AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of an article originally published by _____ in _____ (ISSN _____; eISSN _____).

FINISHING THE "UNFINISHED" STORY
Online newspaper discussion threads as journalistic texts

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Discussion threads published beneath articles on news websites have only lately become the subject of serious scholarship. While early research preoccupied itself with the hostile nature of comments posted on such forums, and the issue of moderation, recent studies have focused on two interlocking questions: the extent to which professional news organizations, and the journalists they employ, are "buying into" the value of encouraging audience-members to comment on their articles and how successfully (or not) news-makers are using threads to forge virtual "communities". While the purpose of constructing such communities has largely been viewed through a utilitarian prism—as a means of drawing in traffic, building brand loyalty and generating income—consideration has also been given to threads as vehicles for empowering citizens, by allowing them to debate and/or contest the authority of professionally written news texts and/or establishment narratives. This article aims to go further, by building on an emerging strand of research which conceives of discussion posts less as adjuncts, or mere responses, to journalists' articles than extensions of them. It argues that the most valuable "evidence-based" posts add background detail, colour and context that can greatly enhance—and help make complete—otherwise "unfinished" stories.

KEYWORDS   audience-member; citizen journalist; citizen source; discussion post; discussion thread; evidence-based post; journalist; newspaper

Introduction

Of all forms of user-generated content (UGC) introduced by news websites to enrich their output, none has been of more disputed merit (and purpose) than the discussion threads many now routinely run beneath articles. While the value of encouraging online audiences to contribute eyewitness accounts, photographs and video footage was swiftly recognized by professional news organizations keen to supplement and enhance their own coverage at minimal cost (Robinson 2010), editors were much slower to acknowledge the virtues of allowing readers to post comments and reactions (Chung 2007; Diakopoulos et al. 2011; Santana 2014; Thurman 2008). This article aims to confront this climate of scepticism, by using a qualitative analysis of the contribution made by discussion threads to show how considered, well-informed reader posts can be every bit as illuminating, *journalistic* even, as other forms of UGC more readily embraced by professional news providers. It does so by presenting illustrative examples

drawn from a textual analysis of discussion threads accompanying 27 online news sto-   5
ries published in July 2011 and 2 October 2012, respectively—all focusing on narratives
framing children as "victims" and/or "threats". The data presented are supplementary
findings of a PhD study into the mediation of popular discourses about juveniles, as
documented in full elsewhere (Morrison 2016).

Early enquiries into news organizations' use of discussion threads—as reviewed   10
by, among others, Zamith and Lewis (2014)—attributed at least some of the resistance
shown by their employees to a normative aversion to abusive or ill-informed comments
(Chung 2007; Santana 2014; Secko et al. 2011; Thurman 2008) and the challenge pre-
sented by reader posts to their privileged gatekeeping role (Deuze 2006; Domingo
2008; Domingo et al. 2008; Lewis 2012; Loke 2012; Robinson 2006; Singer 2005). Other   15
concerns identified included the cost of refereeing discussions, both to ensure civility
and meaningful debate (Chung 2007; Thurman 2008) and avoid litigation provoked by
defamatory posts (Robinson 2010). Even today, with news organizations belatedly rec-
ognizing the potential for threads to promote the construction of online "communities"
they can harness to build and maintain audiences and generate profit (Robinson 2010),   20
many journalists seem remarkably disengaged with the "readers" whose input their
employers profess to value so highly (Broersma and Graham 2012; Canter 2013; Her-
mida and Thurman 2008; Meyer and Carey 2014; Robinson 2010). Content analysis and
newsroom ethnography carried out by Canter at two British local newspapers found
interaction on threads between audience-members and journalists to be "virtually non-   25
existent at 1 per cent" (Canter 2013, 608). Instead, half of all dialogical exchanges
involved two or more posters debating with each other and a further 34 per cent took
the form of posts that affirmed, contested or otherwise interacted with texts them-
selves. While more optimistic about the potential for news professionals to be won
round by the brave new world of audience participation, Robinson's ethnography of a   30
local newsroom negotiating the transition from a print-based newspaper to online-only
publication pointedly distinguished between an upcoming generation of digital-native
"convergers" enthusiastic about engaging with audiences during the process of news-
making and heel-dragging "traditionalists" determined to cling to conventional gate-
keeping hierarchies (Robinson 2010). Also even in settings where journalists are open   35
to building dialogues with readers, practical limitations often intrude, with "the small
size of online teams at news organizations" making it "difficult for them to moderate or
become fully engaged" (Zamith and Lewis 2014, 563), as studies by Thurman (2008)
and Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) have demonstrated.

