content provides for the individual. That is why commercial purposes often are the competitive arena for controlling what meanings are made by the audience.

As opposed to the completely passive mass audience, the audience as consumer may seem to have some power in communication. After all, the media must pay attention to audience wants (Diggs-Brown, 2011). Then, what are the implications of this choice-capable audience for public opinion and the public sphere? Can these choices be devoid of effects from the media, and could this audience be regarded as able to actively participate in the public sphere--in areas other than the economy? Even with the increased meaning making and decision-making capabilities, the audience as “choosing individuals” was still treated as a commodity, a group who that was still the media’s target of ‘domination’ by preferred meanings, or dominant effects of the media.

Fiske (1987) incorporates capitalism into the discussion. Capitalism is characterized by its commodities that serve two types of functions, the material and the cultural. The cultural is concerned with meanings and values that the consumer uses to construct meanings of self, or social identity and social relations. Thus, for the commodity-consumer approach, power lies with the producers who can initially inject and perpetuate meaning in mediated messages via ownership and means of production. This means that media content producers still play the most significant role in meaning making processes. Providing the dominant meaning means it will prevail throughout the media communication chain, thus pre-establishing any meaning making processes of the audience when making choices. Consequently, the audience does not hold much power in dealing with communicative items flowing into the public sphere. Fiske's (1987, 1993) discussion of popular culture as a part of the commodity-consumer perspective on audiences help further elaborate on this point. As subordinates, the only role the people can play is what is called "excorporation," the process by which subordinates make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system. Their actions do not imply much influence for mass communication because in excorporation what is important is the 'doing' itself (any actions that constitutes a culture as a result of media consumption) and not to whom the actions are directed. Such an approach is largely similar to many scholars' perceptions of how popular cultures emerge. Popular culture is always a part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination (Martinez, 1997; K. Shin, 2005; Worsley, 2010). The public struggles to escape from subordination, but dominant meanings of the media hinder them from doing so. This is more or less similar from the public sphere's

perspective—audience-led deliberation and attempts for struggle against the establishment end in vain because their pre-existing beliefs about issues of concern have already been dominated by preferred meanings promoted by the media.

However, a problem with the behaviorist tradition and commodity-consumer approaches to the audience is that they strive to generalize and systemize findings. In this perspective, the ‘mass audience’ is a fixed target (Press, 2006). Of the problem here is the risk of not considering particularities of individuals or different groups of people (communities); moreover messages may mean different things in different cultural contexts. While generalization of effects and responses would be able to contribute to various aspects of communication, a need arises for a critical thinking about what happens at the moment of reception.

Around the same time when the mass audience was a popular perspective of understanding the relationship between media and people, a fundamental change in theories of democracy brought forth a different, developed understanding of public opinion. Whereas in the nineteenth century public opinion only referred to as opinions of a collective entity, it has been increasingly understood as an aggregation of individual / small group ideas (Gunnell, 2011). Paradoxically, according to the notion of the mass audience, the individual had no agency—the audience’s generalizable character would not allow for individual, divergent viewpoints. Here, the public sphere was close to non-existent in terms of its desired functions.

Such continued efforts to understand the media audience and their actions led to a different school of thought. The reception studies approach to audience theory emphasized the meaning-making processes of the audience upon reception of the

message. Discarding the idea of strong media effects, these scholars believed that audience meaning making is essential for communicative actions because communication always conveys some sort of meaning (Gray, 1999); if any portion of the audience interprets meanings with even the slightest differences, the public could share viewpoints that are not completely dictated by the media's preferred meaning and thus exercise agency and power by (Radway, 1988). The point of reception is where societal issues become diversified and deliberated upon outside the dominant meaning, providing legitimacy to the once-perceived myth that is public opinion. Ironically, the audience as receivers was able to exercise activeness in the public sphere through different modes of reception and interpretations of meaning (Genosko, 2010).

To advance from thinking of the audience as just subordinated masses, we must understand the audience as active to some extent, although the degree to which such 'activeness' has been debated. Activeness implies that the audience is able to play some kind of a role, one of the most important being the act of making meaning of mediated messages. If the behaviorist tradition was strictly based on the assumption of the passive audience that has no resistance against the all-powerful effects of media, the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G hereafter) granted "activity" to audiences. Blumler and Katz argued that media use is defined in terms of the way media satisfy individual media users' social and/or psychological needs (1974). A user selects media to satisfy individual needs; hence the acknowledgement of an activity. In this tradition, audiences were viewed as subjects who can provide evidences of gratifications sought vs. gratifications obtained for need categories such as cognitive, affective, social integrative (sense of

belonging), and personal integrative (reinforcement of personal values) needs (Pitout, 2009).

However, the “activity” of making choices in the U&G perspective does not refer fully to independency and activeness, nor does it take into account the influence of the social and cultural contexts within which media use takes place. Ang notes that people are always already implicated in relationships and structures that constitute them as social subjects (Ang, 2006, 2011).

Moreover, acknowledging activities for audiences does not mean that the media are ineffectual (Kitzinger, 1999). In this light, the audience of the U&G model can make decisions, but those decisions are dictated by effects from media that have been gradually accumulated. For instance, cultivation analysis (Gerbner, 1998) states that that continued exposure to mediated messages (particularly television) shape viewer’s perspectives of the world . Applying this to the U&G approach reveals an irony of the self-gratifying active audience—modes of gratification and choices purported at achieving gratification result from influences from media in the first place. In sum, the U&G perspective works under similar assumptions as the aforementioned behaviorist and consumer-commodity approaches in describing media-audience relationships and dominance of preferred meaning.

Taking into account the complex relationships and influences surrounding people, it seems problematic that the behaviorist and U&G perspectives only perceive people as individual members of a singular mass audience. Rather, these individuals should be understood in plural forms because members of the audience constantly change their modes of engagement with media (Grossberg, 1988). Even an individual’s making

choices of usage to seek gratification from media is not a singular, consistent act. These gratifications sought and fulfilled for an individual constantly change according to an individual's complex traits and surroundings (culture, society, interpersonal relationships, value propositions), and therefore can never be a generalized, singular unit.

Treating media as all-powerful and audiences as only a group of individuals was problematic for some scholars. They focused on cultural powers and struggles of people for dominance. In Carey's (1989) metaphor of communication transmission, communication merely requires the efficient transportation of fixed and already-meaningful messages in a linear manner from sender to receiver. Here, transmission is an extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control (Munson & Warren, 2007). The receiver had to realize the meaning of the text in one way or another, especially the meaningful and dominant message.

Early traditions emphasizing the moment of reception were literary criticism and semiotics. At the beginning, the "mass" as recipients of popular culture was still equated with the term "audience." Thus, one tradition of audience research focused on literary and semiotic theory for the understanding of popular culture, which is also known as the implied reader or model reader concept. Umberto Eco (1979) stressed how readers must strive to realize the meaning of a text by drawing on their own cultural resources in interpretation. While this seemingly implies the significance of audiences' roles in making meaning, emphasis of semiotic analysis was on the text itself. Fiske (1987, 1998) argues that all television texts must be open text in order to be popular. They contain unresolved contradictions that the viewer can exploit in order to find structural similarities to his or her own social relations and identity.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of thinking contributes to an understanding of two major traditions in audience studies: reception research and active audiences. Hall's (2006) argument rejects the linearity of the mainstream and the social-psychological model of mass communication. Rather, he highlights the intersections and the disjunction between processes of encoding and decoding performed by the reader. He emphasized the significance of the message and its form in that the discursive form of the message has a dominant position in communication, and that the moments of encoding/decoding are the determinate moments. He also discusses denotation and connotation and that at the connotative level is where ideologies between the encoder and decoder alter and transform significance. Hall identifies three different positions taken by decoders upon reception of the message: Dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant-hegemonic position refers to audiences' identifying and conforming to the aforementioned "preferred" meaning from the encoder (sender). That is, even as active decoders, audiences would accept what they believe the media is trying to tell them—the decoder operates inside the dominant code. However, this notion is slightly different from the behaviorist approach in that the audience is given an opportunity to interpret the dominant meaning and is able to make active choices.

In contrast, the oppositional position describes decoders as understanding both the literal and connotative "inflection" given by the discourse, but decodes the message in a contrary way. Audiences as decoders detotalize the message in the dominant code so as to retotalize the message within a completely different perspective or reference.

Along with the oppositional code, the negotiated position puts into perspective the various decoding moments occurring at moments of reception that may be able to nurture

audience-initiated discussions. Hall argues that audiences understand what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified by the sender. However, audiences “acknowledge grand significations and makes their own grounds rules at a situational level.” (Hall, 2006) This is a mixture of taking the dominant code or incorporating different interpretations (sometimes oppositional) of the meaning of the media text. In sum, this approach posits that audiences make meaning of the message upon reception based on their experiences and interpretations. Therefore, “meaningful” discourse or texts constructed in media content represent dominance. Audiences can accept this preferred meaning or resist (Hagen & Wasko, 2000) and it is at this point reception research finds interest.

Ideas of negotiated or opposing audiences are significant for how the public sphere made up of such audiences are able to provide alternative frameworks that may enhance deliberation. Hall also implies that messages from media are dominantly defined and signified, and that audiences identify the dominant code. However, a level of activeness was granted to audiences, which made possible an explanation of communication failures at point of reception (decoding). Hall states that a great majority of misunderstandings arise from the contradictions between dominant (hegemonic) encodings and negotiated decodings by readers. What Hall calls ‘contradictions’ would be the motivating factors for deliberation and debate in the public sphere. This model is the foundation of what we now think about in terms of active audiences and their engagement with media and others. However, scholars still critiqued reception studies regarding the high significance granted to the communicated text itself. For instance, Radway’s (1988) underlying assumptions, as Grossberg (1988) observes, inevitably takes

the researcher back to a text-dependent, hermeneutic model. Thus, conceptualization of “reception,” or the act of “reading” by audiences, becomes most significant for the development of reception studies. Radway implies that reading is not a self-conscious act where readers collaborate with the author, but an act of discovery about people, places, and events not in the books. Audiences in the reception approach consist of individuals who receive messages and make meaning based on various social and cultural experiences and expectations. The noteworthy aspect of this approach is that focus was on accounts of members of audiences who engaged in reading the texts and provided actual received meaning to them. As such, the reception tradition is arguably still the most useful for understanding the practices of engagement by audiences for the public sphere. Because the most fundamental function of media is to convey messages, meaning-making processes by audiences at the receiving end will always be important, making this approach useful for media scholars across generations. Nothing means anything without reception because the medium is a container, yet at the same time a vortex that enables the influx of immense amounts of information at the time of opening the door to one issue of concern.

Considering the nature of news communication and how journalism permeates the everyday life of audiences, reception studies and its emphasis of meaning in both the encoding and decoding moments provide the theoretical grounds on which news audiences’ engagement within the public sphere can be examined. Audiences’ making of meaning is crucial in understanding what diverse “meanings” emerge as resources for public deliberation of newsworthy topics, how they are different from the preferred meaning of the encoder (news media).

Furthermore, we ought to understand what these moments of decoding look like in the contemporary setting, in an era of rapidly evolving new media technologies. Due to the notion of new media and its high connectivity, interactivity, accessibility, and speed, audiences are now showing a brand-new news-related communicative practice. Their evolved modes of engagement with news, and each other will help us understand what problems we are confronted with for a well-functioning public sphere. What are the implications of the audiences of new media technologies? Characteristics of new media, online journalism, their audiences, and shifting modes of audience engagement call for a rethinking of the public sphere and its implications for society.

2.2. A new breed of audiences: “Converged” audiences and digital culture

The arrival of new communication technologies and platforms (e.g., internet) brought forth the notion of “new media.” The term itself used to have a generic meaning (i.e., any new media platform that did not exist before), but now the term refers specifically to the most recent technological developments in online media environments. New media technologies are represented by 1) high-speed connectivity (Deuze, 2003; S. G. Jones, 1998); 2) increased access to information via the world wide web (Lin, 2009; Nguyen & Alexander, 1996); 3) interactivity via users’ abilities to utilize communicative tools (Jenkins, 2003; Wise et al., 2006; Wojdyski, 2011); 4) virtual domains in which such interactions occur (S. G. Jones, 1998; Papacharissi, 2010); and 5) multimedia platforms capable of providing different forms of content (Silvia & Anzur, 2011; Yaros, 2009).

Above all, the notion of the “active” audience (Hall, 2006; Livingstone, 2004; Press & Livingstone, 2005) is emphasized. Scholars now posit an even more active audience, who go beyond decoding the message to pass along the news to others (Bruns, 2005), comment on the news, and repurpose the news on blogs and other forums (Domingo, 2008). In the era of pre-media interaction, audiences used to show activeness only where a venue for live interaction was provided (Napoli, 2011). For instance, live audiences of theatre would stomp their feet and yell at the actors in real time, responding to each piece of music and types of performances on stage. However, these active audiences had only miniscule influences because live interaction would only be possible to people who physically shared the same medium—in this case being in the same building where the performance was taking place. Now we may be returning to this type of action, except now we are no longer confined to the boundaries of the medium. Before new media, live interaction from the audience was only possible when physical space could be shared; now interaction can occur from the other side of the globe, almost to the same extent as in the days of live audiences because multimedia and virtual technologies work to provide liveness (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010) with images (still or moving) and audio that can be accessed in real time.

This new media environment is different for both media professionals and audiences. Technologies demonstrate possibilities for communication in ways never conceived before. People’s everyday life interactions with those technologies are new. The media’s—including news media’s—approaches toward these people, therefore, have become brand-new. What this means is that while the members of the audience have remained the same, their relationships with media and forms of engagement are changing

(McCombs et al., 2011). Hence, they are now brand-new audiences. New audiences are more active than ever because they are empowered with the ability and self-agency to participate in the production, dissemination, and commentary regarding mediated messages (Domingo, 2011; S. S. Sundar, 2007). They have more choices for consumption and methods of engagement (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005); increasing differences among individualities within the audience can be expressed and acknowledged via media (Papacharissi, 2009).

New media audiences, could be called *converged audiences*: audiences of converging platforms within a larger technological framework (everything new media) that facilitates the instantaneous crossover from one message form and content to the next, not to mention the genres and topics of mediated messages. To discuss this in light of overflow of information and access (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003, p. 323), the contemporary phenomenon of overflow transforms the audiences' relationship with the text from "a limited, mostly one-way engagement based around a single medium into a far more fluid, flexible affair which crosses media platforms" (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003, P. 325).

The term 'converged audiences' itself is polysemic because it also refers to audiences being converged in terms of the roles they play in mediated communication and their fluidity to be integrated into several different types of audiences by their active choices (e.g., clicking their way beyond mere reception and interpretation of messages and into peer initiated discussions). Convergence of audiences occurs in this sense because these different audiences all end up existing in front of one's desk (PCs), lap (laptops) or palm (smartphones). The audience engagement no longer requires one to be

bound to a medium in the traditional sense. They are thus active members of converged audiences at various locations at once.

For converged audiences, audience engagement does not occur in distinctive phases for different messages or platforms. This happens in numerous ways and shifts from one form to the next in the blink of an eye. All of this occurs not at distinctive moments, but as discursive and continuous practices in a newly developing audience culture. Furthermore, engagement culture of converged audiences pose even greater significance for journalism and news media, because the newly emerging 24/7 news cycle requires rapid and constantly updated coverage and interaction of newsworthy topics (Lin, 2009).

For these converged audiences, media is not an external or peripheral tool but a part of their everyday life. Here, the notion of everyday life in relation to media (Silverstone, 1994) gain more meaning because it signifies a permeation of media into people's lives. Convergence of media and life results in audiences' engaging with media constantly and continuously. Therefore, examining the culture of these converged audiences' everyday life engagement with news media is crucial for understanding the influence of audiences' news engagement on democratic society and public opinion. Cultural practices need to be considered—those emerging from audiences' increased interactivity and how they influence societies to which they belong (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2014) as well as the specific domains accommodating discussions of the audiences themselves.

Culture, especially in association to communication, refers to the practices of constituents that have been established over time, and become a consistently held practice

of a significant portion within society (Billings, 1986). How people engage in these practices is significantly affected by technological progress. Carey (1989) used the example of the telegraph to explain how communication as culture is affected by technological changes. The telegraph, with its never-before seen speed and capacity to reach remote and faraway locations, has separated communication from confinements of transportation and reconfigured time and space. In other words, for the first time messages could travel faster than people. As a result, it allowed communication “to control physical processes actively” (p. 203). With speedy communication enabled with this technology, people were able to alter physical travel routes and change how they thought about social issues even before being personally affected by them. Moreover, it changed how industrial processes were handled as well as languages that were used (p. 202). Applying these discussions to new and digital media environments, we are reminded of how social media have changed the way people think about interpersonal relationships, issue framing, language use, etc. (Hayward, 2012). Such theoretical implications about communication and culture allow for discussions appropriate to the new and emerging culture in communication, or so-called “digital culture” (Deuze, 2009; S. E. Jones, 2014; V. Miller, 2011).

Combined with concepts of the converged audience, their communicative actions, and the digital media environment, digital culture refers to the consistent communicative actions of online audiences in a converged, digital setting. Characteristics of new media and its offerings toward the audiences’ communicative capacity define their everyday media practices, which can be equated with digital culture. In other words, digital culture is the everyday communicative practices of converged audiences—to further situate the

definition in this dissertation, digital culture in light of the public sphere is made up of those everyday practices that are associated with deliberation of public opinion within society. Everyday communicative practices of these converged audiences occur in virtual spaces. They are constantly connected using interactive features in all their shape and form to retrieve and share information (Preece, 2001). Converged audiences as users of digital media are a part of the vast network that is linked via a world-wide web {Miller, 2011 #342}(V. Miller, 2011).

An important question is what motivates these audiences to take part in communicative actions. In other words, what would make these converged nomadic audiences (Grossberg, 1988), to communicate with others? What is important is that they share ideas. A good example of these different renditions of virtual community in news media can be found in *Trove* (www.trove.com), a website service provided by the *Washington Post*. Trove allows audiences to personalize and customize news consumption. These features refer to where users indicate their news interests and topics and the website tailors the presentation of stories based on those interests (S. S. Sundar & Marathe, 2010). Under the definition of the virtual community made up of converged audiences, the users of *Trove* are in a community because they share the virtual platform and use the same features. They are connected and thus can engage in communication whenever they like. Moreover, they don't need to be connected at the same time, because their practices on the website will be accumulated over time and thus become a part of the digital culture (i.e., how audiences use the website).

Second, audiences on *Trove* can look for others who have similar interests. This is the shared interest/topic aspect of virtual communities and digital culture that garner

communicative actions. Representing oneself in digital culture is easier than ever, and thus these self-identification indicators anchor communicative actions (Thumim, 2012). Although different from the traditional sense of cultural practices in communication, the possibility to omit the person-to-person simultaneous communication requirement or the shared physical space allows for these audiences to be a part of the digital culture occurring on *Trove*. Furthermore, discussions on *Trove* can be shared on other social media websites easily, which demonstrates how virtual communities of converged audiences can easily shift to a different platform.

Digital cultures that result from these new types of communities have significant implications for civic engagement and the public sphere. Constant availability, controllable social interaction, new opportunities for self-expression, creativity are elements of digital culture that resonate within the larger society that could transform audiences' roles for social and political change (Chayko, 2008; Rosenberry, 2010).

Of the traits of audience engagement in digital culture, directly comparable to the public sphere is the notion of counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). While this idea was introduced as a critique of the original notion of the public sphere, its advocacy toward an unique, non-bourgeois, non-conforming peculiarities of individuals (Fraser, 1990; Loehwing & Motter, 2009) is a plausible description of what converged audiences practice as a part of digital culture. For instance, Million's (2009) description of counterpublics through the case of *Indymedia Athens* demonstrates that the non-conforming, breaking-from-the-norm type of individualized voices become salient in the advent of online communities and increased interactivity in digital media.

Salience of individual voices is the keyword for digital culture. In digital culture, the private sphere intersects with the public sphere whereby individual voices can be heard one way or another as long as they are willing (Papacharissi, 2010). While this doesn't always lead to active political participation (Rosenberry, 2010), digital culture sufficiently provides an arena where various forms of self-representation can be produced and presented (S. E. Jones, 2014; Thumim, 2012). These representations of the self, ranging from self-identification (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009) to articulation of opinions regarding social issues (Miegel, 2013), result in cultural practices that have the potential to increase civic engagement.

Furthermore, digital culture could increase civic engagement regarding news, since higher interactivity lowers the bar for individuals to participate in discourse about social issues on a regular basis (Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010). As such, digital culture offers increased activism from audiences (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). The caveat is the possibility of increased individualism resulting in oppositional positions that become a hindrance to the public news discourse, such as insensitive, rude and speculative ideas that would likely be rejected had the conversation been carried on by journalists (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011).

Digital culture also implies an enhanced collaboration of the collective (Whitaker, Issacs, & O'Day, 1997). Everyday communicative practices of audiences, regardless of whether they are of the public or counterpublic, occur more frequently than ever and thus the opportunity to access information shared by others increases (Huang, 2012). In other words, the lower barrier for participation and sociability in digital media (Pena & Blackburn, 2013) can accommodate a larger conversation , which possibly consists of

more relevant information that will be beneficial to the members of society in the public sphere (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Consistent connectedness to many virtual communities at once helps an individual be better informed, make decisions, form opinions, and influence each other through better representation and more frequent conversations (Thumim, 2012; Wu Song, 2009)—these are keystones for an effective public sphere in an effective democracy.

The emergence of these brand-new, converged audiences and their digital cultures, and especially the discursive nature of audiences that practice digital culture, means we need to rethink what was previously known about different aspects of the “new” news audience – their culture, their communities, their engagement, and most importantly, their roles and influences in the *new* and *digital* public sphere.

2.3. New audiences, new digital public sphere

Technological developments have changed media for mass communication in many ways, mostly through a shift toward different types of media platforms that enable interaction and an establishment of brand-new kinds of networks. Implications of this media transformation is so powerful that McLuhan’s (2006) well known phrase, “the medium is the message,” seemingly makes sense more than ever. This idea has since been further developed by many scholars who are technological determinists (McQuail, 2010). This theory refers to the notion that technology, through its developments and usage, necessarily brings along with it particular communication forms and uses. Here, the emphasis is on the association among communication technologies, functions of media within new technologies, and how the newly transformed media brings about

social change. To elaborate, invention and application of communication technology influences the direction and pace of social change. As we are faced with ever-rapid transformations in communication technology and new media platforms, we also ought to understand whether this statement is true in the contemporary setting. Such discussions can be applied to the idea of the public sphere, whose desired functions in society aid the formation of public opinion and ultimately development that lead to effective democracies.

As mentioned above, meaning making is an important element in the public sphere because mutual understandings among people depend on what meanings are shared and what are not. As communicative tools become advanced along with democracies, deliberation in democracy was made easier to access but more complex in its form. Each person with his or her own meaning constructs collides in the public sphere due to their activist nature and the arena in which activism is made possible (Chung & Kim, 2006; Schudson, 2004). In this new and highly active forum, individuals make various interpretations of issues and have more means available to share meaning (de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010).

These distinctive meanings from audiences conceive opinions, and deliberation of those opinions via interactive features of the media lead to a virtual means for forming public opinion. Opinions formed within this new and virtual “digital” public sphere still pose great significance (Bruns, 2005; Li & Sung, 2010) because they are ideas of real people and representative of what is going on in the real world (de Zuniga et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2005). This is especially true for journalism audiences because they deal with real world topics on a daily basis. However, changes in news audiences’ characteristics

are often unique and show previously unknown tendencies, leading us to rethink the public sphere.

Since communication occurs between people in the public sphere, and people utilize communication technologies, the public sphere must be understood in terms of how it can function within technological developments toward digital media. The public sphere is an area in social life where “people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems.... It is a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser, 1998, p. 86). In this definition of the public sphere, each individual is able to express opinions. In that sense, media transformation in the digital age is helpful for the public sphere because it is the most advanced system that freely allows for a full-scale expression of opinions (Hauser, 1998).

As mentioned above, the Habermasian public sphere requires three institutional criteria: 1) a domain of common concern; 2) inclusivity, which does not hinder any new member from joining the conversation; and 3) disregard of status, which means no specific traits of the individual is taken into account, other than the ideas and opinions with which one participates in public deliberation (Habermas, 1989; McKee, 2005).

Online journalism as a part of digital media is able to fulfill all of these requirements. As discussed above, journalism consistently makes decisions about newsworthy topics and what pieces of information will reach the audience. Once those decisions are made, technologies allow for those news stories to reach a wider audience (Domingo, 2008). Therefore, issues of common concern are made better accessible to the public. As for the domain in which public discourse occurs, virtual spaces in the form of online forums and

web pages provide a sense of location. In the ideal sense, the public sphere is not necessarily a physical space. Whereas Habermas's notion of the public sphere was first conceived from noticing conversations of the bourgeois in salons and coffee houses (McKee, 2005) and he sought to describe the public sphere as consisting of face-to-face interactions, the new digital public sphere may be used to describe any virtual space where people's discussions meet. In principle, what really matters to the Habermasian public sphere is the presence of "shared social spaces" (Haas, 2004, p. 179) where matters of common concern are deliberated upon, regardless of place or form of dialogue. In this light, online news provides tangible domains (e.g., commenting threads, online forum pages) that can accommodate and leave evidence of audience feedback.

The internet is by far the most effective in bringing inclusivity and disregarding status. In news-related forums, any and every person with access to appropriate tools can enter and exit the discussion at will. This is because new media platforms are built on communication technologies for connecting to and engaging with media (Castells, 2003). Without a computer or some other device that allows you to connect to the internet and provides an interface for the user to view the data in understandable form, online communication is impossible. What this means is that the existence of the "connecting" medium allows users to easily participate in deliberation processes or cut off from them without having to deal with face-to-face interpersonal protocols (J. Cho et al., 2009).

In addition, the individual is rarely identified on the online forum. Generally, users are only given unique IP addresses for connection protocol and the only way to identify the user is by an online alias, which does not have to hold information about the person. One can use random characters and numbers that do not hold much meaning,

which ensures anonymity. Anonymity gives people the power to control discussion while encouraging them to voice concerns against powerful agencies, including the media itself (Reader, 2012). Anonymity has been found to diminish apprehension, which in return increases participation (Reinig & Mejias, 2004).

In such circumstances, all citizens potentially have equal access and are also devoid of any predispositions that may arise from being able to see the person—civil discussion as desired in the public sphere may be enhanced. Public discourse online allows everyone to “leave their differences at the door and agree to all speak the same language.” (McKee, 2005, p. 145) In the public sphere, one form of dialogue should not be favored over another as long as there is a “rational-critical deliberation focused on matters of common concern to the participants.” (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2010, p. 231) These standards “can be applied to assess the democratic potential of face-to-face dialogue, mediated deliberation, and more complex, hybrid forms like those found in Internet discussion forums.” (Haas, 2004, p. 180).

Of course, the virtual setting is not absent of all status markers; online discussions are predominantly conveyed through texts, so the writing, word choice, punctuation as well as content matter could reveal things about the individual. This may return status to the mix. Similarly, online aliases are also indicated through text or visuals (thumbnail images) that potentially frame in audiences’ minds what kind of a person the individual might be. Notwithstanding this potential risk, the virtual setting is still nearest to stripping away status indicators that had been much more visible and thus more salient in face-to-face situations.

Other unique characteristics about digital culture are worth noting. As Jones (1998) speaks of digital media, no one medium, one technology has been able to provide the elements of community, empowerment, and political action in combination. To add to this, in digitalized democracies a convergence of technologies occurs, leading to convergence of spaces and practices. Thus, this convergence of the ever-empowered individual and their networking with each other leads to important changes in societies and how information is handled, significantly influencing how communities within societies work (Benkler, 2006). Audiences' behaviors towards institutions of journalism are irregular, sporadic, unpredictable, and ultimately dependent on their wants and needs (Deuze, 2009). Thus, for these networks of private spheres in digital culture, how information and ideas are handled in user communities is key in the new media landscape (Schudson, 2004).

Incorporating fluid notions of democratic society, Papacharissi (2010) asks how online technologies remake how we function as citizens in democracies. Democracy evolves with developments or hindrance in various aspects and the researcher must interpret the moment within the progression. In this day and age, digitalization is transitioning democracy more than ever, toward a collective of private spheres rather than a single public sphere. That is, citizens feel more powerful in negotiating their place in democracy via the nexus of a private sphere (Papacharissi, 2009).

However, while the term private sphere implies fragmentation, it is a sphere of connections as opposed to isolations. Hartley (2012) claims that media consumption of online audiences shifted from industrial consumption and behavior to networked productivity and dialogue. Additional perspectives on new civic habits in these "private"

spheres help elaborate on this point: 1) While the individual has become the most important entity for society, the self is networked and a new culture of remote connectivity emerges. As a result, audiences are multiplied, at the same time with stronger autonomy, control and expressivity: they are at once privately public and publicly private (Papacharissi, 2010); 2) while autonomy and the desire for control increases, individual also promote the self in a pool where several private spheres encounter each other (Chyi, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009, 2010); 3). This results in more satire and subversion, but these subversions are able to contribute to the larger conversation in communities because its reach and scope of ideas are broader than ever (Bruns, 2008); 4) each individual efforts of participation come together via a shared medium, thus resulting in aggregation and the plurality of collaborative filtering (Shah et al., 2005). This provides synergy for discussions among members of the community because decentralized reports from private spheres collectively provide a more cohesive story with better context.

Also, though the private sphere does not guarantee an enhancement of democracy, it generates a new space and new sociality that is important for the public. The private sphere is a part of the public sphere, but never the same. Thus, in thinking of what was formerly known as a single community of people or just few communities in democracy, the plurality and fluidity of new communities requires attention. Communities or individuals can't be dealt in the same way media once looked at them, as cogs in a smoothly running machine that can easily be tightened or loosened at the media's discretion.

A related characteristic of the new media environment and digital culture is that it consists of numerous “networks.” Networks of media users, which could be defined as groups of audiences interlinked via communication technology and virtual spaces, is a strong force for social transformations. Castells (2003), in his discussion of networks, states that technological development is a game-changer for society and networks. His main idea is that the power now rests in networks and that networks are replacing hierarchical structures. Communication technologies are propelling forces for social transformation because they allow for the annihilation of space, which in turn allow for more interaction and formation of groups.

Integrating the ideas of the private sphere and networked audiences, the digital public sphere can be defined as holding the same fundamental principles as its originating concepts, but one whose members and practices are discursive. The public sphere has always featured openness for participation, but the digital public sphere goes further to accommodate an openness regarding various forms of participation, space and different ways of engagement. It then becomes important to understand what new modes of audiences’ engagement mean, and their influences to formation of public opinion.

Different forms of audience engagement and the changing nature of their community made possible by the interactivity granted onto the empowered active audience have important implications for news engagement and civic participation (N.-J. Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; Shah et al., 2005). Since the news cycle has become the full 24 hours and web pages have exponentially increased the possible numbers of news stories, news media have broadened the scope of news coverage to fill the excess time and space (Domingo, 2008; Thurman, 2011). As a result, contemporary audiences are

faced with an overflow of information (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003; Chyi, 2009) and they end up skimming news (denotative) rather than scanning news (connotative) for what it deemed as worthy for journalists, and news organizations strive for their attention by means of sensationalism and topic-centric coverage (Lin, 2009). Thus, the dissertation needs to look further into the changing relationship between news media and their audiences and how deliberation in the digital public sphere occurs through audiences' engagement with online news. In the next chapter, two representative forms of news engagement in the digital media landscape are discussed.

CHAPTER 3. USER COMMENTS AND “LIKES”

3.1. Deliberation in the digital public sphere: User comments and “likes”

New online media are developing a serious audience (Harper, 1998). Here, the term “serious audiences” implies two things: they are consistently accessing news more than previous audiences did, and they are more seriously taking part in the process. These serious audiences represent key players who participate in deliberation in the new, digital public sphere.

Some scholars continue to regard news audiences as still strictly dependent on news media, even if they have changed significantly. For them, the role of the audience is limited to reacting to content that is determined and provided by the news media who as the gatekeeper chooses what material will be received by audiences (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shirky (2008) is also in this camp, distinguishing professionals (journalists) from ordinary citizens: bloggers or other active members of the web, while equipped with means to produce content themselves, are not journalists. According to Shirky, any member of the audience can engage in news communication, but will require initial content that is provided by existing journalists.

However, other scholars argue that the audience and its ability to leave instant feedback and evaluate stories is an important element in the newsmaking process (Domingo, 2008; Pujik, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Bruns coined the term “produsers” (Bruns, 2005) to refer to citizen journalists who can participate in news production to shape news conversations (Hermida, 2011). Also, these new audiences have found an outlet for interactive communication between widely separated individuals

(Rosen, 2008) so that access to news-related conversations is broadened. Consensus is that whatever it is that the audience does, it is significant for news communication.

Audiences are also important from a media business perspective, because their willingness to consume and attention and interest to media are required for a profitable media business model (Doctor, 2010; Napoli, 2003). This is closely associated with viability of online journalism because its profitability is dependent on how much attention audiences pay—their attention leads straight to advertising revenue (Domingo, 2008); this factor is influenced most by how many viewers visited the news webpage. In other words, audiences' active choices determine the outcome of journalistic success, even in a strictly economic way. Thus, the notion of the converged audience and their discursive consumption habits become a question of utmost importance for online news media. Finding out where audiences are, what they do, and what 'hits home' with them is especially more significant in this day and age.

From a journalism values standpoint, the salience of empowered audiences have reinforced the importance of the role to 'serve the people.' Many argue that in the digital world, journalism must always provide what is desirable to the people and that people ought to turn to journalists for information. With increased interactivity, news media are now better able to provide what is necessary for the audience want the audience to react (Haas & Steiner, 2003; Herbert, 2000). For this reason, advocates advocate that journalists listen to the stories and ideas of the audience, choose frames that would build public understanding of issues (Lambeth, 1998). Therefore, in order to assess success in communicating with audiences, online journalism ought to pay closer attention to their audiences—to find out where people get news, how they respond to news, and what types

of practices they engage in. One of the most important roles of journalism is to better democracy and advance society—to do what is best for society (Christians et al., 2009). Thus, news organizations and their perceptions of and relationship with society and audiences is an evergreen topic for journalism, one that requires even more attention now that audiences' forms of engagement and communities are changing considerably (de Zuniga et al., 2010).

Although some argue that the practices of online journalism have yet to be solidified fully into a distinct mode of news making (Herbert, 2000) it differs from the more traditional media (Hermida, 2011). The potential for immediacy, convergence and presentation methods have influenced not only journalism organizations (Heinonen, 2011) but also how audiences engage with the new structures. In this sense, Pujik (2008), in an ethnographic examination of online newsrooms, concludes that with the arrival of digital interactivity, and the use of chats, text messaging, polls, comments, and e-mail, media organizations are much more prone to gathering feedback from their audiences.

A significant portion of knowledge sharing practices of audiences has to do with monitoring the credibility and accuracy of journalism and contributing to the collective knowledge of the public (McQuail, 2010). In “reading” the news, highly knowledgeable or educated individuals will be able to compare the contents of the news article with what they already know or believe they know, thus evaluating the source with a critical eye (Kata, 2010; S. S. Sundar & Nass, 2001). Furthermore, individuals with an increased level of expertise on a topic can evaluate the values of coverage. News audiences are becoming better educated (McLeod & Shah, 2009), and even if not so, they can immediately search for additional information on a topic, making them semi-experts at

any given time. Plus, anonymity on the web diminishes the burden of accountability for one's own words, so audiences can spark conversations that may be perceived as credible (regardless of whether they really are) and become popular opinion. This is potentially problematic for the public sphere and crucial for news organizations in exercising any control in the public sphere because public opinion gets molded and shaped quickly when people begin to perceive an idea as dominant public opinion (Yun & Park, 2011).

The irony is that users are participating sharing knowledge in the journalism arena more than ever but the ultimate blame for any potential problems goes to journalism organizations. The so-called user experts who are “producers” (Bruns, 2008) appear at both ends of the communication chain, throwing information into the journalism mix but at the same time using that same expertise to ‘check on’ the quality of journalism. That is why journalism organizations are becoming more and more careful in managing participation, both at the information gathering and reception/evaluation stages (Domingo, 2011).

In the age of digital media, news organizations are also struggling with defining who their audiences really are and what they really want. Journalists rely on constructed audiences because they cannot truly grasp the diverse, complex nature of those who experience their products (Lowrey, 2009). Moreover, information surplus in the digital age have increased the public's demand for news. The idea that journalism can provide everything to everyone according to his or her needs is becoming less and less plausible (Chyi, 2009).

As discussed above, news media's values in both practical and philosophical senses acknowledge and value audience engagement. The changing audience has more

means of engagement than before. This signifies a new opinion pipeline (Santana, 2011). Still, some questions remain: Why do members of the audience decide to interact with news content? And what is the most significant means through which the audience engages with news content?

To think about audiences' engagement, the characteristics of their communities and their relationship with news organizations, perhaps the most salient culture of audience engagement with news are user comments. Since the days of the first newspaper, *Publick Occurrences*, where the last page was left blank for readers to write their own comments and share with neighbors who may later read the paper (Reich, 2011), to letters to the editor that demonstrated a certain level of user response to news articles (Nord, 2001), and now to the instant threads created at the bottom of almost every online news article, user comments have been the most popular way for news audiences to talk back to the news organization or other members of the audience. This may seem to be a part of knowledge sharing because user comments occasionally are used for the purpose of sharing knowledge and perspectives. However, user comments deserve separate attention because they provide a specific venue of shared space, where sharing knowledge (Chen & Huang, 2013) is taken to a specific level.

User comments provide evidence of how news was received by audiences' and their relationship with news organizations. Journalists support this feature overall (Nielsen, 2013). However, scholars also raise concerns about whether user comments could truly be treated as accurate indicators of public knowledge and opinion (Anderson et al, 2013; Canter, 2013; Lee, 2012; Hlavach, 2011).

In order to resolve this issue, an increasing number of websites are providing a commenting system and interaction within comments via ‘thumbs-up’ or ‘thumbs-down’ voting or replying to comments. These systems are developed to such an extent that comments and comments on comments may influence the news consumption preferences of audiences. These kinds of features on the news aggregator site represent what Shoemaker and Vos call an “audience channel” of gatekeeping (2009, p. 125). The audience can also function as extra-media factor (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), shaping how journalists subsequently construct stories. Also, comments are receiving more attention from researchers because they are believed to effectively portray public opinion and influence discourses in other areas of society (Chung & Kim, 2006; Reich, 2011). Plus, engagement via user comments brings the dominance over public opinion from the elites of society, the decision makers, to the people.

However, some journalists see user comments as problematic, because those journalists regard users as babbling about nothing important, doing so only to put forth opinions (Reich, 2011). For this reason, news organizations have sought ways to effectively manage audiences’ comments. The most widely used form of management for user comments is moderation (Domingo, 2011; Reich, 2011). News organizations use both pre-moderation (creating filters and censoring algorithms on the website in order to screen comments before they are published), and post-moderation, which involves reactively removing or modifying a comment after reviewing posted comments that express complaints about other posts. However, both approaches cost news organizations time and money: both involve someone or some system sifting the inflow of user

comments –which are coming in numbers far exceeding past feedback and commentary by audiences.

Thus, news organizations needed a way to get help from the audiences. The fact that user comments were visible to everyone, not just the journalists and that everyone had the ability to interact with the content led organizations to add simple gadgets such as “like,” “dislike,” and “flag/spam” buttons after each comment. The crowd was the moderator—the “liked” comments would bring forward the useful and relevant comments, because accumulation of audience feedback regarding audience discussions would eventually converge to desirable modes of engagement (e.g., discuss the topic of the news article per se in civil ways). The most “liked” comments would appear at the top of the list, regardless of chronological order, hence giving them the name “top” comments. On the other hand, the “dislike” or “spam” buttons allowed audiences to vote against comments that were irrelevant, unpleasant, or commercial (sometimes “flag as spam” is used) to either remove these comments or make them remain at the bottom of the list.

User comments and the “like” function are mechanisms provided by new media that potentially enhance the digital public sphere greatly. First of all, each of the three institutional criteria (common domain of concern, inclusivity, disregard of status) can be met. Also, they are participatory actions that are tangible evidences of audience discourse. Viewing others’ opinions and adding onto the conversation one’s own viewpoints enables deliberation in the virtual public sphere. Moreover, the act of pressing “like” is a vote and an expression of endorsement. Voting is the bedrock of democracies, and the “like” feature enhances civic engagement by enabling the public to vote on each comment. The

latter is important for the formation of public opinion because it enhances the deliberation process. In addition to the array of ideas being shared in the forum, the “like” status provides people with an idea of which viewpoints are really popular among the public.

3.2. Current knowledge regarding user comments and “likes”

The digital culture of audiences’ engagement through commenting or “liking” a comment deserves further investigation. First, we have yet to understand motivating factors behind users’ commenting and “liking.” Examining the factors or processes that lead to commenting or liking will help explain why and how people comment or “like” in the ways they do, enriching the discussion of whether audiences’ such engagement is useful for the digital public sphere. Second, examining the common characteristics of user commenting forums as places for virtual conversations is important because online discourse resembles real-life communication in some aspects, but it also distinctively differs due to commenting format, massive diversity of opinions and interests, non-measurable reach, existence of bystanders, and rapid speed (Cenite & Yu, 2010; J. Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2005). Lastly, empirical findings already address whether user comments and “likes” are valuable for journalism but more research around user comments and “likes” is necessary to understand the full implications of this for the digital public sphere.

3.2.1. Motivating factors – A media effects approach

Much research in communication and user behavior, and especially effects research is highly applicable to news audiences and their commenting behavior. While

these studies sometimes overgeneralize and fail to address the specificities of different societies and cultures, they are still useful for understanding what may be going on with digital media users.

Media effects research on news audiences, including their willingness to interact with news content, has two streams: 1) How news media affects *you as the individual* and 2) how you perceive the effect of the message on *others*. The first perspective considers how the individual's perspective on a topic could be a factor in one's judgment of the credibility of the media's coverage of the issue (Vallone & Ross, 1985). Here, bias is a potentially significant aspect. Lord et al (1979) found that individuals favor information that confirms their preconceptions or hypotheses on a topic, regardless of whether the information is true. Here, it must be noted that individuals, when accepting the favorable information, believe it to be more credible as a result of their preconceptions. The hostile media effect hypothesis (HME here forth) explains similar phenomenon in the opposite direction. Gunther and Schmitt (2004) define the hostile media effect as one where an individual who has a strong opinion on a topic (thus defined as a partisan) perceives media coverage on that topic as unfavorable to his or her side, even if the actual content were neutral. According to the hostile media effect, the partisan sees the media coverage as unbalanced, and thus not trustworthy. These two media effects theories are significant because they state that perceived credibility and value of the message depends on the individual and the individual's bias. Then, what factors may lead individuals to engage with news through commenting and "like" features?

One's perception of the media's effect on others may lead to behavioral responses in news engagement such as 'liking.' The Third-Person Effect hypothesis (TPE hereafter)

draws its ideas based on the following paradox: You, as the individual, are not influenced by media content, but you think that others (all people other than you) are influenced by the media content to which they are exposed (Perloff, 2009). The paradox is that if ‘you’ are right in that other people are influenced by media, it shouldn’t be any different for you—media are also influencing you, in the perspective of others.

However, “liking” or “disliking” are behavioral responses, which means the audience does more than merely perceive an effect or the magnitude of that effect on others. To discuss behavioral responses to perceived effects, Gunther & Storey (2003) introduce an indirect effect model, also called the presumed influence model, proposing that people 1) perceive some effect of a message on others and then 2) react to that perception.

The final and most important link to the willingness to “liking” a comment is the theory of presumed influence (PI) (Gunther et al, 2006; Gunther & Storey, 2003). This theory states that when an individual sees the media’s influence on others, he/she be willing to engage in behavioral response about it (i.e., do something about it). The researcher argues HME and TPE are both fundamental processes that increase the level of presumed influence and intentions for behavioral responses. For instance, the partisan of HME would see a topic being discussed in an undesirably biased way, as mentioned above. If such a partisan perceives an influence as a result of the news article being presented to the public (presumed influence), they might think that the article is highly undesirable since they perceive the article as being biased. This dissertation seeks to find out whether such an integration of the two theoretical frameworks may be demonstrated in reader’s willingness to engage with news.

In asking whether presumed influence derives firsthand from HME and TPE or just the audience's attempt to guess the real impact of communication, Tal-or et al (2009) found very few studies that look at the prevention or coordination aspects of the behavioral component of presumed influence. The few studies they found dealt with the willingness of individuals to censor messages deemed harmful (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999), which looked at the prevention aspect; the adolescent smoking perception study that looked at coordination and compliance with peer norms (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Liebhart, & Dillard, 2006); and the test of causal direction between presumed influence and behavioral intentions (Tal-Or, Cohen, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2010). Thus, perhaps a causal direction that starts from presumed influence to "liking" a comment exists.

To elaborate, TPE assumes that individuals do not see effects occurring on themselves but only on others. For partisans who see a high level of undesirable bias (against their beliefs) on media, media's strong effect on others would result in the willingness to respond with some behavioral action. The researcher argues that one such behavioral response could be "liking" a favorable comment/article to reinforce one's values or "dislike" the allegedly biased comment/article to let others know that about a problem with the content. In sum, a theoretical linkage among the three media effects perspectives (HME, TPE and PI) can be established in light of motivating factors for "likes" in the commenting sphere.

3.2.2. Deliberation through online conversation

Deliberation online is implemented through a platform that allows for conversations and rhetoric resembling debate. User comments are shared one by one

within a virtual space made up of virtual members of a temporary community (Brundidge, 2010). Because only one comment can be seen at a time, user comments allow for other members of the audience to either participate in the conversation or become spectators of debate. As participants, audiences are able to read someone else's comment and then provide supporting or opposing viewpoints about the previous comment of the topic at large. For controversial topics in particular, this sequential argumentation help shape ideas about the topic matter (Liu & Li, 2012). Perhaps more importantly, user comments that resemble conversations increase the users' intent to participate and show a more salient civic attitude toward issues of common concern (You, Lee, & Oh, 2011). Ideally, a peer-to-peer conversation configuration allows for meaningful negotiation (Shanahan, 2009) and enables collective efforts to achieve good in society (Gyori, 2013).

For deliberation, user comments present an open opportunity for participants to make themselves heard. Thus, how to make deliberation work in a conversation consisting of potentially everyone at potentially the same time becomes important (Stromer-Galley & Mhulberger, 2009)—and as noted earlier, media organizations have furnished voting or rating systems for peer moderation (Domingo, 2011). The concept of votes or ratings from others in the audience have a significant effect on perceptions regarding an idea or product (Godes & Silva, 2012). The possibility of voting for comments that are deemed useful also contribute to the significance of user comments for deliberation purposes in the public sphere, because audiences are able to make decisions, as part of the conversation group, what ideas are more helpful or preferable.

Furthermore, potential influences of user comments result in users employing rhetorical tactics in order to win others over to their side by generating attitudinal and

behavioral changes from people (Sommer & Hofer, 2011) so as to “like” their comments. Negotiations and presentation of expertise about the topic are ways through which audiences as conversation participants convey messages about topics that are of interest to the public (Shanahan, 2009; Walther et al., 2010). Providing expertise on a topic enables the comment to emerge in the conversation as helpful, and thus receive “likes” and good ratings (Shanahan, 2009). Here, the question is where the motivation to share expertise comes from: to contribute to the conversation or receive better ratings. The former would be optimal for what the public sphere posits. The latter represents what might happen when the feature overtakes the content, such as in websites (e.g., Newstrust.com; kin.naver.com) where commenters receive ranks based on how helpful their comments were. In order to achieve higher rankings, users present expert opinions and sometimes conduct their own research to make themselves better experts (Jinyong Lee, 2014; S. Lee, 2014).

Also, because user comments are conversations that consist of written text (with possibly the exception of videos and images that can be uploaded to some online forums), textual elements are used to receive attention. This is effective because unlike in real-life conversations, text remains as tangible evidence. Other members of the audience can read the comment for as long as they like, analyzing and interpreting their meanings. For example, status cues (Velasquez, 2012) or trendy modes of social media (e.g., Facebook) expressions (Hyde-Clarke, 2013) can convey the commenter’s meaning so as to receive positive reactions from others.