Today, even academics who take a more positive view of the contribution made   40
by discussion threads remain divided about their intrinsic *journalistic* value. A general
tendency is to view threads primarily as tools for facilitating dialogue and debate about
issues raised by articles, rather than *contributing to*—let alone modifying—*texts them-
selves*. Though some—notably Schuth, Marx, and de Rijke (2007) and Robinson (2010)—
conceive of threads as sites for meaningful "discussion" (hence the use of the term dis-   45
cussion, rather than comment, thread here), Hornmoen and Steensen (2014, 552) define
their overriding characteristic as a form of "eristic" or argumentative "dialogue", quite
distinct from the more considered "deliberation or persuasion" typifying conventional
"print op-ed" articles written by professional opinion-formers. In other words, threads
serve a worthwhile democratic function insofar as they encourage robust exchanges of   50
views on given subjects, but are of limited *journalistic* value, in that they generally fail

to foster dialogue leading to conclusive, evidence-based resolutions of disputed facts or issues. This view that threads have little to contribute to the content or framing of news texts themselves has been put down, in large part, to the continuing disregard journalists show towards them as a *source* of news. To quote Zamith and Lewis:

> Overall, the literature on online news comments suggests that journalists are sceptical about the quality of audience contributions in news website forums; therefore they choose to limit the extent to which users may participate in the news construction process, and altogether struggle to moderate and shape their commenting spaces into something resembling the idealized dialogue of the public sphere. (Zamith and Lewis 2014, 563)

For all the pessimism about the journalistic virtues of discussion threads, though, an emerging current of research argues that the most considered posts can positively contribute to *(re)shaping* the news texts on which they are commenting—and that (however belatedly) journalists and their editors are beginning to recognize this. Though Örnebring's comparative study of the use of threads and other UGC on the websites of two leading tabloid papers, Britain's *The Sun* and Sweden's *Aftonbladet*, found limited evidence of users being "empowered" to create "news/informational content" (Örnebring 2008, 783), in the case of "discussion forums" specifically the "most popular" *were* "news/information-oriented" ones (780). More significantly, he observed that threads had the potential to become a particularly influential form of UGC, in that they "allow users to manipulate existing content thereby (potentially) changing the nature and character of the content they are accessing" (777). Indeed, as Meyer and Carey (2014, 214) have observed, in arguing for more direct interaction between journalists and those posting on threads, discussion posts "represent a way to continue the conversation about important community topics" and "can help journalists see that the story does not end once it is published"—by identifying "new avenues for examination and new perspectives to include". Similarly, Robinson (2010, 129) found a recognition among both "convergers" and "traditionalists" that threads offered both "a source of information" and "a way to extend the story", while Hermida and Thurman (2008, 349) elicited "an acknowledgement" from some editors they interviewed about threads as relatively early as 2008 that audiences could be "very knowledgeable about certain areas", leaving journalists "very interested in unlocking that information" (as the editor of *FT.com* put it). Alistair Brown, general manager of *Scotsman.com*, regaled them with an instance when "a story on a proposed tram system in Edinburgh" generated a "quite remarkable" level of debate, including "a discussion about the geography of the city by geologists worldwide" (353). Such arguments draw on a crucial concept introduced by one of very few studies to date to conceive of discussion posts less as mere responses, or *adjuncts*, to texts on which they comment than *extensions* of them. This is Secko et al.'s 2011 exploration of threads as tools for both exposing and addressing the (unavoidably) "unfinished" nature of the top-down, journalist-led narratives on which they comment. Though focusing specifically on science journalism—a specialist arena that is arguably more susceptible to challenge and correction by what might be termed audience claims-makers than most, due to the intrinsically contestable nature of scientific enquiry—this ground-breaking article offered a useful pointer for improving our understanding of the increasingly layered way in which discussion threads *can* contribute to news discourse generally. In threads published beneath the science articles

they analysed, Secko et al. found evidence that posts were being used as a form of "narrative interaction between journalist and commenter, spanning from a questioning of the journalist's authority to contradicting essential elements of the journalistic narrative" (Secko et al. 2011, 820–821). They added that "in no cases was a posted journalistic narrative considered a completed package with reader comments simply saying 'thank you for the information and insight'" (825). More to the point, journalists themselves often acknowledged this, explaining that they "would read the audience commentary after their articles in order to get a sense of what people were concerned about, and even details on breaking stories"—and describing them as "useful ways of getting information", given that "you can't be everywhere in the country" (823). In other words, what Secko et al. identified was an unfolding negotiation not only of the facts presented in journalist-led articles, but the nature of threads themselves—with posts emerging not just as a means by which readers could *respond* to articles but a way for them to *contribute to* and/or *alter* them.