On the other hand, the text itself could be given so much meaning that cues and symbols used in the comment become overly representative, thus framing the comment

(and potentially the commenter) in simplified ways. This could be problematic in a sense that it also has the potential to fail at least one criterion: disregard of status in discussions. Online discussions in general hold benefits in comparison to their in-person counterparts, but the frames of meaning garnered from text-based communication could increase the significance of some ideas over others or vice-a-versa—thus influencing the public sphere in completely new ways.

Such characteristics of online comments as conversation are significant because the potential reach of a user's comment is immeasurable. Therefore, all aspects of the user commenting landscape—engaging in conversations, stating opinions, persuading others, rating others' comments—end up having a magnitude of an influence in public deliberation (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2005; Stromer-Galley & Mhulberger, 2009). In addition, online comments are abundant in number and are not limited by any physical or temporal restrictions. Moreover, various factors influence the act of “liking” and many influences may result from ‘likes.’ Thus, what has potential to be meaningful dialogue for public opinion (Hauser, 1998) may not be utilized beneficially if we continue to understand user comments and “likes” in the same ways as our everyday real-life conversations.

3.2.3. Value for journalism and public sphere

In theory, user comments and “likes” could enhance journalism's roles and public deliberation in the public sphere. Studies have identified new patterns in audiences' media practice that demonstrate salient influences of user comments and their recommendation functions in the digital public sphere. Having examined “highly recommended” news content Thorson (2008) argued that news organizations should

utilize user recommendation systems to more effectively communicate with audiences and understand what the public are interested in. Dong (2012) also found that users were strongly affected by recommendations and ratings left by other users in making decisions about media content. Such findings highlight the importance of the topic of user comments and “likes” for deliberation in the digital public sphere.

Other studies looked at the meaningfulness of user comments from the newsroom’s perspective as well as the individual’s. In a content analysis of actual user comments and interviews with newsroom personnel, Canter (2013) found that while journalists intended to enhance civic participation in public affairs, journalists were reluctant to accept the ideas stemming from the online commenting threads. As a result, news media did not fully exploit the potential—and desired-- benefits of user comments in the public sphere. For the individual, an incentive for participating in the conversation derives from a need and desire to represent oneself as much as possible (Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

In addition, audiences’ deliberation efforts—seen in comments and “likes”-- become important guidelines for news-making decisions by news media organizations. Because comments show how the audiences have reacted to news content (Oh, 2010), journalists pay attention to the themes and topics introduced in comments and make gatekeeping decisions accordingly (McElroy, 2013; Oh, 2010). Therefore, self-agency of audiences possibly provide tangible evidences of what people want (S. S. Sundar, 2008), allowing journalists to serve the public best by providing what they want in news communication (Nielsen, 2013; Santana, 2011).

A survey of pertinent literature about user comments and “likes” suggest that these features in online news potentially make the digital public sphere more effective than in the original notion. However, whether this is really the case is debatable. For instance, social desirability theory introduces potential issues with formation of public opinion through ‘likes.’ Social desirability is the idea that people in general will form their opinions based on what they believe is the popular opinion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Based on news media’s agenda-setting and framing, a particular opinion usually gets repeated throughout various news media, until it creates a false vision where the perceived truth is actually far removed from the actual truth.

At times user comments that add no real value to the discussion receive “likes”—including comments that are funny, snarky or witty, but are made merely for emotional appeal. This suggests that the traditional uses and gratifications approach is inadequate in explaining digital media audiences’ gratification (S. Shyam. Sundar & Limperos, 2013). As a part of seeking emotional appeal for gratification, many online audiences look for humor (Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007) even when engaging with public affairs material. They prioritize this factor for activities on the web because it satisfies —this need not be strictly related to the topic matter.

With increased interactivity and the possibility of being seen by others, audiences may be practicing an articulation of “likable” factors (such as emotional appeal) in mediated messages through appropriation of media production and engagement culture (Hall, 1992). Such a culture invites users to write funny comments rather than constructive ones. Although a comment can certainly be both humorous and constructive

at the same time, in today's digital culture it seems being funny or emotionally provocative trumps meaningful content.

This idea is also closely related to the theory of the spiral of silence, the theory that individuals who perceive themselves as having a minority viewpoint will refrain from challenging the dominant notion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This could constrain active participation in full deliberation, which may result in the individual's only going as far as to "like" the comment and nothing more. Yun and Park's (2011) experiment on online users' willingness to speak out in online user comment spaces incorporated the spiral of silence theory, finding that people showed an inclination to refrain from posting a message if they concluded that their opinion was the minority. This suggests that online discussion forums are not ideal for communities because largely those with the majority opinion will post on a forum. Moreover, the authors warn that users are already fragmented, even when the virtual spaces provided by media categorizes them as communities.

Similarly, Lee and Jang (2010) investigated whether other reader's reactions to news on internet portal sites affect individuals' perceptions of public opinion, assessments of media influence, and their personal opinions. The authors found that those exposed to others' reactions that were incongruent with the news slant will assume less news influence on general public than those who only read the news article. Readers turned to user comments to assess the effectiveness of news articles, they turned to user comments. Depending on what the perceived opinions were, they assumed that the news article did not have an influence in shaping public opinion, and even inaccurate because it does not reflect what is going on in society.

this dissertation aims to conduct empirical research on precisely these potential issues and to identify problems for the digital public sphere, to investigate how those problems manifest themselves and understand how the digital public sphere may function better in today's media landscape.

3.3. Problems of the "like" feature for the digital public sphere

Activeness of audiences and tangible, empirical evidences of audience engagement shown through user comments and "likes" on face value may seem to enhance the public sphere, and in turn enhance deliberation for an effective democracy. However, we must be very careful to consider the implications of the user commenting system for the digital public sphere. The public sphere has elements may not be supported by the notion of "likes" in the digital public sphere, which could harm or undermine public deliberation.

First, the ideal democratic public sphere *requires the concurrent exchange of ideas in shared domains*. Democracy in its earliest conceived form in Greece featured representative members of the public actively participating in face-to-face debate about social issues in the *agora* (public square) (Urbinati, 2002). Live discussions were what made the Agora successful, and also something the Habermasian public sphere prefers (Haas, 2004).

Online commenting forums, while interactive in nature and designed to accommodate as many active participants as much as possible, in reality does not hold all willing participants at the same time. Due to the potentially increased inclusivity of new media, an established time for a discussion to start or end never exists. Some comments

are left before others, and those who are late in joining the conversation are met with an array of existing comments. Many who come later may rely on the “liked” comments to grasp what the popular ideas were. This is a potential problem for the public sphere, because discrepancies in participants’ moments of accessing the conversation may result in pre-existing, predominant viewpoints that have a priming effect imposed on the newcomer (Pena & Blackburn, 2013).

Perhaps an attribute agenda setting and framing occurs due to the chronological order of comments and ideas that appear on the comments boards. For instance, if one of the first visible comments for a news story on a politician opposed that politician, other people who are against the politician would actively provide strength to that argument by giving it a “thumbs up.” However, on a similar but separate article on the same politician, the top comments could be in the exact opposite direction and be favorable toward the politician. In this case, if the decisive factor were indeed the order of comments shown to people, the researcher believes that this is a severe problem because an extraneous factor (outside of the topic matter) ends up dictating what the popular idea is for a story. Other relevant but late comments do not get the opportunity to be a part of the discussion just because it lacks visibility.

This problem is closely associated with another problem of online commenting. For the public sphere to be effective in coming to a consensus for public opinion, decisions should be made by *as many willing members of the public with as much relevant available information as possible*. However, as implied above, some existing comments may already hold dominance over others due to the number of “likes” received.

The newly participating user could end up neglecting the whole picture of the discussion by failing to view other less popular (but potentially valid) comments on the list.

In this fast-paced information era, the “like” function as indicator of public opinion is like two sides of a coin. Comments with the most “likes” are popular comments, and in principle could be considered public opinion. People are aided by being able to view the result of filtering that occurred before their entrance to the commenting forum. However, these “top” comments do not necessarily present public opinion as desired by the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. For instance, the number of “likes” could be merely because of chronological order of comments—some may have felt compelled to like a comment among the first few they saw. This could mean that the “top,” dominant comments preoccupies the forum from the early stages of the conversation, remaining there as “top” comments for others to perceive in the same way. Moreover, in new media and with the plethora of information available, the number of individuals truly willing to engage in discussion may be rapidly decreasing. People have shorter attention spans, eager to quickly find out what the public opinion is—they glance the “top” comments and move on to the next piece of information. Full deliberation becomes a missed opportunity, as diverse viewpoints get buried on page six or seven and go unnoticed.

Audiences are too busy in their converged everyday lives of media engagement to really pay attention to every single statement and comment that exists within the forum. Their short attention spans force them to pay attention to the “top” comments – a tricky term in itself that already is granted a certain level of significance. As a result, members

of this forum do not fully engage as members, and end up perceiving the misrepresented public opinion.

Accurately understand the public's reception of a news topic because the tool we think of as essential for news, such as user comments, may lead us to confusion in terms of fully understanding what audiences think (Napoli, 2011). As much as user comments are an important new form of interactivity for communication, the researcher believes too much emphasis is given to user comments and "likes." When a comment receives many thumbs-up votes, the idea may be taken to represent the dominant opinion of readers; but at least with user comments on news websites, top comments for two articles about the same topic may have completely opposing ideas but also have an equally high number of "thumbs up."

Most popular comments—and thus perceived as representative of public opinions—sometimes have nothing to do within the context of the topic that is being discussed (Lee, 2014). Some comments with the highest numbers of "thumbs-up" merely criticize someone else's comment or make funny remarks that pose little relevance to the topic. People "like" these comments among many within the thread of conversations just because they are extreme, provocative, or just plain funny. True, the audience has spoken, and others have contributed to a process where certain statements end up on top of a ranking system.

The researcher argues that public opinion can potentially be misrepresented. The word misrepresentation is used here because few "popular" comments do not necessarily reflect what the public believes. One may argue that if many people "liked" a comment, then that "top" comment can be called an epitome of public opinion. Yet, the "top"

comments may hinder the deliberation process for sharing public opinion if they gain popularity even when they are not meaningful to the conversation. Digital culture, no matter how many counterpublics (Miloni, 2009) or private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010) it comprises, still operates within a society where interpersonal interactions and exchange of knowledge and ideas should improve society by adding meaningful discussions to content. The problem is that comments lacking context to the topic have the potential to receive a high number of votes (e.g., “likes,” “thumbs up”) to give the impression that they accurately represent what the public think, when in reality the votes were a result of factors that were not so meaningful (e.g., provocativeness, humor, criticism) to the topic.

Moreover, because user comments can also reach the same large readership as those accessing the story page, some individuals have exploited this mass communication aspect for their own gratification. For some, user comments are opportunities to push an agenda that was not related to the news topic. For others, people seem to be “babbling on” about anything and everything, ranging from using snarky language just for the sake of it (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013) to making an unrelated, funny comment just to gain attention (Shifman, 2007). This makes conversations in the commenting forums even more decontextualized and irrelevant. Repeated exposure to such behavior may even result in some members of the public choosing not to participate (or even view) this form of audience engagement with news.

Third, ideally, *the public sphere should not have any pre-determining factors*. Here, pre-determining factors is a reference to one of the requirements of the Habermasian public sphere, which is that it has no pre-discriminating factors. Instead of using the term pre-discriminating, which refers to perceived dominance and superiority

that overtake the discussion, this dissertation uses pre-determining to refer to more subtle characteristics of user comments and features that predetermine some sort of significant idea or lack thereof. In the digital public sphere, new media audiences are moving toward a hybrid private/public sphere model, as they have agency to seek information on their own and establish individual viewpoints before engaging in public discussions about the topic (Papacharissi, 2010). An individual over time can receive and accumulate much information about a news topic of interest. Needless to say, their continuous interaction with others in real life, interpersonal interactions will aid the individual in forming beliefs about the issue. However, the convenience and accessibility of online sources also facilitate this process. Even if the news story emerges quickly, the individual can use web search or read numerous other sources to quickly form his or her own opinion.

This tells us something about the nature of online user behavior, especially regarding controversial news topics, which often provokes extreme opinions from people. Thus partisans (i.e., those holding strong predispositions toward an issue) among audience members (C. Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Huge & Glynn, 2010) are common regarding controversial topics. However, not all users choose to leave comments; instead they may engage in a weaker level of interactivity, which is to rate the comments. This can be done with a click of a button; it doesn't require as much effort as typing one's comment on the website. The problem occurs when such actions are motivated by deliberate intentions to propagate the rest of the public. Suddenly, the public sphere becomes an arena of battles for dominance in terms of meanings and frames regarding the news topic.

Thus, when a comment advocating one side of the issue becomes visible as one of the few first ones, it becomes more and more prominent among subsequent comments because they continue get more ‘thumbs ups’ from readers with similar perspectives. As long as it makes it to the top comments section, it will remain; people usually tend to read the most “liked” comments, thinking that was the popular opinion of the community at stake or society in general (Dong, 2012). In other words, audiences attribute pre-determining factors, in this case deferring to others’ actions of “liking” the comment, thus forming a sort of bias about “top” comments without fully investigating the discussion at hand (Dong, 2012). Combined with the first two problems, the average citizen in the digital public sphere may get a distorted view of public opinion, by depending too much on the number of ‘likes.’ Such problems seem to occur most often in struggle for ideological dominance regarding political issues (Bastos, 2011). Moreover, the “like” or “dislike” features of online news websites may limit opportunities for further discussion regarding controversial news topics. When audiences on the topic, especially through “top” comments, only offer extremist viewpoints, the possibilities of a further discussion may be reduced to a dichotomous choice—whether to push the “like” button or not. Meanwhile context is lost. While the commenting forum is still technically available for further discussion, the pro- or con- perspectives as demonstrated by “likes” or “dislikes” on a popular comment may dominate a reader’s potential to think about the issue in moderate ways.

Fourth, *the public sphere is a fixed domain that does not take into account peculiarities of communities or cultures.* In the public sphere, the members of a community and cultural norms were consistent (Habermas, 1974), and understood by the

whole (Hauser, 1998). The public sphere is an ideal state—the notion of willing members and common issues of concern are both difficult to achieve in real life settings (Fraser, 1990; Holub, 1991). Even so, as the ideal state of public participation the public sphere maintains fixed standards for how members join the conversation, recognize same issues, deliberate on issues, and arrive at conclusions (Loewing & Motter, 2009; McKee, 2005). That is, the public sphere supposedly functions as a universally applicable domain (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Such characteristics of the public sphere have been met with challenges (Fraser, 1990; Hauser, 1998), especially in the online landscape (Beers, 2006; Huang, 2012), because the idea of online communities is highly discursive (Jones, 1998; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Meyer & Carey, 2013).

Brand-new cultures reside within brand-new communities. In the new digital culture, community needs to be redefined. The notion of the community has some distinctive characteristics: self-identification of members as members belonging to the community (Maslow, 1943), ongoing participation (Shirky, 2008), shared ideas (Orbe, 2013; Smith & Marx, 1994), and shared spaces (V. Miller, 2011). Of these characteristics, the concept of space and modes of participation are changing. Community is shifting from what used to require fixed spaces and physical presence of members to increasingly virtual spaces and online presence (Baym, 1998).

These new and changing virtual communities function differently from offline communities. First, the importance of self-identification (sense of belonging) and ongoing participation both are diminished because people can easily join or leave the community. Second, the concept of community is expanded to more potential participants than ever and can hold many more people and a variety of ideas (Hsu, L., Yen, & Chang,

2007; Preece, 2001; Rosenberry, 2010). Third, because of the plethora of ideas, members embrace pluralism and the community breaks into several different sub-communities (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991). Finally, how the individual member functions within a community (their practices) becomes highly discursive and difficult to grasp (Kavoori, 2009).

For instance, an individual may be a part of millions who shared the viewing experience for a viral video, yet never engage in discourse about it with anyone but a couple of people at the office. The community can be in forms of coffee shop patrons but also the millions contained within that *YouTube* link page amid comment boxes, likes/dislikes, and related videos. Community is not really about where one is, but what one does; if there was shared experience, but never any shared physical space, people can still be called to be a part of the same community (Jenkins, 2003). The *virtual community* has similar characteristics as the notion of the *converged audiences* set forth in this dissertation.

This discursiveness of the community influences practices of members within the community. A member can instantly enter the boundaries of a community; active discussions in these communities may form at one point and disappear in a few minutes if the conversation ceases to exist and no one is paying attention to it anymore. Conversely, a community may sporadically be formed, disappear but then re-establish itself as these converged audiences enter and exit out of the media forums. This is not to say that communities in new media should always be so loosely defined; the emphasis is really on how a new notion of community may be added to the types of audience communities we

are traditionally aware of, and certainly to the ideas regarding participation of members in the public sphere.

On a more profound level of thinking about the public sphere, these completely new and unconventional communities lack a sufficient level of commonalities or structure because they comprise of a large number of different audiences who are only attached to the topic in little ways, or act completely opposite or differently to the dominant public, due to their own individualism (Deuze, 2009; Milioni, 2009). Therefore, an imperative for a singular and fixed public sphere should be reconsidered. The researcher posits that while the idea of what the public sphere can achieve is still important, how people participate in them in different ways is a new, emerging concept that requires close attention.

Furthermore, the need to look at how the public sphere may function differently gains more meaning when intercultural influences come into play (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2010). Understandings regarding the public sphere are based on characteristics of western culture; different cultural norms and influences from elsewhere in the world potentially changes how the public sphere works in society and how people take part in it. Therefore, this dissertation applies these discussions to an intercultural comparison between the U.S. and Korea. Perspectives on potential intercultural differences are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In addition to the four problems above, *we do not know what it really means when users “like” a comment or what motivating factors make them willing to “like.”* Is this form of engagement really something we can assume to be careful deliberation of the topic, or is it less meaningful (or has completely different meaning)? In light of

empowerment of the public, “liking” may demonstrate the simplest of interactive powers held by users in the form of votes/polls. Plus, this action requires the least bit of effort from the participant. A simple click of a button increases the number of “likes” by a single count, which is the visible evidence of participation.

However, it may be this enhanced convenience empowering nature of the “like” feature that endangers deliberation in the public sphere. Liking, as opposed to being an act based on careful consideration of the comment, may mean a lot of different, sometimes trivial, things. As discussed above, some might like a comment just because they saw the large number of existing “likes.” Also, one may like a comment just because they liked the fact it was part of an intense argument.

Among many possible explanations, the influence of social media on our everyday life practices is perhaps the most plausible. On Facebook, one of the most widely used social media websites, users are given three options when seeing a post/comment: they can comment on, share, or “like” the post. Given that the posts they saw are from their Facebook “friends,” users “like” the comment to share with the commenter or other friends that they were there to read the comment (Hermida et al., 2012). Pressing the “like” button fulfills interpersonal obligations without having to carefully read or respond to the comment via writing. Such practices may be replicated in online news commenting, hence making members of the news audience more prone to “liking” a comment without carefully reading them. In addition, more news websites are linking their comment boards with these social media websites, which may be a factor amplifying such behavior.

Furthermore, the act of “liking” a comment may be influenced by factors constraining deliberation in the public sphere. Individuals willing to promote a certain agenda in society may utilize the “like” function to push a comment to become a “top” comment. While such activism is supposedly useful for forming public opinion, the researcher posits that in the digital public sphere, “portion representing the whole” through manipulation may be a significant problem. When members of the audience lack the time or willingness to read all of the numerous news articles on the topic and all comments, they look to quickly perceive public opinion through “liked” comments (Dong, 2012). If polarizing comments are somehow systematically “liked” and moved to the top (especially in the early stages of a conversation), there is the danger of misrepresentation of public opinion, where a single point of view results in representing public opinion without further discussion (Bastos, 2011). One Korean scholar found evidence of propagating and manipulating public opinion through “likes,” during the Korean presidential elections of 2012 (E. Park, 2012). Since Korea is a country that has adopted commenting and “like” features in news earlier than many other countries (Rhee, 2003; Chung, 2006; Oh, 2010), the researcher assumes that the problems identified above may appear more saliently with its audiences. Thus, this dissertation incorporates Korean cases for intercultural comparisons with the U.S.—the following sections discuss how intercultural differences may influence the potential problems of “likes” in the digital public sphere.

3.4. *An intercultural perspective: The case of Korea*

Cultural tendencies and practices influence “likes” and “top” comments. Online commenting features manifest in different ways in different cultural contexts. Existing cultural and social contexts affect practices in different groups (countries, regions, communities, etc.) due to particular modes of thinking (Berry, 2000; Nisbett, 2003), social values (H. S. Park, Yun, Choi, Lee, & Lee, 2013) and customs (Ting-Toomey, 2010). Other influences on cultural differences regarding digital culture include: *historical* (Bastos, 2011; Schudson, 2004; K. Shin, 2005), *social* (J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 1999; H. S. Park et al., 2013), *technological* (Castells, 2003; W. Cho, 2009; Smith & Marx, 1994; Thurman, 2011), *political* (Bohman, 2004; Brundidge, 2010; D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Shifman et al., 2007), *economic* (Boyd-Barrett, 2008; Mersey et al., 2010; Pfister, 2011; Thorson, 2008), *linguistic* (Hall, 1992, 2006; Massey & Levey, 1999), and *psychological* (Berry, 2000; Nisbett, 2003). Digital culture, although most salient in virtual spaces, is still grounded in existing cultures. Therefore, phenomena regarding user comments and additive features (“likes,” “top” comments) as part of digital culture should be examined with an intercultural lens.

Intercultural comparison for user comments and “like” / “top” comment features is especially meaningful because these features have recently developed rapidly in online news and online discussion forums. As a way to manage user participation and feedback, online systems around the world have increasingly been employing these features. Yet, the abovementioned problems of “likes” and “top” comments may be more serious or appear differently in various parts of the world. Therefore, how these digital features have functioned in different settings is an important research question. Therefore, Korea

is an exemplary case for intercultural comparison with the U.S. because its digital culture (especially online commenting culture) works differently.

3.4.1. Historical, social, technological influences – Digital populism

Throughout Korea's recent history, technological developments have had a significant impact on rapid formation of digital culture. In Korea, internet penetration has occurred at an exponential speed, equipping people with many tools for digital communication in a very short time (W. Cho, 2009). One of several reasons for this phenomenon is that under military rule of the mid- to late 20th Century, ICT development was prioritized. Also, as Korea's democratization process was relatively recent and fast, the public was more inclined to accept different means of expressing opinions. Korea underwent stages of democratic consolidation, which was accompanied by the introduction of the internet. These new developments in communication were capable of leading social mobilization because it helped to construct organizations of scattered individuals (Brundidge, 2010).

However, digital technological developments did not have only positive effects, especially regarding political activism and social movements. Kim (2008) labels online activist protest movements against U.S. beef imports a case of digital populism. Populism refers to interests and conceptions (such as fears) of the general people that appear collectively and as the single main stance of the people. In many cases, populism results in expulsion of other views. Kim argues that digital media augmented such populism. With fear about the risk of U.S.-imported beef increasing the likelihood to cause mad cow disease, people collectively responded to form interest groups and leave emotional

comments to incite others to protest. Findings illustrated that this collective sentiment caused people to ignore, or even purposefully exclude, any alternative perspectives. Arguments about the low chance of being infected with the disease existed, but they were overlooked or criticized by an immense number of comments that expressed concerns. The “top” comments voting system also played a role here by allowing only the so-called popular comments to be shown to the public, skewing the presentation of political perspectives. Such a notion of digital populism has consequences: when a strong opinion appears and instantly ‘catches on’ as the popular perception of political affairs, it will not only misrepresent the reality of public opinion but becomes the only perception available.

Moreover, as part of technological influences, presentation techniques seem to aid the diffusion of problems regarding digital populism in online forums. With advanced news presentation technologies and developments in platforms (web browsers, mobile devices), media have concentrated on multimedia storytelling functions (Silvia & Anzur, 2011). By actively using these components in news discourse, media emphasized the power of the multimedia narrative; audiences have become accustomed to it in a plethora of information and platforms (Bergman, 2013). The pace with which immense amounts of information are presented to audiences result in a decreased ability to sense multiple perspectives (S. J. Oh, 2008); this has become a problem in the highly advanced media landscape of Korea.

3.4.2. Social, political, economic influences – Activism, propaganda and commercialism

With the popularity and effectiveness of user comments in Korea’s media landscape, successful activism has increased. People utilized the high levels of

interactivity and accessibility in online forums to present new ideas, which accompanied attitudinal and behavioral responses. Korea's 2002 presidential elections and the *Nosamo* movement are good examples of this. Roh Moo-Hyun, a progressive politician was one of two candidates running for president. With only a month left before election day, he was 20 percent behind Lee Hoi-Chang, the conservative candidate. Roh's followers, who were predominantly younger, established a group called *Nosamo* (here, the syllable "No" refers to Roh's last name, which can be spelled in different ways in the English language, including "No"). This group utilized mobile text messages and online user comments to disseminate information supportive of Roh, often appealing to emotions (Linchuan Qiu, 2008). They also instigated rallies by inviting people to come out to the streets in support of this outperformed candidate. The result was a huge turnaround. Roh defeated Lee and became president (Linchuan Qiu, 2008).

This example shows increased online activism that changed the nature of public discourse and social movements (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). As mentioned above, the birth of the internet combined with a young democracy saw Koreans engage actively in this new platform for discussion—online discussion boards have been used to demonstrate people's activism (Kwak, 2005). Korea, as a well-developed ICT nation, became a prime example of online activism and participation arguably before many other countries in the world.

On the flipside, however, people's preferences and high usage of online discussions meant that these online venues could potentially be used to promote agendas, as more people can be reached with the convenience of the technology (D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007; Chung & Kim, 2006). That is, similar strategies for garnering collective

activism and participation have been used by entities with specific agendas (e.g., political, commercial) to win people over. Seeing the success of online activism movements, politicians or political activists started employing techniques to benefit their specific political agendas by manipulating “top” comments (Herald.com, 2013). Although the power seemed to have shifted from the government and media to the people (Rhee, 2003), their collective actions were still under the influence of discussions initiated by the politically dominant.

According to media critics, this was mainly made possible with media’s agenda setting that was controlled by political entities. *Nakkomsu*, a podcast hosted by two journalists, media critic and a former politician, pointed out that the secret wedding of a popular entertainer was reported in order to cover up talk of corruptions about then president Lee Myung-Bak (E. Kim, Kim, Joo, & Chung, 2011; Y. Kim, 2011). The podcast became extremely popular for its watchdog role and investigative work shedding light onto corruption (Joo, 2012). The podcasts introduced examples of government and media’s attempts to dictate what people will be talking about. The podcast mentioned cases of deliberate attempts by the government and National Intelligence Agency NIS) to manipulate comments (and “top” comments) to affect perceived public opinion.

According to the podcast hosts, government propaganda succeeded .

However, *Nakkomsu* was also a propagandist in its own right, because it used propaganda techniques such as card-stacking, offensive language, emotional appeal, and shutting down the opposition (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012) to attain a passionate following. The podcast also set the agenda and framed issues in ways that were favorable to their purpose. The avid followers of this podcast wholehearted accepted the show’s version of

controversy and conspiracy. When the followers became active commenters on news websites, they constantly showed angry responses that hindered constructive debate (Editor, 2012b). As a result, online discussion on political news at the peak of *Nakkomsu*'s popularity became a realm of mutual 'us vs. them' denunciation. The 'us' were *Nakkomsu* fans who believed they knew all about the government's acts of propaganda and 'them' were ignorant publics who were still unknowingly affected by government's exploitation of news agenda-setting. Such a phenomenon also resulted in the failure of the digital public sphere because the public deliberation function of online comments was far from working appropriately.

Similarly, motives for economic success user comments and the voting system for comments were also used for motives for economic success. Businesses in Korea began to use user commenting systems as a marketing tool, similar to how companies in the rest of the world use "likes" on Facebook pages to promote products (Alhabash et al., 2013; Hermida et al., 2012). This was likely due to the relatively weaker popularity of Facebook in Korea in comparison to user comments. As mentioned in the introduction, companies have allegedly hired commenters to leave favorable comments and vote them "up" so that they could become "top" comments (Hwang, 2013). For instance, in a recent debate about two IT giants, Samsung and Apple, Korean online commenting sections were different from the U.S. in that they had more uniformity in arguments pointing out to the same advantages that Samsung advertises (Jungil Lee, 2014; K. Lee, 2013). Although not fully confirmed, this shows that user comment sections of news in Korea may be closely associated with commercial motives. Furthermore, x popular bloggers have been approached by companies to leave favorable reviews, posting and comments

about their products so that their online presence could lead to the company's advantage in online forums (Y. Park, 2013). In return, the bloggers would receive complimentary sponsored products from the company (Baek, 2014). For all of the above, commercialism leads to manipulation and misrepresentation in the digital public sphere where diverse opinions are trumped by deliberately placed "top" comments.

3.4.3. Mode of thinking – Confucianism, homogeneity, extravaganza

e differences in thinking modes are a major influence in how cultural phenomena occur in disparate ways, especially comparing the east and west (Berry, 2000; Jang, 2013; L. Kim, 2011; Y. Lee & Kim, 2010; Nisbett, 2003; H. S. Park et al., 2013; Yoon & Lee, 2013). For thousands of years, as elsewhere in East Asia, Korean society has functioned under the influence of Confucianism, which may influence user comments and "likes" in Korea's digital public sphere.

A key concept in Confucian beliefs is that the elders in society (here, elder does not only refer to older, people but wiser elites) know what is best for society and thus enlighten citizens (Hahm, 2004). Society espousing this elitist notion sometimes results in wanting to be told by the elite media or comments with "top" status as to what the right perspective or frame is, which possibly provides grounds for the triumph of the "like" voting system. This would predict that Koreans would prefer comments from elites and grant high levels of credibility to them (Chung & Kim, 2006). Perceived prestige of "top" status often result in phenomena where comment-voting features are valued more than the contents of the comments themselves. Often, user comments beg for "likes," saying things such as "with this comment I deserve to be the top comment" or "this comment

should not be the top comment” (S. Choi, 2013). The manipulation of “top” comments as a tool for propaganda arguably achieved more success in Korea because people gratified receiving “likes” (e.g., becoming an elite in public deliberation) and accepting the “top” comment for its status (e.g., being told what public opinion is).

Furthermore, Korea is made up of a homogeneous ethnic group. Therefore, the public sphere in Korea particularly values homogeneity and nationalism (H. Lee & Cho, 2009). Outbursts by people during the 2002 World Cup shows that “nation-ness was performed as cultural practices that were utilized for individual revelation and as expressions of nationalism” (p. 93). Similarly, Korean digital audiences frequently show homogeneity of opinions (or tendencies to value only those opinions) regarding issues of national affairs.

This trait connects back to the problems in the digital public sphere, where diversity of opinions is overshadowed by populism and activism. Korea’s coherent civil society is seen as a result of strong nationalism and the sense of belonging to society (S. H. Kim, 2009). Demonstrations for democratization in 1980 and 1987 gathered tens of thousands together to protest against the authoritarian regime, showing extreme collective power. Such a cultural context sometimes results in uniformity of ideas or haste formation of a dominant public opinion (Bastos, 2011). That is, fabricated reality (and public opinion) may be considered “the only opinion in town” just because harmony and homogeneity of ideas is valued (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). Once an idea becomes dominant, it is accepted by many as the desired opinion. In this sense, deliberation for public opinion in the digital public sphere is diminished. This collectivist

trait can be compared to the overall individualistic nature of people in western culture, including the U.S. (Cai & Fink, 2002).

Extravaganza is also key in Korean public discussion culture. Controversial topics, extravagant debate and speculations are salient aspects of Korea's digital culture that hinder accurate and credible deliberation in the public sphere. For instance, Koreans tend to feel as though they are stakeholders to issues even if those issues do not directly affect them or they don't have much knowledge about them (2008). In other words, Koreans typically prefer extravagant events (as if they were directly involved) and making conjectures about issues that they know much about. This may make Koreans susceptible to online discussions that are out of context or inaccurate (J. Lee, 2013), increasing the negative influence of "likes" and "top" comments.

Combined with other influences, Korea's such susceptibility to extravagant (J. Lee, 2013) or populist (Y. Kim, 2008) ideas suggest that media's effects could be augmented. For instance, preferences for homogeneity and extravaganza may show similar influences as posited by HME, where the individual becomes strongly attached to one idea and highly dismissive of alternative opinions. Moreover, Confucian beliefs and the way of life valuing harmony within others may increase the effect of presumed influence, where the individual upon seeing a popular influence of an idea on others may wish to conform to the idea or express agreement, which implies a stronger effect of the PI phenomenon.

3.4.4. Linguistic influence: Meaning-making

Finally, because online discourse still mainly consists of text (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011) how comments are presented linguistically affects how they are received. For instance, a news article raising unsolved questions about a politician's past provoked many references to 500 won, a coin of currency in South Korea. These comments received many "likes" and occupied "top" comment slots because they were referring to a popular comedy skit. In the skit, a beggar would appear and whenever people asked questions about him, he would say, "give me 500 won and I will tell you." In this case, people were making references to the joke in the skit instead of the topic at hand (politician); they still received "likes."

In the advent of virtual communities, consistent participation in online discussions resulted in particular cultural trends that influence meaning making in digital culture. A controversial community website called *Ilbe* (translation: 'Daily Best') has been criticized due to members' chauvinistic and far right tendencies (E. Park, 2012). Whenever members of this community were visible in news website comment sections, others responded resentfully. The public identified the *Ilbe* member through the language used. Over time (although short, because *Ilbe* was established in its current format in 2010), this virtual community adopted trends and language to engage in discourse, so a so-called *Ilbe* culture formed. Now non-members claim they can more or less pick out *Ilbe* users from the rest because of the language and words they use. As a result, an ongoing criticism of this group began.

However, a problem occurred because *Ilbe*'s so-called 'internet terms' began to spread. Non-members adopted them and some witty terms were even used in everyday

conversations (MBN, 2014). Digital culture is easily transferrable and diffusible in comparison to traditional culture, and thus boundaries of what was known to be ‘community’ disappeared. In the wake of this issue, a Korean celebrity was criticized on Twitter because of a term he used. People claimed that the word was an *Ilbe* term, and these accusations became “top” tweets and “top” comments that it became a main story (Chosun.com, 2014; MBN, 2014). He claimed that he was not a member, and that he had merely picked up the term from the internet. To defend him, his followers created an *Ilbe* Glossary to help distinguish what words were problematic *Ilbe* terms and also provide context to how the term came about.

This example shows many influences taking place, including collectivism, digital populism, activism, and political (the main debate against *Ilbe* stems from ideological issues). However, the most important factor at hand is language and how meaning is made as a result of digital transformation of language and discourse. Public deliberation is altered as a result of people’s reception of language, and commenting forums become a battlefield for terminology-based arguments that are backed up by “likes” and “dislikes.”

This research attempts to explain cross-cultural differences regarding user comments and the “like” feature. Such a comparison and analysis will allow for more insight toward the different shapes, forms and developments of potential problems in the digital public sphere based on various influences (historical, social, political, economic, mode of thinking, linguistic). This comparison is especially important for this dissertation because it provides a counterexample of one of the assumptions (and hence a problem identified in this dissertation), which is that the public sphere should not be affected by peculiarities of communities or cultures (Fraser, 1990; McKee, 2005). This approach

thereby allows for a rethinking of the traditional notion of the public sphere and its expanded application to the discursive influences for communicative actions in the real world.

CHAPTER 4. METHODS

4.1. Research questions & Hypotheses

The overarching question for this dissertation is **whether the “like”/“dislike” features of commenting forums for online news websites demonstrate problems for their functioning in the digital public sphere**, and how these phenomena differ for U.S. and Korea. This question represents a synthesis of the four problems identified in the previous chapter regarding “likes” in the digital public sphere. In order to assess the current user commenting landscape for their helpfulness in the digital public sphere, findings from each research question were integrated. In light of the necessity for intercultural comparisons, the overarching question also seeks to find any salient differences or similarities between U.S. and Korea, two countries that have seen active audience engagement with news through user comments and “likes.” The overall goal is to understand how meanings are taken through news communication. News communication includes the news story (from news media to audiences), audience response (to the story or the journalist) and audience conversations (discourse among audiences).

Second, the question is aimed at understanding whether the fact that user comments and “likes” occur virtually (i.e., non-face to face) at different points in time (i.e., non-real time) hinder the deliberation of public opinion. For the first user commenting on the news story, no communicative action can be called deliberation because no interaction with others has occurred. From the second user on, each newcomer in the commenting forum joins the discussion. If such newcomers do not pay attention to the full discussion by examining all ideas presented, the digital public sphere

may not be working effectively. That is, the individual's interpretation of the issue of concern may be limited to the first few user comments they see on the first few news stories they access. Therefore, this study emphasizes the influence of the chronological order of user comments, which, at least hypothetically, limits the visibility of the whole picture. Furthermore, if certain recent (and thus visible) user comments have received a number of "likes," this may result in an automated agenda setting by hinting that those comments are 'trending' or 'popular' comments. Arguably, this limits both one's ability and willingness to extend their attention toward other perspectives. Such habits result in misrepresented understanding of public opinion in the digital public sphere, which may make it less helpful for our society than desired.

Third, the research seeks to determine whether participants may end up perceiving public opinion without taking into consideration all available information from all willing participants. Usually the number of unique visitors is not the same as the number of comments. Only about one-fifths of users are avid commenters (Naughton, 2013)—meaning that user comments may not be representing the public sphere of willing participants in their entirety. However, user comments are still the most salient form of visible participation, and their influences have been substantial (Li & Sung, 2010; Reich, 2011; Wise et al., 2006), which still makes it valuable material for study. The problem is, that terms used in online news websites such as "liked," 'trending', or "top" comments may mislead people too easily to perceive what they see as accurate indication of public opinion. This poses another potential problem for the public sphere because such misleading notions of comments, alongside chronological order and visibility, may bring in pre-determining factors (i.e., superiority or dominance of a comment over another) for

audiences. If findings indicate that comments with the abovementioned characteristics may have an influence on audiences' perception of public opinion, the researcher will be able to conclude that manifestations of the various aspects of the "like" feature may be an hindrance for an effective functioning of the digital public sphere.

Fourth, this research considers the notions of online news communities and their culture that may influence "liking" practices and perceptions of public opinion. The ephemeral nature of online news communities in comment forums and peculiarities of each forum (often dictated by what comments end up as "top" or 'trending' comments) result in limited viewpoints. On the other hand, as short-lived as they are, these virtual communities may lead frequent visitors to accumulate experiences on the website, thus forming a cultural practice of commenting and "liking." Recognition and adoption of these cultural aspects may be a significant factor for "likability" if a large enough number of people share those same cultural cues. Then, identifying "likable" factors from empirical evidence is important to understanding how these factors positively or negatively influence the deliberation of public opinion. Presumably, certain culturally preferred "likable" factors deviate from a relevant discussion but provide other decontextualized cues that may appeal to the public (e.g., humor, criticism, provocativeness), which could be detrimental to an effective exchange of relevant ideas in the public sphere if such cues were to dominate the motives for participating in discussions. That is, the discussion forum could be filled with statements that only focus on being funny or critical rather than properly address others' comments or the issue at hand.

Finally, this dissertation seeks to find out whether the act of “liking” a comment or attitudes of audiences toward “likes” are motivated by forces that could be helpful for the digital public sphere. In other words, this larger question leads the researcher to ask “what is your attitude toward the “like” feature?” and “what do you mean when you “like” a comment?” Garnering firsthand accounts from actual users of online news websites sheds light on what is happening with online news audiences when they engage with news in the form of user comments and ‘likes.’

In order to address the overarching question, this dissertation specifies the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of frames of “top” comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?

RQ1 investigates the relevance of the most “liked” comments to the issue of concern, which is the news topic being covered. In other words, RQ1 looked for how audience-made meanings from news stories were relevant to the story. From the media’s perspective, presenting meaning is often achieved by framing issues through which reality is understood (Entman, 1993, 2004). Framing occurs when the media “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make more salient in communicating text... to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation... for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Journalists define the problem in their own terms, increasing the salience of self-ascribed meanings that are thus framed and conveyed through language, symbols and signs (M. M. Miller, Andsager, & Riechert, 1998). The particular frame chosen by journalists leads receivers to form an understanding of the problem within these frames of

meaning, arguably because the public experiences issues mostly through news portrayals, not from personal experiences (Andsager & Smiley, 1998).

Framing can be best understood as a strategic and useful way for media to shape how we perceive and think about issues (M. M. Miller & Riechert, 2001). The issue is that news media have increasingly been offering their own interpretations of events to reflect their own perspectives; while the news media are expected to provide what is good for the public, whether their frames end up serving public interest foremost is questionable (Entman, 2004). This is because audiences are highly susceptible to news media's framing of issues. Until recently, audiences have not been able to exercise much power in meaning construction construed (Druckman, 2001). However, with the rise of communication technologies and heightened democratic values, audiences could help determine how content is framed (Brundidge, 2010; S. S. Sundar, 2008). Most importantly, how the media frames are reframed by the audience are now visible because new media records and stores audiences' responses to media coverage (Stroud, 2013). Thus, an in-depth look into audiences' framing of issues and media coverage allows an understanding of how media-ascribed meanings are received by the public, which are fundamental material for public's deliberation on the issue.

If audiences' framing of the issue in "top" comments are irrelevant to the main topic, the researcher may conclude that "top" comments as a result of audiences' "likes" are not effective in deliberation of public opinion in the digital public sphere. On the contrary, if findings indicate that frames of these "top" comments are relevant to the topic, regardless of the type of frames (agree or disagree with the frames in the article),

audiences' engagement with news in the form of "likes" may be said to pose useful meaning in the deliberation of public opinion.

RQ2: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea regarding themes of "likability" / "dislikability" emerging from comments about "top" comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?

RQ2 addresses what others say about "top" comments so as to understand what possibly makes a comment "liked." In addition to posting initial comments or "liking" a comment, many news websites now offer features that allow users to post a comment underneath a comment (also called "sub-comments" or "replies"). Thus, the term "themes of likability" refers to a slightly different operational definition of the "frame" from RQ1, referring to topical and/or social constructs inherent in the text that were deemed appealing or "likable" by others in the audience as evidenced by their own accounts. I assume that these sub-comments contain statements from others in the audience about what they liked / disliked about the "top" comment. In other words, these mini forums serve as the discussion about the comment itself, where audiences reflect upon the outcome of their engagement via "likes." Findings regarding this second research question enabled the researcher to further consider whether relevance to the discussion topic is a "likable" factor for a user comment. Findings helped support findings for the first research question. Also, "likability" factors of user comments were identified and used for RQ6, which is discussed below.

RQ3: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of the relationship between the chronological order of comments in those comments receiving "likes" in the most commented stories during the 2012 presidential elections?

RQ3 strictly looks at the relationship between the chronological order of comments and their gaining status as highly “liked” comments. As discussed above, verifying whether comments appearing before others are more likely to receive “likes” would provide insight toward the usefulness of “top” comments for the digital public sphere. If these early comments are becoming top comments regardless of relevance to the news topic or specific themes that make them particularly likable, it demonstrates that the digital public sphere may not be working toward a full deliberation of the issue of concern. This question deserves to be addressed separately because it highlights the potential nature of “top” comments as having limitations in terms of visibility and inducing pre-determining factors such as perceived dominance of an idea that preoccupies the discussion forum. In conjunction with findings obtained with RQs 1 and 2, the correlation between higher number of “likes” and chronological order is discussed in light of how first accessible ideas in a potentially vast conversation may also be a “likable” factor. If findings suggest so, the researcher may conclude that such a phenomenon technically does not aid the deliberation of public opinion in the public sphere because other supposedly more important factors (e.g., introduction of new perspectives to the topic) may be overshadowed by chronological order of user comments (Godes & Silva, 2012), which is arguably a less meaningful characteristic.

To this question, the researcher also hypothesizes as follows:

H1: For both countries, comments that were submitted earlier will have a higher probability of receiving “likes.”

H1 assumes that chronological order will be an indicator for the probability of a comment receiving more “likes.” Today’s online media landscape offers so many platforms and as a result an enormous amount of information for the individual that

people cannot process everything that is accessible. Thus, audiences increasingly skim through information, and in many cases only view the top portions of the article or comments (Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012; Orbe, 2013; Silvia & Anzur, 2011). This is especially more so the case with the emergence of smartphones and tablets. These hand-held devices offer the same information surplus in a smaller device (screen) and simpler interface that audiences show tendencies of not consuming media content to the end (Chyi, 2009; Chyi & Chadha, 2012). Since comments in most news websites show the most recent comments first, it is possible that more audiences only see few recent comments and choose to “like” a comment from that portion. Such a behavior may increase the probability of recent comments receiving more “likes.” Furthermore, the researcher hypothesizes that U.S. and Korea, countries with advanced web and mobile technologies (Hayward, 2012; Linchuan Qiu, 2008), will both show this tendency.

RQ4: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether predispositions and perceived effect of “likes” affect one’s willingness to comment on the story or “like” a comment?

RQ4 treats individuals’ traits (predispositions on the news topic) and their perceived influence of “liked” comments on others as independent variables to address the question of whether these variables are significantly correlated with the individual’s willingness to “like” a comment. Here, a connection among media effects theories provide basis for how individuals’ cognitive and behavioral processes could become a problem in the digital public sphere. As discussed above, the media effects tradition offers theories about partisanship and bias (HME), perceived influence on others (TPE), and behavioral response from an assumption of a strong influence (PI) that may be synthesized to investigate the effect that takes place for a behavioral response of news

engagement in the form of “likes.” However, if either variable (partisanship or perceived influence on others) is a predictor for one’s willingness to “like” a comment, pre-determining factors (preset bias or the perceived strength of an influence of a comment) will be taken to play a role in the act of “liking,” meaning that full deliberation in its desired sense cannot be achieved. Also, if a vehement opponent of a political candidate shows a strong willingness to only “like” comments that criticize the candidate or only “dislike” comments that praise the candidate (as suggested by HME), the researcher can conclude that “willing participants” in the public sphere may consist of only highly biased persons, thus misrepresenting what public opinion in the larger society is like.

Moreover, the researcher is able to hypothesize the relationship among the cognitive processes occurring as a result of each theoretical framework (HME, TPE, PI). According to HME research, partisans (those who hold a strong viewpoint about a topic) will perceive greater bias when they see a news article, even if the article is balanced. Congruent to the HME phenomenon, the researcher hypothesizes as follows:

H2: In both countries, individuals who identify themselves as strongly supporting or strongly opposing one candidate will perceive a balanced news article on the topic as biased against their own perspective.

According to the cognitive processes resulting from a combination of HME and TPE, seeing a greater bias in the article will lead the individual to judge the article as containing less desirable information. This “less desirable” judgment is key—the partisans will be concerned about such biased and undesired information reaching the public. Such concerns may result in a higher level of presumed influence on others. This will especially be the case with the presence of comments and “likes,” which are written

evidences of others (the “third people”) responding to the news topic at hand. Therefore, the researcher poses the following hypothesis:

H3: In both countries, greater perceived bias of the news article will be associated with greater presumed influence of comments and “likes” on others.

According to H2 and H3, partisans of the HME model will see a stronger bias in the article and consequently presume a greater influence on others. Such a high level of presumed influence of an article holding undesirable information, the researcher argues, will be a key factor for an increased willingness to react to that influence via a behavioral response (as posited by the theory of PI). The researcher hypothesizes that the kinds of behavioral responses will take place in the commenting forum, by leaving a comment or utilizing the “like/dislike” button. In this case, the partisan will seek to “dislike” even a neutral user comment and of course, hold a strong willingness to “like” a comment that he/she approves (i.e., praises the favored candidate and/or criticizes the opposition). Thus,

H4: In both countries, partisans will show a higher level of willingness to engage with the news by leaving user comments or using the “like/dislike” features than those who are not partisans.

This hypothesis, if supported, will imply that partisanship, or extreme viewpoints, will likely lead to active participation in the digital public sphere. The researcher concedes to the point that extremists regularly show strong offline participation as well (C. Christen et al., 2002; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2011). However, the issue with the online setting is that such extreme viewpoints are masked under the unit of one comment or one “like,” and as a result hold higher potential influence. In a virtual setting where anonymity is common and face-to-face cues are veiled (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Reinig & Mejias, 2004), audiences can only rely on the text (comment) or votes (“like”)

to gauge the implications of others' communicative actions. As a result, the researcher argues, online audiences become more susceptible to comments and "likes" when participating in the digital public sphere. This point is raised in the next research question.

RQ5: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of perceived public opinion of readers influenced by the existence of "top" comment status and "likes" on comments for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?

RQ5 compares actual audience members' response about their perceived public opinion regarding a news topic as a result of viewing the news story and user comments. If findings suggest that even irrelevant content presented in "top" comments are significant predictors of perceived public opinion, the researcher can conclude that "top" comments are detrimental to the digital public sphere. Furthermore, the researcher triangulates such findings with results from analysis from previous RQs to provide a more rigorous analysis of findings and provide an enriched discussion of the negative/positive influence of "likes" and "top" comments for the digital public sphere.

As an underlying assumption of the problem with "likes" in the digital public sphere, the researcher hypothesizes as follows:

H5. In both countries, the number of "likes" and "top" status of comments will be significant indicators of how individuals perceive public opinion.

In other words, this hypothesis states that individuals will show a tendency to perceive the contents in highly "liked" comments ("top" comments) to be representative of public opinion. Everything else being equal, if people indeed attribute more value to "top" comments, a potential problem is that people understand public opinion merely as a result of the "like" feature and not through careful deliberation of each opinion that is shared in the discussion. This is especially a greater issue if the motivating factors for

“liking/disliking” are not fully relevant to the topic at hand (e.g., a comment that is “liked” only because it was offensive). RQ6 seeks to address this issue.

RQ6: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether themes of “likability” identified in RQ2 are adequate elements of user comments that make them “likable” for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?

In the same research phase for data collection for RQ5, RQ6 incorporated findings from RQ2 to investigate whether comments featuring the same themes are still “likability” factors when a user sees the comment in a controlled setting. This helps the researcher to verify findings from RQ2, and further enrich the discussion of whether different types of “likable” factors are significant predictors or “liking” behavior.

RQ7: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of online news audiences’ and media professionals’ attitudes about “liking” / “disliking” and “top” comments?

RQ7 allows the researcher to find out what news audiences of various demographics think about the “liking” culture in news engagement. For this question, findings from other research questions are integrated into topics for discussion that helps enrich the discussion of findings. Data collection and analysis regarding this research question serve to triangulate findings and enrich discussions resulting from other research questions by comprehensively discussing in-depth the “liking” feature with actual online news audiences. This research question is addressed with open-ended questions and further discussions about the “liking” culture in general. For instance, if the respondent states that he/she does not use or pay attention to the “like” feature at all, the research asks why, and if the respondent seems to think that it’s because “likes” do not make meaningful contributions to the discussion, the researcher would incorporate this

response as supporting evidence of how “likes” are not helpful for public deliberation and that even actual users reject the usefulness of this feature. Also, respondents for data collection of this research question were participants in the experimental stage from RQs 4 through 6, a design that helps further explore what findings from the experiment mean.

Each of the first six research question compares findings from the U.S. and Korean audiences. Korea, as a leading nation in information and communication technologies, has seen these issues emerge at a quicker rate, which makes it a valuable site for research and comparisons. In addition, influences of different cultural norms and modes of thinking may help us better understand the diverse facets of audiences in a rapidly integrating global community.

4.2. Operational definitions

According to the theoretical discussions above, this dissertation seeks to examine the audiences’ news engagement culture via “liking/disliking” and “top” comments, and its influence on the digital public sphere. For this purpose, the following operational definitions are used:

- **“User comments”** refer to pieces of writing (usually short, less than a paragraph and usually a sentence or two) uploaded by users on an online news website. On the news website, each story page contains a user comments section consisting of a comments box and existing user comments. When a user enters one’s comment in the box and submits the comment (**“commenting”**), it is uploaded and appears in the list of comments that have been uploaded (**“existing comments”**).

- **“Most commented stories”** are stories that have the largest number of user comments on their pages. Online news websites allow for the sorting of search results by the number of comments received, and also provide a list of “most commented stories” of the day in the sidebar of the website user interface.
- **‘Liking / disliking’** are interactive actions performed by audiences in online news websites in the comment section. Usually, each existing user comment on the article page is accompanied by a “like (thumbs up),” “dislike (thumbs down),” and/or “flag” button. In this dissertation, the act of “liking/disliking” is defined as the individual’s clicking on any one of those buttons as a form of engagement with news. Furthermore, the total number of unique clicks on the “like” or “dislike” button is tallied and presented alongside the user comments, which allows the researcher to record this number to establish an order of most “liked” or “disliked” comments as needed.
- **“Top comments”** are usually three to five individual user comments with the most number of “likes” or “thumbs up” that are listed by the online news website under the same name. In the user comments section of the news aggregator websites chosen for the study, the selected “top” comments appear first, regardless of time of posting, but in the order of the number of “likes” received. On other news websites, these “top” comments are referred to simply as “most liked” comments.
- **“Sub-comments”** are comments posted by users in response to an existing comment. Sub-comments do not appear at the level of the existing comments, but underneath each existing comment. In other words, users may choose to upload a

standalone user comment in the comments section, or leave a sub-comment that are listed alongside other sub-comments for a single comment. In online news websites, sub-comments are usually hidden and can be accessed by clicking on a “show responses” or “show sub-comments” button.

- **“Trending” or “Popular now”** news stories or comments are those that have received a large number of comments (sub-comments) or “likes” in a relatively short period of time. Most of these news stories or comments appear in the “top” list category, but sometimes these “trending” stories or comments are presented separately. News articles online news websites often utilize this function, possibly in attempt to provide a sense of currency in audience participation. Usually, “trending” lists are provide alongside “top” lists in forms of tab hyperlinks, meaning the user can click on a tab to sort content in the kind of order they would like to see.
- **“Likability”** refers to aspect(s) of a user comment that makes other users want to “like” the comment. In this dissertation, “likability” factors are determined by examining existing data of “top” comments (that have already received a considerable number of “likes”) and analyzing accounts from actual online news website users who have “liked” a comment before.
- A **“frame”** as a concept refers to the social construct about the mediated topic that demonstrates interpretive efforts (Goffman, 1974) in the news story or the user comment. Operationally, a frame is defined as main idea(s) inherent the news story or user comment text that illustrates how the communicative actor interprets meanings regarding the topic in question (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2009; Entman,

1993). Also, frames in the “top” commented user comments are closely examined for not only the way in which the topic was interpreted by the commenter, but also as indicators of “likability” factors that may or may not have to do with the topic in question. For instance, a “top” comment that has little to do with the news topic will be categorized as irrelevant, but at the same time also identified of social constructs (emotions, advocacy, criticism, agreement, stereotypes, provocativeness, etc.) that are recognizable by audiences at large. Sub-comments of “top” comments facilitate the process of understanding how these social constructs were recognized and evaluated by others in the audience. These social constructs are to be treated as frames of the “top” comments demonstrating “likability” by allowing the researcher to investigate how frames create societal discourse and are adopted by users (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

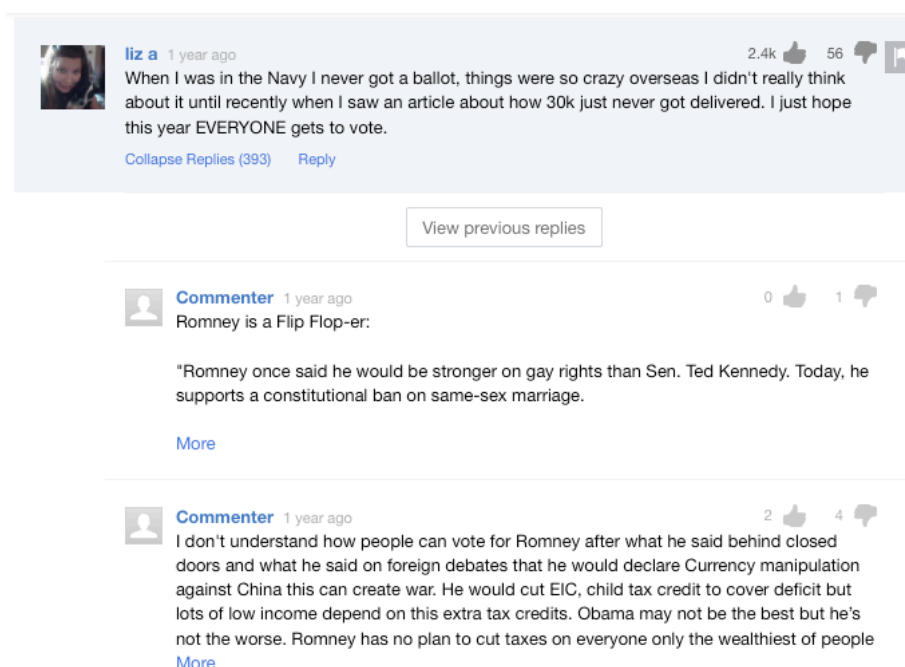


Figure 1. Example screenshot of a “top” comment, “likes/dislikes” and sub-comments

4.3. Methods

This dissertation employed a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009) because it enables the researcher to explain the discursive nature of contemporary audiences. Contemporary audiences, conceptualized as “converged” audiences in this dissertation, are discursive and complex—who they are, what forms of engagement they utilize, and what influences them or what influences they have (Jenkins, 2003; Livingstone, 2003). By the same token, the problems identified in this dissertation regarding converged audiences and “likes” are also complex. Neither quantitative or qualitative approaches alone can address such complexity (Creswell, 2009). This dissertation used a sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2009). The primary focus is in the qualitative phase, which is executed before the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase allows for the researcher to explore a phenomenon and interpret relationships regarding the problem at hand. This design is used most often to develop and test an instrument for further investigating a relatively new phenomenon (pp. 210-211). This strategy was appropriate here because it allows the researcher to first interpret various concepts and relationships associated with the “like” feature and apply them to a quantitative instrument. Moreover, the advantages of this mixed methods design include facilitated implementation of concepts and measures, expansion of qualitative findings, and verification of emerging perspectives.

Qualitative methods understand the communication process as “occurring within a specific cultural, historical and political context” (Brennen, 2013, p. 2). Because the method does not assume relationships or effects, it is especially useful for research where

the researcher doesn't know what to expect or seeks to develop an approach to the problem and wants to explore nuances related to the problem at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Since the problem with "likes" in the digital public sphere is a new phenomenon, this method was appropriate.

The quantitative research method allows for a generalization of results to the larger population (D. C. Miller & Salkind, 2002; M. M. Miller & Riechert, 2001; Schroder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003). For quantitative research, incorporation of variables defining relationships and strict validation of those relationships is key (Salkind, 2010). Therefore, the researcher devised a quantitative design with relevant factors (variables) to verify and generalize themes emerging from the qualitative inquiry.

The mixed methods design encourages triangulation; one can be more confident of results if different methods lead to the same results (Sjovaag & Stavelin, 2012). On the other hand, if two methods yield conflicting results, one needs to reexamine the questions. Audience engagement research has already found that mixed methods increased both reliability and validity of measures (K. Anderson & Brewer, 2008).

Four separate phases of data collection and analysis were conducted here: 1) Framing analysis of "top" comments and sub-comments left as responses to those "top" comments on most commented news stories covering the 2012 U.S. and Korean presidential elections that were published on a news aggregator website from each country; 2) Analysis of the relationship between chronological order of comments and the likelihood of the comments' receiving "likes" on most commented news stories covering the 2012 U.S. and Korean presidential elections that were published on a news aggregator website from each country; 3) Controlled experimental design testing the influence of the

presence of “top” comments and “likability” factors of comments on audiences’ perceptions of public opinion; and 4) Focus group interviews of actual news audiences and in-depth interviews of media professionals about general attitudes toward the “like” culture in news engagement and open-ended questions about components of each previous research phases. All phases took place for groups and materials from the U.S. and Korea.

As discussed above, the sequential exploratory design emphasizes the qualitative phase that is conducted first and guides the quantitative phase, which further verifies and generalizes findings from the qualitative phase. This dissertation adopted a framing analysis as the guiding qualitative method and a controlled experiment as the subsequent quantitative method in the sequential exploratory design. Two more methods were used to enrich the data and enhance triangulation. Analysis of the chronological order of comments used the ranking comparison method by employing the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test (Wilcoxon, 1945) to compare the number of “likes” received by each comment based on the chronological order of comments. That is, this phase investigated a separate but related problem of “likes”—comments left earlier receiving more “likes” and thus potentially influencing perceived public opinion. Findings from this analysis were incorporated into the discussion of the first two research phases that addresses the problems of “likes,” thus enriching the discussion of findings.

The qualitative focus group / interview phase followed the framing analysis, statistical test of chronological order, and experimental phases. This final phase encompasses concepts and findings from all of the other research phases. The focus group / interview provides firsthand accounts from actual users and media professionals

about their attitudes toward “likes.” In sum, this fourth and last method and analysis enriches findings from the previous three methods and adds new dimensions to how “likes” should be understood in the digital public sphere. Detailed descriptions of each method are provided in *sub-sections 4.3.1* through *4.3.4* in this chapter.

All four phases used as material news coverage from the 2012 Presidential elections in both Korea and the U.S. Researchers have found that political issues, especially elections, increase audiences’ levels of participation and news engagement because the act of voting is a fundamental right and mode of citizen participation (Shifman et al., 2007; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008; Wood, 2004). Even those who do not engage actively in politics are inclined more to seek information and voice opinions every election term (J. Cho et al., 2009; Lazarsfeld et al., 2003; Wood, 2004). Recent studies also find that audiences engage more with online news media (Hayward, 2012; D. A. Miller, 2012; S. S. Sundar, 2008)

Presidential elections are significant in three aspects for the digital public sphere. First, the electoral system and voting decisions are the most fundamental prerequisites for a democracy (Euben, Wallach, & Ober, 1994; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008; Wood, 2004). Moreover, presidential elections are of concern to everyone in the nation. Second, elections require willing members of the audience to make voting decisions. Some may argue that elections force an individual to make a decision between dichotomous choices, and that this is not a representative case of deliberation in the public sphere. However, the researcher argues that participants in the public sphere may engage more prominently with this dichotomy of choices. If a participant in the public sphere has made a decision, he/she only needs to argue against only one opposing perspective. The researcher argues

that this, combined with the prominence of the elections as an “issue of common concern,” has the potential to increase the level of participation in deliberation in the public sphere. Lastly, presidential elections in both countries in 2012 were closely associated with online audience engagement (Dong, 2012; Editor, 2012b; Hayward, 2012; B. Kim, 2012). The recent U.S. presidential elections have been called as evidence to a “new social media era of hashtags, likes and tweets (Hayward, 2012). Every aspect of the elections, dating back to the primaries to the conventions and to the debates and election night, “top” comments, tweets and “most liked” YouTube videos gained spotlight, functioning as a prominent force in citizens’ decision making processes.

Especially in Korea, commenting culture and “likes” have been considered significant for perceived public opinion during presidential elections. People’s obsession with “likes” and “top” comments (Herald.com, 2013) in Korea is best demonstrated by the website *Ilbe*, which was mentioned in *Chapter 3*. This controversial website is known to be occupied by conservatives who represent some of the most extremist right-wing arguments opposing reconciliation with North Korea, financial reform and social equality. However, this website was not created by individuals with political agendas. It was at first an online community where humorous content was shared. The name *Ilbe* means “daily best”—members of the website wrote posts or share links to stories, images, videos and make humorous commentary about issues in society. When the posting receives the most likes for that day, it becomes the “daily best” article. The website gained popularity over a short period of time with tremendous inflow of user-generated content and commentary, all longing to become the “daily best.”

During the 2012 presidential election campaign in Korea when a great deal of political commentary was shared, some highly conservative viewpoints became “daily bests.” Once this happened, conservatives began to make very strong and extreme remarks about the progressive presidential candidate, ranging from name-calling to plausible conspiracies (e.g., accusing progressive politicians to be affiliated with the North Korean government). All the other conservative members of the website began to “like” such posts and many more conservatives from other websites flowed in. As a result, the culture of the website was changed by later that year. Any comment that was not conservative was condemned and verbally attacked by groups of people. Suddenly, the website became a virtual dwelling community for Korea’s young conservatives. Later, these extremist members of the website were even accused of manipulating top comments in some news portal websites by visiting the website in a similar timeframe and pressing “like” for a conservative user comment (E. Park, 2012). Users of this website, who were not initially grouped together for political purposes, now became part of one of the strongest right-wing forces on the internet. Their beliefs and arguments are so rigid and unpleasant now that people of Ilbe are now called ‘Ilbe-bugs,’ as if to refer to creepy, frightening beings on the internet (citations here). All of this resulted from the act of “liking” and wanting to be “liked” –which brought them together as political forces in the presidential elections.

4.3.1. Framing analysis of “top” comments and sub-comments

RQ1: “What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of frames of “top” comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?”;
and

RQ2: “What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of themes of “likability” / “dislikability” emerge from comments about “top” comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?”

To address RQ 1 and 2, this research used framing (Entman, 1993) to analyze top news articles about the 2012 presidential elections and their user comments and sub-comments. Framing is appropriate for addressing this research question because, as mentioned above, studying frames allows the researcher to understand how meanings are made by audiences upon receiving the message. Framing analysis looks to identify a schema of interpretation in the material that are designed to be acknowledged and accepted by individuals in order to understand issues (Goffman, 1974). In other words, framing is the process by which communication sources, such as a news organization or a commenter, “defines and constructs an issue” (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997, p. 221) and “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make more salient in communicating text... to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation... for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The issue is that the media have increasingly been offering their own interpretations of events to reflect their own perspectives; whether they value public interest foremost is questionable (Entman, 2004). Through this method, the researcher attempted to examine processes whereby the news media and commenters construct a perspective that encourages others to interpret a given situation in a particular way. The researcher looked for techniques by which the news media and commenters elevate particular pieces of information in salience (Entman, 1991, 1993; Iyengar, 1991) and perpetuate a frame of reference (Wyer & Srull, 1984).

Each “top” comment and news story was the unit of analysis. Materials were analyzed with focus on two aspects of framing: *How the commenter made meaning*

(“reframed”) of the issue being covered by the news story and how audiences’ frames were presented (“strategies”) in dialogue in an effort to make their frames salient.

For the former, the researcher looked for symbols, keywords, field of meaning, and/or references that were either *related to the news story’s framing* or introduced by the commenter to *reframe the story*. Such an approach for comparing framing of meanings in the stories and the comments derived from the literature discussing reception positions (dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, oppositional) upon which meanings are made by audiences (Gray, 1999; Hall, 2006; Livingstone, 1991; Morley, 1980, 1992; Press, 2006). Among the three positions, emphasis was put on the negotiated position, which best describes how today’s news audiences engage with news. Contemporary audiences no longer wholly accept what the media gives them because access to larger bodies of information and the convenience to be able to search for more have allowed audiences to challenge the media (Meyer & Carey, 2013). Thus, audiences recognize the media’s frames and interject with their own knowledge and perspectives to result in “reframing” (Hermida et al., 2012; Van Dijk, 1991; Worsley, 2010), which is understood in this dissertation as the negotiation of meaning. Even when reframing does not occur and audiences fully accept what they have been presented with, their increased potential for activism results in their “weighing in” on the topic (D. A. Miller, 2012; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008), which the researcher believes is closest to the negotiated reception.

To analyze how the comments’ framing functioned as a part of the deliberation process, focus was placed on rhetorical language and themes indicating the commenter’s status, role and intentions as participant in the dialogue (Caldwell, 2013; Hauser, 1998). Here, the researcher argues that framing holds rhetorical characteristics. Framing is a

process whereby communicators construct perspectives that allows for a given situation to be interpreted in a particular way (Entman, 1991, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Frames operate by providing a narrative account of an issue or event and highlighting a specific point of view (Entman, 1991, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Reese et al., 2001). The act of selecting and highlighting perspectives from the issue results in the communicator gaining power dominance through priming and agenda setting that are achieved through successful framing (Entman, 2007). In other words, framing works as the process and tool through which the communicator promotes wanted agendas.

In this sense, Kuypers (2009) notes, frames are “powerful rhetorical entities that induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways, essentially making some aspects of our multi-dimensional reality more noticeable than other aspects” (p. 181). When analyzing how these narrative accounts are presented, rhetorical points of view become important because the communicator’s (commenter’s) acts of encouraging, promoting or convincing receivers of the interpretive frames require rhetorical persuasion strategies (Gyori, 2013; Hauser, 1998; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Moreover, communicators selectively emphasize ideas that have potential to mobilize public opinion and engage others in dialogue by offering themes that could be agreed upon (Jerit, 2008).

This approach to analysis is similar to a rhetorical analysis, as it is more interested in the material “for what it does than for what it is” (Corbett, 1969, p. xii). However, it still ought to be called framing analysis because primary concern is how the frames are constructed and presented; strategies for presenting the frames in the dialogue were considered as an extension of the commenter’s framing.

Sample

The thirty most commented news articles in the 2012 presidential elections from each country were selected (N=60). For data collection of Korean materials, the news portal website, www.nate.com, was used. The website is an aggregator of news, providing news articles from numerous newspapers across the country. It has an online system for sorting articles by the number of hits and the number of comments they receive; news articles move up the rankings as they receive more views or comments, and top ten stories of the day in terms of views and comments are shown on a separate tab on the page. Comments on each article are also ranked through a vote by readers, where each user can give another comment a “thumbs up (like)” or “thumbs down (dislike).” At default, three comments with the most ‘thumbs up’ votes are displayed as “top” comments. The comments themselves can also receive feedback, since sub-comments are allowed.

Of course, a vast number of online aggregators have different systems and models, including some providing a similar service for commenting, voting, and ranking systems. However, www.nate.com is one of the only few web news portals in Korea that provide a commenting and ranking system developed to such an extent that comments and comments on comments are being utilized enough to possibly have an influence in the news consumption preferences of audiences, and one that enjoys a considerable amount of popularity. Furthermore, of the three portal websites in Korea (naver.com, daum.net, nate.com), users of the other two show very strong political tendencies (JAK, 2014; S. Park, 2013). Thus nate.com was chosen to allow for as little effect from the news portal community’s existing bias.

For the United States, *Yahoo! News* (news.yahoo.com) is a comparable news aggregator website. Yahoo! News is the most popular news website in terms of U.S. traffic rank at an estimated 110 million unique monthly visitors (eBizMBA, 2013). It also provides the “like” / “dislike” function and the “top” comments system where those popular comments show up on top of the list, and it also features the sub-commenting (response) system. In terms of political orientation, *Yahoo! News* has not been known to lean toward a specific agenda aside from an overall liberal agenda dominating the internet (Huang, 2012).

The search term “presidential election” for both countries was used to search for news stories appearing in a span of two months prior to the election date. Therefore, Korean news stories were between October 19, 2012 and December 19, 2013 and U.S. stories between September 6, 2012 and November 6, 2012. The timeframe for data collection was determined according to the frequency with which news regarding the two elections was covered. For both cases on average, the number of searched items was significantly higher from two months to the election on.

Not surprisingly, while news coverage regarding the topic “presidential election” was the most prevalent throughout the year (the topic ranked first in terms of news coverage frequency for both countries in 2012), the high increase and intensity of coverage began with two months remaining. In the U.S., end of August and early September marked the nomination of Mitt Romney-Paul Ryan and Barack Obama-Joe Biden for the Republican and Democratic Parties, respectively. On September 22, early voting began in twelve states. October marked the most extensive month that built up to Election Day, with three Presidential Debates and one Vice Presidential Debate that were

nationally televised. In Korea, Park Geun-hye was already decided in August as the candidate for the Grand National Party, the top conservative party in Korea. As a result, people and the media awaited events and milestones from the progressive parties for newsworthy storylines (i.e., until when representative political figures from all political camps were identified for race and competition coverage). In late September, Moon Jae-in won the nomination for the Democratic Party, the largest progressive political party in Korea. However, around the same time a businessman named Ahn Cheol-soo declared he would run for president as independent. He was hugely popular, especially among young people. He strongly opposed the conservative party and the storylines regarding his and Moon's conflict, negotiation and campaigning strategies became popular in October. Until November 23, when Ahn stepped down from candidacy to support Moon, news media highlighted the extremely close three-party race (B. Kim, 2012). After November 23, news stories focused on the two major candidates. Three Presidential Debates took place in early December. As a result of the turn of events above, news coverage was most frequent and extensive beginning in October, also resulting in large amounts of articles forecasting the aftermath of the elections or reviewing the year.

From the initial search, over 115,000 stories were yielded from nate.com and over 180,000 from news.yahoo.com. In the search result the top thirty most commented stories were identified using the 'sort by; feature provided in each website's "advanced search." For each story, the top three most "liked" comments ("top" comment) were extracted for analysis, comparing emerging frames of the news stories and their top comments (n=90 per country, N=180 total). Three comments per news story were chosen as a result of purposive sampling: they were the ones receiving the most "likes" and were given "top"

status. The “top” comments appear on the top of the list as a default, which the researcher believed were the most popular comments and thus successful in terms of the commenter’s framing. Refer to Appendix A for a list of materials analyzed.

Afterward, sub-comments of the “top” comments were analyzed to find “likable” themes of the comments. Because sub-comments on existing user comments are usually short (single line), five sub-comments for each “top” comment were selected for analysis. When there were five or less sub-comments, all sub-comments were collected. First five sub-comments were chosen under the assumption that they were most germane to the “top” comment as well as the story, and deviated the least by means of sub-discussions that tend to happen underneath a “top” comment. In some cases, fewer than five sub-comments for a “top” comment were posted, due to sub-comments being deleted by the user or ‘flagged’ as spam by other users. As a result, sub-comments analyzed were $n_{korea}=426$, $n_{usa}=440$, $N = 866$.

Analysis of sub-comments focused on identifying main themes that referred to reasons and/or meanings from the sub-commenter regarding why they “liked” or “disliked” the comment. Accordingly, these “likability” themes of each sub-comment were analyzed in light of the “top” comments under which the sub-comments were posted. This analysis took into account any indication of the techniques or traits inherent in the “top” comment and meanings made by the “top” commenter, and how those meanings were interpreted by the sub-commenter in relation to the story or the comment itself, when applicable.

As the researcher holds a certified Korean-English translator license, the researcher translated and analyzed the materials.

4.3.2. Ranking comparison analysis of chronological order of comments

This method addresses

RQ3: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of the relationship between the chronological order of comments in those comments receiving “likes” in the most commented stories during the 2012 presidential elections?;

and tests

H1: For both countries, comments that were submitted earlier, thus ranking last in chronological order, will have a higher probability of receiving “likes.”

To investigate the statistical correlation between the chronological order of comments and their status as “liked” comments the first ten comments for each of the top thirty most commented stories from each news website were listed in chronological order (N = 600). Chronological order refers to ordinal rank according to the amount of time between a news story was published and the comment was entered. For instance, each comment was given a time value in minutes indicating the difference between story publication and commenting, and then assigned a rank with 1 being the least apart from the article publication time. This translation of elapsed time into ordinal rank was possible because all of the first ten comments for every most commented news story in both countries were posted within one hour of the news story publication time. In fact, more than 96 percent of them (577 out of 600) were posted within the first thirty minutes. This cohesion in time distribution of the comments prevented the ordinal rank from being skewed. Also collected from each comment is the number of “likes” they received. Then analysis tested whether correlation between the order (1, 2, 3, 4, ...) and the number of “likes” received was statistically significant.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to address this question. This statistical test is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test that allows the researcher to assess whether mean rank values differ for matched samples (Salkind, 2010; Wilcoxon, 1945). In other words, it is a paired difference test that enables the comparison of two sets of values coming from same participants (materials) in the sample. This was an adequate method of analysis that allows the researcher to draw statistical inferences regarding the probability of a comment receiving more “likes” based solely on the amount of time it took after the news article was published. The researcher assumes that comments that appeared earlier have a higher probability of receiving more “likes” and thus becoming a “top” comment. Since the Wilcoxon signed-rank test does not take into account the quality or content of the comment, results supporting the assumption may raise questions about the usefulness of the “like” and “top” features for high quality discussion in the digital public sphere.

4.3.3. Experiment

This research phase addresses:

RQ4: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether predispositions and perceived effect of “likes” affect one’s willingness to comment on the story or “like” a comment?;

RQ5: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of perceived public opinion of readers influenced by the existence of “top” comment status and “likes” on comments for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?; and

RQ6: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether themes of “likability” identified in RQ2 are adequate elements of user comments that make them “likable” for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?;

and tests

H2: In both countries, individuals who identify themselves as strongly supporting or strongly opposing one candidate will perceive a balanced news article on the topic as biased against their own perspective;

H3: In both countries, greater perceived bias of the news article will be associated with greater presumed influence of comments and “likes” on others; and

H4: In both countries, partisans will show a higher level of willingness to engage with the news by leaving user comments or using the “like/dislike” features than those who are not partisans.

Experiments are the most powerful research design that allows a straightforward test of possible causal relationships and checks whether identified factors and indicators could be verified in controlled settings (Schneider, 2007, p. 172). So, the experiment phase sought to verify themes and factors that were identified from the previous framing analysis by collecting empirical data from participants who were exposed to stimulus material. The material was generated by the researcher to include these themes and phenomena from real life online news settings so as to draw conclusions on the effect of these themes as well as resulting individual perceptions on public opinion that could be attributed to media effects theories.

The experiment involved a mixed design 2 x 2 x 2 factorial experiment (D. C. Miller & Salkind, 2002; Schneider, 2007) employing stimulus material followed by an online post-treatment test questionnaire.

The three independent variables were: 1) presence of “top” comments (existing relevant “top” comments among many comments with indication of the number of “likes” and “dislikes” and existing comments without any indication of “likes,” “dislikes” or ‘top status’); 2) partisanship (extreme favorable stance toward one candidate, extreme opposing viewpoint toward the other candidate); and 3) presence of

“likability/dislikability” factors (existence of one of the four “likability” and three “dislikability” factors drawn from the previous research phase).

The experiment incorporated the independent variables with the following: Two versions of online stimulus (manipulated news article and ten comments) and questionnaire were designed, one for each condition of the first independent variable (“top” comment status). The two conditions were identical with the exception of the indication of the number of “likes” and “top” comment status in one condition. Partisanship data were collected from a question about predispositions in the pre-treatment test.

Finally, the “likability/dislikability” factors were incorporated in the content of the comments. In manipulating (generating) user comments for the material, the researcher selected five out of the ten comments to hold one “likability” or “dislikability” characteristic stable. In other words, half of the comments in the material contained a “likability/dislikability” factor. As a result, all participants across different conditions for each of the first two independent variables (“top” status, partisanship) were exposed to the “likability/dislikability” treatment equally, making this aspect of the experiment design a within-subjects design. Hence, the overall experiment design was a mixed design experiment (two between-subjects variables and one within-subjects variable). Although five “likability/dislikability” factors were incorporated into one of five comments each, this study did not compare the effects of individual factors. Rather, the researcher sought to test if the presence of the factors would have an effect on participants’ willingness to “like/dislike” the comments. Therefore, this variable was designed to hold only two levels.

Dependent variables were: 1) willingness to “like” a comment; 2) willingness to “dislike” a comment; 3) perceived public opinion; 4) perceived strength of public opinion on self; and 5) perceived strength of public opinion on others. These dependent variable data were collected via the responses to a questionnaire participants completed after being exposed to the stimulus material. Dependent variables were central to this dissertation in terms of investigating the influence of “top” comments on perceived public opinion in the digital public sphere and an individual’s willingness to “like” a comment as a mode of news engagement. From data collected for dependent variables 1 and 2, assumptions regarding the “likability/dislikability” factors of user comments and the influence of presumed influence (PI) were tested. That is, these variables allowed a look into whether the factors drawn from qualitative analysis were significant indicators for participants’ actual willingness to engage in behavioral responses (“like” or “dislike” a comment). Dependent variable 3 allowed the researcher to understand the effect of pre-existing “top” comments on perceived public opinion. Dependent variables 4) and 5) were used to test the assumptions regarding the message effects of user-initiated communicative actions (“likes”) on perceived strength of public opinion in the digital public sphere at large.

		Existing “top” comments	
		“Top” Status	Without “top” Status
Partisanship	Toward Candidate A		
	Toward Candidate B		

“Likability/dislikability” Factors	Present		
	Not present		

Table 1. Experimental design

Sample

Two hundred participants from each country were recruited ($N = 400$). U.S. subjects were university students, instructors, and administrative staff in a large mid-Atlantic university recruited through 1) flyers posted across campus grounds and nearby regions and 2) announcements and/or email invitations to students currently enrolled in large lecture sessions, under the approval of leading instructors of the courses. Three participants were randomly selected for a cash payment of \$25 for compensation for participating in the study. In addition to the random selection for the cash payment, participants recruited from enrolled courses received, at the leading instructors’ option, extra credit or the option to complete an alternative assignment that would allow for the same amount of extra credit.

Korean subjects were recruited through 1) online announcements via e-mail and social media, 2) on-site recruitment at an academic convention held at a large national university and 3) announcements and/or email invitations to students currently enrolled in large lecture sessions, under the approval of leading instructors of the courses. Compensation methods for Korean subjects was identical to those for U.S. subjects. Subjects’ names or other identifiable information were not used for the study, except for basic demographics information (education, gender, news consumption habits, commenting habits, “like/dislike” feature usage, political stance). Only email addresses

were collected in order to contact the participant whose name was selected to receive the cash payment, and further recruit participants for the fourth research phase, focus group interviews. For those earning extra credit, participants' names were collected for verification purposes but never connected to the actual study.

The total number of subjects were divided into two groups using the randomizing function of the spreadsheet software, after which each group was sent separate links to each condition (a = "top" comments, b = only comments without "like" or "top" status) of the online experiment. Subjects were informed that they are participating in a study about online news perceptions and reader behavior.

Stimulus Material (Manipulation)

For each country, a news article was re-created (see Appendix B) from existing news articles used in the qualitative phase of the study, and were manipulated for presentation to subjects as stimulus material. The topic For both countries for the news articles was also the presidential election's two most prominent candidates. Information and quotes provided in the sample articles were merged into a single news article for each country and manipulated for balance, so that both candidates had the same amount of space and words. The respective news events were based on real events because participants might be suspicious of a story mentioning a fake campaign setting; they may remember the events associated with the elections.

The news article generated for U.S. participants was headlined, "President Obama, Mitt Romney sharpen campaign messages" and covered the campaigning messages and strategies of the two candidates in their Ohio campaigning. Manipulation was achieved

by rewriting paragraphs and sentences around major quotes from each candidate (or supporting groups/parties), rearranging the order of paragraphs for flow and transition and editing the paragraphs so that length would be balanced for each candidate. As a result, with the exception of the 134-word, neutral introduction, the 534 words long article was divided evenly with 200 words allotted for each candidate. The article was checked for manipulation by five former or current journalists, who confirmed that the news story was balanced, plausible and without error in writing, information, structure, etc. manipulation checkers included three former journalists who are currently mass communication scholars at the University of Maryland and University of Missouri who offered to pretest the data collection instrument and stimulus material. One of the current journalists works as a business reporter in New York; the other is a public life beat reporter in Kansas City, MO. A similar news article was generated for the Korean experiment. Research on news articles on nate.com showed that “sharp-contrast” type coverage appeared most frequently regarding presidential debates. Unlike in the U.S., the Korean candidates did not simultaneously visit a campaigning location to exchange sharpened, vividly contrasting messages. Because providing opposing viewpoints effectively was more important than matching the scene and background for each article, the researcher chose to merge and re-create an article covering the Presidential Debate. With the same manipulation strategy employed for formulating the U.S. material, a news article was generated with equal division in length. Out of 1,073 characters, 273 were introductory (neutral) and 400 characters for each candidate were used in paragraphs providing arguments from respective sides. This article also underwent a manipulation check from five Korean native speakers who are journalists, lecturers or students

studying mass communication. They confirmed that the article was balanced, plausible and without error.

Accompanying the news articles were ten comments that were also generated and manipulated by the researcher. Eight out of ten user comments were concocted by combining comments that held similar frames. These frames included *supporting a candidate*, *shutting down the opposition*, *providing more information/ideas*, and *media criticism*, which were themes found from the analysis of sub-comments. Two out of the ten comments were unrelated to the story (decontextualized). One of these comments was an advertisement commonly seen in commenting forums of respective websites.

Ultimately, the eight relevant comments were labeled for their support for a certain candidate: Three of the eight comments supported one candidate and three supported the other. In one of these six comments, the framing strategy of *shutting down the opposition* was employed as well. Two remaining comments were neutral and held frames that did not express *support for a candidate*. One neutral comment provided *additional information/ideas* and another comment provided *media criticism*.

In addition to generating and arranging comments with the frames discussed above, the comments were further manipulated to include in the independent variable, “likability/dislikability.” This was accomplished by employing these factors that were identified from the analysis of “top” comments and their sub-comments. Out of the ten comments for each country, one comment was an advertisement (representing commercialized comments in news websites) and therefore excluded. Of the remaining nine, five comments were manipulated to hold one of these “likability/dislikability” factors that were universally visible in “top” comments for both countries. Three of the

five comments held “likability” factors: *Humor*, *witty rebuttal* and *media criticism*.

Comments showing *media criticism* were used without manipulation because the framing in the comment was indeed the likability factor as found through analysis. Two comments held “dislikability” factors: *Indecency* and *decontextualization*. Commenter information was not provided. These factors were exposed equally across participants in the two conditions (with or without “top” status and “like/dislike” number indication) explained below.

On the two news websites analyzed, the user ID was visible (for nate.com, half of the ID were blocked—for example, ‘abcd*****’). However, since the researcher did not intend for any interpretation or value judgment resulting from seeing the user’s ID, the commenters’ names were substituted with “Comment1,” “Comment2,” “Comment3...” All comments were also checked for manipulation, plausibility and error by the same five individuals (for each country) who checked the news articles.

For each country, two types of stimulus material were generated. A single version of the news articles and user comments were used for both conditions in each country, but materials for each condition differed in terms of the user comment presentation. The first condition (a) included the manipulated news article and user comments that indicated the number of “likes” and “dislikes.” Three comments with the most “likes” also had a ‘top comment’ mark next to it. In order to find out whether the number of “likes” and “top” status would influence participants’ perceived public opinion, two of the three “top” comments favored one candidate (U.S.: Obama; Korea: Moon) and the third was a neutral comment. The second condition (b) included the same material presented in the same order but with no indication of “likes,” “dislikes” or “top” status. For both

conditions in either country, the total number of comments (1,322) was indicated to show perceived reach and prominence of the news article.

As discussed above, stimulus material for each country and condition were generated and manipulation by following the same process for each country. The material was presented in a way that resembles an online news website. For each condition, the material was shown in four slides that look like screenshots of websites. For each slide/screenshot, headers titled, “Your Internet News: The Daily Report” (U.S.) and “Your Internet News: My News Portal” (Korea) were used. This title was determined after a pretest of five participants from each country who suggested that the Korean website title be changed to include the word “portal,” since it is a commonly used term to describe new aggregator website. Underneath the header were mock menu items (links) such as politics, opinion, regional, sports, international, business, IT, health, and style. These menu items were identified from items commonly used in both *nate.com* and *Yahoo! News*. Also in the screenshot were mock website features such as search bar, sign in/register buttons and news categorization heading (The Daily Politics: Special Report). Then the headline was shown, followed by date and byline, and then the news story. For each country, an image with portraits of each candidate side-by-side appeared with the story. On the second page, the news article was presented in the same website, with the words ‘continued from previous page’ showing underneath the headline. At the bottom of each screenshot were page numbers that indicated each page. On the third and fourth screenshots, user comments were shown with a grey line dividing each comment.

The overall appearance, plausibility and presentation of the entire stimulus material were pretested again by five individuals (who checked for manipulation of the

content as well) from each country. Upon their confirmation and suggestions, modifications were made.

Instrument

An online questionnaire was employed for the experiment (see Appendix C). The pre-treatment test questionnaire section gathered demographic information about the participants such as age, gender, education level, news consumption habits, etc. The main goal of the pre-treatment questions was to collect data regarding the degree to which each participant favored one candidate over the other (partisanship). This is how the researcher was able to categorize each participant as a strong view holder regarding the news topic (presidential elections). In order to avoid priming effects (i.e., the participant strongly anticipating material and questions regarding the elections), this question was asked as part of a set of questions that asked for opinions on five different controversial issues.

The online questionnaire tool showed the stimulus material that was discussed above. After viewing the stimulus, participants were asked a series of questions. The first question was about the perceived stance of the news article and perceived popular opinion on the issue (five-point multiple choice question with options ranging from “Strongly supporting candidate” A to “Strongly supporting candidate B”). The question about the perceived stance of the news article was included to verify the hostile media effect (HME) phenomenon, where partisans (individuals with strong viewpoints) perceive a neutral article as biased against their beliefs. The second question about perceived

popular opinion sought to find out whether individuals' perceptions were affected by their perceived stance of the story and/or the user comments.

These questions on perceived stances/opinions were followed by a question about the strength of perceived public opinion resulting from reading the material (both on self and others, with a four-point scale ranging from "Very little influence" to "Very strong influence"). This question attempted to verify the third person effect (TPE). Next question asked about the participants' willingness to leave a comment after reading the article (four-point scale ranging from "Very little willingness" to "Very strong willingness"). Then questions about the willingness to "like" a comment followed, showing all ten comment choices to indicate whether they would "like" the comment or not. Regarding the set of ten questions about the willingness to "like" a comment, another set of ten text entry fields were provided for participants to indicate what the reason for willing to "like" each comment (if so indicated) was. This same format of questions was repeated to ask about the willingness and reason for "disliking" the comments. The set of questions asking about reasons for "liking" or "disliking" were included to further investigate the influence of "likability/dislikability" factors that were incorporated into five out of the ten comments. This set of questions was posed to examine the participants' willingness to comment, "like" or "dislike" a comment, which could be considered a behavioral response discussed in the influence of presumed influence (PI). The researcher assumed that participants, upon seeing influences on others by reading the news article and comments, would be willing to engage in behavioral responses ("like" or "dislike"). In this process, the researcher argues that perceived bias of the mediated content (HME) and perceived level of effect on others (TPE) may be significant indicators of the

willingness for behavioral response (S.-K. Oh & Nan, 2013). Furthermore, the description of reasons for willing to “like” a comment was used to examine whether “likability/dislikability” factors were indeed indicators for an overall higher number of “likes/dislikes.”

Finally a set of questions asked about participants’ attitudes toward user comments and the “like/dislike” feature. One question asked participants to indicate their opinion on the following statements (on a four-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”): “I pay attention to comments when reading news online”; “I pay attention to the number of “likes” or “top” comment status when reading news online”; “I think user comments are helpful when reading news online”; I think ‘likes/dislikes’ features are helpful when reading news online.” The next question asked participants to describe why they believe “likes/dislikes” and user comments are helpful or not. The last question asked participants to indicate whether they would pay attention to the number of “likes” on a comment they leave, and why.

Procedure

As mentioned above, email addresses of the participants were collected through various means of recruitment in each country, after which all the contact information were recorded on a spreadsheet. Randomizing function was used to divide participants into two groups. Each group was sent an email containing the link to their respectively assigned online questionnaires. Consent forms were provided at the beginning of the online questionnaire to acquire electronic consent from the participants. After confirming that a participant completed the questionnaire, email addresses were included in the list

that were later used to randomly select one participant for each country who received an iPod (\$150 value). Results were then analyzed.

4.3.4. Focus groups / In-depth interviews

RQ7: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of online news audiences' and media professionals' attitudes about "liking" / "disliking" and "top" comments?

In order to address the question above regarding audiences' and media professionals' attitude toward the "like" feature, a series of focus group interviews was conducted with participants in the experiment phase) and in-depth interviews with media professionals (journalists, media executives, communications practitioners, IT specialists). Focus group participants were all students at university, who are mostly in their late teens or early-to-mid twenties and represent the generation of active audience participants who engage with media on a daily basis (N.-J. Lee et al., 2012; McLeod & Shah, 2009; H. S. Park et al., 2013). Participants of the focus group interviews were chosen upon completion of the experiment phase, soliciting participation in the focus group for additional compensation (\$10 per participant). Participants were selected by virtue of their willingness to participate. The focus group methodology was used to gather a large data from several subgroups in a relatively short amount of time (Morgan, 1996) because conducting interviews with individual participants would not be feasible. Also, the researcher took into account that first-time participants of the interview method may be overwhelmed with the one-on-one setting, whereas a focus group with fellow participants may enhance activity and participation. As Adams (2000) states, focus groups is best for developing insights from group interactions. Conducting the focus group sessions not too

long after the completion of the online experiment was important, because questions may be relatable to their experience with the stimulus material. Therefore, focus groups for each country occurred within two months of completing the experiment phase.

Six focus group sessions were conducted, three for each country. Three focus group sessions consisting of six to seven (six, seven and seven respectively; $n = 20$) participants were conducted in the U.S. and three sessions consisting of seven ($n = 21$) were conducted in Korea. All participants ($N=41$) were recruited from the participant pool for the experiment via contacting randomized sub-samples for willingness to participate in the focus groups. Participants were paid \$10 in cash for their participation and refreshments were provided at the sessions.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with five media professionals from U.S. and seven from Korea ($N=12$). Media professionals were selected to be a part of this research phase for a more complete understanding of how audiences' news engagement functions in the public sphere. By garnering responses from those who provide content to the public and closely observe occurrences in the public, and incorporating these responses to findings from other methods, the researcher was able to adopt a more proper approach toward understanding how the "public" is influenced by audience news engagement. Media professionals were asked to share their observations and attitudes from the media's perspective. Moreover, considerable differences in professional expertise (journalism, strategic communications, IT) of the media professional group were an issue that would make the focus group less effective.

Media professionals were recruited via a mixture of convenient sampling and snowball sampling method for each country. In the U.S., a pool of journalists who are

members of a journalism research institute were initially contacted, and two responded with intention to participate. Upon completion of the interview with these two individuals, they suggested names and contact information of other media professionals who may be interested in conducting the interview. In Korea, a media executive at a national news organization expressed interest in the interview as a result of emails that were also sent to a listserv of journalism/mass communication professionals. This executive provided names and contact information for other media professionals who were willing to participate. Participants were eligible for cash payment of \$10 and refreshments (if the interview took place face-to-face), but all of them declined. All interview sessions were held in a conference room that is able to accommodate 10-15 individuals. Of the twelve individual interview sessions, eight were conducted face-to-face (two for U.S., six for Korea) and four were conducted over the phone (three for U.S., one for Korea).

Of the three journalists in the U.S., two were 39 years or younger and one was 40 or older. All three had more than 10 years of journalism experience, with the oldest journalist holding 18 years of experience. Two of the three had covered politics/campaigns before, including the 2012 presidential elections. The other was a sports journalist. All three journalists were on social media websites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), but none of them used them for their professions. Two of the three journalists held graduate degrees and one had a Bachelor's degree. The communications practitioner was younger than 39 years old, has been in the field for 11 years, held a Bachelor's degree and had never covered elections of political affairs before. She used various sorts of social media and utilized them extensively for the job. The IT specialist was younger than 39 years of age, held a bachelor's degree, had 5 years of experience at the news

organization and also used various forms of social media on a regular basis (but not for the job). None of the media professionals identified their political stance.

Among the four Korean journalists, two were 39 years or younger. One journalist had 7 years of experience and the rest had over 10 years of experience, with the most being 21. All four journalists had experience covering politics and election campaigns, including the 2012 presidential elections. Three of the four journalists used social media on a regular basis, and one of them utilized Facebook, Twitter and YouTube on the job. All four journalists held a Bachelor's degree. The communications practitioner was younger than 39 years, held a graduate degree, had been in the field for 8 years, and had worked for a politician as a client. She used social media websites regularly for executing projects. The IT specialist was younger than 39, held a Bachelor's degree, and had worked for the news organization for 11 years. The IT specialist said that he has social media accounts but do not use them often. The media executive was older than 50, held a master's degree and was a reporter for 26 years. He had extensively covered politics as a reporter, including election campaigns. He oversaw his news organization's coverage of the 2012 elections. The media executive said he is frequently on social media to learn trends of audiences. Of the media professionals in Korea, two (one journalist and the communications practitioner) identified their political stance—both of them were liberal.

For the focus groups, structured questions asked: 1) *What are some reactions from the material that was shown in the experiment?*; 2) *What is your attitude toward "liking" culture?*; 3) *What kind of consumption habits do you have for online news in relation to comments and "likes"?*; 4) *What are your beliefs about the influence of "likes" and "top" comments on public opinion and democracies?*; 5) *What are your perspectives toward*

“likability/dislikability” factors of comments?; and 6) Do you think there are implications from chronological order of comments?