It is, then, the concept of the "unfinished" journalist-led narrative which forms the locus for the present article. As the following sections demonstrate, threads (can) amount to *extensions* (however imperfect, structurally messy and incomplete in themselves) of the texts on which they are commenting. Informed commenters—many of whom would probably never conceive of themselves as "citizen journalists" (Allan and Thorsen 2007)—are hybrids not only of journalists and *readers/audience-members*, but journalists, audience-members and *sources*. Viewed in this light, their interactions with one another—and with journalists and the narratives on which they comment—is less debate/discussion than negotiation of the "facts" of an issue, theme or topic and (at times) of the *detailed specifics* of individual stories. As Secko et al. (2011, 826) rightly observed of threads they analysed, "audience involvement" can—and frequently does —work "with the journalistic narrative", by "adding agents, events and scenes" that contribute to "a fuller version of the story" than would exist if it were not for the contributions posters make.

Meet the "Finishers": How Discussion Posts Were Coded and Analysed

As explained above, primary research for this article draws on supplementary findings from a qualitative textual analysis of discussion threads posted beneath online British newspaper articles gathered during the course of a doctoral research project investigating the framing of children in contemporary discourse (Morrison 2016). Sampling at five-day intervals throughout July 2011, starting on 1 July, the researcher coded all articles about children published in UK national papers to identify the most dominant frames used to portray them. Of the seven categories defined, by far the biggest was that positioning juveniles as "victims" (262 out of 462, or 57 per cent), with the second largest depicting them as "threats" (46, or 10 per cent) and another 17 articles (4 per cent) falling into a hybrid victim/threat category. With these dominant frames identified, a discourse analysis was carried out of all discussion threads published beneath the online versions of the "victim" and "threat" articles concerned, to explore how audience-members both *responded* and (potentially) *contributed to* them. To distinguish between posts that merely reacted to an article—rather than contributing new or additional substance to it—comments were colour-coded as either "reactive opinion" or

"evidence-based", with the latter category sub-divided into posts rebutting a narrative versus those endorsing it. Further coding was used to distinguish between three classes of reactive opinion: those that affirmed the journalist's frame by parroting it; those that negotiated with the frame, by accepting some aspects while contesting others; and those opposed to it (Morrison 2016). This analytical approach was repeated in the first week of October 2012 for a second sample of articles, this time focusing on a then unfolding "child victim" case study relating to the high-profile abduction of a five-year-old girl.

As coming sections demonstrate, the dialogue engendered on threads frequently went well beyond mere discussion or debate—to present *additional* information which built on, and reinforced, journalists' narratives or (in a minority of cases) contradicted or otherwise undermined them. Moreover, in drawing on the asserted expertise and/or first-hand experience of audience-members, these "evidence-based" posts often introduced details and perspectives which arguably helped "finish off" previously unfinished journalist-led articles—by filling in missing details and/or providing what amounted to additional/alternative source testimony.

Before exploring individual examples, it is worth pausing to consider the *frequency* of evidence-based posts, as compared to those of a purely reactive or opinion-based nature. Out of a total of 2809 comments posted beneath the 23 online articles sampled in July 2011, just over one in five (565) contained at least some material which might be classified as *evidence*. Of these, well over half (333) presented additional information and/or testimony which had the effect of consolidating the journalist-led narratives to which they contributed. However, a sizeable minority (232, or 4 out of 10) brought material to the table which either *modified* or *challenged outright* the journalists' versions of events. Meanwhile, of the four threads sampled from 2 October 2012—all relating to a specific unfolding case-study story, the abduction and murder of five-year-old April Jones[1]—the percentage of evidence-based to purely opinionated posts was comparable (at 22.4 per cent, or 572 out of 737). On this occasion, the proportion endorsing the journalist-led narrative was far higher (representing 82 per cent, or 135 out of 165)—though this was arguably to be expected, given the "live" nature of this unfolding story, which concerned a frantic manhunt.

Nonetheless, with at least one-fifth of all "comments" analysed going beyond *reacting* or *offering opinions on* articles (or issues to which they related) by presenting additional information/testimony with a bearing on the *facts* they portrayed, discussion threads can clearly be viewed as vehicles for fostering dynamic interactions between journalists, their texts and their public(s): ones with the potential to help complete stories that would otherwise be left "unfinished" (Secko et al. 2011). As always, though, the most persuasive evidence can be found in individual examples, and it is to a consideration of specific instances in which true citizen *journalism* can be glimpsed on threads that we now turn. To demonstrate the full range of ways in which audience posts can add to the depth and detail presented in journalist-led articles—rendering them more "finished" than they were beforehand—the evidence-based extensions of articles selected for analysis here have been divided into the following four varieties:

- Posts/threads that affirm and consolidate journalist-led narratives.
- Posts/threads that negotiate, qualify or clarify journalist-led narratives.
- Posts/threads that oppose or contest journalist-led narratives.