At the start of each focus group session, the first pre-established question was posed by the moderator (researcher) and answers were given by each participant in the room, going around a circle. Afterwards, participants were encouraged to engage in discussions. At appropriate junctures in the discussion, the moderator moved onto the next relevant question. From the second structured question on, volunteers were selected to provide opinions and then the floor was opened to the rest of the participants. Each question was asked in different ways depending on the context in which the question was posed. For instance, proper transitions or examples from participants’ previous statements were incorporated in posing questions (e.g., in asking question #4, answers from #3 were used as transitional phrases: “As participant A mentioned, it seems that people pay a lot of attention to “likes” these days. If so, what are your thoughts on how this audience culture affects public opinion?”). Each session ran for between 45 minutes and one hour.

The sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for best addressing the broad question of audiences’ attitudes toward “likes.” In addition to the remarks made by each participant and the discussions that took place, the researcher observed gestures and salient behaviors from participants. These notes were kept in consideration of the topic at hand, time and situation. In other words, the researcher was the moderator, coder and observer, synthesizing findings and notes (Creswell, 2009; Morgan, 1996; Salkind, 2010) upon collection and transcription of data.

The individual in-depth interview looked to examine similar concepts, but gather responses from the media professionals’ perspective. Also, not all of the media

professionals took part in the experiment before the interview was conducted (three did not completed the experiment. For those who had completed the experiment, the first question was: 1) *What are your reactions from the material that was shown in the experiment?* Similar to the focus group, the next question asked: 2) *What are your attitudes toward “liking” culture?* Needless to say, this was the first question asked to the three interview participants who did not complete the experiment. Afterwards, a question about the media professionals’ beliefs about the influence of “likes” and “top” comments on public opinion and democracies were asked (question #4 from the focus group).

After these questions was where the main difference between the focus group and interviews were. Questions about consumption habits and “likability/dislikability” factors (questions #3 and #5 from the focus group) were asked in light what the media professionals observed or believed to be happening in digital culture. While these media professionals could also be commenters and online users themselves, only their perspectives as handlers of communicative material were sought for. As a result, media professionals provided their insight about audiences and digital culture from a third person viewpoint. Also, questions were posed with language and familiar terms (Lindlof & Taylor, 2003; Pickering, 2008) that invited the media professionals to incorporate their professional experiences in their responses. For instance, when asking about *audiences’ consumption habits* and the *prominence of “like” culture*, the researcher asked about the media professionals thoughts on perceived consumption trends of user as well as whether they themselves look at comments and “likes” personally on the job and in different newsroom/news cycle situations. Another example was when media professionals were asked to share any experiences where they saw a strong “likability” factor among

comments. The question about the *implications of chronological order of comments* (#6 on the focus group questions) was inserted at different points during each interview as the researcher saw fit.

Following conventional in-depth interviewing strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2003; List, 2002; Pickering, 2008; Salkind, 2010), when the media professional provided accounts on issues through an intriguing experience, the conversation would remain at the topic to examine further the different aspects of the experience. Four of the twelve interviews were conducted via telephone. This was important to consider because in the phone interview, gestures or body languages could not be observed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2003). The four phone interviews were conducted as such due to geographical constraints and scheduling conflicts. While a limitation in comparison to the other face-to-face interviews, important themes and ideas were still shared in the phone interviews. Data collected via this means were still used in analysis in conjunction with the rest of the data. The interviews, phone or in person, took on average about thirty-five minutes.

This research phase and the methods provide a comprehensive way of examining what it means to “like” a comment for online audiences, and the influence of “top” comments on public opinion formation. Also, by identifying “likability” factors of user comments, the researcher was able to better understand to what extent user engagement is closely related to the issues of concern. Moreover, as mentioned above, each phase of research is designed to be mutually beneficial to the other—findings from the first phase were utilized in the experimental design, and analysis of focus group and interview data were used to enrich results from each of the three steps and to provide additional insight to attitudes toward “likes,” and ultimately to the overarching research question for the

dissertation: **Do the “like”/”dislike” features of commenting forums for online news websites demonstrate problems for their functioning in the digital public sphere?**

CHAPTER 5. “TOP” COMMENT FRAMING

RQ1: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of frames of “top” comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?

Analysis of the material showed the following as salient themes: *“And the winner is...”*; *“They are deceptive, you are stupid”*; *“There is more to the story that we ought to know”*; and the following framing strategies: *Encouraging action* and *Shutting down the opposition*. Corresponding to the researcher’s strategies for analysis, findings were categorized as “reframing” or “strategy.”

5.1. Reframing: “And the winner is...” (US & KOREA)

“Top” comments on election news stories in the US and Korea tended to take the stories’ frames to discuss whether a candidate was going to win the election or not. Notably, these frames cited the ideological background of the candidate or his or her party as grounds for drawing such conclusions. Furthermore, these newly introduced frames for understanding the story provided little room for neutrality.

In Korea, “top” comments on a news story about candidate Park Guen-hye’s press conference exemplified this. Park was addressing allegations that her family was involved in corruption regarding a controversial scholarship fund that her father, himself a former president, had established to collect wealth (D. Lee, 2012). The story’s main theme was her firm denial. The headline quoted her saying “Justice never loses.” This hinted that she had nothing to hide; even if investigations were conducted she was confident of her family’s innocence. “Top” commentators were quick to express strong disagreement. Directly responding to the quote used in the headline, that justice never loses, one comment read, “That is why you won’t win this election.” Another “top” comment read: “She is not in this election to serve people. She is only running so that she

can inherit what her father had. She is saying she will show that people who are accusing her how she will wield justice whichever way she likes. She should not be elected.” This comment’s frames Park as the daughter of a dictator, Park Chung-hee, who was president of Korea for sixteen years before he was assassinated. Similar to the first comment, this commenter took Park’s quotes used in the news story and interpreted them as showing her greed, resembling her tyrannical father.

In the U.S. case, comments on a story summarizing the second Presidential debate showed similar tendencies. An *Associated Press* wire story providing highlights of the debate (AP, 2012) provided several examples and quotes from Candy Crowley, the moderator, to depict how she attempted to maintain order amid heated debate.

However, the top commentators were eager to reframe the story to speak for or against a specific candidate. For instance, one “top” comment stated, “Romney wanted to look enthusiastic and eloquent, but all he did was make himself look like a stubborn kid. Obama won this one, and he will win the election.” Another comment said, “Romney was very presidential – Obama seemed desperate! Romney wins.” Both comments framed the news story about the proceedings of the debate into a decision about who the winner was, with the first comment going further to assert on the eventual winner.

Audiences interpreted election-related news as items for which conclusive decisions must be made. Furthermore, comments claimed that it was imperative to select one of the two candidates and supported him/her. With this frame, commenters implied—and sometimes explicitly mentioned—that there was no middle ground. Other user comments exemplified this frame such as the following,

- “I’ve already made up my mind to pick Moon” (Korea);
- “Even a three-year-old will know to vote for Moon” (Korea);
- “There are plenty of people who support Park. She’ll win” (Korea);
- “Whoever says their [sic] undecided should be unvoting” (U.S.);
- “We should have the election now. People need to know that there is a clear right candidate here” (U.S.)

Possibility for a continued discussion regarding the pros and cons regarding a candidate and multiple aspects that need to be taken into account are absent from the frame; an effort to name the victor became top priority for the comments in making meaning of the news coverage.

Such meaning-making processes are understood from the perspective that audiences associate the election to a race as a result of media’s perpetual framing (Kellner, 2001). Furthermore, this reframing by audiences is plausible in that people are inclined to declare a winner in elections or debates since they see it as a competition (D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007). However, even considering the nature of election-related discussions, this frame appeared in numerous types of news stories that did not at all compare performances of the candidates. For instance, one Korean news story about the significance of Moon’s visit to Bongwha village (where former President Roh Moo-hyun lived before he committed suicide) garnered the comment, “Please win this election. We all know that you [Moon] will come out on top.” Since Moon was the Secretary General to Roh during his presidency, the news story framed Roh’s legacy as important to understanding Moon and what he meant as a candidate. To this, the “top” comment omitted any discussion about Moon the candidate and immediately concluded he should be the victor. Similarly, comments signifying Obama or Romney as future president received many “likes” on stories that covered electoral voting rules or a timeline of future events in the campaigning process.

This frame was noteworthy because the most “liked” comments were ones that drew conclusions about one or the other being the winning candidate. Again, one could argue that audiences perceive elections as a process that decides winners, and such comments could well be a part of the conversation. However, the fact that more than half of the most “liked” comments analyzed in this dissertation (97 out of 180 comments) showed such frames show that opportunities for profound and careful discussions about steps in the process or the candidates’ qualifications are lost in the wave of dominant frames that make (mostly) unwarranted assertions. Whether such reframing of election news in audience discourse is helpful for deliberation for public opinion is questionable.

This frame appeared saliently in both countries, but with more frequency in Korea than in the U.S. More users of *Yahoo! News* showed some response to the direct topic at hand and maintained neutrality about the two candidates. On the other hand, more than three-fourths of Korean “top” comments were framed to conclude upon the victor/righteous candidate, regardless of the immediate topic being discussed in the news article.

5.2. Reframing: “‘They’ are deceptive, ‘you’ are stupid” (US & KOREA)

Another theme saw audiences directing attention to problems in the candidates’ political communication as well as news media coverage. Generally, this frame appeared as criticism of the initial framing efforts of political entities (e.g., candidates, publicists, political parties, etc.) and the news media. Audiences recognized salient frames from the candidates or news media and sought interpret the messages as deceptive efforts that

were problematic for how public opinion is shaped. Such reframing efforts were visible in more than one-thirds of the comments (71 out of 180) that were analyzed.

This frame appeared frequently as part of an effort to discredit the opposing candidate. For instance, after the second Presidential Debate in the U.S., many headlines featured a quote from Mitt Romney that potentially was derogative toward women. In responding to a question about his take on hiring more women for his cabinet, he used the term “binders full of women” to describe how he was able to garner many women applicants. Slipped tongue or not, he was highly criticized by commenters (Estes, 2012). However, this frame did more than downright criticize him for the quote. “Top” comments refuted the point Romney was trying to make, which was that he had put much effort into hiring more women. In the three stories in the sample that featured Romney’s story, some comments included: “Y’all are not getting the facts straight. He never really hired more women. He was lying and making an offensive comment all at the same time”; “Mitt Romney is such a liar. Factcheck.org says that the whole more women in his cabinet thing is not a fact”; “Stop talking about binders full of women... What’s more important is that he was lying when he said this.” As these comments show, audiences emphasized the credibility (or lack thereof) regarding what Romney was saying. Other “top” comments were still making fun of Romney’s response and using wordplay or jokes to demean him, but ones that featured this reframed idea were more deliberately focused on pointing out the bigger problem that Romney had. What these comments say is that aside from being a man with a problematic attitude toward women, he was deceitful in the first place, in front of the whole nation. Commenters found fault on this fundamental issue and reframed the story to be about a “deceptive candidate.”

This was also prominent in Korean comments. Whenever the three candidates made a strong public comment about an issue, some “top” comments questioned the credibility of those comments, some even providing counterevidence to prove that the candidate was lying. When Park denied ties to corruption, the “top” comments included: “She is deceptive. She just thinks this whole problem is going to go away if she denies is often enough” and “I am so sick of her lies. She headed the organization for several years!” Ahn Chul-soo made statements about his vision to make the country a better place to live for the middle class. A “top” comment mentioned that his daughter, who studied in the U.S., had lived in luxury apartments in Palo Alto and Philadelphia. The comment criticized him for being of “the most privileged upper class” who is just saying these things about the middle class to “ring up” votes (Y. Choi, 2012). On an article about Moon’s press conference after Ahn withdrew from the elections where Moon paid reverence to Ahn, “top” comments mentioned “He’s full of bull****. Everyone knows that he was criticizing Ahn so much until just yesterday” or “Here comes Moon again with his media play.” Media play is a term used by Korean audiences to refer to how politicians publicize themselves in a positive light by getting journalists to write favorable stories about them. As seen in the examples, deceit and discrepancy in the candidates’ words and actions became target of extensive criticism.

This frame additionally criticized deceptive manipulation (or the attempt to do so) at the political party level. As was the case throughout history (Jang, 2013), the two countries’ election landscape was sharply divided in terms of liberal vs. conservative partisanship, and this resulted in the elections itself becoming a battlefield for political communication campaigns of two ideologically loaded political parties. Audiences, too,

viewed the candidates as epitome of each political party: Obama / Moon were from liberal parties, and Romney / Park were candidates for the conservative parties.

Therefore, the interpretive frames for how each candidate exploited audiences through media participation were expanded to the political parties. For instance, several examples used of the term “Democrats” and “Republicans” when referring to issues regarding each candidate. At times, some comments used terms such as “rich conservatives” or “socialists” to denounce ideological backgrounds of each political party.

In Korea, this was even more conspicuous with name-calling of each political party or ideological tendencies. For instance, the liberal/progressive political party in Korea was frequently referred to as “communists” highlighting their liberal stance toward the communist North Korea. On the other hand, the conservatives were called “reactionary fools” who did not and could not accept change. As a result, persuasive political communication tactics from either group were suspect to deceptive motives that spanned beyond the election or candidates. Once remarks from candidates were deemed to be ideologically loaded, commenters took issue with the whole of politics and how political groups constantly seek to manipulate the public to sway public opinion.

News media were also a target of audiences’ reframing of the deceptive “they.” For both countries, news media or reporters were framed as the most significant entity that mislead the public or plainly do a bad job at providing a valuable angle on the news topic. “Top” comments such as, “do you really believe everything the media tells you?” were commonly visible in both websites from each country. Such comments were posted on news stories with a wide scope of topics. In the U.S., a news story highlighted New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s sudden support of Obama after Hurricane Sandy (Staff,

2012b). A “top” comment criticized the media, saying, “Even the headline is misleading. The media is trying so hard to see Obama win.” Looking further into the news topic, on a story that speculates that Obama will eventually win the presidency with the help of Hurricane Sandy, a “top” comment noted that all the coverage regarding the impact of Sandy on the presidential race grabs the public’s attention away from controversial issues about Obama: “The hurricane is helping Obama, in that its distracting from the even more disturbing videos that have surfaced, about the Benghazi attacks...the Obama administration flat out lied to the American peoples faces, CBS didn't air the interview...” These comments suggested that media’s framing of Obama should have focused on the controversial actions of the U.S. Armed Forces in Libya, and to stop focusing on the hurricane’s positive effect on Obama’s ticket. The comment mentions how the TV network CBS omits vital interviews to deceive the public and sway public opinion.

As mentioned above, an important aspect of this frame was also to criticize the media for not doing their job right. On the same article, the most “liked” comment was: “A lazy, ‘what if’ article.” This comment received more than 1,500 “likes,” which implies that problematizing the news media’s coverage was a highly agreeable frame. Audiences pointed fingers at the media and associated them back with the politicians, as can be seen in a “top” comment that stated, “Dems [Democrats] must be desperate to get this out” on a news story that predicted Obama’s successful candidacy (Miller-Farr, 2012). To the commenters, news stories attempting to frame one candidate as the eventual winner or leader were considered to be manipulation on the part of the media and politicians.

Similar frames were used in Korean “top” comments. In particular, “top” comments questioned the integrity of news media in covering the candidates. Emphasizing how some news outlets are ideologically biased, they were called “pamphlets” as though they were tools for political propaganda. Many conservative newspapers are operated by conglomerates (Korean term *jaebol*) who have had a close relationship with politically and economically powerful entities in Korean society, whereas many liberal newspapers were founded during the democratization movement in the 1980s that were reactionary to the same politically and economically powerful entities (Kwak, 2005). On nate.com, stories from a wide variety of news publications were presented—among them, conservative publications such as the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *Joong Ang Daily*, *New Daily*, and *Dailian* were all labeled as “pamphlets” or “instruments” for the Grand National Party (GNP), the conservative political party in Korea. On the other hand, liberal media organizations such as *Hankyoreh*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, *Sisain*, and *Pressian* were called highly progressive and identified as being a North Korea-friendly organization, just as the Democratic Party was accused of being. These comments consistently reframed the topic at hand to be about the incapability of the news media to provide meaningful and unbiased coverage, but only attempt to manipulate the public with their ideologically loaded agendas.

Such reframing of the audience seems to show an overall dissatisfaction with or distrust of the news media. Disbelief and criticism toward media and politicians are seemingly grounded in the media’s alleged lack of credibility (Druckman, 2001; S. J. Oh, 2008). The “top” comments demonstrated this perception of audiences through frequently used terms such as “bias,” “manipulation,” “unfair,” “deceptive,” “not credible,” and

“agenda.” By making the interpretation of the story about how the communicators of information are doing a bad job, these “top” comments raised problems for the role of journalism and political entities in the public sphere.

Lastly, the identification of deceptive framing practice led to comments criticizing the public for being susceptible to such messages. For instance, after ousting the media for trying to manipulate people’s points of view, “top” comments condemned the audiences, as shown in the following examples:

- “How can you believe this kind of nonsense?” (Korea);
- “How come I see others being affected by this kind of a message that’s just like an ostrich burying its head in the sand?” (Korea);
- “[Names another commenter] You are a joke to believe what they say” (U.S.);
- “Come on people, how stupid are you?” (U.S.)

This theme was distinctively different from the first theme (And the winner is...) because it does not seek to sway opinions but merely point out a problem. However, in some cases a “top” comment found fault with the news story (“this story is just another roo-ra shoutout for Obama that does not give you anything important or meaningful about the elections...”), calls others gullible for believing the story (“... how dumb they think people are amazes me, and even more when I see people taking stories like this for granted...”), and calls for a need to rectify this problem (“... SO STOP THIS. ALL OF YOU”). In this case, the dissatisfied commenter wished for something to be done about the deception from media/politicians and bemoaned how people believe these alleged propaganda stories without doubt. By calling others stupid or inferior, this comment framing implies that the “liked” comments are the ones that point out the truth and safeguard the public from any attempts to hinder deliberation for public opinion. On the

other hand, these “top” comments also show that people tend to believe strongly that the self is not susceptible to media messages as much as others (Chung & Kim, 2006).

A significant trend shown in this kind of framing was that comments usually referred back to the immediate topic at hand and the frames used in the stories. This was a noticeably different from comments not closely related to the topic or information being discussed in the news stories. That is, the comments functioned by within the framework of the news story. However, when it came to accusing the news media and political parities for being deceptive, the commenters did not provide much evidence. Moreover, this frame did not provide solutions, but were more focused towards raising issues. The emergence of this frame (“They are deceptive, you are stupid”) was equally dominant in both countries.

5.3. Reframing: “There is more to the story that we ought to know” (US)

Contrary to the previous theme of audience reframing that put the originators of communication (news media, political entities) in negative light, some “top” comments provided more information and/or context regarding the news topic. In particular, this type of framing generally acknowledged the content of the news reporting and interpreted the media’s frame or topic of the story as worthy of further discussion. In other words, rather than find fault with the media’s coverage or politicians who are a part of the story, audiences extended the existing frames or introduced new frames that would be helpful for understanding the story. This type of “reframing” appeared in nearly twenty percent (33 out of 180) of the “top” comments analyzed.

Providing comparisons or a frame of reference was a popular way to engage in this kind of framing. For instance, in news stories about topics related to the voting process (e.g., early voting, election day procedures), some “top” comments provided firsthand accounts of what they had experienced in different parts of the country. U.S. news articles covering early voting in Ohio (Sanner, 2012) and Florida (Fineout, 2012) saw “top” comments that shared experiences in other states such as New Jersey or Georgia:

- “I work and I really appreciate early voting in Georgia...it helps me avoid long lines, get home to my children.. So I see no problem with it.. I have a long commute to work and home... Having the opportunity to vote on Sat. is a blessing...”
- “#\$\$\$? here in NJ, I have never had a wait for more than 10 minutes. If they have that many people in line, then need more machines or more polling places!”

Sharing experiences from around the country, these comments reframed the story into a discussion of unequal voting conditions in different states. Furthermore, a “top” comment provided information about how early voting is conducted in the military, letting the public know that different types of voting procedures and timeframes exist (“Be sure to count ALL THE MILITARY VOTES too...”). This comment also mentioned that citizens who do not know or care about early voting should do so because they indicate public opinion and could be important if the procedures are not transparent and common all around (“...A vote is a vote whether it's cast the day of the election or 3 days before. Your voice matters. VOTE GET OUT AND VOTE.”)

Similar albeit fewer examples were found in Korea. Because a significant number of voters are in the armed forces due to mandatory service (Korean men must serve in the military for two years), the media always covers issues regarding early voting/remote

voting by. These stories receive a lot of comments that share their own experiences in different areas, and even comparing the current situation with what it was like in the past. For instance, “top” written by former soldiers compared 2012 with earlier elections in 2007, 2002 or even 1997. Some stated that the whole process has improved greatly (“It’s a huge improvement from when I was a soldier”), but others also mentioned that the same things were happening in past elections and these problems need to be fixed for the elections to be truly democratic (“No surprise that early voting for our soldiers is shady... Again.”).

This specific story type and comment framing show that the public as a collective make meaning of the topic: early voting, recognize the importance of this step in the election process, and provide information they believe are useful to others so that voting citizens are better informed about various aspects of the election. Needless to say, presidential elections are for the whole country, and sometimes the local issues may go unnoticed or are treated as less important. However, the commenters highlighted how these seemingly isolated issues could be essential pieces of the whole.

In other cases, contexts (mostly historical, but at times social or economic) were provided about the story so as to ease the process of interpreting the story. In doing so, the comments also made meaning of the main media frames and either reframed or extended them. This occurred especially frequently when candidates’ past actions were discussed. For instance, on articles about Ahn Chul-soo’s accomplishments as CEO of an IT company and his plans to increase jobs (Kang, 2012), “top” comments provided examples of his accomplishments over time that were not mentioned or only briefly in the news story. These comments were used both for supporting or rejecting the candidate.

For instance, some comments referred to anecdotes from the past that prove Ahn's diligence and morality as a businessman to laud him, but others also mentioned Ahn's involvement with certain groups and commissions in the past to criticize him for being pro-conglomerate.

The researcher believes that these extended frames to the story were not always useful for the public's reaching conclusions or applying them to discussion. This was because most of these additional pieces of information / interpretive frames offered by the comments were too specific to be considered meaningful context. Many of these "top" comments provided no further explanation for why the additional frame or diverting attention to a new frame was important. For example, on a story about alleged bombs planted in front of a Florida early-voting station (Pfeiffer, 2012), a "top" comment asked, "Why does Florida always seem to have problems with votes/elections and prosecuting criminals?" This comment could be categorized under this theme because it frames the issue of a potential terrorist attack at a voting station into a question that raises (ambiguous) questions about the state of Florida. No explanations or further statements helped others understand the central idea. Whether the commenter wanted to criticize Florida, or was asking the question out of sincere curiosity is impossible to know. Also, no evidence was provided, or a clear reason for why he or she believes if this is the case for Florida. Finally, no supporting ideas discuss why Florida seems to be a problem. These are all necessary components of the audiences' reframing to be effective, which were frequently absent in "top" comments showing this theme.

Efforts to provide more context to the story were far more prevalent in U.S. comments. Audiences' presentation of links or other stats pertaining to the topic matter

were also more frequent in the U.S. Number of “top” comments employing this frame nearly tripled (24 to 9) the number in Korean comments. This may illustrate a significant difference in online commenting culture between the two countries.

5.4. Strategy: Encouraging action – “Approve my disapproval” (US & KOREA)

Some “top” comments offered rhetorical strategies for effective presentation. As noted above, this research considers frames to hold rhetorical characteristics—from the commenters’ perspective, their framing of comments are efforts to persuade others in the audience to accept the meaning made in their comments. This framing strategy was found in over a third of the “top” comments analyzed (61 out of 180).

The most common theme in this regard was to solicit agreement/approval about the commenter’s dissatisfaction. Their dissatisfaction was targeted towards presidential candidates, current president (in the U.S. case, candidate and president Obama), government, news media, and other commenters. In these comments, question marks and rhetorical language were used often. Some examples encouraging others to agree with the comment included:

- “Who else thinks Romney needs to be forbidden to speak again?” (U.S.)
- “This is all because of the President Lee and his corruption. Would you really want to vote for the same old party again?” (Korea)
- “Many people believe the government should be doing a better job with immigration laws, no?” (U.S.).

As shown in these “top” comments, they are written as rhetorical questions to solicit responses from others. This framing strategy accomplishes two things: 1) It implies that the meaning conveyed through the comment is significant and ought to be agreed upon by the public; and 2) it frames the issue at hand as a problem that requires action from the

audience. By framing the commenter's disapproval as a topic that ought to be acknowledged by others, criticism toward the candidate receives salience and thus can be perpetuated. The third "top" comment above exemplifies these aspects: By suggesting that the idea in the comment is popularly believed, the comment's interpretation of the administration's performance regarding immigration laws is made significant.

Furthermore, framing the comment with a conclusive question encourages responses from audiences. That is, the commenter's framing of the issue calls for both changes in perception and some sort of action.

The most dominantly sought type of action in the "top" comments was approval from audiences, solicited to be in two main forms: "likes" and sub-comments. Consider these "top" comments:

- "Does anyone believe this crap from the media? Press "like" if you think this news publication is useless." (Korea)
- "What is wrong with Hy**** (ID of another user) and his extremist points of views? "Like" this comment to show Hy**** what's up!" (Korea).

They include the rhetorical tactics (posing questions) as seen in previous examples, but these comments also explicitly ask for other viewers to "like" the comment. Requesting this specific behavioral response is intended to perpetuate the comments' frame because when others respond to the original comment and/or "like" the comment, the comment moves up and becomes the "top" comment. In addition to framing the comments as criticism toward news media or another user, these commenters are able to strengthen the popularity of his/her idea.

As mentioned above, posts that encouraged actions from others in the audience were confined to the commenting forum. For example, very few (three) "top" comments encouraged actions of approval in real life, such as mobilizing, voting or going out to find

out more information about the candidate. These encouragements for action mainly remained at asking for people to share the same perspective, or at most write a sub-comment or press the “like” button. This shows expectations of what others might or might not do as a result of reading one’s comment. Seemingly, repeated experiences on the online commenting systems have enabled the commenter to know what kind of cognitive or behavioral changes should be sought.

Second, almost all of the pertinent examples of this frame illustrated the commenter’s disapproval. In other words, this rhetorical frame was not used to garner agreement that supported an idea or candidate. With only few exceptions, these rhetorical questions were mostly used to criticize. As a “top” comment stated, “In my life I’ve never asked someone to support my candidate but I know to ask for collective criticism for the bad candidates”; seeking for support of one’s negativity was the dominant phenomenon.

Third, encouraged action did not call for meaningful deliberation processes, but were used mainly to perpetuate the salience of immediate frames introduced in the comment. As shown above, Korean commentators explicitly requested “likes” from others in the audience. This finding suggests, similar to the second aspect, that audiences have their own understanding of how the commenting forum works and what the most effective ways are to garner approval for their points of views.

Lastly, a finding specific to Korean comments was that relatable contexts or additional information were rarely provided in the comment. Unlike the findings for other themes, the “top” comments belonging in this *Encouraging action category* were considerably different from other “top” comments. Instead of adding something valuable

to the conversation, the focus of these comments was disapproval (mostly blunt) about the topic. Commenters' dissatisfaction had to do with a component or frame that was in the news story, but other than recognizing and incorporating the topic matter into the comment, these examples did not pursue additional discussion. This was contradictory to the fact that many of these comments solicited sub-comments, because sub-comments underneath a "top" comment naturally form a discussion. In almost no cases was the original commenter taking part in the sub-comments of the story. Only twice did the "top" commenter respond to some sub-comments in the forum, but the original commenter never referred back to the main theme of his/her frame (disapproval) and strategy (soliciting agreement). Sub-comments from the original commenter were rather in conversational language and referred only to funny or provocative sub-comments that did not have anything to do with the original comment's expressing disapproval.

Overall, similar numbers of comments (35 for Korea, 27 for U.S.) in both countries employed such framing tactics and encouraged some sort of action from other online audiences. However, solicitation for "likes" showed up only in Korean examples. Meanwhile far more U.S. comments asked for others to speak out and discuss via sub-comments.

5.5. Strategy: Shutting down the opposition (US & KOREA)

Another framing strategy often used (58 of 180) in "top" comments was to attack the opposing viewpoints, by making criticism of the opposition the most salient frame. Subject to this criticism ranged from individuals (politicians, reporters, commenters) and groups (political parties, news organizations, activist groups, users of specific websites)

to ideologies/perspectives (liberal vs. conservative agendas on various issues). Examples from comments in both websites showed the framing of criticism of the opposition. An example from Korea was found in collective criticism regarding one commenter. In addition to the comment about the user Hy**** that was shown above, the other two “top” comments for the story also discussed this user. Hy**** had commented, “Praise Park and his father, who is like our own father and saved this country!” The commenter was referring to the despotic leader Park Chung-hee, the father of Park Geun-hye. Commenters did not receive this well. Hy**** received more than 1,000 “dislikes.” Sub-comments even hinted that audiences saw Hy**** to be an extremist conservative who might trade freedom and democracy for economic opulence, making a reference to how Park (the father) oppressed the rights of people to implement his plans to industrialize the country. The other two “top” comments said:

- “It is people like you, Hy****, that will mess up this country. How can you believe that the crazy, complex-ridden dictator was actually good for this country? People shouldn’t listen to you.”
- “Just... Shut up, Hy****.”

The news article itself was not even about the Park father and daughter—it summarized the first Presidential Debate (YTN, 2012). So these comments including Hy****’s were taken out of context. In fact, the “top” comments appeared only as a result of the extremist comment from Hy****. Majority of comments on the story did not discuss the debate but directed anger and criticism toward Hy****. These comments showed that checking on the opposing (or undesired) viewpoint and shutting it down was of priority to commenters. One of the first three to respond to Hy**** with strong language were the ones that received the most “likes” and ended up being “top” comments.

Similarly, some comments attacked certain groups of people. For instance, an article about gun control-related policies (Espo & Benac, 2012) drew two contrasting “top” comments:

- “... NRA’s lobbying politicians is what lets this go on. Those sick bastards.”
- “Murder is illegal, punishable by life in prison, or death in some states. Did this factor deter the shooter? How would another gun control law stop him then?”

The first “top” comment condemned the NRA and politicians’ ties to the organization. On the other hand, the second “top” comment criticized the Obama administration’s efforts to increase gun control; this comment was responding to the story, which was covered government not getting enough supporters for his plan for gun control.

Similarly, Korean commenters showed that both political parties were the subjects of attack.

- “The GNP never explains themselves even when there are thousands questioning their integrity.”
- “The Democratic Party is such a stuck-up group. They always raise issues and controversy... Always, about anything.”

Both criticize, the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) for bad communicative efforts and the Democratic Party for stubbornness and lack of conciliation efforts. The news story was about the second presidential debate (S. Lee, 2012) and contained frames that characterized each political party. Audiences acknowledged and responded to an attribute of the media’s frames (e.g., gun control debate, political party behavior), but took the commenting opportunity for the sole purpose of criticizing social or political groups. They criticized the political parties without providing context or providing additional information about the accusations.

These frames were also directed toward ideologies (or people in general holding those ideologies). The following “top” comments illustrate this well:

- “Those so-called liberals need to shut up. They are always about trying to take our tax money.” (U.S.)
- “Sigh... There are things you can do and can’t do, even on the web... What kind of behavior is this? You should be ashamed of yourselves” (Korea)
- “But you know what they are going to do? They’re just going to go back to being rich and not giving a f***.” (U.S.)
- “All ‘progressive’ politicians do is to insist on something. Insist, insist, insist...” (Korea).

Commenters are pointing fingers at an undetermined portion of the public who hold viewpoints opposite to the theirs. As the first comment stated explicitly, these framing efforts are essentially trying to “shut up” the opposition through criticism so that disputing arguments would not even be possible.

In order to accomplish this, name-calling or attributing highly negative notions to object of criticism were used. For instance, Obama was constantly associated with the term “socialist” for his stance on healthcare and taxation for the rich. Romney was called a “snob” or a “wishy-washy person,” probably due to his affluent background and his constantly changing position, as well as his controversial “47 percent” statement (he had mentioned that no matter what, 47 percent of voters will vote for Obama, hinting they are incompetent citizens who depend on the promises Obama made to provide healthcare, food, housing, etc.).

In Korea, Park was consistently framed as “the dictator’s daughter” or “notepad princess.” The latter name-calling derives from Park’s habit of carrying a small notepad. Accusers seemed to think she was reading from a script she had written in it. Combined with the fact that she didn’t seem to be knowledgeable about various aspects of public affairs, commenters implied that she is a princess who grew up in the Blue House

(Korea's equivalent to the White House) and knows nothing about the things a president has to face. On the other hand, Moon was called "red" or "commie" because his progressive party has been lenient to North Korea. These derogative words appeared in a main reframing theme in section 5.2 *"Reframing: 'They' are deceptive, 'you' are stupid."* Indeed, *shutting down the opposition* was a recurring strategy for this frame, perhaps due to its critical nature. Such overlapping themes are discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.

This framing strategy was different from the others discussed above because the main interpretive field of meaning was not about *what the commenter believes* but *what the commenter hates*. Moreover, unlike other main framing themes where the deceitful motives of media/politicians were questioned or additional information/context were given, this specific strategy did not provide criticism in the context of some substantive issue. That is, if the former attempted to enlighten or inform audiences of wrongful information in coverage, the latter merely took an undesirable (to the commenter) target and downplayed it. This framing strategy contained no larger principle or desired state of public opinion but instead only ostracizing and castigation.

With name-calling and shutting down the opposition, which are known to be effective propaganda techniques (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012), the comments arguably sought to dominate the online public discourse. Media framing literature posits that framing strategies are used by the media (communicator) to compete in an arena of multiple framing efforts (Druckman, 2001). Similarly, these comments aim to dictate the online conversation. Under circumstances where dominance in discussion translates into

impacting public opinion and further into influencing the outcome of the elections, such framing strategies were recurring in the conversation.

5.6. Other notable findings

Audiences' framing and reframing strategies were sometimes combined. For instance, comments that strongly favored one candidate to be a winner also tried to shut down the opposition. Illustrating this combination were the following comments:

- “There is every reason to believe that Moon and the liberal agenda is finally going to win this time, because we are all better informed. Anyone who is informed will not dare say that Park will be an adequate president for this country.” (Korea)
- “Whatever you might say, I think Romney is ready to be president and will win. If you are going to criticize me, stop for a second and think about what you want to say. Are those things really what you think will benefit this country?” (U.S.)

Moreover, some “top” comments showed characteristics that could be categorized as one of main themes above, but did not fit any category perfectly. For example, dissatisfaction was not the only value judgment for which the “top” comment was seeking approval. In the following “top” comment actions of “like” and “dislike” are both sought:

- “I’m a Moon supporter, but I just want to know what the people think. Press “like” if you think Moon is going to win, and “dislike” if you think Park is going to win.”

In addition, the commenter also mentions that he/she is a supporter of one specific candidate. By including this frame in the comment, the commenter is looking to acquire agreement for his/her approval of the candidate, not disapproval.

Also, comments provided additional information not necessarily related to the main frames of the story. These comments provided in-depth information about a topic

relevant to the elections overall, but not to the specific story or discussion. For example, some “top” comments in both websites listed things that a candidate did or did not do (e.g., did not sign a certain bill in congress, vowed support for certain groups/causes, etc.). They were used either to support or reject the candidate on the grounds of the information given. This kind of “top” comment appeared, in verbatim in some cases, in more than one story. The researcher assumes these kinds of issue-reframing seek to spread information above all else, regardless of story. That is, these commenters use news story commenting boards as opportunities to disseminate ideas. Continuity in news discourse from reporter to audiences was halted—completely new frames took over the commenting forum with the help of “likes.” While this phenomenon did not occur as frequently and was not categorized separately in the findings above, it was commonly seen in both websites.

Similar to the “you are stupid” frame discussed above, some “top” comments framed the commenter as a wiser and desirable citizen in comparison to the rest of the audience. These “top” commentators usually stated how they were dissatisfied with the quality of discussion in the websites:

- “These comments make me sick. I should have never come to Yahoo.” (U.S.)
- “I am a well-educated who knows what’s up. People need to do their research before commenting because I am tired of looking at them.” (Korea)

By distancing the self from the rest of the group, these commenters are implying that they are better than the rest. Arguably the effort to frame *Yahoo! News* or nate.com as undesirable news websites is also present. However, the commenter is referring to the quality of other comments, not the news article. By rejecting audiences’ discourse in the news website community, the commenters confer higher status upon themselves. The issue is that the commenters contradict themselves in that they are still making the effort

to stay in the conversation and leave a comment. Also, no context or additional discussion was offered regarding how such framing (the inferiority of the mass) matters to the online discussion. Above all, the fact that these comments received many “likes” and became “top” comments is a notable phenomenon. On the other hand, these types of frames in comments also received more “dislikes” than others. To interpret whether this is merely an expression of dissatisfaction or representing a self-criticism culture of audiences on the quality of deliberation was not possible.

For some “top” comments, the framing strategy could be categorized as simply begging for “likes.” To elaborate, these “top” comments explicitly asked for others to “like” their comment; the framing of the comment was toward the necessity or rationale for the comments’ receiving “likes.” Unlike similar-type comments that take polls with the “like” and “dislike” buttons, these comments only scarcely provided information that could be used for public deliberation. In most cases, the comments did not have much to even do with the election, as seen in the following “top” comments:

- “Click on this link to see the controversial photo of Park at the National Assembly... When people share things like this, they become “top” comments, right?” (Korea)
- “Today I am being enlisted in the army for my duties... Can you please press “like” for me on this day? It will be a dream come true.” (Korea)
- “I predict that I will be a “top” commenter at the end of the day.” (Korea)

With the exception of maybe the first comment, they provide no information about the elections. Plus, the link in the first comment led to a page with photos of Park at National Assembly slacking off and showing boredom at the National Assembly (the original link is broken, but a similar image can be found here: <http://goo.gl/KFuAt0>) It could be an image questioning her work ethic, but considering that many politicians are subject of online humor via images (or internet memes), it wasn’t quite what the commenter

advertised. The other two comments explicitly asked for “likes,” citing reasons that had nothing to do with the topic. Therefore, what these comments solicited or signified probably could not even be called frames. However, the fact that these types of comments were occasionally visible in the material was worthy of reporting. Notably, this theme only appeared in the Korean website. Perhaps Koreans are more obsessed with having their comments “liked.”

The greater desire for “likes” and “top” comments for Korean audiences is also indicated in other comments objecting to this desire.. Three “top” comments asked commenters to stop soliciting “likes” or manipulating “likes.” By manipulating “likes,” these comments were referring to the act of increasing “likes” via some unjust activity (e.g., getting offline friends or accomplices to find the comment and “like”—sometimes even accused of increasing “likes” for monetary purposes, by receiving money from the political parties to do so). These comments and the “likes” they received also provided a glimpse into audiences’ perceptions of Korean digital culture, which included an unreasonable desire toward receiving “likes.” Such criticisms were even more saliently visible in sub-comments, which is discussed further in *Chapter 6* as “dislikability” factors.

5.7. Summary

A total of thirty most commented news stories were selected from each website and three “top” comments from each story. As a result, 180 “top” comments (90 from each country’s website) were analyzed. In the framing analysis, the researcher looked for salient themes in the comments that either 1) reframed the meaning or frame of interpretation provided in the news article or 2) employed framing strategies for

functioning in the online conversation. For the former, the analysis focused mostly on how the commenter received meaning and then how this receptive position was expressed. For the latter, the researcher focused on rhetoric and other strategies that aided the significance of the comment in the online commenting discussions.

Three main themes emerged in how “top” comments reframed news coverage of the presidential elections. First, “top” comments showed a tendency to *declare the winner of the election* at that point of the campaign. Regardless of when the comment was written, many examples reframed news stories and signified only the end result—who will win. Advocacy and support for a candidate was a major factor for these frames. This type of reframing occurred most frequently among all cases, and in both U.S. and Korea.

Second, “top” comments *questioned the deceptive nature* of the originators of communication (news media, politicians) and *criticized the public* for being gullible. These comments identified the media framing in the news stories, recognized the deception and manipulation that were motives of such framing, and expressed concern/frustration for how the public seemed to be accepting those frames without resistance. For refuting the deceptive framing of the socially powerful that was inherent in the news stories, these comments provided information showing counterevidence or problematic aspects in the stories. Such reframing in the “top” comments appeared in both U.S. and Korea as well.

Third, comments tried to *provide additional frames to the existing coverage* that shed light on other important relevant aspects. This was different from the second theme because these comments did not necessarily criticize the media or audiences for being deceptive or easily manipulated. Rather, the comments focused attention on properly

informing others in the public so as to enhance the quality of discussion in the online commenting board. Such an “introduction to a new frame” was accomplished with detailed facts or carefully articulated arguments as opposed to showing offensive or extreme language. Generally, this framing theme was found more in U.S. “top” comments.

Fourth, a framing strategy that *sought behavioral responses* from audiences that would support the ideas set forth in the comment. These comments mostly presented ideas that were negative toward candidates, political groups and ideas, and asked for others to support the negative assessment. As a result, these comments were structured so that strong, negative remarks about the subject of criticism were mentioned and then some solicitation for behavioral support (“likes,” comments) was made. This was a strategy that utilized the specific characteristics of online commenting systems where responsive actions from the public were only visible through “like” voting or sub-comments. Instead of asking for changes in perception or posing a rhetorical question, these comments specifically encouraged action that would be tangible evidence in the online sphere. Both U.S. and Korean comments showed this framing strategy.

Fifth, as a strategy that would perpetuate the commenter’s frames (both implicit and explicit) in the online debate, “top” comments attempted to *shut down the opposition*. Notably, a conspicuous statement or question was always used to justify how the opposing perspective was unacceptable, no matter how plausible the opposition sounded. This element suggests that the focus was shutting down the opposition. In these comments, promoting one’s own ideas was secondary, similar to propaganda techniques and debate strategies. This strategy appeared in both U.S. and Korea.

One less salient yet still noteworthy theme involved providing additional information to the discussion but that was *decontextualized from the news story*, or sometime even the elections itself (U.S. & Korea). Also, some other “top” comments’ frames focused on *conferring superior status to the commenter* (U.S. & Korea). By expressing dissatisfaction about the quality of comments (not news stories or the performance of candidates), these users distanced themselves from the public debate and made complaints. Some “top” comments in Korea simply *begged for “likes.”* In most cases these comments had nothing to do with the story or topic. However, they did receive a significant number of “likes” and thus became “top” comments. Lastly, a small number of comments combined the above or failed to matching the category perfectly. Most “top” comments in both countries recognized the media frames and employed them in the comments. Exceptions occurred in relatively less frequent cases where decontextualization, or deviation from the original news coverage, was apparent for the purpose of introducing a completely new frame. Therefore, from the public sphere’s perspective, most of the “top” comments were a relevant part of the deliberation for public opinion.

The frames or strategies in “top” comments were common for the two countries as shown above. Exceptions were visible in that for the U.S., more comments provided information and context; for Korea, more comments focused on the “like” feature in the online commenting board. The researcher interprets this to possibly mean that the U.S. audiences prioritize the value of *content* and the Korean audiences the utilization of the *system or feature*). Korean “top” comments seemingly held a higher level of desire, or explicit interest, for receiving “likes.” In contrast, U.S. comments did not explicitly

express as much preference for receiving “likes.” Also, Korean comments overall had more persuasive and rhetorical language in the comments that were discernible. These differences, although not significant, do illustrate that “top” comment framing in the two countries may have been influenced by cultural characteristics. Whether findings about intercultural differences in attitudes toward “likes” are indeed accurate is further investigated with results from other methods.

CHAPTER 6. FINDINGS ON “LIKES”

This chapter provides findings garnered from the analyses of sub-comments left under “top” comments and the chronological order of a comment and the probability of it receiving more “likes.” These two analyses illustrate factors that may result in a comment receiving more “likes.” In the analysis of sub-comments, “likability” and “dislikability” factors are drawn based on the responses by sub-commenters that express why they “liked” or “disliked” a comment. Ranking comparison analysis through the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test operationalized *chronological order* as the rank for each comment based on the amount of time between a news story was published and the comment was posted, and compares this variable with the number of “likes” received by each comment.

6.1. Analysis of sub-comments

RQ2: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea regarding themes of “likability” / “dislikability” emerging from comments about “top” comments for most commented news stories during the 2012 presidential elections?

As an extension of the analysis of “top” comments, five sub-comments from each of the 180 “top” comments were analyzed to identify any “likability” or “dislikability” themes (N=866, as discussed in *Chapter 4*). As mentioned above, this analysis looked at indications from sub-comments as to why the user “liked” or “disliked” the “top” comment. This analysis looked for how sub-commenters perceived the frames or framing strategies in the “top” comments and what meanings were accepted, if any. Because sub-comments were shorter than original “top” comments on average and do not hold as much text, full range of frames for comparison was not feasible. Therefore, this framing analysis focused on terms and phrases that indicated if and why the sub-commenter

“liked” or “disliked” the comment. In other words, the search for frames in the text prioritized sub-comment framing that discussed the motives of the user implying their attitudes toward the “top” comment. Such framing included satisfaction, dissatisfaction, agreement, disagreement, approval, disapproval, acknowledgement, rejection, criticism, evaluation, and potentially, negotiation (reframing). These findings were used as indicators for “likability” or “dislikability” depending on the direction of valence and organized and categorized together again as emerging themes, or factors. Findings were drawn and synthesized from each country for comparisons of commonly visible “likability” or “dislikability” factors.

6.1.1. “Likability”: Humor (U.S. & KOREA)

A highly visible theme in sub-comments that indicated “likability” was preference for humor. Out of the 866 sub-comments analyzed, nearly half (415) mentioned humor, often through explicit language/emoticons that indicated laughter. In U.S. comments, the words “lol” (laugh out loud) or “rofl” (rolling on the floor laughing) were used. These are widely used internet terms that indicate laughter. In Korean comments, string of characters such as “ㅋㅋㅋ” and “ㅎㅎㅎ” were used frequently in various adaptations. These characters are consonants in the Korean language that illustrate the sound of laughter, “kukuku” or “hahaha” (there doesn’t seem to be a limit to the number of times the characters are used). The former is used more in Korean internet language.

One notable difference for Korea is that the characters are used very frequently as almost a habitual string that follows a comment. For instance, a comment would say, “I want to learn more about this issue” and follow with the “ㅋㅋㅋ.” In this case, laughter

was included, but was not to be taken literally to mean that it was a response to humor. Also, sarcastic laughter was expressed with these same characters: “Are you saying that Park will be a good president? Really? ㅋㅋㅋㅋ.” Unlike in the English internet language, where ‘lol’ or ‘rofl’ more or less refer to genuine laughter, the Korean language has adopted ‘ㅋㅋ’ to mean many different things, including the abovementioned sarcasm or as place fillers. These subtle particulars were taken into account when analyzing the Korean comments. Even so, the number of comments expressing real response to humor was significant.

Implicitly, sub-commenters illustrated that humor was a factor for their “liking” by acknowledging or responding to the humor in the “top” comment. Even without the apparent expressions, these comments illustrated recognition of the humor and amusement as a result. On a *Yahoo! News* story (Estes, 2012) covering the aftermath of the second Presidential Debate (where Romney had the “binders full of women” blunder), a “top” comment said, “There are too many women here commenting. Get back in your binders!” To this, sub-comments had explicit reactions such as “lol” or “That made my day. Thanks!” However, one sub-comment said, “But you see, the binder is already full with Romney’s women. There’s no room.” This sub-comment shows why one can conclude that humor was the main “likability” factor. The sub-comment understood the application of the sarcastic frame in the joke (making fun of how Romney spoke as if women could be materialized or treated like pieces of paper) and responded with additional play off of the term “full” used in Romney’s comment.

In Korea, a joke demeaning a candidate was received similarly. On an article that showed Park Geun-hye holding her smartphone upside-down (J. Lee, 2012), a “top”

comment wrote, “Her notepad probably doesn’t have instructions on how to use a smartphone.” The joke referred to the well-known claim that Park relied on her notepad for every single thing she does, framing her as incompetent. A sub-comment said, “She might even be holding her notepad upside-down.” This sub-comment continues to accept the main frame of the “top” comment and the joke about Park’s alleged ignorance. By hinting that she might even use her trusted notepad wrong, this sub-comment extends the joke; at the same time, sub-comment apparently showed that the humor in the joke was what made the frame more effective.