- Posts/threads that add information and/or context to the substance of an article that neither clearly affirms nor opposes the underlying journalist-led narrative.   5

Affirming Posts

Typical affirming evidence-based posts were those that contributed additional context or detail to a news text which endorsed and consolidated the way it had been framed by a journalist. So it was that on 11 July 2011, "The Watcher, Nuneaton uk" explained the legal basis for the perceived injustice underpinning a story about a man   10
convicted of harassing his ex-wife's new partner by showing other parents a newspaper cutting revealing him to be a convicted sex offender (Dolan 2011). "The Watcher" accurately described the main provisions of Britain's Sex Offenders' Register, which allowed "Head teachers, doctors, youth leaders, sports club managers and others, including landlords" to be "notified of the existence of a local sex offender", but only "on a confi-   15
dential basis"—stressing it was "illegal" for them to pass on this information. Though somewhat selective in the facts he presented—"The Watcher" called for a UK equivalent to America's "Megan's Law" (Library of Congress 1994) when, in fact, a new Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme, widely dubbed "Sarah's Law", had been introduced in October the previous year—the essence of his or her critique of the then UK system   20
was accurate. As had been true prior to the 2010 developments, it remained the case that anyone to whom the identity and whereabouts of a convicted sex offender was disclosed had to keep that information confidential or face prosecution (Lipscombe 2012). This stood in stark contrast to "Megan's Law", which offered all members of the public open access to a searchable database of named sex offenders living in the com-   25
munity (Library of Congress 1994)—a fact spelled out by no fewer than three US-based posters, "mickie, ca, usa", "Stephanie, Florida" and "lakotahope, Virginia, USA". Of a different nature, but arguably of similar merit, was "seamus, Grimsby's" contribution to the same thread. This took aim at the inconsistent way British justice was applied in comparable cases, by reminding fellow *Mail* readers of a story "only a week ago in this   30
paper" about a council that had successfully "gone to Court to allow them to tell a mans [*sic*] children of his sex offences some 20 years past even though they were of a minor nature"[2]. A glance back at a report published on 4 July—headlined "Children of Sex Offender Must Be Told of 20-year-old Crimes After High Court Appeal for Secrecy Fails" (*www.dailymail.co.uk* 2011)—confirms the accuracy of this post.   35

Arguably of greater *contextual* value, though, was the welcome historical perspective "Completely Average, Somewhere" lent to a discussion provoked by a *www.daily-mail.co.uk* story headlined "Mothers Using Nicotine Gum to Avoid Smoking in Pregnancy 'Put Unborn Babies at Risk'" (Borland 2011, 13), by informing readers critical of the article's alarmist message that "90 years ago the Infant Mortality rate was over   40
10% (More than 100 died out of every 1000 births)", whereas today it was "less than 0.5% (Less than 5 in 1000 births)". This led him or her to conclude that fellow readers should "think before you speak, unless you would like to return to a 10+ per cent Infant Mortality Rate". The importance of this post was that, as with others incorporating similarly bold statements of historical context, independent research confirms it to   45
be substantially true. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the last time

the infant mortality rate had been as high as 10 per cent was circa 1917: 94 years before the contested article appeared, but close enough to the "90-year" point suggested by the poster to be judged correct within a statistically insignificant margin of error (Griffiths and Brock 2003).

A variation of evidence-based posts that contributed detailed background otherwise absent from articles to substantiate or consolidate their framing were those adding a mere line or two of crucial clarification in support of a journalist's claims. A clear example of this arose from a lengthy dialogue between several posters sparked by an assertion in a story about the pregnant teenage daughter of a Guernsey-based "mother-of-14" that she would qualify for "supplementary benefit" when her own child was born (Sears 2011a). Though both "Ellen, West Midlands" and "Lizzie, southampton' were quick to challenge this detail, on the grounds that supplementary benefit had been abolished in 1988, it fell to "Sarah, Guernsey" to correct them both by pointing out: "not in Guernsey it hasn't!" Others, by contrast, drew on personal experience to offer significant new source testimony that helped strengthen an article's framing. For instance, 4 out of 11 comments posted beneath a 26 July www.independent.co.uk story covering a row between the Vatican and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny about the mishandling of allegations of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church asserted bitter firsthand experience to reinforce the "paedophile priest" narrative underpinning the tale (Day 2011, 22). These included a post from "aussiemaverick", who recalled how, "at the age of 8", he or she had "attended and lodged at a Catholic school in Melbourne", where he or she has been "abused physically and psychologically by the nuns and priests"—an experience for which he or she had "never forgiven the Church".