Scholars have found that humorous messages was useful in public discourse regarding the elections (Shifman et al., 2007). This is aligned with empirical findings that show how appealing to emotions is a powerful way to convey the message (H. S. Park et al., 2013) and increase individuals’ susceptibility to the message (Alhabash et al., 2013). Since comments seek to frame and promote issues (Cenite & Yu, 2010), including humor seems effective for commenters seeking to be noticed .

6.1.2. “Likability”: Witty Rebuttal (U.S. & KOREA)

Another major “likability” factor shown from sub-comments was wit (319 instances in 866 sub-comments analyzed). In many ways this is similar to humor, because witty comments usually involved farce. However, in this particular “likability” component was also the aspect of rebuttal or rejoinder; sub-comments indicated that a “top” comment gained popularity because it provided a witty response to the news story, other commenters, or opposing perspectives in general. Notably, for this “likability” factor the two aspects (wit and rebuttal) appeared in combination. If a comment only held

wittiness, sub-comments usually responded one of two ways: they either showed amusement or responded with “So what?” type questions / criticism for the comment not functioning in context with the rest of the conversation. Wit was appreciated only when it held humorous appeal. Otherwise, wit alone was not a “likability” factor. Rather, it appeared to decrease audiences’ “liking” the comment. In fact, these cases would be grouped together in a “dislikability” factor discussed in a later section (6.1.6.) labeled *Decontextualization*.

On the other hand, if comments engaged only in rebuttal, they were often perceived as too serious or belligerent. Sub-comments responding to non-witty rebuttal illustrated dissatisfaction and condemned the original commenter for being extremist or hindering online discussion. This trend seen in sub-comments was contrary to the major frames in “top” comments, which were “they are deceptive” and “shutting down the opposition.” Such “top” comment framing consisted mostly of rebuttals or counterarguments toward the subject of attack. So, to find that sub-comments were dismissive of these especially strong rebuttals required further investigation. For instance, the following “top” comment showed mostly negative sub-comments in the researcher’s analysis:

- “That’s the problem with media. It provides these kinds of nonsense stories for any little thing that happens. It tries to make everything so important. I am so f***ing sick of the media. I am f***ing sick of all of these a**holes who go ooh and aah every time a story like this comes out.”

The news story was about how Hurricane Sandy might help Obama’s campaign by depriving Romney of a chance to rally in Ohio (Staff, 2012a). Here sub-comments condemned the commenter for strong language (“stop cussing”), belligerence (“chill out dude”) or offensiveness (“whoa—if you think you’re so smart, then why are you even

here commenting and reading these comments?”). These sub-comments served as evidence to include this comment in the discussion for “dislikable” factors.

Nevertheless, the comment received many “likes” and it was one of the top three comments for the news story. The comment had many “dislikes” as well, but it had more “likes” to stay a “top” comment. How did this comment maintain “top” status? A possible explanation is that this comment held another “likability” factor that was not shown in the sample of sub-comments analyzed by the researcher. Standalone rebuttal without wit (but belligerence) may have been “dislikable,” but some kind of “likability” factor was also inherent in the comment that still allowed the comment to receive “likes” to become a “top” comment. Another sub-comment provided a glimpse into this: “I know what you’re saying. A story like this, I wouldn’t even take time to read. The media ought to be ashamed of themselves.” The sub-comment expressed agreement with the original commenter’s issue framing, which in this case was criticism toward the media. From further analysis, this component—“media criticism”—was found to be a main “likability” factor, which is discussed in the next section.

Sub-comments expressed their liking to the witty rebuttals by complimenting the commenter. This trend hinted that users were evaluating the quality of the comments. For instance, on an article published the day after the elections, which announced Barack Obama as the winner, two “top” comments were left consecutively by two different users:

- “I’m moving to Canada.”
- “Are you kidding me? I’m in Canada now and today I started a new bank account to save for moving back.”

The first comment could be considered as having humor, which explains why it was a highly “liked” “top” comment. To this, the second “top” commenter interpreted the

framing of the first comment and responded to the frame by saying that Obama's victory not something to be distressed about. In the process, the commenter played off of the joke in a witty way by mentioning how he/she was already in Canada. Sub-comments were favorable. One comment read, "Well done, sir" and another said "[second commenter] for the win." This sub-comment showed that approving the level of wit and effectiveness of the rebuttal were why the user "liked" this comment.

To confirm further that rebuttal without wit may not be sufficient for "likability," the researcher searched for another comment that mentioned Canada (to ensure that the comment was responding to the first comment). Another comment (not a "top" comment) did not receive as many "likes": "You don't think Obama will have influence on Canada?" The three sub-comments responding to this specific comment all pointed out that the comment was too serious. They were urging the commenter to accept the humor and "ease up a bit."

This phenomenon was also visible in Korea. Whenever refuting arguments or making strong criticism toward a candidate, group or idea, presence of wit was what seemed to divide the "likable" comments from the "dislikable." Koreans often describe this with the term "sense." As a country that has recently been influenced by America (Kwon & Lee, 2009), everyday use of the Korean language does include some words borrowed from English (Hadikin, 2013). Often, these words are appropriated or modified in slightly different ways so as to mean something different or have nuanced meanings. To Koreans, the word "sense" does not refer to sensory feelings of animate being, but refers to a narrower notion of the word: intangible quality of adeptness in various situations. Put more simply, the closest translation back to English would be "wit," "taste"

or “cleverness.” And in several Korean sub-comments, the term “sense” was used to respond to a “top” comment. They would usually say, “You’ve got good sense” or “Nice sensible comment.” Such praise is similar to the compliments in the U.S. sub-comment discussed above (“Well done, sir”).

A significant finding for Korea as well was that these sub-comments used the word “sense” to express gratification from a comment when the wit and the rebuttal were combined. For a comment that was only witty or funny, laughing signs would be used (categorized as *humor*). For a comment that did not have wit but only argumentation, the sub-comments would refer to them as overly serious or aggressive. A “top” comment that was mentioned in an earlier section was also a good example. Responding to the headline “Park Geun-hye: ‘Justice never loses’” (D. Lee, 2012) was a comment that said, “That is why you won’t win this election.” As analyzed above, the comment was directly responding to the quote used in the headline, stating that if justice never loses, then Park would be the one who would lose the election. This was a highly “liked” comment (over 2,000 “likes”), and sub-comments all commended this commenter for having the “sense” and making a good, concise point that was clever at the same time.

As shown throughout this section, certain frames and strategies were visible that accompanied “likable” factors that usually work to aid the strength of the framing. Deliberation in the digital public sphere functions within online conversations, and statements in the conversation are granted importance with “likes” and “top” status. In order to be granted this promotion, the comments have evolved in a way to provide argumentation in a clever way. If the reader appreciates the value of the message and technique, that is when the frame is successfully implemented in the discussion.

Moreover, it seems to be an adequate framing strategy for online conversations because online comments appear one-by-one and thus rebuttal is much more easily distinguishable. Each piece of the argument has its own space, which require it to have impact (e.g., wit) for successful conveyance. In sum, the conversation and discourse nature of online comments creates an environment or culture where both content and presentation technique affect the viability of a message.

6.1.3. “Likability”: Media criticism (U.S. & KOREA)

Another “likability” factor that garnered common, collective responses from sub-comments was criticism of news media (292 instances in 866 sub-comments). Notably, news media was the subject of criticism more so than any other entity (e.g., candidates, politicians, individuals, ideologies). When a “top” comment criticized the news media for the quality of coverage or lack of credibility, sub-comments showing acknowledgement and possible reasons for “liking” the comment accepted the frame and expressed strong agreement. For instance, a sub-comment said, “Comments like this disclosing the nasty agendas of the media should be upvoted so that others can see.” This particular sub-comment recognized the media criticism in the “top” comment and saw the need to state the significance of such a comment for the public.

Other comments simply provided approval by saying things such as:

- “I’m so sick of the media too” (U.S.)
- “There is a reason why *New Daily* is always being criticized.” (Korea).

While this theme was more salient in the U.S., the Korean example represented an interesting trend. In several occasions, Korean audiences used a four-character idiom called “Myung-Bul-Heo-Jeon,” which translates as, “There is always a reason for fame

(or notoriety).” This idiom can be used to refer to popular/revered entities but also to criticize. In the material analyzed, the idiom used most often to criticize controversial media organizations. The subject of criticism in the sub-comment, *New Daily*, is a relatively new (founded in 2005) right-wing online publication whose slogan is “Save Internet—Defeat the darkness in the Peninsula as the light of Korea.” The darkness mentioned in the slogan refers to the “increasing propaganda from progressive-minded groups who wear the mask of populism” (Newdaily.or.kr, 2014). In order to accomplish this, the publication has been known to promote extremist conservative viewpoints (mostly negative attacks on progressive politicians). The “top” comment, which said, “This is not even news,” criticized how the *New Daily* article titled “Moon's son wrongfully got his job? Shock!” (Reporter, 2012) made false accusations about Moon Jae-in’s son. The sub-comment used the four-character idiom to express agreement with the criticism of this media outlet.

An important aspect about this “likability” factor is that criticism of media received more collective approval from audiences than criticism toward any other entity. This may be because members of the digital public sphere seek to defend, as a group, themselves from problematic framing by the media. As discussed in the literature regarding publics and counterpublics (Loehwing & Motter, 2009; Milioni, 2009) as well as power dynamics regarding media and society (Entman, 2004; Fiske, 1989, 1993; D. A. Miller, 2012; Rhee, 2003; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008), audiences have struggled to retain power from politically and socially powerful entities, namely the news media. This is implemented in ways where the public identifies, negotiates and sometimes rejects the media’s framing of issues. The researcher posits that such strategies could include

criticizing the media for its bias and lack of credibility, thus diminishing the value of news media framing for the public good (Druckman, 2001; S. S. Sundar, 2008). Debate regarding other issues may see a divide among the public, but criticism of the media may pull audiences together as a part of the public that are collectively on the watchout for media's manipulation that may deter the public's right to know and make informed deliberation efforts.

6.1.4. "Likability": Socially accepted trends (KOREA)

A factor for "likability" more prominent in Korea was socially accepted norms or trends (found in 134 of 426 Korean sub-comments). This refers to frames (ideas) or language and expressions (form) used in the "top" comments that were favorably received by audiences because they were already popular in the online sphere. The "top" comments in this category included using 'in-words / in-phrases' (popularly used words and phrases, mostly deriving from pop culture) and promoting overtly popular perspectives. Sub-comments recognized one or more of these aspects in the comments, displaying acknowledgement of their "top" status.

In Korean "top" comments, popular phrases or words were used in several instances. Many of these comments employed expressions from popular culture (mainly comedy shows) or online language trends that would easily be recognized by the public. For instance, on a news story that posed the question, "To which candidate is the public's mind headed in Busan?" at the end (J. Kim, 2012), a comment said, "Are you curious? Give me 500 won and I'll tell you." This specific phrase was mentioned in a previous chapter regarding language trends in Korea—it is from a comedy skit on a show called

Gag Concert, which is a long-running popular show. In 2012 a skit in the show featured a beggar who encounters a woman; whenever the woman asked him questions, he said the same words, asking for 500 won (about 50 cents) for any answers. Upon seeing that a question was posed in the article, this particular “top” comment responded not with a plausible answer but a popular and recognizable phrase from a skit. To this, sub-comments showed amusement, using laughing signs or saying, “I gushed out when I read this” (here, “gush out” refers to spurting liquid from one’s mouth, an expression to show that the person had uncontrollable laughter). Therefore, this comedic phrase at an unexpected time made people laugh. Further, this amusement apparently was a reason for pressing “likes.” Of the comments analyzed, comments employing popular phrases were not closely related to the content of the story of the online conversation, but still received many “likes.” While this example specifically has to do with humor, scope of other findings regarding this “likability” factor was beyond just humor.

Also, common internet terms were used in “top” comments that audiences recognized. On an article about opinion polls from Jeolla province, two “top” comments used the word “skate” (ray-like fish). The connection is that this fish, a regional product of Heuksando, an island off the southern coast of the province, is fermented for consumption and emits a strong, foul smell. As such, this term has been used in some online communities as a derogatory term when referring to the citizens/politicians of Jeolla. Thus, on the article about the citizens of Jeolla, comments were using the term, saying, “Opinions from these nasty and predictable skates [from Jeolla] shouldn’t even count.” On seeing this derogatory term, sub-comments offered both praise and reprehension. Some criticized the commenter for aggravating regional conflict, but many

others actually agreed with the commenter and expressed strong approval (“That’s absolutely right. Every single skate I’ve met have been deceitful and betraying.”).

Similar terms of this type were found in people’s name-calling of past presidents: “Seunsangnim” was a word used to describe Kim Dae-jung, who was also from Jeolla. The term means “teacher” but pronounced in the Jeolla dialect (standard pronunciation can be transcribed as “Sunsaengnim”). It refers to how Kim had his own clique of Jeolla-based politicians who would call him “teacher.” Former president Lee Myung-bak was called “Gakha.” This word means “sir”—this term makes a comparison to other “sirs” who were despotic leaders of the military regime in the 70s and 80s (Park Jung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo) and refers to the dictator-like attitude of Lee and how allegedly corrupt he is, just like the other despotic leaders were. Sub-comments on comments using these kinds of terms also expressed approval (“Yes, you said it right.”) or explicitly stated that the term was a reason why they pressed “like” (“Whenever I see something that says “Gakha,” I have to make it a “top” comment”). Some sub-comments also castigated the use of such unflattering terms, but were outnumbered by those indicating “likability.”

Aside from employing socially well-known phrases as discussed above, “top” comments sought to represent or demonstrate an obviously popular point of view. These “top” comments noticeably used strong and appealing language that asked for the public’s approval. A good example could be found on news stories covering candidates’ statements about public safety (Ko, 2012) or tax cuts (B. Kim & Hyun, 2012), something that all of the public seems to have common opinions on. On an article about public safety, a “top” comment said:

- “With these increased sexual crime rates, I’m afraid to go outside at night. Isn’t everyone? Please fix this, president, whoever you are going to be.”

In recent years, the Korean public’s awareness of sexual assault crimes have increased (W. Kim, 2013), and it has been a frequently used media frame. Overall, people have voiced concerns, and this comment utilizes that common fear to receive “likes.” This is not to say that the “top” commenter’s main intentions were to receive more “likes” and become a “top” commenter. Nonetheless, this framing strategy of providing opinion that is already popular and asking for people’s approval was clearly effective for receiving more “likes,” as sub-comments said that they “have to ‘like’ a comment like this.”

Therefore, this was an important “likability” factor.

In some cases “top” comments merely reiterated other “top” comments on similar issues. For example, on a story about tax cut plans proposed by the candidates (Editor, 2012a), a lengthy “top” comment provided personal story about making a living amid hardships and criticized the economically powerful in Korean society. It received over 1,000 “likes” and sub-comments mostly showed how they were emotionally moved, hinting that the “likes” would have come from people with similar receptions. However, one sub-comment said, “I saw this exact same comment the other day.” Looking further into other sub-comments that were left after this one, it seemed that people found the original comment, and many of them started criticizing the commenter. The original comment, which was left on a similar story (Y. Kim, 2012), was verbatim to the “top” comment on this story, and predated the “top” comment by a few hours. Seeing that the users of the two comments were different, the researcher concluded that second user copied the original comment seeing that it makes a good point and perhaps thinking that it had “likability” factors. Then he/she left this comment on a different story that became

very popular for inexplicable reasons (i.e., the story may have gone “viral” due to many reasons, including timing, link sharing, comment accumulation, etc). As the story became popular, more readers visited this story and “liked” this particular comment, making it a “top” comment of a “top” story, and thus a part of the material analyzed for this dissertation. Although many sub-comments condemned the commenter for being a copycat and some “disliked” the comment, the “likes” still far outweighed the number of “dislikes”—an indication that people may not look into the originality or verification of the content of the comments but merely press “like” as a result of instant gratification.

Significant aspects for this “likability” factor are fourfold: First, these “top” comments were for the most part not closely related to the news story’s frame. Considering how decontextualization from the story was a big factor for “dislikability,” (discussed in section 6.1.6.) compliance to popular trends/norms was a stronger factor that would make a comment reach “top” status. Second, these “top” comments were all deriving from other popular expressions or ideas; in some cases there even was appropriation. In other words, comments did not have much originality. Again, originality of perspectives and articulation of ideas was not considered as important by the public who granted many “likes” to these types of comments. Third, the comments received many “likes” but also a large number of “dislikes.” This is perhaps because these socially accepted language or trends are not acknowledged by everyone. For instance, some of the terms (e.g., “skate,” “seunsangnim”) that were mentioned in this section are usually used only in certain online communities. As the users in those communities cross over to news aggregator websites, these terms overtake the commenting forum and become a widely recognizable term. Even so, people who are not

a member of the community may not feel compelled to “like” the comment using such terms. Some who do not approve of the online community may feel stronger about pressing “dislike” toward certain derogatory terms or out-of-context comments. The findings indicate, however, that once such terms or ideas are accepted, the people who “like” the comment again outweigh the criticism and “dislikes.” Finally, this “likability” theme was dominantly present in Korean cases. The only case where U.S. comments held this characteristic was with an overtly popular belief about a topic (e.g., “top” comment arguing for the importance of voting in a democratic society), but even this type of framing did not appear saliently. Such stark differences in Korea and the U.S. regarding this “likability” theme poses significance for further discussion regarding intercultural differences in how audiences perceive “likability” and incorporate them into user comment on news websites.

Some indications of “dislikability” factors in a comment were mentioned in sub-comments. However, because the comments analyzed for this dissertation were most “liked” comments, instances of “dislikability” were not as frequently visible from the sub-comments. A majority of the sub-comments only discussed why the comment was “likable,” why he/she agreed or approved the “top” comment or provided further discussion within the frame set forth in the “top” comment.

6.1.5. “Dislikability”: Indecency/rudeness (U.S. & KOREA)

Universally in both U.S. and Korea, “top” comments that were indecent or rude in any form drew criticism from sub-comments. This was markedly visible in “top” comments that employed the *shutting down the opposition* framing strategy. For instance,

calling out the ignorance of the public in strong language (“People are so stupid”) was rebutted with sub-comments that indicated that the comment was offensive:

- “Who are you to say people are stupid?”
- “That was uncalled for”
- “It makes me sad to see such rude people leaving comments”

In another “top” comment on a story about the Democratic Party’s (Korea) controversial campaign promotion tactics, some comments seemed to be perceived as sexist. The story included criticism of the Democratic Party’s website, which encouraged women to urge their boyfriends/husbands to go out and vote, by threatening their significant others to withhold a “good time” from them if they did not vote (Sung, 2012). As offensive to women as this webpage was, a “top” comment said, “The ad is stating that women should use their sexuality as a weapon for injecting political agendas.” Although this comment could be interpreted as providing criticism toward the webpage, one sub-comment responded with disbelief that someone would associate the words “sexuality” and “weapon” (“What is your problem? You probably also believe that sexuality is a weapon for women?”). Regardless of whether this sub-comment was interpreting the framing of the “top” comment correctly, the “dislikability” factor was that indecency and inappropriateness were inherent in the comment in the eyes of the sub-commenter.

In the process of “shutting down the opposition” or providing criticism toward certain people or groups, the line between “likability” and “dislikability” was dependent on the extent to which the audiences were offended. How to define or label this factor of “offending others” is still debatable, because the number of sub-comments discussing this was small in number (only 41 out of 866 that were analyzed). However, the researcher

concluded that the terms “indecent” and “rudeness” adequately summed up the scope of offensiveness that the sub-commenters “disliked.”

6.1.6. “Dislikability”: Manipulation (KOREA)

Sub-comments criticized “top” comments when the “top” commenter seemed to be attempting to manipulate the number of “likes.” This phenomenon was only seen in Korea (36 out of 426 Korean sub-comments). Mainly, sub-commenters took issue with “top” comment manipulation for two things: when the “top” comment was conspicuously trying to increase the number of ‘likes and when the “top” comment allegedly cheated to receive more likes.

The former refers to when the comments were begging for “likes” or proposing a poll of some sort that would gather “likes” regardless of the quality of the comment. Some “top” commenters asked for others to “like” the comment, citing various reasons/justifications:

- “Today I am being enlisted in the army for my duties... Can you please press “like” for me on this day? It will be a dream come true”
- “I deserve to be top comment after the information I provided.”

These “top” comments were also mentioned in *Chapter 5* in the discussion of the frame: *Encouraging action*. Seeking others to “like” indeed led to a high number of “likes” and may have been an effective framing strategy, but it was also a “dislikability” factor according to the sub-comments. Sub-comments called these “top” commenters “attention whores” or “overly obsessed with “top” comments,” expressing dissatisfaction at the quality of the comment, or lack thereof.

The second type of manipulation that sub-comments were discontent with was a more structured effort for manipulation. For such criticism, the notion of the “commenting part-time job” was important. In Korean politics, there have been numerous occasions where political parties and special interest groups showed deliberate efforts to control online public opinion by hiring/selecting “Social Cyber Teams.” These teams would monitor social media and online comments and leave comments that promote favorable political agendas (N. Lee, 2011). Naturally, one way these cyber promotion teams used to dominate the public discourse was to excessively “like” a comment as a group. This was considered a big problem in Korean society—in fact, one significant case in the Korean elections events timeline was when an employee of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) was charged with manipulating user comments (Byun, 2012). In addition to this, members of some online communities attempted to increase the number of “likes” on a comment that represented their points of views, by sharing the link to the news story and urging other members to click on the link and “like” the comment from one of its members (T. Kim, 2012).

For these reasons, when audiences saw that an extremist comment received many “likes” in a short period of time, they expressed a sense of disbelief. Sub-comments were keen to point this out and criticize the commenter or any group affiliated with the comment:

- “Manipulation? Again? Stop doing this”
- “The part-timers are here again, manipulating comments!”
- “You are on one of those ‘cyber teams,’ aren’t you?”

The content or framing of these comments varied so widely that no real trend or theme was visible as to which kinds of frames were treated with this alleged manipulation; sub-

commenters were criticizing any comment that held a strong political agenda and accumulated many “likes.” That is, when the criticism and doubt toward manipulation of comments would appear was also unpredictable. The notable thing from this theme is that whenever such doubts were raised, it was expressed as a “dislikability” factor. A sub-comment even mentioned that people have to come stop this comment from getting “top” status by “disliking” the comment or “flagging” it as spam.

6.1.7. “Dislikability”: Decontextualization (U.S. & KOREA)

One of the reasons for rejecting a “top” comment was that the “top” comment was not closely related to the topic at hand (30 out of 866 sub-comments). The “top” comments that were mentioned in the discussion of *socially accepted norms/trends* could fit into this category. While many “liked” the comment, some sub-comments doubted the comment was helpful for public discussion. Comments that were funny (humor), refuted an argument in a clever way (witty rebuttal), criticized the media, or provided socially accepted trends received many “likes.” However, even with these elements present, sub-comments expressed dissatisfaction when no context was given for the “top” comment or if the comment was far removed from the main topics/frames in the story. This was equally visible in Korean and U.S. websites, as sub-comments in both websites universally said things such as:

- “So what is this comment doing here”
- “What does this comment do for the story?”
- “This comment sucks, it is not related to the story at all.”

Therefore, no matter what kind of “likability” theme a comment possessed, it would still be criticized if it did not pose relatable meanings that enabled a connected discussion of

issues at hand. This finding also shows that multiple “likability” and “dislikability” factors could be present in a single “top” comment at the same time.

Moreover, this “dislikability” theme was easier to discover from non-”top” comments. The “top” comments analyzed for this dissertation already held such strong “likability” factors that the sub-comments did not provide strong evidence regarding the extent to which decontextualization is deemed problematic by audiences (i.e., even the completely decontextualized comments were “top” comments that received many “likes” because of the “likability” factors that were present in the comment, overwhelming any other disadvantageous aspect).

6.1.8. Overarching themes: Agreement / disagreement

The most frequently mentioned or implied reason for “liking” a comment was the user’s agreement with the comment. This overarching “likability” factor was closely associated with how the framing of “top” comments were recognized and accepted by audiences. This was expressed in several forms in the sub-comments including explicit agreement or implied consent/approval and perpetuated discussion of the main frame(s) of the comment. Explicit agreement usually used words such as “Yes” and “I agree,” which were obvious indicators. In some cases, the approval of the “top” comment was not as explicit, but still comprehensible in the sub-comments. These sub-comments frequently used conjunctions such as “So” or “Therefore,” hinting that the sub-comment was acknowledging what was said. For example:

- “Top” comment: “He is the top 0.1% in this country. He owns a company and he probably lives in a palace.”
- Sub-comment: “So this means he will have no sympathy for the real middle class who struggle to find a place to live.”

The “top” comment was mentioning how Ahn is merely pretending to be representing the middle class and that is allegedly a lie. The sub-commenter, by expressing approval of the “top” commenters meaning made toward Ahn, indicates that agreement with the comment may have been a factor for his/her commenting on the comment and perhaps a “likable” aspect.

Similarly, still other sub-comments took the main frame(s) of the “top” comment and complied with it by provided supporting evidence or further discussion. For instance:

- “Top” comment: “I have never seen such a wishy washy person in my life... and that is as close to an apology as you're going to get you freeloading, think you're entitled, non tax paying American.”
- Sub-comment: “Remember when he was talking himself out of the whole Mormon thing? He can changes his words twenty times a day, this guy. Sure, he’s a smooth talker, but it’s empty and full of excuses.”

On a comment that criticized Romney’s speaking style and attitude, the sub-comment provided another example and an opinionated statement that point to Romney’s changing of words or escaping controversy with well-versed excuses. On the contrary, disagreement with the comment was considered to be a “dislikability” factor but not included in the separately categorized themes in the sections above.

For this research, it should be noted that these “likability/dislikability” themes are different from the others discussed above because of two reasons. First of all, agreement/disagreement or acknowledgement/rejection was an overarching theme that could be applied to numerous additional factors, and thus requires further and detailed investigation. Second, the factors were not inherent in the comment, but were

“likability/dislikability” themes arising as a result of audiences’ reception. In other words, to generate a comment that has this “likability”/dislikability” trait (agreement/disagreement) is not possible without knowing the tendencies of audiences. Therefore, while this theme was the most dominant and visible, it was not a “likability” factor that was used as an independent variable for the experiment. Further discussions on the application of “likability” factors in the experiment research phase are provided in *Chapter 7: Experiment*.

6.2. Ranking comparison analysis: “Likes” and chronological order of comments

To address the research question:

RQ3: What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of the relationship between the chronological order of comments in those comments receiving “likes” in the most commented stories during the 2012 presidential elections?;

Data from a total of 300 comments from each country (N=600) were collected. They were the top ten most “liked” comments from each of the thirty most commented news stories. The analyzed variables were a) the amount of time elapsed between when the article was published and the comment was made (“TIME”) and b) the number of “likes” the comment received (“LIKE”). The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was conducted to investigate whether the changes in time led overall to a statistically significant difference in the number of likes. The Z statistic from the test allowed the researcher to determine the direction and statistical significance of the affected change (e.g., whether more “likes” were received as time progressed). Moreover, data from each country were compared to identify differences in the magnitude and direction, if any, of the results.

The ranks table for the U.S. comments below shows that out of 300 comments, in 246 instances the rank for the number of “likes” was higher than the rank for “time.” The

Wilcoxon signed-ranks test of U.S. comments showed that the change in time indeed elicited a statistically significant change in the number of “likes” a comment received ($Z = -13.183$, $p = .000$). As shown with the Z statistic value and the ranks table, this significant change held a negative directional characteristic—as the amount of time increased, the number of “likes” decreased. Put reversely, less increase in time resulted in a significant positive change for a higher number of “likes.”

Ranks			
	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Negative Ranks	42 ^a	51.50	2163.00
Positive Ranks	246 ^b	160.38	39453.00
Ties	12 ^c		
Total	300		

a. LIKE < TIME

b. LIKE > TIME

c. LIKE = TIME

Test Statistics ^a	
	LIKE - TIME
Z	-13.183 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

Table 2. Wilcoxon signed-ranks test tables (U.S.).

Similarly, the ranks table for the Korean comments also shows far more instances where the rank for the number of “likes” was higher than the rank for “time.” In fact, the researcher saw no instances of negative ranks (where the amount of time ranking was bigger than the “like” ranking). The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test of Korean comments showed that the change in time also elicited a statistically significant change in the number of “likes” a comment received ($Z = -14.863$, $p = .000$). Again, the Z statistic

value and the mean rank differences show that shorter the amount of time from when the article was published, the higher number of “likes” a comment received.

Ranks			
	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
LIKE - TIME	Negative Ranks	0 ^a	.00
	Positive Ranks	294 ^b	43365.00
	Ties	6 ^c	
	Total	300	

a. LIKE < TIME

b. LIKE > TIME

c. LIKE = TIME

Test Statistics ^a	
	LIKE - TIME
Z	-14.863 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

Table 3. Wilcoxon signed-ranks test tables (Korea).

Finally, the data collected from each country were compared to each other via a two independent samples Wilcoxon signed-ranks test, with the country information as the grouping variable. As seen in the ranks table below, the mean rank for “TIME” was higher in the U.S., meaning that the increment of the time variable in the U.S. sample was larger. On the other hand, the mean rank of the Korean comments was higher, which means that the number of likes throughout the sample increased more.

The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test shows significant differences for each country regarding the rank scores discussed above for both elapsed time ($Z = -2.846, p < .005$) and number of “likes” ($Z = -9.209, p = .000$). Results in the ranks table and the Z

statistic infer that a more significant difference existed regarding the negative effect of time on the number of “likes” (i.e., increased time will result in less number of “likes”).

Ranks				
	COUNTRY	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
TIME	KOREA	300	280.46	84138.00
	US	300	320.54	96162.00
	Total	600		
LIKE	KOREA	300	365.66	109698.00
	US	300	235.34	70602.00
	Total	600		

Test Statistics ^a		
	TIME	LIKE
Mann-Whitney U	38988.000	25452.000
Wilcoxon W	84138.000	70602.000
Z	-2.846	-9.209
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000

a. Grouping Variable: COUNTRY

Table 4. Wilcoxon signed-ranks test tables (All)

Therefore, a comment has a higher probability of receiving more “likes” when it was uploaded early. This finding provides evidence for the problem of “likes” raised by the researcher regarding “likes” in the digital public sphere: pre-determining factors such as the order of comments result in dominance of opinions, regardless of the content.

6.3. Summary

Analysis of sub-comments (N=866) left as responses to “top” comments showed multiple reasons for “likability” and “dislikability.” The most salient and overarching factor for “likability” or “dislikability” was agreement or disagreement with the user. Overall, language and meanings signifying preferences, approval, acknowledgement, or

rejection included some indication of whether the sub-commenter agreed with the main frame(s) of the “top” comment, and to what extent. However, this specific theme was too broad to be called a ‘factor’ because it was an overlaying notion throughout. Therefore, more specific themes or factors were drawn for application to the experiment research phase as operationalizable variables.

For “likability,” *humor* was one of the most dominant characteristics that received positive responses from sub-commenters. This perhaps attests to the growing trend of seeking gratification through emotional appeal in online content (Alhabash et al., 2013; H. S. Park et al., 2013). Similarly, *witty* (including humorous) *rebuttal* in “top” comments received explicit and implicit approval from sub-commenters. The reason for the emergence of this distinctively specific theme was perhaps the nature of commenting forums that accommodate conversation and debate (Bohman, 2004; Cenite & Yu, 2010; Hyde-Clarke, 2013). Comments that held characteristics that effectively (with wit, cleverly) posed counterarguments in public discourse were those that received more positive responses, thus translating into “likability.” Furthermore, *criticism of the media* was a frame attribute in “top” comments that were preferred by audiences as a collective. This perhaps demonstrates how audiences seek to monitor and evaluate the performance and influence of the news media as a part of their struggle for power (Fraser, 1990; Loehwing & Motter, 2009; Milioni, 2009). Finally, using *socially accepted trends* (languages, perspectives) was received with satisfaction and approval. This illustrates that conformity to trends in digital culture may be a factor that enables a comment to receive more “likes” and gain popularity.

Themes in sub-comments hinting “dislikability” were relatively scarce given the characteristic of the sample. The comments analyzed were all highly “liked” comments, and thus did not yield as much indication for things that audiences didn’t like. Even so, *indecentcy and rudeness* in comments were responded with sub-comments indicating disapproval due to the comments’ offensiveness. It seems that principles for civil discussions were a part of expectations from the public, even in the online commenting sphere. Also, audiences were eager to point out problems with a “top” comment if there was doubt of the comments engaging in some orchestrated action (collective action, increasing “likes” due to intentions for monetary gain) to achieve “top” status. The researcher calls this theme *manipulation*, which was against normative standards of many members of the public. Finally, sub-comments displayed dissatisfaction on comments that were highly *decontextualized* from the topic or issue at hand. Even when “top” comments help some “likability” characteristics, they were reprimanded in sub-comments if there was not a close relevance to the news article or other comments in the discussion. Again, this goes in line with how audiences may be putting efforts to maintain a meaningful conversation about public opinion, even in the digital public sphere.

Cultural differences in the “likability/dislikability” factors were also visible. For instance, potential factors such as *humor*, *witty rebuttal* and *media criticism* were prevalent both in U.S. and Korea. However, *socially accepted trends* appeared most saliently in the Korean comments. For “dislikability,” *indecentcy/rudeness* and *decontextualization* were common themes in both Korean and U.S. sub-comments. However, manipulation was an issue introduced only in the Korean context.

The researcher argues that these themes only appearing in Korean websites have to do with the way in which its digital culture has evolved. First, it seems that Korean commenters had a higher desire to receive “likes” and achieve “top” status. Unlike in the U.S., Korean commenters used words such as “want,” “wish,” “deserve” when discussing “likability” or “top” status. Second, Korean materials showed phenomena unique to its digital culture (e.g., manipulation of comments in groups, making money for manipulating public opinion in online settings) that were recognized by the public in general. Third, such collective recognition of issues may be deriving from the fact that Korean audiences are more accustomed to online conversations and have formed certain ways of conversing online in their everyday lives. Whether this could be called a matured digital culture is not certain; however, it indeed is an evolved form of cultural practices and norms. Fourth, more uniformity was visible in the kinds of expressions and/or perspectives that were used in Korean “top” comments and sub-comments. Perhaps this can be attributed to the strength of homogeneity and collective-ness (Y. Kim, 2008) in Korean audiences. Such intercultural differences, in this case resulting from characteristics of Korean digital culture, are discussed further in later chapters.

The themes hinting “likability” discussed above are significant for the frequency with which the themes appeared and how extensively each theme was mentioned in sub-comments. The “dislikability” factors were ones that occurred more frequently than any other factor, but they were considerably fewer perhaps because all sub-comments analyzed were those responding to established “top” comments. In other words, readily “liked” comments yielded few findings about why people “disliked” the comment.

The researcher acknowledges that conclusive evidence of “likability” or “dislikability” cannot be drawn. This chapter compares frames and framing strategies that were acknowledged or rejected by sub-commenters, which may or may not be exact reasons why people “like” or “dislike” a comment. However, this analysis is still meaningful because it enables the researcher to apply these so-called factors as variables in a subsequent research phase (experiment) and further examine the validity of these factors with responses from actual users and media professionals (interviews, focus groups). As a part of the larger research design, these findings provide a better understanding of various influences on “likes” and “top” comments.

Furthermore, as an extraneous and standalone factor (i.e., not related to content) for “likability,” chronological order of comments was examined through a ranking comparison using the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test. Here, chronological order refers to how soon the comment was posted after the news story was published. Results showed that chronological order was a significant factor for number of “likes.” The test results were statistically more significant for Korean comments.

CHAPTER 7. EXPERIMENT

An experiment was conducted to understand how audience perceptions influence individuals' willingness to comment or "like/dislike" a comment. The experiment further examined the relationship between "likes" and "top" comments on individuals' perceptions of public opinion. The experiment sought to understand the impact of "likability/dislikability" factors on individuals' willingness to "like" or "dislike" a comment.

The experiment was conducted in both U.S. and Korea. After a pre-treatment test, participants were exposed to stimulus materials that were manipulated for each condition of the "presence of the 'top' condition" variable. A total of 200 participants were recruited from each country ($N=400$). After discarding twelve responses due to incompleteness or withdrawal, additional data was collected to bring the total up to 200 each per country.

7.1. Pre-treatment test

The pre-treatment test asked:

- a) Basic demographic questions (age, sex, education level)—included to ensure that the participant groups were not overly skewed in terms of age, sex and education level
- b) Questions about online news consumption / commenting experience / "liking" experience—to compare findings from the two countries
- c) Question asking about participants' level of agreement/disagreement on eight statements—to assess "partisanship" of the participant regarding the candidates in the election

Basic demographic data showed the US and Korean participants were not different, although the level of education was slightly higher for Korean participants. Furthermore, more women than men were included, but this was a consistent trend for

both countries. Comparison of data regarding news consumption habits and prior experiences with commenting or “liking” illustrated that participants from each country spent approximately the same amount of time consuming online news. However, Korean participants showed a higher frequency of regular commenting or “liking” behavior. This was attributed to Korea’s advanced ICT (information and communication technology) infrastructure such as mobile platforms and news portals, and included as a possible factor for discussing intercultural differences emerging from the data. Refer to Appendix C for a complete list of tables displaying frequency data of participants for the two question groups.

7.2. Key measures

Partisanship. Participants’ predispositions toward the candidates of the 2012 elections were measured by presenting a statement about the candidates (“Candidate A should have been elected president”) and asking the participant to rate their level of agreement with the statement on a five-point scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). This statement was presented along with five other controversial statements for each country (e.g., for the U.S.: same-sex marriage, gun control, Apple vs. Samsung smartphones, HPV vaccination mandate, Edward Snowden) to reduce demand characteristics. These other statements were selected from a pre-test regarding what thirty-four students perceived to be controversial topics in the news. Responses to the statement were recoded to distinguish partisanship: only the extreme responses (strongly disagree, strongly agree) were labeled “partisanship.” Since candidates of both countries represented different ideological stances (political parties), partisanship was also categorized as such. Of the 400 participants, 121 (30.3%) were liberal (i.e., favoring

Barack Obama or Moon Jae-in); 79 (19.8%) were conservative (Mitt Romney or Park Geun-hye); and 200 (50%) were non-partisan. Figures for each country were as follows: In the U.S., 52 (26%) were liberal, 33 (16.5%) were conservative and 115 (57.5%) were non-partisan. In Korea, 69 (34.5%) were liberal, 46 (23%) were conservative and 85 (42.5%) were non-partisan. Refer to the tables below for a breakdown of findings regarding partisanship:

PARTISANSHIP (TOTAL)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LIBERAL	121	30.3	30.3	30.3
CONSERVATIVE	79	19.8	19.8	50.0
NOT PARTISAN	200	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	400	100.0	100.0	

PARTISANSHIP (U.S.)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LIBERAL	52	26.0	26.0	26.0
CONSERVATIVE	33	16.5	16.5	42.5
NOT PARTISAN	115	57.5	57.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

PARTISANSHIP (KOREA)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LIBERAL	69	34.5	34.5	34.5
CONSERVATIVE	46	23.0	23.0	57.5
NOT PARTISAN	85	42.5	42.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 5. Partisanship breakdown

Perceived bias of article. After reading the stimulus material, participants were asked to rate their perception of bias in the article with the question, “In your view, the news article you just read is;” presented with a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly biased toward favoring Obama / Moon”) to 5 (“Strongly biased toward

favoring Romney / Park”) ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.40$). Values for the U.S. ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.31$) and Korea ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.49$) were also similar.

Perceived public opinion. After reading the stimulus material, participants were asked to rate their perception of public opinion on the topic with the question, “In your view, the public opinion regarding this topic is:” presented with the same five-point scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly biased toward favoring Obama / Moon”) to 5 (“Strongly biased toward favoring Romney / Park”) ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.05$). Same as the above, values for the U.S. ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .97$) and Korea ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.07$) were similar.

Perceived influence on others. In light of theories of the Third Person Effect (TPE) and of Presumed Influence (PI), participants were asked: (“How would you evaluate the influence of the news article you just read on other readers?”). A scale ranging from 1 (Very little influence) to 4 (Very strong influence) was used ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.04$). Since the stimulus material had both an article and set of user comments, the same question was asked about the user comments ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.13$). The overall values were similar for each country, with slightly higher means from Korean participants. These differences are analyzed in detail in relation to other variables below.

Willingness to leave a comment / “like/dislike” a comment. Participants were asked, “After viewing the news article and news comments, how would you rate your willingness to leave a comment on the news article?” A scale ranging from 1 (Very little willingness to comment) to 4 (Very strong willingness to comment) was used ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.26$). Responses were higher in Korea ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.23$) than for U.S. ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.27$). More importantly, participants rated their willingness to “like” or “dislike” a comment for each of the ten comments that were shown to them. Mean values

and significant findings regarding these responses (by “top” status, “likability / dislikability,” political stance) are reported below.

7.3. Test of HME, TPE and PI (willingness to comment or “like/dislike”)

RQ4: “What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether predispositions and perceived effect of “likes” affect one’s willingness to comment on the story or “like/dislike” a comment?”; and

H2: In both countries, individuals who identify themselves as strongly supporting or strongly opposing one candidate will perceive a balanced news article on the topic as biased against their own perspective;

H3: In both countries, greater perceived bias of the news article will be associated with greater presumed influence of comments and “likes” on others ; and

H4: In both countries, partisans will show a higher level of willingness to engage with the news by leaving user comments or using the “like/dislike” features than those who are not partisans;

Congruent with the Hostile Media Effect phenomenon (HME), individuals who are partisans (who have a strong opinion toward the candidates) perceived the balanced article as biased against their views. Means for perceived direction of bias were compared across partisans according to the direction of their predispositions. Results of *ANOVA* show bias-direction scores for liberals ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .94$) were significantly higher in the scale (i.e., they saw the article as biased in favor of the conservative candidate) when compared to conservatives ($M = 1.24$, $SD = .77$), $F(2, 397) = 235.769$, $p = .000$. Similarly, perceived public opinion scores were significantly higher for liberals ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .85$) than for conservatives ($M = 1.59$, $SD = .93$), $F(2, 397) = 43.313$, $p = .000$. These findings were consistent with the theoretical framework of the HME model, and thus H2 was supported. Statistical significance was also consistent across two countries (see *ANOVA* tables below). Participants’ perception of overall public opinion was tested in detail with regard to the “top” status conditions.

OVERALL TEST OF HME

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ARTICLE BIAS	Between Groups	426.292	2	213.146	235.769	.000
	Within Groups	358.906	397	.904		
	Total	785.198	399			
PUBLIC OPINION	Between Groups	78.796	2	39.398	43.313	.000
	Within Groups	361.114	397	.910		
	Total	439.910	399			

U.S. TEST OF HME

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ARTICLE BIAS	Between Groups	131.336	2	65.668	61.813	.000
	Within Groups	209.284	197	1.062		
	Total	340.620	199			
PUBLIC OPINION	Between Groups	7.268	2	3.634	3.984	.020
	Within Groups	179.687	197	.912		
	Total	186.955	199			

KOREA TEST OF HME

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ARTICLE BIAS	Between Groups	131.336	2	65.668	61.813	.000
	Within Groups	209.284	197	1.062		
	Total	340.620	199			
PUBLIC OPINION	Between Groups	7.268	2	3.634	3.984	.020
	Within Groups	179.687	197	.912		
	Total	186.955	199			

Table 6. ANOVA tables of Partisanship and perceived article/public opinion bias

ANOVA verified that TPE was in effect across all countries. Overall, perceived influence of the article on oneself ($M = 1.28$, $SD = .48$) was significantly lower than the perceive influence on others ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.04$), $p = .000$. The same trend was visible for perceived influence of user comment on oneself ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .80$) in comparison to others ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.13$), $p = .000$. Significance was also found in the U.S. for both perceived effect of the article ($M_{self} = 1.28$, $SD = .49$; $M_{other} = 2.53$, $SD = 1.00$, $p = .000$) and comments ($M_{self} = 1.42$, $SD = .70$; $M_{other} = 2.43$, $SD = 1.15$, $p = .000$) and in Korea for both perceived effect of the article ($M_{self} = 1.29$, $SD = .48$; $M_{other} = 3.17$, SD

= .98, $p = .000$) and comments ($M_{self} = 2.08$, $SD = .75$; $M_{other} = 3.24$ $SD = .96$, $p = .000$).

Comparing the values from the two countries, differences for the two countries in terms of TPE were not significantly different (they both showed a high level of statistical significance). Thus, congruent to TPE, H3 was supported.

When comparing whether perceived influences differed for each condition (“top” comment status and “likes/dislikes” visible vs. not visible), statistical significance was only found for perceived influence of comments on the self ($M_{top} = 1.98$, $SD = .92$; $M_{none} = 1.51$, $SD = .57$, $p = .000$). This illustrates that the presences of “top” status significantly increased the perceived influence of the comments on the self. This trend is discussed further with RQ5.

Finally, the researcher sought to find whether perceived bias, a concept from HME, would be associated with the level of presumed influence. The researcher assumed that greater perceived bias of the news article will be associated with greater presumed influence on others, thus providing grounds for behavior responses as per the theory of the influence of presumed influence (PI). In order to achieve this in part, the researcher looked at whether perceived bias on the article and/or comments would be significant indicators of the willingness to comment. Regression analysis found that perceived bias was significantly related to the willingness to comment overall ($R = .309$, $R^2 = .095$, $F(2, 397) = 20.910$, $p = .000$), in the U.S. ($R = .312$, $R^2 = .097$, $F(2, 197) = 10.592$, $p < .005$), and in Korea ($R = .274$, $R^2 = .075$, $F(2, 197) = 11.342$, $p = .000$). These findings were consistent with the theoretical linkage among media effects theories as assumed by the researcher, and thus H4 was supported. Willingness to “like,” the main underlying variable for this research phase, is dealt in more detail with RQ5 and RQ6.

7.4. Effect of “top” status on perceived public opinion

RQ5: “What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of perceived public opinion of readers influenced by the existence of “top” comment status and “likes” on comments for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?”; and

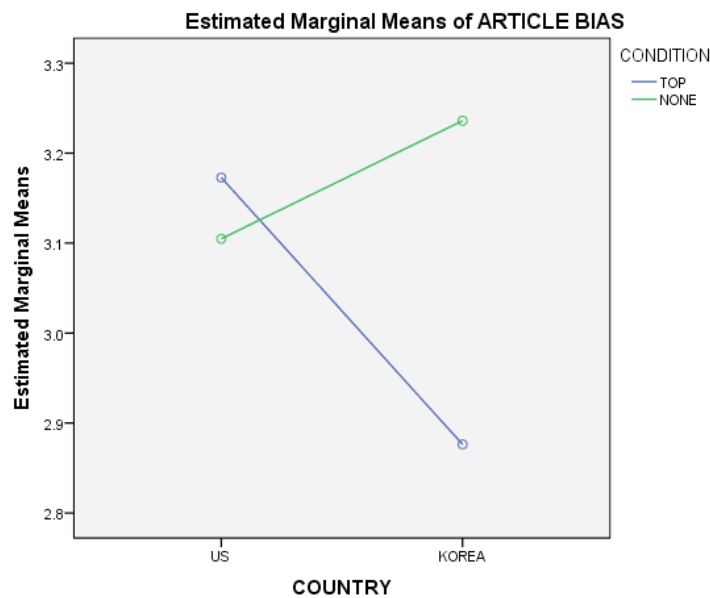
H5. In both countries, the number of “likes” and “top” status of comments will be significant indicators of how individuals perceive public opinion.

RQ5 examines the relationship between perceived public opinion and the presence of features such as “top” status and the number of “likes.” This pertains to the main design of the experiment, where two conditions (presence of “top” comments and the number of “likes/dislikes” vs. no “top” comments or number of “likes/dislikes”) were assigned to investigate this question. Findings supporting H5 would indicate a possible effect or influence of “likes” and “top” comments on individual perceptions of e public opinion. Therefore, the main test for this experiment was to compare perceived public opinion for the two conditions as well as countries. Multivariate *ANCOVA* (*MANCOVA*) was conducted with *condition* and *country* as factors and *perceived public opinion* as dependent variable. Participants’ sex was treated as a covariate as it was considered insignificant to the statistical comparisons at hand.

For both IVs condition and country, mean values scores for perceived public opinion were significantly different. Perceived public opinion was significantly lower in the “top” comments condition ($M_{top} = 2.34, SD = 1.20$) than the no “top” comments condition ($M_{none} = 2.64, SD = .85$), $F(1, 395) = 9.589, p < .005$. Considering that two of the three “top” comments for each condition were supporting the liberal candidate, the lower scores for the “top” comment condition show that participants also perceived more saliently for the public opinion to be biased toward the liberal candidate. These findings

show that the presence of “top” comments and “likes” held a potentially significant impact or influence on individuals’ forming perceptions about public opinion.

Also, the mean values for perceived public opinion were significantly lower for Korea ($M_{korea} = 2.24$, $SD = 1.07$) when compared to U.S. ($M_{us} = 2.74$, $SD = .97$), $F(1, 395) = 24.844$, $p = .000$. While country differences do not take into account the different conditions, an overall lower mean value score from Korean participants perhaps indicates that effect size was larger among Korean audiences. As a result of the *MANCOVA*, interactions between country and condition were also tested. While statistical significance was not reached ($p = .129$), an example plot of the variables below show an intriguing trend. As shown in the figure below, estimated marginal means of perceived article bias is markedly lower in the “top” comments condition for Korea, and the effect sizes for each condition are larger in Korea:



Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: SEX = 1.64

Figure 2. Interaction plot for Country * Condition and perceived public opinion

Furthermore, perceived popularity of comments through “top” comment status was incorporated to investigate whether the “top” status condition would be significant factors for the willingness to “like” or “dislike” a comment. For this, responses for each of the ten comments were recoded into new values. First of all, the researcher computed the average of participants’ ratings to “like” or “dislike” the first three comments. Then, the average scores for the rest of the comments were computed. This was because the first three comments are presented with “top” status in the “top” comment condition. By calculating the average scores of the first three vs. the remaining seven, the *willingness to like/dislike* scores could be compared one on one. *MANCOVA* was again conducted to examine the differences for the *willingness to like/dislike* scores for each condition and also for each country.

The “top” comment condition was a significant factor for willingness to “like/dislike,” but not consistently across all variables and countries. Overall, the willingness to “like” the first three comments was significantly higher for the “top” comment condition ($M_{top} = 2.42, SD = .91$) when compared to the no “top” comment condition ($M_{none} = 2.11, SD = .79$), $F(1, 395) = 13.542, p = .000$. Same was the case for the willingness to “dislike” the first three comments: the mean value score was significantly lower in the “top” comment condition ($M_{top} = 1.61, SD = .63$) than the no “top” comment condition ($M_{none} = 1.91, SD = .75$), $F(1, 395) = 20.023, p = .000$. However, willingness to “like” or “dislike” the rest of the comments (i.e., not the first three) was not significant. In the U.S., only willingness to “dislike” the first three comments showed significance in relation to the “top” comment condition ($M_{top} = 1.46, SD = .56; M_{none} = 1.78, SD = .75$), $F(1, 198) = 18.123, p = .001$. In Korea, significance for

the “top” comment condition was found for both willingness to “like” the first three comments ($M_{top} = 2.73$, $SD = .83$; $M_{none} = 2.23$, $SD = .83$), $F(1,198) = 11.638$, $p = .000$, and willingness to “dislike” the first three comments ($M_{top} = 1.76$, $SD = .67$; $M_{none} = 2.05$, $SD = .73$), $F(1,198) = 8.609$, $p < .005$.

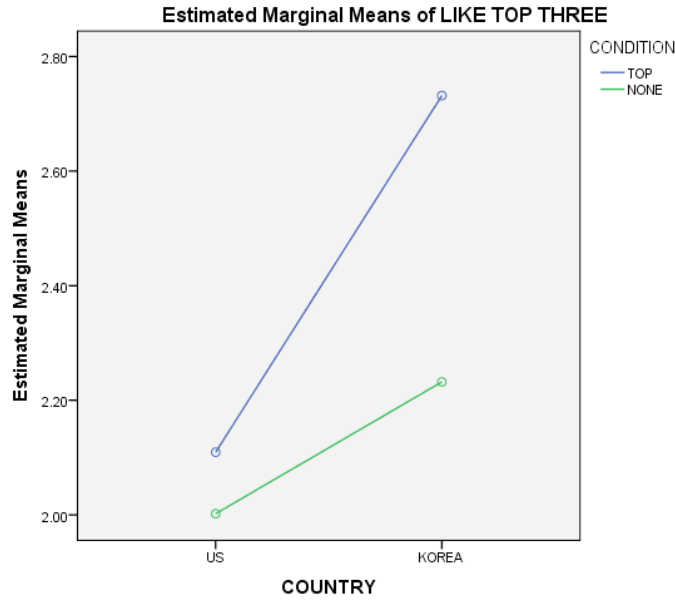


Figure 3. Interaction plot for Country * Condition and willingness to “like” first three comments

These findings suggest that “top” comment status is a significant factor for individuals’ corresponding perception of public opinion, thus increasing their willingness to “like” the comment. This is demonstrated through significantly higher means regarding the willingness to “like” the first three comments for “top” comment conditions. The same phenomenon was shown reversely where the willingness to “dislike” the first three comments was lower in the “top” comment conditions (less likely to “dislike”—compliance to perceived public opinion). Therefore, H5 was supported. Furthermore, Korean participants showed a higher likelihood of being affected by the “top” comment condition. Interaction between country and condition was also found ($p < .5$). As shown

in the figure above, the willingness to “like” the first three comments changes much more drastically in when the “top” comment status is visible.

7.5. Effect of “likability/dislikability” factors

RQ6: “What are the differences between the U.S and Korea in terms of whether themes of “likability” identified in RQ2 are adequate elements of user comments that make them “likable” for news articles regarding the 2012 presidential elections?”

This research question sought to verify the “likability/dislikability” factors that were identified from the qualitative analysis of “top” comments and sub-comments. As a result of the qualitative framing analysis, the following “likability/dislikability” factors were identified: *humor*, *witty rebuttal*, *media criticism* (“likability”), *indecency*, and *decontextualization* (“dislikability”). As mentioned in the explanation of the material and instrument, these factors were applied to the comments in the stimulus material. For both countries, “likability” factors *humor*, *witty rebuttal* and *media criticism* were incorporated into three different comments (one each). Also, “dislikability” factors *decontextualization* and *indecency* were applied to two other comments. However, how and where the factors were applied were applied in the material was different. The successful incorporation of these factors was verified through a pretest of five individuals from each country, as mentioned in *Chapter 4: Methods*. The conditions for the “likability/dislikability” variable (present, not present) were consistently shown in both types of stimulus material for each country, making it a within-subjects variable for testing.

In order to conduct statistical tests regarding these variables, the “likability” and “dislikability” factors were operationalized as follows: mean scores for the three comments containing “likability” factors and the two comments containing “dislikability”

factors were computed, and generated to be separate variables that were labeled “LIKE” and “DISLIKE,” respectively. Five comments that did not hold any “likability/dislikability” factor were combined separately and average scores for these comments were computed, and labeled “NOLIKE” or “NODISLIKE” based on which variable it was being compared with. *t-tests* (one-tailed) were conducted to compare the means of the variable “willingness to “like/dislike” the comment” for each “LIKE/NOLIKE” and “DISLIKE/NODISLIKE” pairs.

Results showed that “likability/dislikability” factors from RQ2 were indeed significant factors ($p = .000$ throughout) for individuals’ willingness to press the “like/dislike” button. Overall, the willingness to “like” a “likability” (LIKE) comment was significantly higher than for a non-“likability” (NOLIKE) comment ($M_{like} = 2.43$, $SD = .96$; $M_{nolike} = 1.77$, $SD = .58$, $p = .000$) and the willingness to “dislike” a “dislikability” (DISLIKE) comment was significantly higher ($M_{like} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.17$; $M_{nolike} = 2.00$, $SD = .87$, $p = .000$). The same trend was found in U.S. for “likability” ($M_{like} = 2.14$, $SD = .93$; $M_{nolike} = 1.61$, $SD = .51$, $p = .000$) and “dislikability” ($M_{like} = 2.47$, $SD = 1.16$; $M_{nolike} = 1.80$, $SD = .90$, $p = .000$). Also for Korea, all the same significant differences were found for “likability” ($M_{like} = 2.72$, $SD = .90$; $M_{nolike} = 1.94$, $SD = .61$, $p = .000$) and “dislikability” ($M_{like} = 3.17$, $SD = 1.07$; $M_{nolike} = 2.19$, $SD = .79$, $p = .000$); a noteworthy finding was that the effect sizes were always larger in Korea.

In addition to the “likability/dislikability” factors, the researcher investigated the influence of *political/ideological agreement* as a main reason for the willingness to “like.” As mentioned in the qualitative analysis for RQ2 (identifying “likability/dislikability” factors), agreement was the overarching theme for sub-comments’ indicating

acknowledgement of the “top” comment. While this “likability/dislikability” factor could not be incorporated as treatment variables in each comment (it was impossible to know what political stance the participant would hold), the researcher was able to execute this through post-hoc comparisons. Comments in the stimulus material were designed so as to show political stance. Of the ten comments, three were in favor of the liberal candidate (Obama, Moon) and three the conservative candidate (Romney, Park). Of the remaining four, two were neutral and two were irrelevant. As a result, new variables were operationalized by computing the average scores for willingness to “like/dislike” each cluster of comments (liberal, conservative, neutral), labeled “LIKE_LIBERAL / DISLIKE_LIBERAL,” “LIKE_CONSERVATIVE / DISLIKE_CONSERVATIVE,” “LIKE_NEUTRAL / DISLIKE_NEUTRAL,” respectively. Mean value scores for each grouping were compared through *ANOVA* with the participants’ *individual predisposition* (partisanship) as the independent variable and each of the *willingness to “like” variable clusters* as the dependent variable. This test was conducted only for the overall data because the researcher’s focus was more on verifying whether political/ideological agreement was an overall factor for “likability/dislikability.”

Findings showed statistical significance for both liberal and conservative partisans in their willingness to “like/dislike” comments in congruency to their stances. For example, willingness to “like” liberal comments for a liberal ($M = 2.80, SD = .98$) was significantly higher than that of conservatives ($M = 1.83, SD = .28$), $F(2, 397) = 62.678$, $p = .000$, and vice versa for respective partisans’ willingness to “like” conservative comments ($M_{liberal} = 1.13, SD = .28$, $M_{conservative} = 2.84, SD = .52$), $F(2, 397) = 277.755$, $p = .000$. Same was the case for the willingness to “dislike” comments holding stances in

favor of or against the partisans' viewpoints. See ANOVA table below. The neutral comments only showed significance for willingness to "like" and not for willingness to "dislike," further supporting the directional trends of the data.

ANOVA FOR POLITICAL/IDEOLOGICAL CONGRUENCY AND WILLINGNESS TO "like/dislike"		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
LIKE LIBERAL	Between Groups	79.543	2	39.772	63.678	.000
	Within Groups	247.957	397	.625		
	Total	327.500	399			
LIKE CONSERVATIVE	Between Groups	149.501	2	74.751	277.755	.000
	Within Groups	106.842	397	.269		
	Total	256.343	399			
LIKE NEUTRAL	Between Groups	68.585	2	34.293	49.907	.000
	Within Groups	272.792	397	.687		
	Total	341.378	399			
DISLIKE LIBERAL	Between Groups	144.007	2	72.003	174.529	.000
	Within Groups	163.785	397	.413		
	Total	307.792	399			
DISLIKE CONSERVATIVE	Between Groups	127.743	2	63.872	71.594	.000
	Within Groups	354.176	397	.892		
	Total	481.919	399			
DISLIKE NEUTRAL	Between Groups	2.477	2	1.238	2.379	.094
	Within Groups	206.648	397	.521		
	Total	209.124	399			

Table 7. ANOVA table for willingness to "like/dislike" based on partisanship and political / ideological congruency

7.6. Open-ended responses

Findings regarding "likability/dislikability" factors and *agreement* as significant factors for the willingness to "like/dislike" were further supported by text responses from participants. In the data collection instrument (post-treatment test questions), participants were asked to share reasons for their rating the willingness to "like" or "dislike." Analysis of these comments from participants in light of the "likability" factors showed that agreement (56%) was the most dominant reason for their choosing to "like/dislike" a comment. For example, participants wrote:

- "I like this comment because I agree with everything that was said"
- "I completely disagree with everything that was said."

For the former, this participant's willingness to "like" rating was 4 ("very strong willingness to 'like/dislike'") and the latter was 1 ("very little willingness to

‘like/dislike’”). Also, “likability” factors (31%) were frequently mentioned as the reason to “like” as were the “dislikability” factors (10%) for “disliking” the comment. Of the “likability” factors, *humor* was the most salient, appearing more than half of the time when “likability” was mentioned (e.g., “I found this comment to be particularly funny”). Among the “dislikability” factors, decontextualization (80%) was the most dominant reason for participants’ willing to press the “dislike” button (e.g., “I don’t like comments that are not even related to the issue”). Of the reasons, only 2% of the participants’ responses mentioned something about the existing number of “likes” or “top” status (e.g., “Other people seem to like it a lot, and I guess I do too”). Interestingly, these 2% were all from Korean respondents, which show that Korean participants perhaps do pay more attention to the “top” comments and number of “likes.”

The limitation to this complementary data analysis was that the response rate and reliability of the data were inconsistent. Some participants wrote the same response for all comments, in which case the responses were discarded. Other participants left responses for some comments and left others blank. In this case the entered responses were analyzed. Nevertheless, this additional qualitative data sheds light onto the trends and relationships that were found in the statistical analysis.

7.7. Other notable findings

Participants were asked to rate an array of four statements (“I pay attention to comments when reading news online”; “I pay attention to “likes/dislikes” when reading news online”; “I think user comments are helpful when reading news online”; I think “likes/dislikes” are helpful when reading news online”) on a four-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Mean values for each item were as

follows: Attention comments ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .99$); attention to “likes/dislikes” ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.11$); comments are helpful ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.00$); and “likes/dislikes” are helpful ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.05$). Again, overall mean values were higher in Korean responses.

Participants were also asked, “if you left a comment on a news website, would you pay attention to the number of ‘likes/dislikes’ you receive?” with a simple “Yes” or “No” choice. Overall, more participants indicated that they would pay attention (57.8%). However, in the U.S. the percentage of “Yes” responses was less than half (48%), which was significantly lower than for Korea ($X^2 = 9.821$, $p < .05$). This was also significantly correlated to the previous experience of using the “like/dislike” button ($X^2 = .10.931$, $p < .05$). Almost all (95%) of the participants expressed an interest in knowing how their opinions would be received by the public (e.g., “I want to know what others think about my comment). This could be categorized as *interest in knowing one’s status in public deliberation*. Outliers included responses such as “I have a big ego” (*egotistical*) and “I’d do it just habitually.” (*consumption habit*) When participants responded with a “No.” responses held less value because their main reason was that they “probably won’t comment anyway.” Other provides reasons such as “I don’t really care what others think about me” (indifference of public reception) or “I don’t trust the people and discussions on the web” (mistrust in digital public sphere).

7.8. Summary

The experimental findings were generally consistent with the theoretical perspectives set forth by the researcher. Partisanship was a significant indicator for how participants perceived bias in the stimulus material (HME). At the same time, the

participants showed higher perceived influence of comments and “likes,” on others (TPE), which possibly led to an increased willingness to comment as a behavioral response to such perceived influence on others (PI). This trend was more salient with partisans, whose strong viewpoints perhaps led to a higher willingness to refute the undesired effect of the biased (from the participant’s perspective) article/comments on others.

Conditions of the stimulus material (existence of “top” status and number of “likes/dislikes”) were also significant for how participants perceived public opinion. Participants who were exposed to the “top” status condition perceived public opinion to be closer to what the “top” comments were stating. On the contrary, those exposed to the non-“top” status condition did not grant as much significance to the first three comments. Statistical tests and findings regarding this manipulated variable in particular was closest to displaying a possible influence of “likes” and “top” comments on how audiences perceive public opinion.

Furthermore, “likability/dislikability” factors drawn from analysis of the sub-comments (*Chapter 6*) were all significant variables for the participant’s willingness to press the “like” or “dislike” button accordingly.

Differences for each country were also visible. While both countries showed the statistical trends above, Korea showed larger effect sizes regarding the following: 1) perceived public opinion from existence of “top” status; 2) willingness to press the “like” button for “top” comments / first three comments (depending on condition); and 3) the effect of “likability/dislikability” factors on the willingness to press “likes/dislikes.”

The researcher argues that the intercultural differences mainly show how Koreans think differently than Americans about “popularity.” In Korean culture, homogeneity is

regarded as a virtue (S. K. Cho, 1993)—socially accepted ideas, once established, gain more collective approval in Korea (Kim, 2008). Therefore, the number of “likes” and “top” status functions as indicator for social acceptance or “approved” ideas, resulting in a higher presumed influence for Korean audiences. In this sense, the assumptions of PI could be fulfilled more easily with Korean audiences. Coupled with having one of the most highly utilized internet and mobile infrastructures (Lee, 2012; Cho, 2009), Korean audiences may show strong tendencies for engaging in behavioral actions (“liking” or commenting) as well as being influenced by them in their news consumption.

In conclusion, statistical significance found from the dependent variables (willingness to “like” a comment; willingness to “dislike” a comment; perceived public opinion; perceived strength of public opinion on self; and perceived strength of public opinion on others) supported the three media effects theories and suggested a potential relationship among them when it comes to cognitive processes occurring behind news audiences’ online behavior.

CHAPTER 8. FOCUS GROUPS / INTERVIEWS

8.1. Focus groups

Three focus group sessions were conducted in each country (six sessions in all, $N=41$). Five of the six sessions had seven participants and one session in the U.S. had six. The sessions took forty-five minutes to an hour on average, during which six general, structured questions were asked. The researcher acted as moderator for the focus groups. One observer was present for each of the six sessions; the observer's notes were incorporated into the researcher's interpretations.

The researcher aimed to give all participants an opportunity to share ideas. In focus group settings, power dynamics are sometimes observable (Morgan, 1996). In order to prevent an individual or a subset of the group dominating the discussion, the researcher directed each structured question to a less frequently speaking member of the session. The researcher took note of unspoken language (Lindlof & Taylor, 2003) such as silence, facial expressions, laughter, body languages, etc, since these non-spoken expressions and interactions among participants also lead to important findings about their attitudes. In relation to the second strategy, the researcher and observer sought to identify relationships and interactions among participants as the discussion progressed. A strength of the focus group method is that rapport and interaction with other participants allows for a rich, in-depth look at the conversations (Adams, 2000; Morgan, 1996). Therefore, other members of the focus groups were mentioned (e.g., "Mr. A, you seemed agree with what Mr. B said. Would you like to elaborate?"). The researcher used silence and waiting as a tool for fostering discussions that may not occur otherwise if the structured questions were recited in order and with haste. Articulation of thoughts and follow-up discussions

may take time to develop, and the researcher was constantly aware of this possibility to reach as much as possible the full range of ideas and perspectives. Opportunities for follow-up questions were valued, including by provoking follow-up opinions (e.g., “Are there any other thoughts?”). The themes below arose from the discussions.

8.1.1. Reactions to the experiment

The first question was aimed at examining participants’ reactions to the news article in the experiment. The participants mostly shared their opinions on the perceived bias of the article and comments. Most participants did believe that the article was neutral, with equal viewpoints from both candidates. However, those who identified themselves as partisan (strongly in favor of one candidate) had issues with paragraph placement. This was common for both countries. For instance, supporters of Obama had issues with the story ending with information regarding Mitt Romney. They stated that it seemed to favor Romney. Some of the others who thought the article was balanced also concurred, saying that structure and placement within an article could lead to skewed opinions from readers.

Then the researcher introduced questions about the significance of the order of comments. At this point each session group, which was a mix of participants for both conditions (“top” status and no “top” status), were debriefed about the experiment design. Overall, participants agreed that the placement and order of comments influenced their understanding of public opinion. They mentioned that whichever comment they saw first would affect how they perceive others to think about issues, especially if it was a topic they know little about. While U.S. participants said that “top” status was not very important, most Korean participants said that “top” status could be taken to mean public opinion. Koreans mentioned that “likes” show the number of times the public voted on an

idea, and thus it could be directly translated to the concept of public opinion. This difference was consistent throughout the six sessions, which was contrary to the experiment findings where the U.S. participants also were affected by the “top” status condition. The researcher speculates that self-reports in the U.S. focus groups may have been influenced by the fact that they emerged during a discussion moderated by the journalism instructor who teaches at the university, which led them to reject any influence from factors other than content of the comments. The Korean participants were also aware that the researcher was a media scholar and instructor, but since the researcher was an outside member they had not met before, they may have been less cautious of the researcher’s presence.

Since the previous chapter established that the order and content of comments could be important factors for how public opinion is perceived, the researcher asked if their perception of public opinion affected their willingness to “like” or “dislike” a comment. A majority of the participants from the U.S. did not have a referable experience because they were not avid commenters or “likers,” but did say that they would probably “like” the comment if they were frequent users of the feature:

- “If I had to ‘like’ this comment, I would because I agree with it and it seems to be the public opinion. I would provide it with more strength and dominance.” (U.S.)

On the other hand, many participants in the Korean focus groups mentioned that they used the “like/dislike” button occasionally, and that they made sure to “dislike” a comment they disagreed with. This behavioral intention was associated with their concerns of the comment affecting others. This was more salient if the disagreeable comment was a “top” comment:

- “When I see something that’s a ‘top’ comment but is something that is bad, I always go and “dislike” it in hopes of making it come down from the ‘top’ board. Others could be affected by this, you know.” (Korea)

These intentions were also mentioned briefly in the U.S. focus groups, but appeared more saliently in the Korean participants.

A theme emerging from follow-up questions regarded the helpfulness of comments and “likes.” Majority of participants in both countries seemed to regard comments and “likes” to be unhelpful when reading news articles online. Overall, the participants suggested that the digital public sphere is not the best place to form understandings about public opinion. However, they showed intent to actively pay attention or participate in the forums to rectify the inaccuracy-ridden digital public sphere.

A participant summed up this idea well:

- “Although I think commenters are useless in general, I am active on the commenting forums because I think my comment or ‘like’ could help people form better informed ideas about issues.” (Korea)

The researcher found a sharp discrepancy between perceived effects on the self vs. others, which supports the TPE phenomenon. Moreover, the fact that participants universally agreed with these statements also implied collective recognition of the superiority of the self. This was noteworthy because the “third person” did not apply to those present in the room. The researcher speculates that, as an affinity group that had formed in the room throughout the course of the discussion, collective sentiments regarding issues such as self-assessment of perceived affects and the value of online comments, both of which were statements implying superiority of the members of the focus groups over online users.

8.1.2. Reasons for “liking”

To the question of what the participants meant when they “liked” something and what they thought others’ “likes” meant, participants across countries and sessions mentioned three main meanings of “likes” as they perceived them. First, “likes” meant *agreement/support*. This was congruent to the findings from other method phases. A participant said:

- “I ‘like’ a comment when I agree with what was being said. It could be a political comment, but also just a thought about life in general. I just have to be able to relate to it.” (U.S.)

Participants stated that this was especially more important in political news and even more so in elections, since ideologies, policies and candidates are usually sharply divided. In this light, the participants mentioned that they see “likes” severely promoting ideas and opinions in elections.

Koreans discussed manipulating comments by increasing the amount of perceived agreement through “likes” “Part-time commenters”—as the Korean participants put it—is sometimes controversial in the Korean digital public sphere, with political/interest groups seeking to hire individuals to manipulate the number of “likes.” A participant described personally seeing this:

- “I remember seeing a comment extolling Park one minute and when I refreshed the page two minutes later, the number of ‘likes’ had increased to over 1,000. I knew that something was up. They were trying to promote Park by making it seem like there were more people than in reality that agreed with this comment.” (Korea)

Two others in the same session added personal accounts of how they thought this was a prominent phenomenon (and a problem) in the Korean commenting sphere. When this concept of collective manipulation of “likes” (thus fabricating reality of the amount of

agreement from the public) was mentioned in the U.S. focus groups, the participants did not believe the idea or didn't care about it as much. In the U.S. however, some participants saw a similar problem in corporate communications or commercial messages:

- “On Facebook I see this all the time. One company makes some stupid statement about their product, and the number of ‘likes’ go up exponentially. I’m sure they’re hiring people who ‘like’ this stuff. It will make the statement seem like it’s gaining a lot of support from people.” (U.S.)

Second, “liking” meant the intention to spread ideas. Almost all of the participants who mentioned this as a reason for “liking” referred to Facebook. On Facebook, when a user “likes” a comment or post, this information is shared with his/her Facebook friends. Therefore, “liking” in many cases resulted from the desire to share content. A noteworthy aspect of this was that the desire to share occurred regardless of whether the participants agreed or disagreed with the issue. For instance, a commenter in the U.S. focus group said:

- “I remember ‘liking’ any post from CNN when the Boston bombing was being covered. I guess I ‘liked’ what CNN was doing, but I was mostly ‘liking’ on Facebook so that it will be on my wall and others will be in the know.” (U.S.)

Others also mentioned that they “like” comments that they feel deserve to be shown on top. This didn't necessarily have to do with agreement or support. One participant from Korea mentioned:

- “I evaluate the comments for how funny they are, and if they are super-funny I just ‘like’ them so that they can become ‘top’ comments. Reading funny stuff is one of the perks of surfing news online.” (Korea)

Some participants in the room disagreed with humor being an important reason to “like” a comment, but they agreed to some extent in that they use the “like” function to let an

ordinary comment become a “top” comment. Another participant from the same focus group said:

- “Even when I see irrelevant comments about someone dying or a sick kid on social media or online news websites, I’m inclined to press the ‘like’ button because I want others to know the situation. I know it sounds weird that I ‘like’ the picture or comment about a terminally ill kid, but that’s what I do since my ‘like’ will likely spread the idea around.” (Korea)

This quote implies that the word “like” is not really taken literally but modified in meaning for what it can accomplish. This phenomenon was more dominantly observable in the U.S.—one way to explain this is that more avid users of Facebook were in the U.S. groups, which was the most widely used website for using “likes” to spread ideas.

Third, “liking” meant alternative action (to active participation). Commonly for both countries, participants seemed to have an idea about the level of activeness it required for one to comment vs. “like.” One U.S. participant stated:

- “[I] see an issue that I have strong opinions with, but just press the ‘like’ button on a comment that is closest to my opinion because I can’t sit down and actually type my comments.” (U.S.)

This was attributed to the audiences’ struggle with processing too much information in the online news environment. A Korean participant said:

- “It’s just less work. I know several people who would just ‘like’ a comment rather than commenting on it or come back later to discuss it. I rarely come back to a story because there are so many new stories to read. I just can’t comment and come back and respond and... [sigh][laughter].” (Korea)

This participant’s laughter drew more laughter from the rest of the group, who seemed to resonate with what the participant was saying. This idea of “likes” being the alternative to actually commenting and discussing news was an important finding because it implies that active participation in the public digital sphere may be missing as a result of audiences who are overwhelmed with information. A U.S. participant said:

- “I sometimes feel bad about this because I know that as a citizen I ought to participate actively in discussions. But I don’t have time to really go and interact with others. The most I’ll probably do is ‘like’ a comment.” (U.S.)

Similarly, this behavior was connected with laziness. Mentioning Facebook, several participants in both countries mentioned that they “like” comments on their wall when they don’t have the time to respond to each one.

8.1.3. Influence of “likes” on the public sphere

One U.S. participant who spoke negatively about others’ “liking” behavior said:

- “I honestly don’t know why ‘likes’ are on the commenting boards. Whenever I read the ‘top’ comments, I feel like they are crap. Who “likes” these comments? I would rather talk with my friends at a coffee shop about this than to believe what the number of ‘likes’ mean.” (U.S.)

She was referring to the undesirable traits of “likes” (not specific in meaning, result of laziness in participation, promoting inaccurate or undesired viewpoints) and how that could be detrimental to the public discourse regarding news topics. A Korean made a similar comment:

- “I see this in all election news conversations. There is this struggle to win the debate, and ‘likes’ seem to be the indicator of who won. But when you read another article on the same topic, you see that the ‘top’ comments are completely different. It’s actually different for each article, so it’s dangerous if you form opinions after reading just one article and its comments.” (Korea)

Although both Korean and U.S. focus groups expressed such views, the concerns expressed above received more support in Korea.

This idea was also closely related to the participants’ perceptions of the influence of “likes” on the digital public sphere. No focus group mentioned the term public sphere, but participants agreed that there is less discrimination online. On the other hand, that

everyone had an opportunity was mentioned as a potential problem. A Korean participant said:

- “It might be good that everyone can share opinions and each of their ‘likes’ receive the same weight. However, what if a junior high student, who hadn’t formed any opinions about the candidates, decided to go and like any random comment? If this is done often enough, he [she] might have a negative influence on public opinion because people will see that somebody ‘liked’ the comment.”

Further discussion seemed to suggest (mostly in Korea) that one must be equipped and ready to comment and “like” in news discourse. The researcher observed that among the group was a common concern that an immature or ill-minded individual (“trolls”) could overtake the discussion in undesired ways. U.S. participants, albeit fewer of them, similarly mentioned the problem of trolls or indecency in comments. One participant stated the following and several others expressed similar thoughts:

- “Comments are so rude. They don’t do anything but piss people off. This is not helpful at all.” (U.S.)

Regardless of the difference in number in the two countries, everyone who expressed this concern expressed worries about the potential effect of “top” comments in the public sphere. Citing trolls or their intentionally deceptive/rude comments, participants said:

- “When they [trolls] start spreading weird rumors and it gets some ‘likes’ because it was funny or provocative, then the people just seeing the ‘top’ comments are prone to them.” (U.S.)
- “Rudeness brings rudeness. It’s like one mudfish just going crazy in the water and making the whole water all muddy. No one can help it.” (Korea)

The adage used in the second quote is equivalent to the English saying, “one rotten apple spoils the barrel.” The two participants stated that for something to be called deliberation for public opinion, it shouldn’t be determined by a single provocative person’s viewpoint.

They noticed, however, that provocative and marginal opinions are what the news media cover :

- “I only see stories about crazy people on the news, and it’s not much different in commenting culture.” (U.S.)

Since they believed a properly functioning online commenting sphere needs no gatekeeping/censoring mechanism, they suggested that the commenting forums as a place for public deliberation has even more potential issues for negatively affecting the functioning of the public sphere. Criticizing the news media’s lack of attention to the commenting boards, a participant said:

- “Do they [news organizations] even look at what you write? If so, they’re not doing a good job.” (Korea)

Anonymity was referred to as a main problem in the digital public sphere that amplifies the problem. A Korean participant said:

- “If people were to be held accountable for the things they say, they probably wouldn’t act like this.” (Korea)

Many people agreed, some even stating that they had written curse words in comments before because they knew that their usernames would be masked. Some disagreed however, referring to websites such as Facebook or nate.com (which formerly only allowed users to use real names) that had always had problems with indecency. In all, the focus groups mostly agreed that anonymity is a problem for proper public deliberation.

8.1.4. “Likability/dislikability” factors

Participants were asked what factors make them or someone else either “like” or “dislike” comments. The researcher encouraged participants to come up with two or three main “likability/dislikability” factors they thought were prevalent in the current

commenting landscape. As a result, three key “likability” and “dislikability” factors were identified. One “likability” factor mentioned by participants in both countries was *humor*.

One participant noted:

- “You know that the way to win internet is to say something funny. It’s funny or die out there.” (U.S.)

By *winning* the internet, he was referring to a widely used online expression, which takes the word *win* to mean something highly desirable or cool. Many other participants expressed agreement with this statement by nodding or smiling. Others made similar statements:

- “When I read comments, I actually look for whether they make me laugh.” (U.S.)
- “A humorous comment is what gets most ‘likes.’” (Korea)
- “No matter what the content, the funny ones are ‘liked,’ it seems” (U.S.)
- “Jokes make up the best comments.” (Korea).

Specifically in Korea, the word *sense* was used often to describe this. As described in findings about “likability” from sub-comments (*Chapter 6*), this word has a slightly different meaning in the Korean language, which refers to a mixture of sense of humor, wit, appropriateness, and reading the situation. However, different from the analysis of sub-comments, the word *sense* here was used to refer specifically to sense of humor. Participants said they looked for *sense* in comments, but when asked to elaborate, they all mentioned that humor was what constituted *sense*. This was the most widely mentioned factor—it was discussed in all six of the focus groups.

The second “likability” factor was *usefulness*. By this term, the participants referred to how useful the comment was in understanding the whole story. In five of the six focus group sessions a similar discussion took place about how some comments were

helpful for the participant in forming an informed opinion about the topic. They cited comments that held useful information or provided context regarding the situation:

- “I remember reading a comment that gave real detail [sic] statistical data about LeBron James. As a basketball fan who was beginning to like James, this was a useful comment because it let me figure out who the best NBA player was.” (U.S.)
- “There was a comment that allowed me to understand why Moon was saying the things he did about Roh. I’m embarrassed that I didn’t know about this before, but that comment let me understand how to understand him from that point on.” (Korea)

Many people also said that they find such comments to always have a high number of “likes,” which provided support for why this factor could be a “likability” factor. This factor was discussed in light of the problems of comments and “likes” for the public sphere. The participants seemed to believe that under the circumstances where “top” comments and “likes” could be undesirable for public opinion, comments that are useful should be promoted and voted up more:

- “These comments should be the “top” comments, not some random guy yelling the heck out about how Obama is a socialist or something like that.” (U.S.)

Participants offered different definitions of *usefulness*. Some said that it just needs to be useful to them personally, but others mentioned that the usefulness should apply to everyone (universal value). The former was more salient in the U.S. sessions and the latter in Korean sessions.

The third “likability” factor was *provocativeness*. This was contrary to what the researcher had found in *Chapter 6*, because provocative and strong language in comments was deemed to be a “dislikability” factor. However, participants mentioned that provocative comments are always more likely to receive “likes” and become “top”

comments because the extreme viewpoints are always going to be “liked” by a good portion of the public. The following quote encapsulates this perspective well:

- “When a comment is balanced or decent or polite or whatever, it’s going to go unnoticed. It’s the extreme comments and strong language that will garner any kind of a response. Sure, it can receive some ‘dislikes,’ but I feel like people are going to find something they agree with more, and so the ‘likes’ will overcome the ‘dislikes.’ Then that means that the comment will become one of the ‘top’ three.” (Korea)

She was taking the question to ask about what a standalone “likability” factor was, not look at the overall picture of the potential for “dislikes.” In other words, she was responding with her ideas on what merely increased the chance of “likes.” This was a different stance from the researcher’s own interpretation of the term, and thus this was noted with significance. To her comment, some others disagreed and said that provocativeness really isn’t a “likability” factor but a factor for debate. Despite opposition, she convinced others that the fact that these provocative comments do receive “likes” is a sufficient indicator of “likability.” As a result, consensus was established in that particular session. Besides, this factor was mentioned in more than just one session. In a total of three sessions, provocative was cited as a main factor for “likability,” all with similar logic as the Korean participant mentioned above. However, most participants agreed this was a “dislikability” factor as well. Thus, this factor would not have been a good variable for the experiment or other research phases; the fact that actual members of the online news audiences prominently mentioned this aspect allowed the researcher to better understand their perceptions of what constitutes “likability.”

Congruent to the main “likability” factor, the most frequently cited factor for “dislikability” was *uselessness*. The uselessness of a comment was explained in two ways: inaccuracy and lack of context (decontextualization). Participants were keen to

point out that any information that is proven to be inaccurate receive many “dislikes.”

Sometimes the participants believed that online audiences generate such comments to manipulate public opinion and engage in propaganda. Several participants mentioned deceitful agendas of commenters as a main reason for these comments and their “dislikability”:

- “When I see comments that promote wrongful information and start praising a certain political agenda, I cringe because it is a form of propaganda.” (U.S.)
- “Users or part-time commenters write these things that are inaccurate because they think they can control what we believe through the number of ‘likes’” (Korea)

Decontextualized comments were also deemed highly “dislikable.” This second attribute of *uselessness* was also apparent in both countries, although slightly more prominent in Korea. Mostly, the participants referred to commercial messages on commenting boards:

- “For any given news story, there will be an advertisement that somebody somewhere has managed to upload.” (Korea)

U.S. participants also mentioned the highly “liked” posts on Facebook that are visible in their news feeds, and said they would “dislike” if Facebook allowed the function (Facebook does not have a “dislike” button). Moreover, participants mentioned user comments that just say what they want to say, regardless of relevance to the news story. For instance, in both countries the participants noted seeing comments that were lengthy, full of ideological promotion but were on non-related articles. They believed that these kinds of comments were pre-written and uploaded to any story. What the participants were dissatisfied with (particularly in Korea) was the fact that some of these comments were “top” comments on some stories.

Another “dislikability” factor emerging in the discussions was *indecentcy/rudeness*. This was concurrent with the findings from the analysis of sub-comments. Participants

interpreted rude behavior as something that occurs from increased interactivity and anonymity:

- “When people are given this power to leave comments, and if their intentions are ill, they will just leave indecent comments everywhere. This is reprehensible behavior.” (Korea)
- “Anonymous comments is [sic] where this rudeness starts. They know that they can’t be found.” (U.S.)

These statements were received with approval from others, who shared their experiences of seeing user comments that were anonymous and extremely rude. In some cases, the participants were certain that the comments were from trolls who would repeatedly leave indecent comments. An avid commenter from Korea said:

- “There are commenter usernames I recognize and others recognize as bad influence. This commenter just wants attention, even if that attention results in ‘dislikes.’”

The notion of striving for attention was a commonly discussed theme in different sessions. Some participants noted that they thought the rude commenters seem to be enjoying themselves by leaving comments that are offensive to others. Furthermore, this commenting behavior was associated with negative influences for public opinion, as the participants expressed belief that these comments sometimes do become “top” comments and have the potential for offending people and skewing public opinion.

The last “dislikability” factor was *controversy*. This was a factor that was similar to the “likability” factor *provocativeness*. That is, not all participants believed that controversy was necessarily a bad thing, but they suggested nonetheless that these types of comments would always receive many “dislikes.” One participant in a U.S. group provided a representative statement:

- “You are bound to talk about controversial stuff, especially if it’s the elections. And even if these comments have valid ideas, they will always be ‘disliked’ because the other half of the population hate[s] your perspective.” (U.S.)

Again, this factor was a result of the participants understanding “dislikability” to mean something that gets “dislikes,” no matter under what context. This was different from the original intentions of the researcher but provided a different perspective of the notion of “dislikability”—“likes” and “dislikes” are two sides of a coin. This was also visible in both countries, and was mentioned in three out of the six sessions.

8.2. Interviews

Twelve interviews (five for U.S., seven for Korea) were conducted with media professionals (journalists, media executives, communications practitioners, IT specialists for news websites). Of the twelve, seven were journalists (three in the U.S. and four in Korea), one was a media executive at a broadcast news organization (Korea), two were communications practitioners (one for each country) and two were IT specialists (one for each country). Eight interviews were conducted in-person and four were conducted over the telephone (three for U.S., one for Korea). Regardless of occupation and areas of expertise, media professionals were commonly asked the same set of structured questions. The main focus of these individual interviews was to identify what media professionals think about the same issues that were mentioned in the focus group interviews. The media professionals, knowing that the researcher is a journalism scholar, constantly asked questions back to the researcher regarding findings and beliefs (e.g., “So what is known in your research about this?”). The researcher attempted to share parts of the findings but then directing the conversation back to the media professional.

8.2.1. Attention to “likes”

More than half of the journalists claimed that they rarely pay attention to comments or “likes.” Reasons cited for not paying attention to comments and “likes” were that they interfere with objectivity in reporting. A U.S. journalist said:

- “Comments and “likes” are a distraction because when you start reading them, you get lost. You have to maintain integrity as a journalist, because that’s in our job description.” (Journalist, U.S.)

On the other hand, the media executive and communications practitioners all stated that they pay attention to comments and “likes.” The media executive said:

- “I have to know what public opinion is. It’s my job. I have to tell my reporters and producers what issues to pursue and how people might react as a result.” (Media executive, Korea)

The communications practitioners for corporate organizations (both countries) said they pay attention to comments and “likes” because popular opinion affects how the public perceives their companies. The IT specialists (both countries) said they paid attention to these features because they are in charge of managing them—it was part of their job.

In this trend the journalists seemed divided by age and nationality. Three of the four journalists who were 39 or younger said they pay attention to comments and “likes.” All three journalists who were 40 or older said they do not pay any attention. Perhaps this shows a changing trend in journalists’ attention and recognition toward comments and commenting features. This was even more evident when the researcher asked about media professionals’ observations regarding whether newsrooms paid attention to “likes.” All journalists said that they noticed a trend of younger journalists and startup newsrooms

paying more attention to comments and “likes.” All but one media professional in Korea said that they pay attention to “likes,” but no journalist in the U.S. paid any attention.

8.2.2. *Attitudes toward “likes”*

The majority of media professionals mentioned that they thought user comments were not useful. Their comments suggest that the media professionals believed that these features could lead to misunderstanding of the mediated content.

- “[The features] may seem useful in terms of appearance, but inside the actual works are inaccuracy and diversion of attention that takes away from what we want to tell through the news stories.” (Journalist, U.S.)
- “When the users attempt to take over the news discourse, they are usually not as well prepared as we are. If they are, we are in trouble. Therefore, their comments can be helpful in some regards, but not in the comprehensive and helpful way that we are able to provide.” (Journalist, Korea)

This perspective cites the lack of expertise and professional principles on the part of audiences as the main reason. Media professionals believed that, as a professional who is handling media constantly, they will have more useful things to say in mediated communication. As a result, their evaluation of the helpfulness of comments from audiences was low. This self-acclaimed professionalism as the reason for not granting much value to comments was prominent in both countries.

Asked to assess the overall values of comments, media professionals were quick to respond with dissatisfaction. An IT professional referred to his experience on the job:

- “You have no idea how many comments get blocked due to profanity and curse words. You have no idea...” (IT professional, Korea)

The body language and frustration demonstrated from the media professional’s demeanor was especially strong, indicating that he was not in favor of user comments.

Some media professionals seemed to support the “like/dislike” voting system because they believed it was the best way to gauge public opinion:

- “It is the closest thing to accurate evaluation of what people think. It’s like a constant poll. Media needs it, you know.” (Communications practitioner, Korea)

The researcher believed that this didn’t necessarily mean they were in favor of the current state of commenting and “likes.” The same media professional also said:

- “...but something’s got to change with these systems. We need to do a better job of moderating them. I see that some meaningless comment gets ‘likes’ and I don’t get it.” (Communications practitioner, Korea)

At the other end of the spectrum were media professionals who thought “like” features were useless due to the distortion of their function or lack of clarity in this behavior from audiences:

- “It may have been a good thing in the beginning, but now it’s turned into this weird phenomenon where everyone is just striving to get ‘likes.’ The whole system lowers the quality of comments, even.” (Communications practitioner, U.S.)
- “It’s just so difficult to find out what they mean by ‘liking.’ If we don’t know that, what good is it?” (IT professional, U.S.)

This frustration and dissatisfaction toward current circumstances surrounding “likes” was highly visible in U.S. media professionals; mixed responses were mostly from Korean media professionals.

On the other hand, the notion of “top” comments was not supported commonly across professions and countries. The major issues were with implying rank among opinions and inability of the media to manage this feature:

- “I don’t know why they even have this ‘top’ comment thing. I think it’s just a way of lining up audience responses, which is wrong. Every opinion, if related to the topic, is important.” (Journalist, Korea)
- “People [in Korea] go crazy at this ‘top’ status thing. I’ve seen comments that beg for more ‘likes’ because they want to go on the ‘top.’ There is no value to that, yet they want it.”
- “So many useless comments on the ‘top’ list. What does ‘top’ mean anyway, then?” (Communications practitioner, U.S.)
- “It will only work if the polling system was better designed or managed.” (IT specialist, U.S.)

When asked about the perceived prominence and outlook for these features, all agreed that this is currently a big phenomenon, but some media professionals noted that they believe this culture is becoming obsolete with the use of social media. On the contrary, some believed that social media behavior consolidates current commenting and “liking” behavior and that they were going to be more prevalent in the future. These practitioners referred to websites that readily use social media websites (Facebook, Twitter) in order to incorporate comments from audiences, projecting that there will be an integrated system of comments that will be even more compatible with social media websites. A cultural divide existed in this discussion. All of the above discussions came from U.S. media professionals; Korean media professionals did not grant as much prominence to social media culture. This was perhaps because the news portal websites and their commenting features still outweigh the prominence of social media websites (E.-J. Lee, 2012; S. Lee, 2014; Y. Park, 2013). Only one journalist in Korea argued for the importance of social media websites such as YouTube and Twitter for online news.

8.2.3. Influence of “likes” on the digital public sphere

The media professionals’ universal dissatisfaction with “top” comment status was once again a main topic. Even so, the media professionals agreed that “top” comments are highly influential for public opinion, as indicated from the following comments:

- “The “top” comments are going to affect public opinion. I don’t like that. It’s too dangerous” (Journalist, U.S.)
- “They have “top” labels there for a reason. Why call it “top” if you are not going to imply that those represent the public opinion?” (Journalist, Korea)

Media professionals also expressed concern that “top” comments influence public opinion in negative ways:

- “They are negative because they receive too much attention” (Media executive, Korea)
- “The number of ‘likes’ do not necessarily mean that they are useful opinions.” (Journalist, U.S.)

Again, the researcher noticed that this was closely associated with media professionals’ lack of trust in audiences, at least among journalists who believed that audiences do not have the same abilities as professional journalists:

- “The “top” comments are there because they are popular. That’s true. But ‘popular’ and ‘good’ are two different things. Frankly speaking, I don’t think they do a better job than us as citizen journalists or whatever you call them. Their opinions are important, but that doesn’t mean they should receive more spotlight than the story.” (Journalist, Korea)

Another problem the media professionals saw with “top” comments was that extraneous factors could increase the likelihood of a comment gaining “top” status. One of those factors was chronological order. To this, two journalists (both from Korea), both communications professionals and both IT professionals provided personal experiences. For instance, the media professionals noted that they have noted more “likes” on

comments that were left before others, because they are visible for a longer period of time:

- “Those comments are the ones that others see when the news story makes it to the front page or something like that.” (IT professional, Korea)
- “I always pay close attention to when our releases go up and what kind of people comment the most at what times during the day. This is important because the first comments are really important... They have a higher chance of getting more ‘likes.’” (Communications practitioner, U.S.)

Another extraneous factor was the provocativeness of comments, which to the media professionals always seemed to garner more “likes.” In fact, this was a “likability” factor that was mentioned by two media professionals. Journalists in particular saw this factor to be both a prominent factor but problematic as well. A journalist in the U.S. said:

- “Although I don’t read comments often, I do notice that highly controversial and offensive ones, the ones that are provocative, come up on top. This is an issue for me because all the respectable discussions get buried somewhere in the pile.” (Journalist, U.S.)

Moreover, the researcher noticed that Korean journalists saw the need to rectify this phenomenon they deemed to be improper. A Korean journalist used the words “naive” and “gullible” to describe the public. Although he was referring to the collective naivety of people, he used these terms to emphasize that he and other journalists had to work harder to enlighten them. The media executive, while not using such terms, posited a similar idea, and also with solutions:

- “...the users are easily influenced by opinions, but it’s not their fault. It should really be our responsibility to bring them back to light... I noticed that the *New York Times* organizes the comments in the order that the editor picks. I think this is one way we could provide better methods to present public opinion from the people so that it is valuable to them.” (Media executive, Korea)

He was referring to the *New York Times*’ comment-sorting method based on the reporter’s picks, where the reporter reads the comments and picks three comments that

they like the most. By default, these comments could be shown first among the full list of comments (www.nyt.com). Again, this idea of the media professionals having the willingness and mission to rectify the situation and enlightening the people was only discussed in Korean interviews.

In terms of the influences of “likes” and “top” comments on how the media professionals themselves perceive public opinion, almost all media professionals said that they do not pay excessive attention to them or were influenced by them, as discussed above. However, when asked about newsroom/industry culture, some media professionals mentioned that they see a trend of shifting towards paying closer attention to “likes” and “top” comments when producing mediated content. The IT specialists (both countries) in particular mentioned that they were increasingly assigned more tasks that will help analyze the number of comments or “likes” to understand readers’ trends and preferences.