Many affirming evidence-based comments posted in response to the 2 October 2012 abduction of April Jones largely took the form of emotionally charged assertions that young children should not be left alone unsupervised based on posters' own experiences of parenting. However, a small but significant minority drew on second- or third-hand evidence culled from independent sources to bolster their case—some more explicitly attributed than others. One such poster was "george, earth", who informed fellow readers that the "first ever amber alert in the usa saved a little baby from being abducted by her babysitter", before asking of the British government: "Why don't we have an amber alert?!" While his latter point was somewhat misinformed—a new Child Rescue Alert system *had* been launched in 2010, as much of the April Jones coverage observed (e.g. Laville 2012)—his claim that the AMBER Alert model adopted in the United States had led to the successful recovery of a child kidnapped by her babysitter was largely true. So, too, was his assertion that this was an early instance (if not quite the first) of this system being utilized, as confirmed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. That said, there were significant errors in the precise detail of the case "george, earth" cited: notably the age of the abducted child (a 10-year-old, not an infant) and the less material fact that her abductor was her *former* babysitter (www.ncjrs.gov 2002). The inclusion of so many significant incidental errors of detail might, in one sense, be seen to undermine confidence in the accuracy of a post to such an extent that its overall usefulness is questionable. However, if the main point(s) contained in a post that is otherwise confused, misleading or incomplete can be shown to be fundamentally correct, that contribution arguably remains a valid and valuable one—as we shall see from a fuller discussion of the problem of wholly or partially inaccurate discussion posts in a later section.

Another pattern to emerge from affirming posts on April Jones threads, notably on *www.dailymail.co.uk*, was a sense of frustration that, for all its extensive coverage of the case, the paper had failed to accord it sufficient priority over other stories. Among the evidence-based posters making this point was "Tinainparadise, Yorkshire", who reminded fellow readers of the then recent case of "abducted" 15-year-old Megan Stammers—who, despite having "voluntarily" absconded to France with her schoolteacher ("a man who was always going to look after her"), had become the subject of the "top news story for a week". Unusually, for a response *affirming* the "moral panic" discourse (Cohen 1972) underpinning the April Jones coverage, this post's principle contribution was a form of context that *undermined* the similarly hysterical reporting of another abduction case. An incident framed in highly "episodic" terms was, then, lent greater urgency through its contrast with a (supposedly) even more high-profile case that had been equally episodically reported, yet was deemed not so deserving of this coverage. Curiously, this had the effect of lending the poster's panicky framing an atypically "thematic" dimension (Iyengar 1991).

Negotiated Posts

A significant number of evidence-based posts generated in both periods of study—182 out of 565 (or 32 per cent) in July 2011 and 17 out of 165 (just over 1 in 10) on 2 October 2012—neither straightforwardly affirmed the detail and/or underlying agendas of articles on which they commented nor rejected them. These negotiated posts instead sought to steer a line between the opposing camps by accepting some (or even most) assertions made in the narratives to which they responded while strongly questioning or contesting others.

Unsurprisingly, given the sheer number of posts it generated, the *Mail* story about the pregnant daughter of a welfare-dependent mother-of-14 provoked not only widespread hostility and resentment but a number of posts adopting more negotiated standpoints. Some of these could be classified less as posts presenting *fresh/additional* evidence than ones seeking to interrogate the narrative more closely than other readers and/or draw attention to elements journalists (and, in some cases, photographers) had included in their framing but chosen not to emphasize—or had intentionally buried. Though she conceded this story concerned "an unconventional family", "kate, fwi" drew fellow readers' attention to a detail hidden in the original story indicating that, far from conforming to the stereotype of the promiscuous single mum, the parent had had "most of her children whilst married to their father", who "went out to work" and "didn't stay home and laze around". She also emphasized the fact that the amount of state benefit the mother received for her 14 offspring was no greater than if she had "stopped at 5". Similarly, "Darius, Copenhagen" urged others to trust the evidence of their own eyes, by seeing in the staged family photos the *Mail* used to highlight the family's size—all 14 children seated around a long breakfast table and another shot highlighting the scale of the weekly shop needed to feed them—proof that they were a much-loved and well-groomed brood. While he did not "condone generations living on benefits", he argued, "these kids look neat and clean and well turned out, and so does the house".

Perhaps by definition, negotiated evidence-based posts also took a wider variety of forms and were frequently more nuanced than clear-cut affirming and oppositional ones. A trend visible in posts on longer threads was for some audience-members to declare their broad support for an article's underlying narrative frame—and, in particular, the social "problem" it identified (Altheide 1997, 663)—while nonetheless disputing certain aspects of it and/or the "solution" (663) it (and sources on which it relied) promoted. For example, "mum to many, lancashire and damn proud!" responded to a *www.dailymail.co.uk* story about spoilt and unruly youngsters, headlined "Rise of the Violent 'Little Emperors': Children Lashing Out at Parents to Get Own Way" (Harris 2011), by endorsing the implied message that a firmer hand was needed to control kids while at the same time challenging the consensus among other posters that the answer was to bring back corporal punishment. In her almost stream-of-consciousness contribution, she wrote:

> do you know i have never ever had to smack my kids. not ever. why? they were taught right from wrong from the minute they were born. they were taught to treat people how you would like to be treated and they were taught that no means no. they knew when they had gone too far they would be punished they knew not to show me up when out in public and they knew that i was boss. its called setting boundries and if they cross those boundries there are consequences. i am proud to say i can take my children anywhere and they behave. i am frequently told by strangers what well behaved, well mannered children i have. i am damn proud of them but i am also damn proud of myself.

This use of asserted personal experience as evidence—a device which effectively casts posters less as citizen *journalists* than citizen *sources*—was a feature of other posts taking a broadly similar view. Describing her- or himself as "a married working parent (part time)" and her or his "only daughter" as "a focus of my life", "JS, S London" relayed her or his own first-hand experience of the *ineffectiveness* of physical violence:

> I am fairly strict and have brought her up along the same values as I was. She doesn't have all the latest gadgets, watches childrens TV max an hour a day and is an angel at school. I was smacked occasionally as a child and I have done the same to her. For the last yr since she turned 9 she smacks back, she shouts and she rants, she refuses to do her homework and breaks her promises. we've tried smacking and shouting and the naughty step. they don't work. We are now trying rewards for 1 thing only (bedtime) and its working, not always but you don't expect a child to be perfect. I don't know where we went wrong but we are trying hard to fix it…

Similarly, the epic *www.dailymail.co.uk* thread focusing on the pregnant daughter of Britain's "most prolific single mother" (Sears 2011a) threw up an emotive post from "Can't be done, England", again drawing on direct personal experience to dispute some—though not all—aspects of the article. While taking aim at the dominant discourse underlying both the journalist-led narrative and the vast majority of other posts—namely that the United Kingdom's welfare state was open to widespread abuse by "scroungers" (Golding and Middleton 1982)—she still took a pot-shot at this *particular* family, from whom she pointedly distanced herself and her husband. Criticizing the revelation in the fifth paragraph of the story that the mother had "managed to squirrel away enough cash for a £1,600 breast enhancement and a sunbed' (Sears 2011a), the

poster contrasted this with what she strongly implied was the far from glamorous real-
ity of life on benefits for most claimants:

> I "live" (exist, more like) on benefits because my husband's business went bust. There's
> no way any of us can afford new clothes and I can't even get my hair cut, never mind
> get it dyed all colours. Every penny we have goes on food and bills. Obviously I missed
> a trick by not having umpteen children and being able to sell my story to the papers.

Conflicted posts of this kind were also commonplace on threads published during the
24 hours following the reported abduction of April Jones. While concurring with the
dominant consensus underpinning responses to the five-year-old child's disappearance
—namely that the pervasive threat of stranger-danger meant she was too young to be
allowed out alone on a darkening autumnal evening—some posters drew on asserted
experience and/or knowledge to query whether this risk was as omnipresent as most
appeared to believe. For instance, "Miss Hardbroom, Emerald City" *re-presented* to fel-
low readers critical of April's parents' decision to let her out of their sight the fact that
the place from where she had been taken, Machynlleth, was "clearly a small village with
a close knit society", where they justifiably "believed she was safe". By contrast, she
based her own refusal to allow her own five-year-old the same freedom on the fact
that she was unfortunate enough to live "in the big bad city", where (presumably)
child-snatchers posed a plausible day-to-day threat. In a similar vein, "Lakesidelady, Bel-
fast" drew on her own experience of allowing her two children, aged eight and nine, to
play out in their "small residential area"—"often until 9 pm" in "the summer holidays"—
to defend the rights of families living in other relatively safe neighbourhoods to let
their children out unsupervised. Her unusually considered post somehow managed to
justify this position based on the stoical conclusion that "we live in a society where
awful things can occur no matter how many precautions we take". In other words: child
molesters and killers *do* present a genuine risk (albeit in some locations more than
others), but *no amount* of parental protectiveness can ever be sufficient to wholly safe-
guard children against them.