8.2.4. “Likability/dislikability” factors

The media professionals in each session were also asked about their observations on what “likability/dislikability” factors were visible. Responses for this question was far shorter and lacking in content in comparison to the focus groups, mainly because many of these media professionals normally do not pay attention to comments and “likes,” and even if they did, they admitted not having attempted to make the connection before. Many media professionals simply responded saying they don’t know. Ultimately, the factors that were mentioned with some prominence in the interviews were *usefulness*, *provocativeness* (“likability”) and *inaccuracy* (“dislikability”).

Usefulness was referred to as a “likability” factor in the same ways as the focus group sessions. Communications practitioners, who pay attention to “likes” often, mentioned this as the most important factor. They stated that the public and professionals alike appreciate useful information and that this effect of crowdsourcing was a good way to broaden the scope of the discussion. The journalists valued first and foremost how much useful information or ideas are provided in the comments, and this translated into their thinking that it was a factor for “likability.” For example, a journalist in Korea said he assumed that people would appreciate the comments that are helpful. However, the media professionals also mentioned they were making conjecture regarding this factor. One IT specialist, who regularly handles comments for website management, also mentioned that they have noticed some well-articulated and informative comments that were seemingly appreciated by the public, but he was not able to provide any concrete examples or experiences.

Provocativeness, as mentioned above, was another factor that was believed to increase the number of “likes.” This was discussed particularly in light of election coverage, since the media professionals also acknowledged that this topic is usually controversial:

- “When controversial topics are flying about, the provocative one gets noticed, and more ‘likes’ as a result” (Journalist, Korea)

Descriptions of this factor were in line with the findings from the focus groups. However, just because this was a “likability” factor did not mean that the journalists were also appreciative of provocativeness from the media’s perspective. The same journalist from Korea said:

- “But I don’t like the provocativeness, especially the calculated ones. It looks like they are putting some sort of spin to the comments just to gain attention. It’s the content that should matter when determining the number of ‘likes,’ not the provocative aspect. I see so many times that people go too far with this.”

Inaccuracy was a constantly mentioned “dislikability” factor among those who were able to provide an answer to the question. For each of the four who discussed “dislikability”—one journalist (Korea), one communications practitioner (Korea) and both IT professionals (U.S. & Korea)—they saw that inaccurate information in comments are visible and that they could be detrimental to public opinion formation. As a result, they personally showed strong tendencies to want to “dislike” such comments, but also saw or believed that this was the reason for audiences’ “disliking” comments. Further, they also expressed expectations for the public to appropriately “dislike” inaccurate comments:

- “I really want to believe that people will be able to read through the wrongful comments and figure out that someone’s lying. All the tools are right in front of them. They can read my story to find out also. I not only think that this is a big ‘dislikability’ factor, but also want to believe it is so.” (Journalist, Korea)

8.2.5. Other notable findings

Additional findings that were not originally included in the structured questions emerged during the in-depth interviews. First, the media professionals who had voluntarily participated in the controlled experiment provided critique of the experiment material. Unlike the focus group participants who reiterated their responses to the questions at the time of the experiment, the media professionals assessed the plausibility of the story and the comments that were in the stimulus material. This was proof that the media professionals approached the interview strictly from their professional perspectives. When asked about their response to other questions such as perceived bias of the story

and willingness to engage in behavioral responses, the media professionals were reluctant to admit their willingness, one way or the other. This was interpreted to result from their intention to not show any personal bias.

Second, two interviews (journalists, one from the U.S. and one from Korea) shifted to an in-depth discussion of the media's performance in the digital public sphere. The two journalists did not use the term public sphere but did discuss the media's functioning in society as the facilitator of deliberation for public opinion. Both journalists were skeptical of the current news media landscape in its value for public opinion formation. A main reason for this was that they were dissatisfied with the "obsession of news media to get the attention of people." (Journalist, U.S.) He was referring to the news media's struggle to find out what the audience wants and the fact that this struggle came before journalistic values such as "presenting newsworthy information in balanced ways." The Korean journalist also mentioned:

- "There is too much attention to these popular ideas or preferences that the news media is providing low quality material. The headlines of stories are all written to increase clicks... They are like movie trailers that just show some provocative thought and don't really have any substance. The news media must do a better job than this."

The researcher believed that the journalists were expressing concern with how the news media were struggling to provide useful information to the public, but rather were sacrificing quality coverage to provide items thought to be popular among people. They both also mentioned that this was a result of increased preference of speed and spectacular coverage.

In addition, one journalist from each country and the media executive from Korea expressed concern of what one called the "power of the internet mob." They were

referring to groups of people occupying the commenting sphere and changing the frame of the story completely. They believed that once an idea catches on in the commenting sphere and starts receiving “likes,” (or becomes “viral” as the media executive put it) the lopsided preferences of the public toward an idea is difficult to overturn. In other words, the media professionals showed concerns over how audiences frame issues quickly and with multitude. The journalist from Korea summarized this concern:

- “The feature [‘likes’] is playing the role that we normally would have.”
(Journalist, Korea)

Finally, Korean media professionals (but not U.S.) talked specifically about the problem of manipulative ideas in the online public sphere. Referring to personal experiences of seeing user comments that received an unusually high number of “likes” in a short period of time, the IT specialist from Korea hinted that he was aware of the ‘part-time commenter’ phenomenon that is allegedly occurring in Korea. He said that he has several screenshots and system logs that may prove this, although he couldn’t show them to the researcher because of clearance issues. Other media professionals in Korea were aware of the “top” comment manipulation issues, and believed that they were indeed real. When asked about how much this worries them, the media professionals said that they were extremely concerned. The media executive feared:

- “If this whole part-time thing keeps up, by the next elections we might not even have any genuine “top” comments on the popular websites. Regulations must be implemented, like the investigation they are conducting for the NIS.”
(Media executive, Korea)

He was referring to the comment manipulation charges of a former National Intelligence Service (NIS) staff, who as a member of the government were allegedly uploading highly manipulative comments on a regular basis (Chang, Lee, & Cho, 2012). Some even made

allegations about this employee receiving monetary compensation as a result of doing this. In sum, the media professionals in Korea were more aware and concerned about the manipulation of “top” comments and the influence they might have on public opinion.

8.3. *Summary*

Overall, focus group participants believed that “top” comments were not very helpful for the deliberation for public opinion, because of the risk of inaccurate or unrelated information becoming a “top” comment. This is also to say that participants believed that “top” comments do have an influence on the public. However, they were reluctant to admit any influence on them, constantly referring to the quintessential commenter as “they.” Also, some concern was expressed about how chronological order of comments do affect the number of “likes,” which takes away any assessment of the actual value of the comment but just ends up being a factor that allows any quick commenter to be dominant in the online discourse. This was congruent with findings from the ranking comparison method in *Chapter 6*. Notably, these concerns were more salient in the Korean focus groups, as the researcher noted more agreement and common reactions to the concerns expressed about the usefulness of comments. Also, Korean participants did to some extent acknowledge their preference toward highly “liked” comments. Most U.S. participants were not commenters or “likers” themselves, but many Korean participants were active users of these features on online news websites.

“Likability” factors were also identified from the discussions. They were *humor*, *usefulness* and *provocativeness*, in order of prominence. “Dislikability” factors were *uselessness*, *indecentcy/rudeness* and *controversy*. Four of the six factors were closely associated with findings from other research methods. However, two factors

(*provocativeness, controversy*) were factors that were not considered by the researcher, and was a result of the participants understanding “likability/dislikability” as *sheer potential for receiving “likes/dislikes” in any context*. The researcher concurred with this additional angle for understanding the factors and included them in the findings.

The media professionals overall did not admit to a high level of attention to comments or “likes,” Citing their professional principles and distrust of commenters. Even so, the media professionals believed that “likes” and “top” comments are popular cultural practices and influential in society. In turn, they expressed concern about the influence of “top” comments on deliberation for public opinion. The main reason for this concern was due to the lack of credibility and value in some of the “top” comments and the risks deriving from the overall phenomenon. Particularly in Korea, media professionals believed that the public was gullible and needed enlightenment. Furthermore, the media professionals mentioned the prominence of social media websites and their influences on commenting culture. The “likability” and “dislikability” factors mentioned in the interviews were lacking in in-depth discussions because of the little attention they have for “likes” in general. The factors that were mentioned were *usefulness* and *provocativeness* as “likability” factors and *inaccuracy* as “dislikability” factors. Korean media professionals were more regularly paying attention to user comments and “likes.” While media professionals from both countries acknowledged the influence of “likes” and “top” comments and expressed concern about their negative impact on public opinion, Korean journalists in particular believed that it was their duty to enlighten the public who were deemed gullible. Moreover, Korean media professionals showed stronger concern regarding manipulation of comments.

CHAPTER 9. DISCUSSION

9.1. Triangulation

The mixed methods design allows the researcher to triangulate findings so as to understand a complex phenomenon from different angles (Creswell, 2009). Conducting more than one method increases the reliability and validity of measures and allows the researcher to identify any issues that can be resolved through further investigation (K. Anderson & Brewer, 2008). This is especially useful for media and communication studies due to the rapidly changing nature of web media and audiences' practices (Sjovaag & Stavelin, 2012). User comments and "likes" are relatively new modes of audience engagement.

The four research methods were: 1) Framing analysis of "top" comments and sub-comments; 2) ranking comparison analysis employing the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test of the correlation between chronological order and number of "likes"; 3) experiment examining the effect of "likes" on perceived opinion and online behavior; and 4) Focus groups (online news users) / interviews (media professionals). The research phases addressed seven research questions that addressed aspects of the overarching question: **"do the "like"/"dislike" features of commenting forums for online news websites demonstrate problems for their functioning in the digital public sphere?"**

To triangulate findings, the researcher grouped findings from each research method by key topics or themes extracted from the seven research questions. The themes were as follows: *Audience framing*, *Factors for "likes,"* *Attitudes toward "likes,"* and *Influence of "likes"/"top" comments*. The researcher looked for commonalities, overlaps,

contrasting trends, outliers and/or narratives that could be drawn from the synthesis of the data (Creswell, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Quantitative data, when applicable, was used to support findings from the qualitative data, a triangulation procedure that is used in this dissertation's sequential exploratory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2009). The researcher was also able to make inferences about possible relationships and influences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 285), particularly regarding intercultural differences on the problems of "likes" in the digital public sphere.

9.1.1. Comment framing

RQ1 looked for frames in "top" comments for most commented news stories for how audiences negotiated meaning in the news stories and engaged in discussions with others. Framing analysis of "top" comments sought to examine how audiences made meaning of news stories (*reframing*) and employed *framing strategies* to perpetuate their frames in the online discussion. From analysis, three main types of reframing ("*And the winner is...*"; "*They're deceptive, you are stupid*"; "*There is more to the story that we ought to know*") and two main strategies (*Encouraging action—approve my disapproval*; *Shutting down the opposition*) were found.

As a part of the framing analysis, this dissertation also looked at sub-comments left under those "top" comments to understand how audiences received the frames presented in the "top" comments. Findings from this second framing analysis yielded "likability" (*Humor, Witty rebuttal, Media criticism, Socially accepted trends*) and "dislikability" (*Indecency/rudeness, Manipulation, Decontextualization*) factors. Of the "likability" factors, *Media criticism and Socially accepted trends* support findings regarding audiences' comment framing. *Media criticism* was a factor that could be

aligned with “*They are deceptive, you are stupid*” frame. For the frame, the most saliently cited “they” was the news media. Therefore, to find that audiences acknowledged and “liked” comments with *media criticism* shows this frame is perhaps a widely accepted negotiated meaning among audiences.

Socially accepted trends was a “likability” factor that explained the salience of framing strategies used by “top” commenters. A main framing strategy of “top” comments was *encouraging action* (pressing “likes”) from audiences, asking them to approve the ideas of the comment, especially *Socially accepted trends*. For example, on a news story (Y. Kim, 2012) that covered the Presidential candidates’ policies regarding small businesses, a “top” comment shared a personal story emphasizing the lack of attention the current administration is giving to start-up companies. The “top” comment was thematized as having the *Socially accepted trends* because the story was similar to another “top” comment about a previous story (Kang, 2012), with only minor differences in details to the story. That is, the “top” commenter reused a well-received comment again as a strategy to gain prominence through “likes.” To this comment, sub-commenters responded by expressing approval and showing this “likability” factor :

- “Your story is very compelling. How fitting for this news story... The government policies are indeed killing us.” (Korea)
- “A comment like this must be given “top” status. We all agree with the lessons from your story.” (Korea)

Despite other sub-comments criticizing the “top” commenter for using the same story, the comment received enough “likes” to be one of the three “top” comments for the second new story. Perhaps this showed that audiences were also aware of the “likability” factor and as commenters they worked to secure more “likes.”

Similarly, “dislikability” factors such as *Indecency/rudeness* pointed to how audiences’ comment framing frequently used *Shutting down the opposition* as a strategy. In reframing, “top” comments used strong language to criticize opposing viewpoints. Such strong expressions were sometimes received negatively to be indecent and rude, which supports findings showing frequent use of this strategy.

Data collected from focus groups and interviews (the fourth research method) also provide supporting evidence of findings from the framing analysis. Participants mentioned each of the three reframing themes, as exemplified in the following quotes:

- *Frame: “And the winner is...”*— “People hastily draw conclusions, wanting to find a winner. Combined with the fast-paced technology, I think it can be a huge problem.” (Focus group participant, U.S.)
- *Frame: “They are deceptive, you are stupid”*— “I honestly feel people don’t read through the media’s agendas as well.” (Focus group participant, U.S.)
- *Frame: “There is more to the story than we ought to know”*— “I would say that a main ‘likability’ factor is how useful the comment is. You know, how it introduces relevant information for others.” (Journalist, Korea)

The last quote in particular represents a major “likability” factor identified by focus group participants and media professionals alike. Both groups cited usefulness as a “likability” factor, which is aligned with findings regarding how “top” comments reframe news stories by providing new angles and information about the topic under discussion. Focus group participants / media professionals also shared observations regarding the strategies used in “top” comments, which included both *Encourage action* and *Shutting down the opposition*.

9.1.2. Factors for “likes”

The various factors for “likes” were discussed in RQs 2, 3, 6, and 7. Procedures and findings from the different methods were interlinked in the mixed methods design to complement each other:

Analysis of sub-comments found four “likability” factors (*Humor, Witty rebuttal, Media criticism, Socially accepted trends*) and three “dislikability” factors (*Indecency/rudeness, Manipulation, Decontextualization*). Of these, *Humor, Witty rebuttal and Media criticism, Indecency/rudeness, and Decontextualization* were incorporated as independent variables in the comments used for the experiment. Experimental findings were that all five factors were significant indicators for participants’ willingness to “like” and “dislike” a comment, respectively.

Focus group sessions also inquired about “likability/dislikability” factors based on participants’ observations and assumptions. Participants mentioned *Humor, Usefulness* and *Provocativeness* as “likability” factors and *Uselessness, Indecency/rudeness* and *Controversy* as “dislikability” factors. Among their responses, *Humor, Uselessness (Decontextualization)* and *Indecency/rudeness* matched the findings from the analysis of sub-comments. Participants discussed these factors in similar ways as was found in sub-comments, which further verified the adequacy of analysis.

The ranking comparison tested chronological order and “likes” used material drawn from the same two websites (*Yahoo! News* and *nate.com*). Results supported the researcher’s hypothesis, showing that the shorter the time of the comment from when the article is published, larger the chance of the comment receiving more “likes.” Chronological order was also brought up voluntarily by the participants of the focus

groups / interviews. In more than half of the focus group sessions and from four of the thirteen media professionals interviewed, order of comments were discussed as a potential factor for increase in “like” numbers and as a potential problem. Furthermore, considering that the most recent comments appear on top on many news websites, the experiment data may also support the findings on chronological order. In the no “top comments condition (no indication of “likes” or “top” status), the comments that were on the top of the list tended to receive more “likes” (or the willingness of audiences to “like”) on average. Since the experiment was designed with specific variables this finding is not significant, but the general trend from the participant groups across countries and other characteristics (predispositions, online news usage, gender, education) perhaps implies that the trend was also visible there.

9.1.3. Attitudes toward “likes”

A little more than half of focus group participants said that they use and appreciate the “likes” feature and the rest either indifferent or not in favor of the “like” feature. No media professional approved of “liking” culture.

After the experiment, one set of questions asked about participants’ attitudes toward “likes” by rating, on a four-point scale, statements about their attention to “likes” and their perceived helpfulness of “likes/dislikes.” participants were slightly above neutral for both their levels of attention to “likes/dislikes” ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.11$) and helpfulness of “likes/dislikes” ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.05$). These findings were compatible with the findings from the focus group sessions, whose participants were a sub-set of experiment participants. The second set of questions gave participants a hypothetical situation (that they had left a comment) and asked whether they would pay attention to

the number of “likes,” and why. Close to 60% of respondents said they would pay attention, and many of them explained that “likes” allow them to gauge how well fit to the public’s opinion their own comments are. This was also consistent with discussions from the focus groups. In sum, findings from the focus groups and the experiments to the same findings and complemented each other. Responses from media professionals were quite different; this will be discussed further in section 9.2. *Discussion*.

Finally, analysis of “top” / sub-comments and focus group /interview sessions suggests that audiences value “likes.” In the “likability” factor *Socially accepted trends*, many sub-comments mentioned that “this comment has to be ‘liked’” or a comment “doesn’t deserve to be ‘top.’” That is, audiences appreciate “likes” and what it means, and also hold certain expectations and viewpoints about what should be “liked” or not. In some cases, even indications of obsession for “likes” were visible. As shown in the framing analysis of “top” comments, some users sought to receive more “likes” by encouraging others to “like” their comment (framing strategy: *Asking for ‘likes’*). In the same category, some sub-comments mentioned that the commenter is “crazy over ‘likes’” or the commenter is a “‘top’ comment whore.” The same phenomenon was discussed in focus groups and interviews. Focus group participants mentioned a web-wide obsession over “likes” and becoming a “top” commenter. A journalist in the U.S. said:

- “There seems to be an unreasonable liking toward ‘likes,’ and I just don’t get it [laughter].” (Journalist, U.S.)

Furthermore, the cognitive processes mapped out in the experiment (HME, TPE, PI) were supported from focus group participants’ accounts. All seven sessions generated a discussion about how the comment affects others more (TPE). Participants even hinted

that they use “like/dislike” buttons to promote a comment or to keep a comment from reaching “top” status (PI).

Audiences seem to appreciate and utilize “likes” and believe that the feature has become an important part of online news discussions. However, they seem to think that some *others* in the audience are overly attached to the “likes” and “top” comment features and they regard this as a problem.

9.1.4. Influence of “likes” and “top” comments

The central finding was that audiences’ meanings made from engaging with news stories (RQ #1) gain importance with “likability” factors (RQs #2 & #3), which turns them into “top” comments and influences their attitudes (RQs #4, #5 & #7) and perceptions about public opinion (RQs #6 & #7). The figure below illustrates the connection among the research questions:

The model below suggests first based on the framing analysis of comments, that audiences make meaning of the news story and reframe the issue. They also utilized framing strategies to make salient their frames in the online discussion. As discussed in *Sections 9.1.1* and *9.1.2.*, “likability” factors drawn from sub-comments were congruent to many of audience framing themes and strategies. The “likability” factors, including the chronological order of comments, were found to be significant indicators of the participant’s willingness to “like.” Furthermore, audiences’ attitudes toward “likes” and “top” comments (discussed in *Section 9.1.3.*) imply that the features receive prominence in the digital public sphere.

The experiment indicated that “top” status indeed affected participants’ perception of public opinion, meaning that they gauged “top” comments to be accurately illustrating public opinion. The experiment tested hypotheses 2, 3, 4, and 5 based on the theoretical linkage among the research questions. Results supported all hypotheses, indicating a significant relationship between “likes” and perceptions of public opinion.

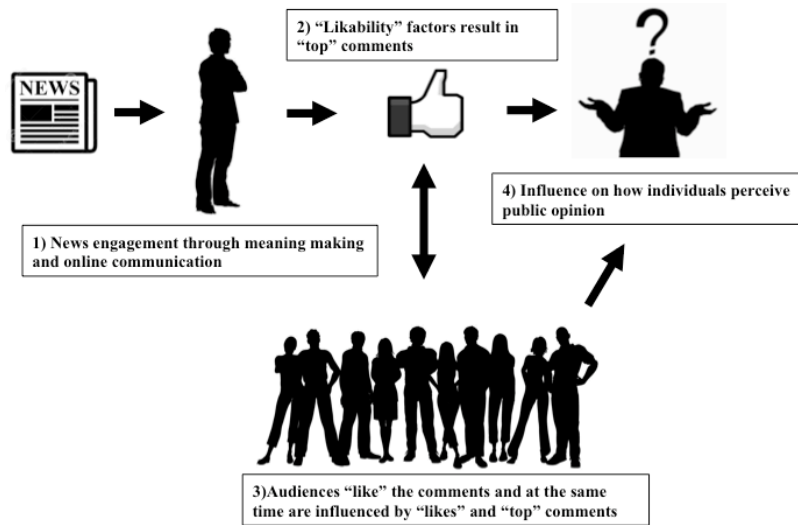


Figure 4. The influence of “likes” and “top” comments

Similar inquiry was made in person via the focus group / interview sessions. Participants provided account of noticing how “top” comments dictated public discourse, and although fewer in number, several participants also mentioned that even they sometimes paid attention to “top” comments to make decisions about what the dominant opinions about the topic would be.

The focus group participants / media professionals also expressed distinct concern about the negative influences of “likes” and “top” comments. For instance, media professionals discredited the influence of “top” comments because they tend to take the discussion to less relevant or skewed viewpoints. Similarly, focus group participants were

concerned about manipulation of comments and “likes” that leads people to misunderstand public opinion:

- “The danger is that some extreme person can somehow, [in] some way get more ‘likes’ and other people might believe that this is the only important opinion.” (Communications practitioner, U.S.)
- “The people who try to do something with the ‘likes...’ They are ill-minded. They try to control what you believe, and I’ve seen that it works quite often. Just think about the ‘reply manipulation teams with the political parties.’” (Focus group participant, Korea)

In addition, sub-comments also discussed the negative influences of “top” comments:

- “To see that this is a ‘top’ comment worries me. What are people going to believe?” (Korea)
- “How did this comment get so many ‘likes?’ What are you people thinking? Gimme a break. I can’t believe people believe this crap.” (U.S.)

Finally, intercultural differences were visible. Korean audiences in general showed a greater tendency to be influenced by “likes” and “top” comments. Some framing strategies (*Socially accepted trends*, *Asking for “likes”*) and “dislikability” factors (*Manipulation*) appeared only in Korea. Moreover, Koreans showed a higher tendency to use the commenting and “like” features as well as show a relatively more favorable attitude toward “likes” (both the focus groups and interviews) in comparison to U.S. participants. Most importantly, responses in the experiment regarding how they perceived public opinion with and without “top” status illustrated that Korean audiences were influenced more by “top” comments. The consistency with which various data pointed to this tendency allowed the researcher to conclude the kinds and extent of the intercultural differences. Refer to the following table for a summary of the triangulation of findings:

Findings	RQs	Method	Remarks
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Comment framing	RQs #1, #2, #7	- Analysis of “top” comments - Analysis of sub-comments - Focus group / interview	Reframing & framing strategies confirmed through “likability/dislikability” factors found in sub-comments and focus group / interviews
Factors for “likes”	RQs #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7	- Analysis of sub-comments - Ranking comparison analysis (Wilcoxon test) - Experiment - Focus group / interview	“Likability” factors identified and tested; further supported through focus group / interview
Attitudes toward “likes”	RQs #4, #5, #6, #7	- Experiment - Focus group / interview	Findings from experiment and focus group pointed to similar attitudes
Influence of “likes” and “top” comments	All	All	Different methods provide findings associated with the model of the influence of “likes” and “top” comments
Intercultural differences	All	All	Differences consistent throughout

Table 8. Summary of triangulation

Subsequent sections will provide a discussion of how these features influence the digital public sphere and its function in society as a place fostering the deliberation for public opinion.

9.2. Discussion

This dissertation explored an emerging form of online news engagement, user comments and “likes,” for how they influence the deliberation for public opinion in the digital public sphere, since what it really means when users “like” a comment and what factors make users willing to “like” are not known. The researcher began with four assumptions and a query about the digital public sphere and “likes”:

- 1) The public sphere requires the concurrent exchange of ideas in shared domains.***
- 2) Discussions in the public sphere should include as many willing members of the public with as much relevant available information as possible.***
- 3) The public sphere should not have any pre-determining factors.***
- 4) The public sphere is a fixed domain that does not take into account peculiarities of communities or cultures.***
- 5) What it really means when users “like” a comment or what motivating factors make them willing to “like” is not known.***

The researcher revisits these problems and discusses findings in light of them.

9.2.1. Problem #1: Concurrent exchange of ideas in shared domains

The concept of concurrency or synchronicity of discussions is an essential aspect of Habermas's original notion of the public sphere (Haas, 2004; Habermas, 1989; Huang, 2012). Habermas based the notion of the public sphere on the real-time, face-to-face discussions occurring in salons and coffeehouses (Habermas, 1989). This is also similar to the early implementations of democracy before delegacy and representation among citizens were in place (Goode, 2005; Urbinati, 2002). For the public sphere, deliberation processes are most successful when participants share the same space and time and discuss common issues together (Goode, 2005). Interactivity from online commenting forums may provide the potential for this since anyone with access to the forums can join the conversation without physical limitations (Lin, 2009).

However, the researcher posited that even with the increased capabilities of audiences to partake in online discussions, problems may arise since these discussions are not really concurrent nor occur in the same spaces. Focus group members mentioned that with increasing pace of online communication and large volumes of information available to them every day, they do not remain in commenting forums longer than ten minutes. Even when they are on the commenting forums, they found themselves preoccupied with other websites and web features. The convergence of platforms available on their computers and smartphones have distracted audience attention from fully participating in online discussions. When asked to describe a typical commenting experience, one focus group member mentioned that she opens several tabs on an internet browser, each displaying different websites including social media (Facebook, YouTube),

news portal (nate.com, daum.net) and community (blogs) websites. She said that she would stay on Facebook for a minimal amount of time, tending to friend requests or viewing interesting posts for a few minutes. For other websites, she would remain longer but not at a single page for more than five minutes. She mentioned that she clicks on multiple links on whichever tab looks interesting. Then she would spend a few minutes on each link, viewing the content and, when applicable, comments from others; she would close each tab and consume as many links as time allows. As a result, according to her accounts, her consumption of news stories, or any web content for that matter, was less than ten minutes maximum. Although not in as much detail, many others in the focus group sessions also mentioned that even when they do read comments, they do not take time to view them carefully.

This finding can be discussed in light of a finding here that nearly 50% of participants (191 out of 400) said they spend an hour or more consuming online news on a daily basis. Audiences appear to still consume news on a daily basis. This is similar to other studies that looked at audiences' online news consumption and engagement (S.-K. Oh & Nan, 2013; C. Y. Yoo, 2011; You et al., 2011). However, the focus groups here suggest that such findings merely represent quantity of consumption, not quality. Audiences are not exchanging as many ideas. Even if they are, they do not consider the space or time as being fully shared. Another focus group participant mentioned that when he leaves comments, he does so in a matter of minutes and leaves (closes) the web page. He does make it a rule to come back to his comment to see how many "likes" or sub-comments he received, but he rarely noticed that the main topics of the conversation were what he observed when posting the comment. Especially when his comments receive

many “likes,” he said that the increased number of people engaging with his comment meant that they were discussing something completely different and that what he had originally thought often became obsolete.

This highlights the central idea of the first problem of “likes” in the digital public sphere. Because online audiences do not participate in real-time or stay in same spaces, their shared ideas are diffuse and lack a focus. Depending on when they join the conversation, the online discussions are shaped in different forms that do not accurately depict how ideas were exchanged and deliberated upon. This could be solved if audiences attempted to follow discussions thoroughly so as to identify the multiple facets of the discussion. However, as mentioned above, although today’s audiences may have the capabilities to do so, they tend not to because of the increasing amounts of information and the pace at which they are provided to them. Thus, commenting forums and “likes” as features of the digital public sphere may not be functioning in the ways Habermas had imagined.

Findings from the ranking analysis of chronological order of comments further support this idea. The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test showed that, in both countries, the shorter the time span between a comment and the news article, higher the probability of the comment receiving more “likes.” The researcher’s interpretation of this is that, just as audiences consume news more quickly and perhaps more superficially, audiences usually end up viewing only the first few comments that accompany a news story. As a result, the decision to “like” a comment is made from a smaller pool of comments that are available. The websites analyzed here (*Yahoo! News* and *nate.com*), as well as many others, display comments in order of currency by default—the comments that audiences are determining

whether to “like” are the ones that are most recent at the point of their accessing the story. The issue, in relation to the exchange of ideas in the public sphere, is that content or quality of comments get less priority. Audiences do not fully evaluate the quality of all comments by so the number of “likes” is highly dependent on the dispersed “coming and going” of audiences, or the small window of time and variety of comments that the audiences see for each story.

Some may argue that this also happens in face-to-face situations. Physical spaces are highly limited and cannot accommodate participants. Participants are not able to participate in face-to-face discussions for long periods of time. This is a major critique of the idealistic assumptions made regarding the original notions of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Holub, 1991). Therefore, some claim that the digital setting is far closer to accommodating the notion of discussions set forth in the public sphere (Beers, 2006; Cenite & Yu, 2010). The researcher also acknowledges that the online landscape does provide more leeway in terms of people’s participation in discussions and that the newly available communicative technologies bring us closer than ever to meeting the requirement of concurrent time and space. However, the problem becomes significant if people perceive the online landscape to be simply better than face-to-face situations for deliberation in the public sphere.

This is a caveat for understanding what the current online commenting spheres do provide and what they do not. Merely assuming that the digital public sphere enhances discussions is dangerous. The current digital public sphere accommodates interactivity and increased access but at the same time has diminished the amount of attention given to individual content. People can be everywhere online and access more things, but they do

not make themselves available to discuss matters in full. Consequently, “likes” can be misleading in that people may interpret each “like” to be a product of sufficient deliberation when they are not. As long as audiences handle convergence of information and platforms with short-lived engagement, “likes” should rather be considered as a product of short-term, limited consumption from audiences that may not hold as much meaning.

Two short news stories-- about Romney cancelling rallies amid concerns over Hurricane Sandy (Bailey, 2012a, 2012b)--provide good examples. The two stories were a day apart and written by the same reporter for the same news organization. However, “top” comments and sub-comments for each story were completely different. On one story, the top comments commended Romney and mentioned that they were “glad to see candidates honoring the seriousness of the storm.” Sub-comments also expressed similar sentiments. In contrast, two out of the three “top” comments on the second article criticized Romney for being a liar. Sub-comments complied with same levels of anger and dissatisfaction toward Romney. Neither story took a position for or against the candidate; nothing noteworthy occurred between the two news stories that made it particularly plausible for people to criticize Romney—they were merely criticizing him in general.

Since audiences do not share the same news articles consistently or visit the web page to comment at the same time, two opposing views on Romney took over the commenting forum for each story based on who occupied it. Moreover, if audiences do not read news stories fully and comprehensively, then people who view only one of the two stories and only the “top” comments will have a skewed perspective about Romney.

Besides, on one story the topic itself (Romney's cancelling events) became much too simplified (negativity toward Romney).

Why this occurs could also be explained with the bandwagon effect. The term in the traditional sense is defined as the benefit that a person enjoys as a result of others' doing the same thing that he or she does (Rohlf's & Varian, 2003). In the case of this dissertation, the "person" would be the commenter. However, the researcher looks beyond this definition and approaches the bandwagon effect from both the commenter and the audiences' perspectives. From the commenter's perspective, his or her framing in the comment gains prestige as it receives more "likes"—the bandwagon effect helps make salient the frame in public discourse, and that is why many strategies to perpetuate the frames were visible (Berger, 2010; Fu, 2012). Much like in the case of marketing objectives, "suppliers aiming for the bandwagon are band conductors who try to get consumers [others in the audience] to play in concert to achieve the supplier's goal." (Rohlf's & Varian, 2003, p. 4)

On the other hand, from the audiences' perspective, the bandwagon effect means that after the first few people say something and gain popularity, this sets in copying motion (of behaviors, ideas) from the rest of the audience (Fu, 2012; Rohlf's & Varian, 2003; S. S. Sundar, Odeldorf-Hirsch, & Xu, 2008). In combination with findings from the ranking analysis, chronologically early comments tend to get more "likes" and thus hint popularity. Such a phenomenon can be crucial to deliberation processes in the public sphere because perceptions of popularity and the following bandwagon effect may not adequately reflect a comment's prestige for what it contributes to the discussion. First and highly "liked" comments could set the context, tone and flow of subsequent arguments

even when they have little to do with the topic or overly represent only a narrow aspect of the issue. As a result, the bandwagon potentially takes the rest of the audience to directions that hinder the provision of a full range of ideas or information.

Therefore, context of the discussion should be taken into consideration (Whitaker et al., 1997; Wu Song, 2009). But, if audiences merely jump on the bandwagon based on the few allegedly popular (or chronologically early) comments, do not constantly share the same commenting forum, or go back on the timeline to view older comments, then context can be lost. Lack of context is closely associated with another key concept, “exchange of ideas.” The public sphere functions properly when participants discuss *shared* topics in *shared* domains; the topic under discussion should be mutually accepted and understood as the issue of concern. However, the transitory by-passers of the web often do not discuss same topics because they come to the discussion at different times and in different places (web domains). For user comments and “likes” to function as elements that enhance the digital public sphere, context of discussions and topics should be emphasized, both by media who provides initial information and fosters discussions, and among audiences who receive the information and participate in those discussions.

9.2.2. Problem #2: Willing members and relevant available information

A second and related problem with “likes” relates to the researcher’s assumption that *discussions in the public sphere should include as many willing members of the public with as much relevant available information as possible*. Audiences do not fully participate in discussions because their news consumption habits hinder a thorough and real-time discussion of topics. The problem with “likes” emerges when factors not crucial

for deliberation (e.g., chronological order, readily visible comments, extreme viewpoints) receive more “likes.”

For the public sphere, participation from willing members is key (Adut, 2012). Audiences, as citizens, participate through various ways, most of which have shifted to online participation (Shah et al., 2005). increasing numbers of people engage in online activism, which often fosters online discussions, especially on news topics (Canter, 2013; J. Cho et al., 2009; McCombs et al., 2011). These willing participants are the key element to the digital public sphere. However, as discussed in the previous section, *willingness of members to participate* is inconsistent, and even insufficient at times, for a well-functioning public sphere. Audiences, in an attempt to filter out the plethora of information available to them, only take part in discussions sporadically and in many cases do not even pay attention to the context of the discussion. This poses an issue for deliberation for public opinion because individuals do not show the willingness to be adequately informed to make decisions on issues (N.-J. Lee et al., 2012; Patterson & Seib, 2005).

Moreover, the audiences studied here do not frequently use commenting features. In the U.S., 65 percent of participants said that they never comment and 42 percent said that they never use the “like” feature. When asked about the extent to which they pay attention to comments and “likes,” participants’ ratings were slightly over the middle point of the scale. More Korean participants leave comments or use the “like” feature, but even there, more than 50 percent of responses said they comment or “like” once a week or less. Other studies also found audiences participation in online news discussions to be lower than expected in Korea and the U.S. (You et al., 2011; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013).

These findings suggest that online audiences may not be utilizing online discussion features as much as has been posited by enthusiasts (Santana, 2011; Shanahan, 2009; Thorson, 2008).

This is not to say that user comments and “likes” are irrelevant. Findings verified that “likes” and “top” comments were significant factors for how people understood public opinion. However, the low statistics of actual participants in online commenting forums do signify a problem: *the comments and “likes,” as influential as they may be, do not represent participation from audiences as a whole.* That is, ideas of the fewer, highly willing participants will be visible in the digital public sphere. Pareto’s (Pareto, 1974) rule can be applied here. Studying Italy’s economy in the early 1900s, he observed that 20 percent of the Italian population received 80 percent of the total income. Later, this socioeconomic trend was coined the “80-20 rule.” Similarly, studies found that a smaller group of highly willing members can be attributed to a majority of activist efforts in democracies and public discourse (Genosko, 2010; Jenkins, 2003; Kwak, 2005).

Consequences of this may be detrimental to public deliberation. As the researcher hypothesized, partisans (who hold extreme viewpoints) in the experiment were more willing to comment or “like.” This finding may be generalized to mean that extremists will be more prominent in online discussions; as a result, audiences are provided with ideas from extreme and individual points of view. Combined with the finding that “likes” and “top” comments influence perceived public opinion, this problem could result in a (skewed) misrepresentation of audiences’ opinions in the public sphere. In addition, those with extreme viewpoints use comments as opportunities to push their agendas. As noted in findings from “top” comments, they employ techniques to win over other readers or

gain spotlight by using strong language (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013) or make unrelated, provocative statements. This decontextualizes conversations in the commenting forums, which may result in audiences choosing not to participate (or even view) this form of audience engagement with news.

In the online digital sphere, another assumption is that all ideas (that are published on the web) are available to others (de Zuniga et al., 2010; Harper, 1998). However, two issues with “likes” deter the provision of *relevant and available information*. First of all, *relevance of the comment* to issues at hand is deterred. The researcher finds supporting ideas from findings regarding how framing strategies are implemented in online conversation. The comments that used the technique *Shutting down the opposition* rarely included information that was directly relevant to the topic. The researcher believes this was because there was no need to. In real life conversations, commonly accepted topics are discussed and followed upon. However, a characteristic of the online discussion forums is that participants all join with potentially different ideas or interpretation of the issue (Stroud, 2013). In other words, individualistic ideals resulting from private spheres (Milioni, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010) overtake the public’s deliberation on issues, and thus shared ideas or domains gain less significance. While this accommodates diversity of viewpoints, a cohesive conversation in the sense of our real world cannot be achieved, and it is not expected. Therefore, users who press “likes” do not necessarily press the button because comments are useful for the conversation. The researcher believes that the “like” button is pressed for some comments that are standalone as long as the main idea in the comment is “likable.”

These comments do not refer to each other (as offline conversations would) except when criticizing them. On the other hand, these comments function to initiate conversations rather than take part in them. Comments with this framing strategy garnered most debate in the form of sub-comments or other comments referring to the original comment. In the midst of this online phenomenon, this framing strategy aimed to *shut down the opposition* so that dominance is achieved in a conversation setting. By promoting the importance of *shutting down the opposition*, the frame is not only perpetuated (rid of opposing viewpoints) but also made dominant (perceived as the only prominent idea in the conversation). Relevance to the topic becomes secondary to competing for dominance, and thus the digital public sphere is not able to accommodate all relevant information.

The second issue regarding *all available information* can be discussed in light of how massive amounts of information overwhelms audiences. As mentioned in the previous section, audiences noted how they couldn't process the plethora of information presented to them. Thus, audiences have to make choices in consumption. The limited intake of information is not much different from offline settings (D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007; Rosenberry, 2010), but the problem in the digital public sphere is that available information are not utilized by participants. The internet, which has become an exponentially expanding sea of information, is exceeding the control of audiences and people are forced to limit the amount of information they engage with. In the process however, perspectives that are relevant and significant for the discussion are also lost. Furthermore, problems such as that of chronological order and "likes" play the role of

making some ideas more salient from the audiences' position. As a result, hindrance for audiences' engaging with a full range of available ideas becomes amplified.

User comments and "likes" in their current state do not fully accommodate all *willing participants* or *all relevant and available information*. This problem suggests an invisible "bottleneck effect" when it comes to flow of information. The new media landscape allows for any idea or information to be accessible and communicable, but audiences' news engagement practices block what they actually receive. Also, audiences end up receiving only a portion of the information available to them owing to their limited capacity in processing information (C. T. Christen & Huberty, 2007; Lin, 2009). The broad spectrum of information and ideas decrease in terms of both amount and variety, much like a bottleneck on highways. Ironically, little outside influence causes this virtual bottleneck problem. The digital culture of audiences is the cause. Moreover, this problem and the first problem are augmented because "likes" and "top" comments, even with the problematic aspects, act as pre-determining factors for public opinion, which is discussed in the next section.

9.2.3. Problem #3: Pre-determining factors

Literature on Habermas' original notion of the public sphere posit that any existing factors of members (e.g., appearance, habits, stereotypes) that pre-determine how participants interpret issues (Hauser, 1998; Holub, 1991; McKee, 2005). Also, pre-determining—the term used here instead of the more accepted term that Habermas used—factors refer to elements that give statements or ideas perceived dominance and superiority that overtake the discussion (Goode, 2005; Habermas, 1974). This dissertation

finds that “likes” and “top” comments could overdetermine interpretations in the digital public sphere—and regards this as a major problem.

New media audiences are shifting toward a hybrid private/public sphere model (Papacharissi, 2010) where increased self-agency promotes the strengthened notion of the individual. The individual can search for more information on the web and synthesize findings with past experiences, thus consolidating his own opinions. Consequently, individuals increasingly hold rigid perspectives about issues—that is, the new digital public sphere can be characterized as a place where established private spheres meet (Fraser, 1990; Loehwing & Motter, 2009). These private spheres represent strengthened ideas and experiences, almost to a point where they can be called personal predispositions or biases (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

Findings from the experiment and analysis of “top” comments illustrated that such predispositions could be pre-determining factors. In the experiment, an individual’s perceiving the story or comment to be biased led to a higher willingness to comment and “like.” Using media effects theories, the researcher hypothesized that a combination of this effect, known as HME (C. Christen et al., 2002; Vallone & Ross, 1985), and the fact that individuals see a stronger effect of media on others (TPE) (Shah et al., 1999; Sommer & Hofer, 2011) would result in intentions to comment or “like/dislike” the comment (PI) (Gunther & Storey, 2003; S.-K. Oh & Nan, 2013; Tal-Or et al., 2009). The hypotheses were supported. Experiment participants were highly willing to comment against their perceived biases on the story or “dislike” a comment that they did not agree with. This shows that individually formed opinions and perceived impact of media on others affects the stance with which audiences take part in discussions. These individual

viewpoints can be a result of either solitary assessment or influences from cultural/societal factors. The problem is that these predispositions are solidified more easily on the internet (Huge & Glynn, 2010; E.-J. Lee, 2012), which could become even more polarized pre-determining factors (Kennamer, 1990; Lord & Ross, 1979).

At the same time, individuals compete for dominance of ideas in the public sphere because they are strongly attached to their solidified ideas (Lord & Ross, 1979; Miegel, 2013). In the process, members of the audience use framing strategies, as found in the analysis of “top” comments. Two widely used techniques for obtaining “likes” were *Encouraging action* and *Shutting down the opposition*. The researcher argues that both inject pre-determining factors to the digital public sphere. For instance, Encouraging action referred to comments that requested others to “like” the comment for various reasons. Translated into face-to-face conversations, this was merely an action of soliciting agreement through behavioral action (e.g., “Say you will agree with me by clapping your hands.”). These techniques were sometimes not even accompanied by relevant information. An example discussed in *Chapter 6* was when a commenter asked others to press “likes” to cheer him up because he was joining the army the next day. Although irrelevant, this comment received more than 1,000 “likes” and remained a “top” comment. In this case, the appeal was the pre-determining factor that trumped hundreds of other comments that were potentially more closely associated with the topic at hand.

The other technique, *Shutting down the opposition*, exemplifies a more explicit pre-determining factor. This technique displayed strong language and in many cases, name-calling tactics. Analysis of “top” and sub-comments revealed that with this strategy, opposing viewpoints were criticized, attacked, and even accused of being liars

or detrimental to society. In some cases, accusations were not even based on facts but emotional charges or stereotypes. Even worse, many comments employing these tactics were not closely related to the news topic (other than the fact that candidates were mentioned). Nonetheless, the strategies were successful in promoting the comment to become one of three “top” comments. The researcher argues that these name-calling tactics instilled pre-determining factors that made it more convenient for collecting “likes.” Related to discussions in previous paragraphs, highly individualize and concretized predispositions are becoming more and more prominent in digital culture; such pre-determining factors are immediately recognized and approved. As a consequence, open discussions and free deliberation on topics are obstructed.

These findings also suggest that “likes” in the digital public sphere are granted in extravagance when compared to approval in real life situations. Since not all members choose to extensively exercise their activeness in commenting forums, they merely click on a button to vote on the comments. According to a study, the current social media audiences react positively or negatively even to subtle cues when engaging with messages (Velasquez, 2012). In other words, the threshold for pressing the “like” button is much lower than engaging in live discussions in the public sphere. The problem occurs when such actions are motivated by deliberate intentions to propagate the rest of the public. With audiences who do not carefully and thoroughly evaluate comments, and strong pre-determining factors that potentially sway the discussion to extremes, likes of propaganda could be implemented in the digital public sphere (Bastos, 2011; Cooley, 2010). *Encouraging behavioral actions, name-calling and shutting down the opposition* are indeed a strategy discussed in propaganda scholarship (Herman & Chomsky, 2006;

Jang, 2013; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). The researcher argues that persuasive tactics used in comment framing showed such characteristics because it is an effective way of influencing how people perceive public opinion.

A consistent finding from sub-comments, experiment and focus group / interviews was that “top” status and number of “likes” influence perceptions on public opinion. Experiment participants who were exposed to the condition a) where “top” comment labels were present showed tendencies to think that public opinion was closer to what they saw on the “top” three comments. This was consistent with the hypotheses based on the literature on comments and “likes.” (Hermida et al., 2012; Kincaid, 2009; Lipsman et al., 2012; S. D. Martin, 2012). Sub-comments expressed in various ways how ideas in “top” comments are pervasive in commenting threads. Focus group and media professionals also shared testimony regarding how they personally are affected by highly “liked” comments or observations of “top” comments dictating how ideas in discussions are developed.

These findings underscore how “likes” and “top” comments are particularly strong pre-determining factors. “Likes” are voting systems, and the numbers of “likes” displayed on websites serve as poll results. Accordingly, members of the digital public sphere who join the conversations are met with numbers indicating popularity. This means that “liked” comments hold dominance as ideas that are highly recommended (Hermida et al., 2012; Li & Sung, 2010; Stroud, 2013). The word “top” in “top” comments imply that these ideas hold superiority over others. In focus groups, participants mentioned that when a comment has many “likes,” they are inclined to view them because they are curious as to what the public agrees with. In the experiment too,

when asked whether they would pay attention to the number of “likes” on their comments, more than two-thirds of the responses were that they would. Participants cited one main reason repeatedly: to find out what others think about the participant’s thoughts.

The researcher believes that audiences perceive significance of the features, whether they admit to it or not. “Top” comments conferred superior status on themselves in comparison to the general public. Also, focus group participants and media professionals at first were reluctant to admit that they were affected by “likes” (consistent with the theory of TPE). However, eventually, their statements indicated otherwise. Some of the same participants later said that they pay attention to “likes” on a regular basis and usually appreciate the power of “top” comments. In particular, when asked about whether they have become “top” commenters before, several participants nodded and shared the stories as positive experiences. Two participants even said, “it made my day.” This was consistent with findings from “top” and sub-comments. More than one-third of the 180 “top” comments mentioned the words “top,” “likes,” “best,” “agreement,” “approval,” and “popular” that the researcher believed were associated with the “like” features. Sub-comments also referred to “likes” and “top” statuses as something of an accomplishment. Audiences seemed to seek gratification from receiving “likes” from others, as though it raises their popularity. In this light, the researcher concluded that some audiences might even be obsessed with “likes.” Comments mentioned how a comment “deserves to be on the ‘top’” or simply begged for “likes.” In sum, the “like” and “top” features arguably go beyond being pre-determining factors—they are highly influential, highly desirable traits in the digital public sphere.

Recognizing this, some people attempted to take advantage of such characteristics of “likes.” As discussed above, the framing strategy *Encouraging action* specifically refers to “likes” as the action that audiences ought to take. Some people or organizations sought to manipulate comments to receive more “likes.” Especially Korean participants made accusations of paid workers, political parties or groups of extremist citizens who visited a news story specifically to increase the number of “likes” until the comment became one of the “top” three. Audiences expressed concern over this phenomenon because they understood the power of “likes.” In the digital public sphere, not only do “likes” hold pre-determining characteristics, but they also become conspicuous strategies to win people over. One website called www.social-hits.net sells Facebook pages that already have thousands of “likes.” While the website is being criticized for possibly being a scam (scamadviser.com, 2014), the idea itself derives from belief that “likes” can be profitable products because the demand for more “likes” exists among people. Repeated manipulation and suspicion from audiences would result in reduced credibility for “top” comments, which was found to be occurring already (e.g., conferring superior status on the self compared to others, and thus discrediting online discussions). In such a case, the “like” feature and “top” comments lose any value and potential they have for promoting adequate deliberation of issues in the digital public sphere.