Also prominent among evidence-based posters adopting a negotiated position
were present or former residents of Machynlleth who used their knowledge of the
town's safe reputation to defend April's parents against critics who disparaged them
for letting her play out alone. What marked these contributors out from the small
minority adopting a wholly oppositional stance, however, was their willingness to
openly countenance the suggestion that, however safe peaceful enclaves like Machynl-
leth might *once* have been, in today's more dangerous Britain they no longer were.
One such poster was "MrsW, Newtown", who recalled growing up on April's estate,
where she was "out till all hours playing". Arguing that only those who had been to
the town would "understand why she [April] was out with her friend at, god forbid,
7 pm"—because "it seems like the safest place on Earth" and "everyone knows one
another"—she nevertheless conceded that, even in Machynlleth, "times change".

Oppositional Posts

Posters contesting the narrative frames of journalist-led texts frequently did so by
adding context, examples, testimony and/or other background information culled from

5   *third-party* sources—details whose omission from the original articles had arguably robbed them of perspective. In so doing, these posters performed a valuable *counter-narrative* role by challenging the episodic frames adopted by journalists and transforming them into more meaningful thematic ones that explored the deeper causes and/or wider implications of the often highly individualized accounts favoured by newspapers.

10   For instance, among the evidence-based posters who adopted a broadly "oppositional" stance in response to the *www.dailymail.co.uk* article about the purported risk to unborn babies posed by nicotine patches was "Taxed-to-the-Hilt, Nottingham", who despaired:

> Honestly, it's unbelievable how advice changes every 5 seconds. I'm currently pregnant
15 > and have stopped a 25 a day habit and replaced it with the occasional use of a nicor-
> ette inhalator. I was really proud that I'd quit overnight and was managing to keep the
> worst cravings at bay with a little bit of NRT [nicotine replacement therapy]—which
> midwife & doc said were fine to use only a couple of weeks ago! I'm going to end up
> a psycho wreck trying to figure out all the conflicting advice on what I should and
20 > shouldn't do/eat etc etc!

Though in a very small minority—their comments numbering only 14 out of a total of 745—a handful of contesting posters were even brave enough to stick their heads above the parapet to contest the framing of the story about the pregnant daughter of a benefit claimant. "Anne, Hampshire" was one of several to dispute the none-too-sub-
25   tle undeserving poor discourse woven into the story, setting herself up as a source by drawing on personal experience of being forced to claim Incapacity Benefit because of a leukaemia diagnosis. She criticized the *Mail* for "pressing the benefits scrounger aspect of it [the story] home"—in so doing, making it "so much more difficult for people who are genuinely entitled to be on benefits", like "the genuinely sick and disabled"
30   and people in between jobs who need "a financial helping hand" to keep them going until they find one. Likewise, "Procrastinating, England" drew an explicit comparison between the "mother-of-14" and herself, as someone who ended up "alone with 2 children through no fault of my own and thank God for the daily income support and housing benefit that was given to me". In drawing this analogy, she was one of several
35   posters to *re-present* details included, but under-emphasized, in the original article, so as to cast this different (more forgiving) complexion on the woman's plight:

> Hang on—as regards the mother—unless I've missed something—she wasn't a "single
> mother" she was married when she had her kids—the article seems to neatly sidestep
> that … she wasn't on the benefits when she had the kids—things can go wrong in
40 > any of our lives—hence a welfare state to act as a safety net…

A similar tack was taken by "Jenny, Darwen", who endeavoured to draw fellow readers' attentions to the details (arguably buried in the original story) that "until 3 years ago" the mother had been "in a steady relationship" and "had all the kids by the same father"—not to mention the fact that "the eldest work, despite having kids". Though
45   not an evidence-based post in the sense that it contributed *new* information absent from the original article, like some of those discussed in the previous categories this comment foregrounded facts only incidentally mentioned in the piece in such a way that it had the effect of subverting the entire narrative construction.

Meanwhile, a Lancashire-based poster offered a welcome dose of reality by correcting the sweeping claim in a 21 July 2011 story on *www.dailymail.co.uk* that "exams are considered harmful" in alternative Steiner schools (Sears 2011b). Defending the school at the centre of the story—which focused on its relaxed attitude towards an alleged assault on a six-year-old pupil—the poster informed fellow readers that "Steiner students do sit O and A level exams". Though his reference to O-levels was undeniably anachronistic (the qualifications having been superseded by GCSEs in 1988), his basic point was accurate and, to anyone taking the time to read both the journalist's report and its accompanying comments, conceivably had the effect of moderating the overall impression of Steiner schools they took away.