Finally, the “like” features may limit opportunities for further discussion. “Top” comments and their strong pre-determining tendencies frequently offer strong viewpoints (as discussed in the previous section) that block opportunities for further discussion. While the commenting forum is still technically available for further discussion, the

popularity of a limited number of viewpoints comment may dominate audiences' potential to think about the issue in diverse ways.

In theory, “top” comments may be useful for the concept of debate posited by Habermas. The comments are individuals' perception of the issue and expression of their reactions toward such perceptions. A collection of these comments, as long as they are all accessible by the public and anyone from the public has the ability to weigh in, would be important components for deliberation and public opinion formation. However, the online system changes the form of deliberation and what it entails. Many comments merely encourage actions or provide significantly individualized viewpoints and strive to simply win the debate. None of these motives is useful for the deliberation process because they don't fully take into account the context of the discussion. These features often decentralize the public's deliberation as each “top” comment (potentially less relevant to the issue of concern) receives more spotlight than the main topic. Thus, the singular public sphere disappears and several small public spheres (initiated by each “top” comment framing) emerge. All of this translates into pre-determining factors that keep the digital public sphere from accommodating true deliberation among public regarding public opinion.

9.2.4. Problem #4: Peculiarities of communities or cultures

The fourth problem of “likes” in the public sphere was that the *public sphere is supposedly a fixed domain that does not take into account peculiarities of communities or cultures*. The public sphere implies a fixed, universally applicable domain of public discussion that works in consistent ways in any situation (Fraser, 1990; Hauser, 1998; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). However, this assumption is problematic when considering

the discursive nature of virtual communities (Chayko, 2008; Hsu et al., 2007; Huang, 2012; Preece, 2000) and salient differences that exist across different cultures (Berry, 2000; J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Nisbett, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). In order to address the former, the researcher sought to understand the meandering nature of engagement practices of converged audiences. To address the latter, the researcher compared audiences of U.S. and Korea throughout the four research phases.

The concept of “community” is shrinking and expanding at the same time (Baym, 1998), and audiences do not hold much obligation to communities since they can easily join or leave communities in virtual settings (Huang, 2012; Wu Song, 2009). As a result, essential ideas of the public sphere such as the *share domain* or *issues of common concern* cannot be easily implemented. In this sense, findings related to the first problem demonstrated that audiences engage in news discussions ephemerally and sporadically. These engagement practices and domains of participation are not systematic and do not fit in the notion of the community as implied by the traditional framework of the public sphere. In such virtual communities, messages are diffused and context is lost (Bastos, Raimundo, & Travitzki, 2013), thus making it increasingly difficult for audiences to grasp ideas or communicate their own (V. Miller, 2011).

Additionally, this dissertation found notable characteristics of what might be called digital culture. Analysis of sub-comments and focus group / interview sessions identified “likability” factors for comments. Identified “likability” factors were *Humor*, *Witty rebuttal*, *Media criticism*, *Socially accepted trends*, *Usefulness*, and *Provocativeness*. The last two were mentioned in the focus groups and interviews. Of these, *Humor*, *Witty rebuttal* and *Socially accepted trends* represent the unpredictable and

decontextualized nature of audience news engagement. That is, the user community in Yahoo! News and nate.com embraced those factors as a more “likable” characteristic of a comment than actual discussion value. For example, any comment that was funny received positive feedback in sub-comments. Some humorous comments were not related to the news topic at all. Interestingly, two comments that told a similar joke about Romney were “top” comments, in two different stories—one about a Presidential debate (AP, 2012), and another about voting procedures (Sanner, 2012). The second story only mentioned Romney once and he was not one of the main frames of the story. However, a joke was a joke—people found them to be funny, and they “liked” them. Similarly, *Witty rebuttal* was not always about the content of the rebuttal but the fact that the comment was both witty and contained rebuttal. Also, *Socially accepted trends* varied in type even in the two months of data that were analyzed—popular phrases or ideas that resonated with the sub-commenters changed weekly or even daily depending on how the commenting community evaluated the acceptability of the trends.

The researcher found that the commenting group is immense in number and the same commenter rarely appears twice in “top” comments. Only two user IDs appeared more than once (one for each country). The commenter from Korea was recognized by sub-commenters as a commenter who frequently makes jokes. In fact, both of the commenter’s “top” comments were categorized under *Humor*. This means that the community is so huge and ever changing that there is no consistency in terms of trends and practices. The “likability” factors were merely a manifestation of broadly classifiable themes. In other words, aside from the fact that audiences appreciated these characteristics in comments, they did not regularly share any established protocol or

range of ideas. Underlying meanings of each “likability” factor were broadly distinguishable themes but could not pinpoint overt practices of the community at large, especially regarding how audiences reacted to news frames or comments at specific levels.

Second, responses were mixed to any “likability” factor. For instance, some sub-comments criticized funny, witty or socially accepted “top” comments for not exactly possessing those characteristics (e.g., “This comment is not funny. Am I the only one who thinks so?”). In other cases, sub-comments claimed that the “top” comments have more “dislikability” factors such as *Indecency/rudeness* or *Decontextualization*.

Reversely, since the comments analyzed were existing “top” comments, even those with “dislikability” factors were seen as favorable by others. Furthermore, the discussion of *Provocativeness* from focus group and media professionals suggested how “likes” or “likability” could be understood differently by different groups of people. This means that community of commenters, even in the shared domain, applies differing standards for “liking.” Such inconsistency is problematic because the public sphere is at risk of being without commonly recognized protocols for discussion. The problem becomes more severe if one considers the web in general, which is a collection of these massive and discursive communities. This discussion is compatible to existing discussions about digital culture in that it is unpredictable, sporadic and discursive (Deuze, 2009; S. E. Jones, 2014; V. Miller, 2011).

The question is whether the U.S. and Korea are more alike, or more different. Common trends were visible across the two countries, especially in the experiment and ranking analysis. For both countries, assumptions about media effects theories (HME,

TPE, PI) were supported, “likability/dislikability” factors were significant indicators for participants’ willingness to “like,” and chronological order as significantly related to the number of “likes.” Moreover, focus group / interview sessions suggested that respondents from both countries believed “likes” and “top” comments to have strong influence in society. Then, could we say that the problems of “likes” appear more or less universally across cultures?

The researcher argues that despite the similarities in the trends regarding the influence of “likes” and many aspects of audiences’ behavior overall, a deeper examination of how the problems manifest themselves in the two cultures underscored noticeable differences between the U.S. and Korea. In fact, cultural differences turned up in all research phases in terms of news engagement practices and influence of “likes.”

As discussed in *Chapter 4*, intercultural differences can be understood from five main influences: historical (Bastos, 2011; Schudson, 2004; K. Shin, 2005), social (J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 1999; H. S. Park et al., 2013), technological (Castells, 2003; W. Cho, 2009; Smith & Marx, 1994; Thurman, 2011), political (Bohman, 2004; Brundidge, 2010; D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Shifman et al., 2007), economic (Boyd-Barrett, 2008; Mersey et al., 2010; Pfister, 2011; Thorson, 2008), linguistic (Hall, 1992, 2006; Massey & Levey, 1999), and psychological (Berry, 2000; Nisbett, 2003). As a framing strategy, Korean comments *explicitly asked for “likes,”* which was a theme that appeared less often in U.S. comments. On the other hand, when reframing news topics, far more U.S. “top” comments emphasize that *there is more to the story that the public ought to know*. Perhaps this means that the U.S. audiences prioritize the value of *content* and the Korean audiences the *system (feature)*. Analysis of

comments and focus group / interview sessions found that Koreans show a higher level of desire to receive “likes” or gain “top” status. Also, Korean comments overall had more persuasive and rhetorical language in the comments that specifically mentioned “likes” or “top” status. On the other hand, the U.S. comments did not explicitly express as much preference for receiving more “likes,” but rather focused more on whether the content of the discussion was relevant. When “top” comments or “likes” were mentioned, they were discussed in light of potential influences of what the content may have for the public. Such findings are compatible with the experiment finding that Korean audiences showed higher susceptibility to “likes” and “top” comments. Korean audiences paid more attention to the number of “likes,” and all of the data showed that they used the feature more extensively. As a result, the influence of “top” status in the experiment on perceived public opinion was also higher.

Korean audiences tend to value the functionality of “likes,” perhaps due to a perception that “likes” confer prestige. When asked about why they pay close attention to “likes,” Korean focus group participants said that they feel proud of all the “likes,” as if it was an accomplishment. Others viewed the “top” comment status as a prize for winning the competition (of fighting for more “likes”). In recent history, Korean society has prioritized economic success as the number one objective (H. S. Park et al., 2013; K. Shin, 2005), and this resulted in severe competition in all aspects of life, beginning as early as grade school (K. S. Kim, 2012). Numbers have been used to rank student performances (K. M. Cho, 2013)—individuals receive their ranks for standardized tests at the national level, with exact numbers to the last digit (e.g., “315,421st rank”). As a result, ideas of competition and dominance are prevalent in Korean society; possibly they treat “like”

ranks (and “top” comments) in the same way. Furthermore, the Confucian way of life grants more prestige to the elite—these revered entities in society show superiority in how ideas are formed in society (Hahm, 2004; Zhang et al., 2005). Having “likes” and becoming “top” comments may be perceived as conferral of elite status in the digital public sphere, hence the high levels of dominance for attention that were visible in data collected from Korea. This idea of the Confucian elite was also visible from interviews with journalists. Only Korean journalists emphasized that they felt obligated to rectify any problems with “likes” and “top” comments, maybe because they believed their status in society (media elites) made them responsible for providing solutions in news communication.

In contrast, U.S. audiences maintained that quality of content and topic matter are still most important in comments. This shows that U.S. audiences embrace the concept of debate or communicative action in the traditional sense of the public sphere (Goode, 2005; Habermas, 1990). Likewise, experimental data from U.S. participants showed less significance in terms of impact from “top” status on their perception of public opinion. As a matter of fact, all trends were less salient in U.S. data. In comparison to Koreans, U.S. audiences have been found to be more accepting of individualism, self-identity and overall diversity in society (D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007; Jang, 2013; M. G. Kim & Kim, 2012; Y. Lee & Kim, 2010), which explains why they were not inclined to grant as much importance on the feature of the commenting sphere as Koreans.

Korean audiences identified *Socially accepted trends* as a “likable” factor when U.S. “top” comments did not. As the name of the category suggests, this can be understood from a social influence perspective. Again, digital populism (Y. Kim, 2008)

as a key issue arises from Korea's historical and social background; its citizens showed high levels of collectivism in public discourse. The socially acceptable trends mostly referred to what society as a whole favored, whether they were opinions, popular phrases, jokes, or stories. Such findings about Korean audiences' collective approval are supported by other observations of Westerners' individualism and Easterners' collectivism (Cai & Fink, 2002; Nisbett, 2003).

Also, this particular "likability" factor gained salience because of linguistic influences. The Korean language is far more malleable than any other language in its form, especially regarding syntax and sentence structure (Song, 2005). As a result, "cyber-talk" or "in-words" have evolved rapidly and are even cited as problems for society (H. Yoo, 2012). Among the socially accepted trends in the "top" comments were such terms and phrases that were considered "in-words" by others.

Furthermore, the overall preference toward commenting and "like" features can be attributed to technological developments. Korea is considered a front-runner in information and communication technologies (ICTs), even more than the U.S (W. Cho, 2009). As a result, Korean audiences' more mature digital culture has distinctive characteristics. First, audiences participate in more virtual community websites, many of which cross over between generic topics and public affairs news (D.-H. Choi & Kim, 2007). As a result, Korean audiences are more accustomed to the online commenting forums and online interaction regarding news topics. This explains the higher levels of online comment usage and perhaps a higher influence of those features on their perceptions about public opinion.

Second, mobile technologies are used more widely and connectivity (access) is higher (Linchuan Qiu, 2008). Conversely, the voluntary virtual bottleneck on information is more pronounced, as seen in the finding that chronological order was a much more significant factor for “likes” in the Korean data.

Finally, Korean audiences generate a pronounced ideological dichotomy online. With a richer media history of engaging in debate and consuming online messages that are sharply divided (W. Cho, 2009; S. H. Kim, 2009), Korean audiences have been better accustomed to dealing with politically controversial issues online (Jang, 2013; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

The cross-cultural differences found in this dissertation have implications for understanding the influence of “likes” going forward. Korea has seen growing popularity of commenting and “like” features earlier than for other parts of the world. Considering that adaptation to new technologies tend to be homogenized in the long term (W. Cho, 2009; Napoli, 2011; Smith & Marx, 1994; S. S. Sundar et al., 2008; Wu Song, 2009), the Korean example may shed light on how “likes” will be utilized and the kinds of influences the feature will increasingly have in digital public spheres worldwide.

9.2.5. Meanings behind “likes”

Finally, “likes” may be an issue for the public sphere because we do not know what it really means when audiences “like” a comment. To address this problem, the researcher identified “likability” factors and turned to the focus group / interview sessions.

As discussed in previous sections, the “likability” factors were not completely representative of what one might call careful deliberation of the topic in the public sphere.

“Liking” empowers audiences with a simple and interactive way to vote on audience ideas, but at the same time it endangers the quality and relevance of the discussion. Factors such as *Humor* or *Socially accepted trends* may be deemed favorable by audiences, but as media professionals testified, they do little for the news topic at hand. Moreover, focus group participants and media professionals alike mentioned that they observed provocative comments receiving more likes, which are devoid of the kinds of substance required in the public sphere for a complete accommodation of diverse viewpoints among members. An individual may “like” a comment just because they enjoy watching intense arguments. Debate itself is promoted, but this only covers a portion of what the public sphere achieves. The risk is that public opinion formation occurs only as merely a result of strong voices and enjoyable comments, not from open discussion and careful consideration of all ideas.

Focus group participants stated that their main reasons for “liking” were *Agreement/support*, *Sharing* and *Laziness*. The first two reasons are somewhat related to deliberation processes because in those cases, “likes” indeed represent participation in exchange of ideas. However, the last reason raises concerns because it can rather be categorized as a passive. That is, “likes” are used as an alternative to full, active participation (Hermida et al., 2012)—audiences press “likes” because they require the least effort. This may still be better than no participation at all, but given that the number of “likes” and “top” status are granted much importance for perceiving public opinion, the carelessness in participation may result in misrepresentation of public opinion. The first few (the most recent in terms of chronological order) comments, the most funny, the most provocative—such comments with possibility of receiving more “likes” are

products of spontaneous participation and not from fully willing members who devote themselves to discussing issues of concern.

As discussed with problems #1 and #2, a large part of motivating factors behind “likes” were found to be from partisan individuals willing to promote a certain agenda. While such activism could be useful for forming public opinion (i.e., incorporation of diversity in viewpoints), the “portion representing the whole” could be a severe problem. When individuals do not have the capability or willingness to read all of material on a topic, they look to quickly grasp the story by reading just a portion of the comments. If polarizing comments are “liked” more (with “likability” factors, as was demonstrated through findings), the individual may result in forming a misrepresented view of public opinion, where a single point of view overtakes any further discussions (Bastos, 2011). Supporting this idea, participants alleged evidence of propagating and manipulating public opinion through “likes.” All of these are potential pre-determining factors (problem #3). And finally, peculiarities of cultures and practices should be taken into account (problem #4), as discursive practices of audiences make it difficult to grasp what “likes” really mean.

9.3. Limitations

This dissertation has limitations. First of all, audience engagement and public opinion are extremely broad topics (Shirky, 2008). Thus, factors outside of the scope of definitions and assumptions of the proposed methods may also have significant influence on the problems of “likes.” For instance, this dissertation looks at only online news engagement; there may be significant differences of behavior or attitudes based on an

individual's established familiarity with news topics and/or online communication technologies.

Also, some of the issues highlighted in this dissertation may occur more saliently on mobile or tablet devices, a newly emerging platform that also provides internet connection and access to some of the same news websites. They may be even more significant for the problems due to the differences in how information is accessed and inputted (Bergman, 2013; Chayko, 2008; Linchuan Qiu, 2008). While the dissertation did take a look into mobile technologies, it did not extensively scrutinize differences that may arise from the particular communication platform.

In addition, the idea of the "public" in the public sphere is a complex concept that cannot easily be researched (Andsager & Smiley, 1998; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; Haas & Steiner, 2003; Loehwing & Motter, 2009; Milioni, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Findings in this dissertation apply only to the "digital" public sphere, and participants in the digitalized public sphere are only those with access to digital technology. The participant sample for this research did show a tendency to be younger and highly educated, which requires a further investigation of different demographics for comprehensively understanding of what the public is constituted. To increase validity, this dissertation analyzed user comments from actual websites in hopes to obtain examples from the general audience. Furthermore, media professionals were recruited to provide a broader perspective on what audiences are doing and their influences on the public.

Empirical data collected from the experiment and focus group / interviews show potential limitations due to their nature of "self-report" in responses. Especially in the in-person focus group and interview methods, the participants may have become aware of

the fact that the researcher is a media scholar and journalism instructor, thus altering their responses and self-assessment to produce what they believed was the desired answer. In order to alleviate this issue, the researcher closely paid attention to discrepancies or contradictions.

The websites selected for this dissertation, while useful since they are popular websites, may be showing peculiar trends that do not show what is really happening with news audiences in general (i.e., in the same ways that peculiarities of communities or cultures may reshape how public's deliberation for public opinion occurs). Moreover, the topic that was selected for this dissertation (elections) usually fosters more controversy and partisanship than other issues in society (Lippmann, 1965; Cho, 2009; Miller, 2012). Comparison with other topics would enable a more thorough look into the multi-faceted engagement practices of audiences. Therefore, comparison with other websites, topics and online platforms is necessary. Finally, the multicultural lens employed by this study certainly will benefit from comparisons with a wider array of international audiences.

9.4. Conclusion

The notion of new media, the new audiences and their increased activism—and, more importantly, the fact that their engagement activity is visible for the rest of the audience to see and comment upon—is something that might seem to enhance Habermas' original conceptions of the public sphere. However, advances in communicative tools, make deliberation in democracy both easier to access but more complex in its form. Such notions of the public sphere—where individuals and their willingness to share meaning in the forum provided by the public sphere—is arguably a significant factor in valuing

‘activeness’ of audiences in a democracy. Whether the increasingly powerful engagement of audiences with media really enhances the public sphere and democracy remains uncertain.

Through a mixed methods approach, this dissertation explored the “like” culture and confirmed findings as well as assumptions about the implications of this mode of news engagement in the digital public sphere. From an analysis of existing “top” comments and their sub-comments, the researcher sought to better understand the current landscape of “liking” culture and how audiences’ practices regarding “likes” are manifested. While causality is difficult to establish even in controlled research settings, the quantitative data and statistical significance achieved here and illustrate a possible influence of the “like” feature on how audiences perceive public opinion and utilize the feature in the digital public sphere. As a result, our current knowledge about media effects theories (HME, TPE, PI) for online audiences and their cognitive processes were expanded and synthesized. Each theory was strengthened and possible relationships among them were explored in examining the online phenomenon centered on “likes” and user comments.

Findings also suggested that audiences’ tendencies in the “liking” sphere posed potential problems that may require a rethinking of the digital public sphere. This dissertation also found that problems of comments and “likes” in the digital public sphere could be intensified in different cultural settings. Factors such as historical, technological, political, and economic factors influenced modes of thinking and characteristics of discourse (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). The data collected from the U.S. and Korea showed both common trends in the two countries and distinguishable differences in the two

countries for how audiences' use and perceive "likes." Koreans seemed to utilize "likes" with more popularity and also showed indications of a stronger influence from "likes." Perhaps the differences in effect sizes and attitudes regarding "likes" and "top" comments could be explained by the individualistic (U.S.) vs. collectivist (Korea) (Cai & Fink, 2002; Nisbett, 2003) nature of people in the two countries. The researcher posits that such cultural influences, among many others, should be key to further theorizing the public sphere.

This dissertation does not undermine the ideal of the public sphere. Rather, it attempts to address the problems with the traditional public sphere arising from technological developments, adapting the theory to digital culture and new, converged audiences. This dissertation recommends that the traditional notion of the public sphere be expanded to accommodate characteristics of converged audiences and the kinds of (digital) culture practices they participate in, as well as how information is received and made meaning upon. Also, the significant influences of "likes" and "top" comments lead the researcher to believe that if the features are here to stay, they must be handled with care both on part of the news media as well as audiences.

The researcher believes that even amid developments in communicative technologies, the public sphere can and should be a starting point, or the standard by which people come together to discuss important issues in society. However, one thing remains for certain: it requires citizens to utilize available tools to engage in communicative action based on fully and comprehensive assessments of possible ranges of meanings and ideas. Furthermore, innate differences in intercultural settings imply that the public sphere can be and will be adopted in various forms where existing beliefs and

accepted norms play a crucial role in how meanings are made and then shared back again with others participating in society. We ought to rethink how the public sphere can be realized in different settings, which expands the original notion of the public sphere. Intercultural comparisons for user comments and “likes” are especially meaningful because they will continue to take different shape and form depending on where the features are used (Lipsman et al., 2012; Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Sharp, 2012). Comparison of these different forms and shapes of the problem will help clarify different contexts. This dissertation contributes to journalism studies by showing that audience engagement with news is taking a turn, creating both new problems and opportunities for democracies. Professionals may be able to better understand the factors that influence the peculiarities of the converged audience that influence the coordination and deliberation of public opinion (Deuze, 2009).

APPENDICES

Appendix A. List of news articles analyzed

1) U.S.

Date	Publication	Reporter	Headline
9/8	AP	David Espo & Nancy Benac	Calls for gun control stir little support
9/17	Yahoo News	Liz Goodwin	Romney in secretly taped video: Obama voters 'dependent' on government
9/25	Yahoo News	Dylan Stableford	Bill Clinton: Romney's '47 percent' remark could haunt him in debates
9/30	Yahoo News	Rachel Rose Hartman	Romney, Obama campaigns battle over Ohio early voting
10/4	Yahoo News	Tim Skillern	Voters' Reaction to First Presidential Debate
10/5	AP	Kasie Hunt	Romney on '47 percent': I was 'completely wrong'
10/12	Yahoo News	David Rothschild	Who won the vice presidential debate? Doesn't matter.
10/12	Yahoo News	Calvin Woodward	FACT CHECK: Slips in vice president's debate
10/16	The Wire	Adam Clark Estes	Binders Full of Women' won the debate
10/16	The Week	Staff	The second Presidential Debate: Romney boasts of his binders full of women
10/16	Mashable	Annie Colbert	Trapper Keep-her? Mitt Romney's 'Binder Full of Women' Gets Meme'd
10/16	AP	Ann Sanner	High court won't block early voting in Ohio
10/16	Yahoo News	Walter Shapiro	In Iowa, it's already Election Day. Who's winning?
10/17	Yahoo News	Calvin Woodward & Tom Raum	FACT CHECK: Stumbles in latest presidential debate
10/17	AP	AP	Highlights from the 2nd presidential debate
10/21	Yahoo News	Dylan Stableford	Obama and Romney tied at 47% among likely voters, new NBC/WSJ poll shows
10/27	Yahoo News	Holly Bailey	Romney cancels Virginia events ahead of Hurricane Sandy
10/28	Yahoo News	Holly Bailey	Romney cancels NH rally amid concern over Hurricane Sandy
10/29	The Week	Staff	Hurricane Sandy: Will Mitt Romney regret suggesting that he'd shut down FEMA?
10/29	The Week	Staff	Hurricane Sandy: Does it help President Obama politically?
10/30	The Week	Staff	3 ways Hurricane Sandy complicates Mitt Romney's path to victory
10/30	Yahoo News	Jeff Greenfield	Why Hurricane Sandy might cost Obama the popular vote—but not the presidency
10/30	Yahoo News	Brendan James	Early voting results favor Obama, but popular vote remains uncertain
10/31	The Week	Staff	Hurricane Sandy: Is Chris Christie throwing Mitt Romney under a bus?
11/1	Yahoo News	Laurie Jo Miller-Farr	Four More Years: Hurricane Sandy Surely Seals the Deal for Obama
11/3	Yahoo News	Eric Pfeiffer	Florida bomb squad detonates 'suspicious packages' found outside early voting site
11/3	AP	Stephen Ohlemacher	Obama seems to have early vote lead in key states
11/4	AP	Gary Fineout	Judge orders 1 Fla. county to extend early voting
11/6	Yahoo News	Liz Goodwin	Barack Obama wins second term
11/30	AP	Mark Sherman	Gay marriage before Supreme Court? Cases weighed

2) Korea

Date	Publication	Reporter	Headline
10/19	Yonhap News	Lee, Jieun	Park using her smartphone upside down?
10/21	Yonhap News	Kang, Youngdoo	Ahn "I will be the president who takes care of unemployment"
10/22	Edaily	Lee, Dohyung	Park "Justice never loses"
10/24	New Daily	Reporter	Moon's son wrongfully got his job? Shock!
10/28	Financial News	Kim, Youngsun	Ahn, "Lease rates for small businesses will be maintained, and taxes will go down"
10/30	News1	Cha, Yoonju	Park "Is there value to extending voting hours when it costs 10 billion won?"
10/30	Yonhap News	Kang, Youngdoo & Lee, Kwangbin	Ahn "Doesn't mean I won't unify"
10/30	Financial News	Editor	Flustering tax policies of the candidates
11/9	Yonhap News	Park, Sungmin	Kim criticized for using derogatory term
11/9	Yonhap News	Lee, Junseo	Park promises free college tuition for third child
11/20	Money Today	Kim, Heeyoung	Painting of Park giving birth "merely satire vs. belittles women"
11/20	Asia Today	Choi, Youngjae	"Ahn Cheol-soo's daughter has been living in a luxury Philadelphia apartment"
11/21	New Daily	Sung, Sanghoon	Moon's camp published PR material threatening citizens
11/23	Yonhap News	Choi, Irak & Kang, Youngdoo	Ahn Cheol-soo resigns from candidacy... "To fight the war as commoner"
11/26	New Daily	Choi, Yookyung	Democratic Party wages war on 'Ilbe'... "Ruly party systematically manipulation public opinion"
12/4	Yonhap News	Staff	First Presidential Debate
12/4	New Daily	Oh, Changkyun	Moon, mudfight? Democratic Party's negative attacks have gone too far
12/5	New Daily	Kim, Sungwook	[TV Wars] Lee the leading role, Moon the supporting... Park shines
12/5	Asia Today	Staff	Lee engages in negative attack, mentions "the government in the south" and "Dakaki Masao"
12/6	Yonhap News	Kang, Youngdoo & Song, Sookyung	Ahn to support Moon... Ahn-Moon holds solitary meeting
12/10	Nate News	Staff	Second Presidential Debate
12/10	New Daily	Staff	United Democratic Party politicians shown browsing Ilbe
12/10	SBS	Seungjae Lee	Economic democratization will be issue for second TV debate... Lee a variable
12/11	Money Today	Kim, Sunghui	Moon "Mandatory military service will be reduced to 18 months and guardhouses will be abolished"
12/11	Money Today	Hui, Byun	Election commission "Democratic Party also attended investigation"
12/12	Yonhap News	Kim, Beonhyun & Hyun, Hyeran	[D-8] Park, "Moon's policies foreshadow tax bombs"
12/13	Seoul Daily	Chang, Sehoon & Lee, Youngjoon	NIS manipulation of public opinion vs. Democratic Party's manipulation of public opinion
12/16	News1	Ko, Yoosun	[Last Presiential Debate] Crime prevention and public safety
12/19	Yonhap News	Shin, Jihong & Shim, Insung	Networks project Park 50.1%, Moon 48.9%
12/19	YTN	Kim, Jongho	Voting situation in Busan, area of interest

Appendix B. Stimulus material used in experiment

1) U.S. Article

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Obama, Romney sharpen campaign messages
By Staff Reporter, December 1, 2012

Mitt Romney made his case Wednesday for the failure of the Obama years in the very place where the president asked for more years in September: Charlotte, host city of the Democratic National Convention.

Obama, speaking at a community college in the critical swing state of Ohio, wrapped his economic message around this personal jab at Romney: "I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth."

The general-election campaign is underway — and so are the attempts to get into each other's head. Each candidate devoted Wednesday to economic arguments about why he should win in November and also why, for very personal reasons, the other should not.

Speaking to about 200 people across from the stadium where Obama will give his convention speech, Romney hammered the president for failing to make good on his promises. Reading from Obama's address when he accepted his party's nomination in Denver four years ago, Romney used the president's words against him in a speech that aides billed as a "prebutter" to Obama's nominating address.

"Were a trusting people. We're a hopeful people. But we're not dumb, and we're not going to fall for the same lines from the same person just because we're in a different place," Romney said.

Citing job losses and the rise in the national deficit, Romney predicted that Obama wouldn't be quoting much from his address or giving a true picture of his administration's record.



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Obama, Romney sharpen campaign messages
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"What you won't hear at that convention is that for the last 38 months unemployment has been above 8 percent, that we've had 24 million Americans that are out of work, have stopped looking for work or underemployment," Romney said. "You won't hear that since he gave that speech and became president that there have been 50,000 more job losses in North Carolina."

With 15 electoral votes, North Carolina will be a key battleground state in the general election. Obama won it in 2008 by a margin of less than 14,000 votes, his narrowest win in the nation. He will need a strong turnout of Latinos, college-educated whites and African Americans to win again.

In Ohio on Wednesday, Obama sought to draw a stark contrast between his efforts to continue investing in what he described as the foundations of America's economic strength and "the other side," which, he said, would put an end to those investments in favor of granting tax breaks for the rich.

At a community college in hard-hit manufacturing country near Cleveland, Obama declared that his commitment to workforce training programs — programs, he said, that Republicans would gut — has helped thousands of laid-off workers find new jobs.

To underscore that argument, Obama took the not-too-subtle "silver spoon" swipe at Romney, adding that there remains a role for government to give everybody a "fair shot" — not just the wealthy.

"Investing in a community college is just like investing in a new road or new highway or broadband Internet," Obama told a crowd of a few hundred at Lorain County Community College, west of Cleveland. "These are not grand schemes to redistribute wealth. They've been made by Democrats and Republicans for generations because they benefit all of us. That's what leads to strong, durable growth."

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2) U.S. Comments (“Top” status condition)

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Obama, Romney sharpen campaign messages

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Comments (1322)

TOP Comment1

Core? What core? What positions? Today Mitt's a conservative, yesterday Willard was a liberal, tomorrow maybe a half dozen of one, six of the other, next year a wingnut. But always a scion of the 1% with just the right touch of Brylcreem and noblesse oblige to get wherever he wants to go. Opportunism is as opportunism does.

1,996 973

TOP Comment2

Hahahahahahahaha! Binders full of women vs. The Man Who Killed Bin Laden – I say no contest

1,364 842

TOP Comment3

This article is terrible. You really want to start a comparison between Obama's history and Romney's history? What kind of an agenda does this reporter have?

1,841 1,343

Comment4

I rather have a conservative that will come pass a blance budget and cut government spending Rather then a President that spend trillions and has nothing to show for it, all his campaign promises are LIES, if Obama he were a CEO of the biggest company in the world,which he is with his record he would be fired,and President Obama pack your bags,we have had enough.

370 214

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Comment5

Let's not forget that Romney himself has stated that he is severely conservative. He has adopted all the extreme stands. It is not that the Obama campaign is doing this for him, Romney himself wanted voters to know that he is severely conservative.

146 54

Comment6

Please, it was the Senate who dictated the healthcare act content. Not the House and not the President. The House bill was to people's liking. It got shot down in the Senate. And the Senate ended up reversing the tradition. The crafted something that finally got them 60 votes to send it to the House. To veto the entire bill because the single payer option was not there would have been foolish.

34 12

Comment7

As Governor of Massachusetts Romney outsourced_ 43,000 jobs. I support him, just like many around me.

25 3

Comment8

I never said it'd be easy, and even I doubt it's possible. But_ a 3rd party has another advantage over the other two; any motivations/ideas it has at the start would be completely unknown. it can keep to itself until elections are around the corner. until then, it could spend months, or even a couple years building its funds and looking for people who either think like them, or just want something different to look forward to during elections. It's not likely, but I can at least dream about it.

17 9

Comment9

Don't even bother. I'm not even gonna vote

0 24

Comment10

This is real! I didn't believe it at first, but you can win an iPad when you complete this survey! Bit.ly/ipadsurvey

0 4

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3) U.S. Comments (Without “top” status condition)

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Continued from previous page

Comments (1322)

Comment1

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Comment3

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Comment9

Don't even bother. I'm not even gonna vote

Comment10

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4) Korea Article

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朴-文 마지막 TV토론서 난타전…신경전 최고조

정치부 기자 2012년 12월 16일

새누리당 박근혜, 민주통합당 문재인 대선 후보가 대선 D-3일인 16일 저녁 마지막으로 열린 TV 토론에서 난타전을 벌였다.

이날 토론은 통합진보당 이정희 후보의 후보직 사퇴로 박근혜·문재인 두 후보만 참석한 가운데 100분간 진행됐다. 이번 대선에서 처음이자 마지막으로 열린 양자토론이다.

한차례의 질문·답변만 주어진 기존 방식에서 벗어나 저출산·고령화, 교육제도, 범죄예방 및 사회안전 대책, 과학기술 방안 등이 다뤄진 이날 토론에서는 주제별 자유토론이 진행됐다.

따라서 지난 두 차례에서는 볼 수 없었던 두 후보 간 한치의 양보없는 설전이 불꽃을 튀었다. 국민생활과 직결된 복지·교육 문제 등을 놓고 서로의 정책공약에 대한 선명성 경쟁을 벌인 것이다.

이 과정에서 두 후보는 상대 후보의 주장을 반박하는 과정에서 목소리를 높이는 등 험한 분위기가 연출되기도 했다.

토론 첫 주제인 저출산·고령화 대책부터 두 후보는 정면 충돌했다.

문 후보가 참여정부 때 저출산고령사회위원회를 설치했다는 점을 언급하며 "이명박 정부에서 박 후보는 공동발의에 참여하여 저출산고령사회위원회 폐지법안을 제출했다"며 포문을 열었다.




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朴-文 마지막 TV토론서 난타전…신경전 최고조

정치부 기자 2012년 12월 16일

이에 대해 박 후보는 "법이 꼭 저출산·고령화 문제를 해결하는 것은 아니라고 본다"며 실질적인 대책 마련에 방점을 찍었다.

그러면서 문 후보의 '아동수당' 공약 등 복지 자원 조달방안을 물으며 역공에 나섰다. 박 후보는 "재정 형편이 가능하면 누가 반대 하겠느냐. 지금 당장 편하자고 후대에 빚을 넘기면 안된다"고 주장했다.

문 후보는 '아동수당' 공약의 경우 무상보육을 완성한 뒤 추진할 과제라고 설명하면서 "저의 모든 정책공약을 정리해서 내놓았다. 그 공약집에 근거해 말해주시길 부탁드립니다"고 반박했다.

복지 자원 조달방안을 둘러싼 논란에 대해 문 후보는 "박 후보는 4대 중증질환을 국가가 책임지겠다고 하면서 재정소요를 연간 1조5천억원으로 제시하는데, 건강보험공단 자료를 보면 3조6천억원"이라며 맞받았다.

박 후보는 "이미 건강보험이 적용되고 있고 비급여에 대해 더 지원하면 그렇게 많은 재정이 소요되는 게 아니다"며 "거기서 계산을 잘못 하신 것 같다"며 물러서지 않았다.

교육제도에 대한 논의로 주제가 옮겨지자 두 후보 간 설전은 더욱 치열해졌다. 선행학습에 대한 문제, 문 후보와 전교조의 연관성, 반값 등록금 등이 쟁점으로 떠오르며 두 후보는 얼굴을 붉히는 논쟁을 이어갔다.

무엇보다 "문 후보는 전교조와 긴밀한 유대를 이어갈 것이냐"는 박 후보의 질문에 문 후보가 "전교조와의 관계가 특별한 문제가 되느냐. 박 후보의 질문은 전교조가 불순한 세력이라는 뜻이 내포돼 있는 것 같은데 교육을 이념적으로 평가하기 하는 것 아니냐"고 맞받으면서 설전은 절정에 달했다.

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5) Korea Comments (“Top” status condition)

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朴-文 마지막 TV토론서 난타전…신경전 최고조

정치부 기자 2012년 12월 16일

반값등록금 문제를 놓고도 박 후보는 참여정부 때 대학등록금이 폭등했다는 점을 공격하는데 역점을 기울였고, 문 후보는 새누리당 정권이 잘못된 정책을 바로잡는데 실패했다고 주장하며 맞섰다.

이 과정에서 박 후보는 “제가 대통령이 됐으면 (반값 등록금을) 진작 했어요” 라고 말해 눈길을 끌었다.

댓글 (총 1322개)

배움
댓글1

난타라기보단... 한쪽이 두들겨 맞는구먼... 저겉보고 누가 대통령감아래...

추천
1,996

악반대
973

배움
댓글2

문후보가 문을 걸어 잠구고 못나오게 한것이 아니라, 공권력 경찰이 문을 열어달라고 했는데 문을 걸어잠근것입니다. 이게 팩트입니다. 감금이란단어가 어떻게 나온거죠? 자기감금인가요? 그리고 인권이란것 자체가 사람을 가리지 않는것입니다. 거기엔 일반 사람들간 차이가 있겠지만 인권변호사라면 더욱 더 그 신념을 지켜야지요. 물론 저도 주소를 알아내려고 자동차사고를 낸것은 잘못된 일이라고 인정합니다.

추천
1,364

악반대
842

배움
댓글3

"아하하하하하 내가 대통령 됐으면 진작에 그거 했어요" 안됐으면 모를까 오늘 보고도 박근혜 뺨으면 진짜 그게 간첩이다

추천
1,841

악반대
1,348

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댓글4

나89년생인데 군대에서 천안함,연평도사건때 고생하던 내 토래군번들은 박지지도 많음

추천
370

악반대
214

댓글5

국민이 100명인 나라가 있습니다 99명이 A후보를 지지하고 1명이 B후보를 지지합니다 근데 웬걸 B후보가 당선된겁니다 이유인즉슨 99명의 A후보 지지자들이 당연히 A후보가 당선될줄알고 아무도 투표안하고 놀러갔습니다 우리 젊은이들 이번에도 나하나 투표안한다고 상관없을거 같나요?? 상관있습니다 꼭 투표하십시오...

추천
146

악반대
54

댓글6

참 이상하지? 20 30이 SNS를 거의 장악하다시피했는데 SNS에서는 박근혜지지자들이 거의없었잖아 ㅋ 근데 까놓고보니깐 3명중 1명은 보수야

추천
34

악반대
12

댓글7

난 근데 왜이렇게 문재인 말하게 채수없지? 속으로는 탄생각하고 싸움걸려고 하는 사람같애 노무현처럼

추천
25

악반대
3

댓글8

아... 진짜 보는 내내 박근혜 헛소리에 내가 다 가슴이 떨렸네. 개콘 하는 시간에 토론편성 했다고 대신 웃기려고 나왔나? ㅋ ㅋ

추천
17

악반대
9

댓글9

<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"<속보> 경찰"국정원 여직원 댓글 흔적 발견 못해"

추천
0

악반대
21

댓글10

대체 누구 뺨아야 할 지 모르겠다.... 정말 모르겠다.....

추천
0

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당신의 인터넷 뉴스세상! **마이뉴스Portal** 2012년 12월

정치 칼럼 지역별 스포츠 국내 국제 비즈 IT 건강/라이프 연예

투데이 **정치** / SPECIAL ISSUE

로그인 가입하기

[관련기사 보기](#) [블로그](#) [돋보기 보기](#)

마이뉴스포탈 내 검색

朴-文 마지막 TV토론서 난타전...신경전 최고조

정치부 기자 2012년 12월 16일

반값등록금 문제를 놓고도 박 후보는 참여정부 때 대학등록금이 폭등했다는 점을 공격하는데 역점을 기울였고, 문 후보는 새누리당 정권이 잘못된 정책을 바로잡는데 실패했다고 주장하며 맞섰다.

이 과정에서 박 후보는 "제가 대통령이 됐으면 (반값 등록금을) 진작 했어요" 라고 말해 눈길을 끌었다.

댓글 (총 1322개)

댓글1

난타라기보단... 한쪽이 두들겨 맞는구먼...

저절보고 누가 대통령감이라...;

댓글2

문후보가 문을 걸어 잠그고 못나오게 한것이 아니라, 공권력 경찰이 문을 열어달라고 했는데 문을 열어잠근것입니다. 이게 팩트입니다. 감금이란단어가 어떻게 나온거죠? 자기감금인가요? 그리고 인권이란것 자체가 사람을 가리지 않는것입니다. 거기엔 일반 사람들간 차이가 있겠지만 인권변호사라면 더욱 더 그 신념을 지켜야지요. 물론 저도 주소를 알아내려고 자동차사고를 낸것은 잘못된 일이라고 인정합니다.

댓글3

"아하하하하하 내가 대통령 됐으면 진작에 그거 했어요"

안봤으면 모를까

오늘 보고도 박근혜 뽐으면 진짜 그게 간첩이다

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Appendix C. Online questionnaire used in experiment

1. Approximately how many hours per day do you read news online?

- Less than 1 hour daily
- 1 to 2 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- More than 3 hours daily

2. Do you leave comments on news websites? If so, how often do you leave comments?

- More than once daily
- Once a week
- Less than once a week
- Never

3. Do you use the “like/dislike” features on news websites? If so, how often do you leave comments?

- More than once daily
- Once a week
- Less than once a week
- Never

4. Please list the top three sources, in order of frequency, you access to receive news:

5. For the following statements on the topics below, please check the box that describes your opinion:

Strongly Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree

Mitt Romney should have been elected president in 2012.

It is good that Barack Obama was elected president in 2012.

Someone other than Mitt Romney or Barack Obama should have been elected president.

6. What is your highest degree?

- High School Diploma
- Enrolled in College
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's
- Ph.D. or Post-doctorate

7. What is your sex?

- Male
- Female

(NEW PAGE) * Please closely read and examine the following and answer the questions:

(STIMULUS HERE)

(NEW PAGE)

You will be asked questions about the article and comments you read. To best respond to each question, feel free to scroll back to the previous page to view the article and comments again.

8. On the following scale regarding the two presidential candidates, how would you rate the direction and magnitude of bias of the article you just read?

Strongly biased toward favoring Obama
Somewhat biased toward favoring Obama
Not biased (neutral)
Somewhat biased toward favoring Romney
Strongly biased toward favoring Romney

9. Based on the material you read, what is the popular opinion regarding this issue?

Strongly biased toward favoring Obama
Somewhat biased toward favoring Obama
Not biased (neutral)
Somewhat biased toward favoring Romney
Strongly biased toward favoring Romney

10. On a scale of ‘Very Little’ to ‘Very Strong Influence,’ how much influence do you think the article you just read have on other users vs. yourself?

Very Little Some Influence Strong Influence Very Strong Influence

Other users

Yourself

11. On a scale of ‘Very Little’ to ‘Very Strong Influence,’ how influence do you think the comments you just read have on other users vs. yourself?

Very Little Some Influence Strong Influence Very Strong Influence

Other users

Yourself

12. After viewing the news article and user comments, how would you rate your willingness to leave a comment on the news article?

Very Little Somewhat willing Willing Very Strong Willingness to
Comment

13. Please briefly describe why you responded to question #12 in the way you did. In other words, why would you say your willingness to leave a comment on the article was rated as such?

14. After viewing the news article and user comments, how would you rate your willingness to press the “like” button on the comments? Again, feel free to scroll back to the previous page(s) to view the news article or comments again.

Very Little Somewhat willing Willing Very Strong Willingness to “Like”

Comment1 _____
 Comment2 _____
 Comment3 _____
 Comment4 _____
 Comment5 _____
 Comment6 _____
 Comment7 _____
 Comment8 _____
 Comment9 _____
 Comment10 _____

15. Please briefly describe why you responded to question #14 in the way you did. In other words, why would you say your willingness to “like” a comment on each article was rated as such?

Comment1 _____
 Comment2 _____
 Comment3 _____
 Comment4 _____
 Comment5 _____
 Comment6 _____
 Comment7 _____
 Comment8 _____
 Comment9 _____
 Comment10 _____

16. After viewing the news article and user comments, how would you rate your willingness to press the “dislike” button on the comments? Again, feel free to scroll back to the previous page(s) to view the news article or comments again.

Very Little Somewhat willing Willing Very Strong Willingness to “Dislike”

Comment1 _____
 Comment2 _____
 Comment3 _____
 Comment4 _____
 Comment5 _____
 Comment6 _____
 Comment7 _____
 Comment8 _____
 Comment9 _____
 Comment10 _____

17. Please briefly describe why you responded to question #16 in the way you did. In other words, why would you say your willingness to “dislike” a comment was rated as such?

Comment1 _____
 Comment2 _____
 Comment3 _____
 Comment4 _____
 Comment5 _____
 Comment6 _____
 Comment7 _____
 Comment8 _____
 Comment9 _____
 Comment10 _____

18. Please rate the following statements based on the scale provided:

Strongly Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree

I pay attention to user comments when reading news online.

I pay attention to the number of “likes” or “top comment” status when reading news online.

I think user comments are helpful when reading news online.

I think “likes/dislikes” features are helpful when reading news online.

19. Regarding the question above, please briefly describe why or why not you think user comments and “likes/dislikes” features are helpful when reading news online.

User comments _____
“Likes/dislikes” _____

20. If you left a comment on a news website, would you pay attention to the number of “likes” or “dislikes” you receive? Why or why not?

Yes, please describe: _____

No, please describe: _____

Thank you!

Appendix D. Demographic traits of experiment participants

1) U.S.

NEWS CONSUMPTION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LESS THAN 1 HOUR	84	42.0	42.0	42.0
1 TO 2 HOURS	81	40.5	40.5	82.5
2 TO 3 HOURS	30	15.0	15.0	97.5
MORE THAN 3 HOURS	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

COMMENTING EXPERIENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MORE THAN ONCE DAILY	19	9.5	9.5	9.5
ONCE A WEEK	24	12.0	12.0	21.5
LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK	27	13.5	13.5	35.0
NEVER	130	65.0	65.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

LIKING EXPERIENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MORE THAN ONCE DAILY	46	23.0	23.0	23.0
ONCE A WEEK	30	15.0	15.0	38.0
LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK	39	19.5	19.5	57.5
NEVER	85	42.5	42.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

EDUCATION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	12	6.0	6.0	6.0
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE	176	88.0	88.0	94.0
BACHELOR'S DEGREE	6	3.0	3.0	97.0
MASTER'S	5	2.5	2.5	99.5
PH.D. OR POST-DOCTORATE	1	.5	.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

SEX

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MALE	67	33.5	33.5	33.5
FEMALE	133	66.5	66.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

2) Korea

NEWS CONSUMPTION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
LESS THAN 1 HOUR	125	62.5	62.5	62.5
1 TO 2 HOURS	49	24.5	24.5	87.0
2 TO 3 HOURS	14	7.0	7.0	94.0
MORE THAN 3 HOURS	12	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

COMMENTING EXPERIENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MORE THAN ONCE DAILY	43	21.5	21.5	21.5
ONCE A WEEK	26	13.0	13.0	34.5
LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK	37	18.5	18.5	53.0
NEVER	94	47.0	47.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

LIKING EXPERIENCE

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MORE THAN ONCE DAILY	69	34.5	34.5	34.5
ONCE A WEEK	9	4.5	4.5	39.0
LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK	47	23.5	23.5	62.5
NEVER	75	37.5	37.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

EDUCATION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	33	16.5	16.5	16.5
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE	33	16.5	16.5	33.0
BACHELOR'S DEGREE	73	36.5	36.5	69.5
MASTER'S	47	23.5	23.5	93.0
PH.D. OR POST-DOCTORATE	14	7.0	7.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

SEX

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
MALE	77	38.5	38.5	38.5
FEMALE	123	61.5	61.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

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