As in other categories, the most impressive oppositional posts tended to be those drawing on knowledge culled from prior learning and/or media exposure that questioned the reliability of articles' claims and/or framing. Responding to the alarmist reactions of posters to *www.dailymail.co.uk* who saw the April Jones story as a vindication of fears about predatory paedophiles, "Caz, Glasgow" directly challenged "tash 38, Salisbury's" claim that it was "to [*sic*] dangerous" to "let my kids out"—by branding it "wrong"—and informing her that children were more likely to be abused by "people they know" than "a stranger". While she did not cite any specific sources to substantiate this statement, it is validated by an ever-growing body of empirical research, ranging from government-commissioned reports (e.g. La Fontaine 1994) to academic studies (e.g. Grubin 1998; Pritchard and Bagley 2001). By far the most prevalent class of oppositional post generated by this particular story, though, were the evidence-based responses contributed by residents of Machynlleth itself, who disputed the dominant "ubiquitous stranger-danger" discourse on the grounds that their town was (or used to be) a safe location where children could play out alone unthreatened. In this vein, "Abby, Small Welsh Town" castigated fellow posters for "raising speculation over her [April] playing out by herself", arguing that "up until now" Machynlleth had been "such a safe place". Rather than concluding that it no longer *was* safe and that its transformation into a more dangerous place was a disturbing sign of the times (as some of those quoted in the previous section appeared to), this poster seemed to view the five-year-old's abduction as a one-off freak event attributable to "some awful person taking advantage of the close knit community". Likewise, in a more extensive defence of "Mach", "Rr, Machynlleth" provided a vivid description of April's estate, by framing it as an atypically child-friendly environment:

> I don't think people realise how small Machynlleth is! I'm originally from there and there are big open greens, surrounded by houses! 4 big green patches in Bryn-Y-Gog which are pretty much in the middle of 4 squares of housing! Nobody has ever considered Mach being a danger like this! For a child to be out infront of her own home with her mates before darkfall, is really normal as there are normally a big crowd of children playing happily on these open greens outside there houses! I always did when I was younger with all of my friends! Machynlleth is not a city or even a large town, it is a town where everyone knows everyone! So all the people saying that April shouldn't of been out on her own, you are wrong, as this perfectly normal in Mach at 7 o clock when it isn't even dark!

Posts Adding Information/Context But Neither Affirming Nor Opposing Overall

As with some affirming, negotiating and oppositional posts, the most powerful of those contributing context or background which neither upheld nor opposed the journalist-led narrative on which they commented tended to draw on hard independent data (whether directly or implicitly). A 25 July 2011 story on *www.telegraph.co.uk* about a warning issued by then Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell that children's happiness was being jeopardized by British society's increasing preoccupation with shallow material values prompted "susan t" to observe, acerbically, that it was easy for him to lecture others about the limited worth of possessions, given that "the average national salary is £25 k, Gus O'Donnell earns £250+k, and that money/lack of money is the greatest reason for marital disharmony": in other words, that he was, in all likelihood, "10 times" happier "than the average wage earner". As with the post to *www.dailymail.co.uk* which cited infant mortality rates 90 years earlier to uphold the virtues of contemporary preoccupations with improving pregnant mothers' lifestyles, the facts supplied by "susan t" were substantially true: according to an ONS statistical bulletin from 2011, median UK earnings were £26,200 as of April that year (Office for National Statistics 2011), while a near-contemporaneous survey of "high earners' pay" published by the then Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition government placed Sir Gus's salary scale at £235,000–239,999 (www.gov.uk 2015). Though the poster's claims were, then, marginally exaggerated, the *essence* of the disproportion she highlighted was valid.

In terms of widening fellow readers' perspectives, though, the most impressive contribution to the same thread was a comment from (presumably) United States-based poster "Gregyank" pointing out that diminishing household incomes in Britain were, in part, an outcome of the fact that "the combined GDP [Gross Domestic Product] of Canada and Australia with 54 million people" had now "surpassed the GDP of the UK with its 62 million people". In truth, the figures he cited slightly understated both Britain's and the combined Canadian and Australian populations in 2011: the ONS reported that there were 63.3 million UK residents at the "mid-year" point (Office for National Statistics 2013), while Canada's populace numbered, respectively, just under 33.5 million in May 2011 (Statistics Canada 2011) and Australia's 22.5 million by that December (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012), taking their joint headcounts to 56 million. Nonetheless, the substantive point about Britain's declining status as an economic superpower, relative to the two other growing economies concerned, was arguably well made—and that alone was certainly accurate.

Problematic Posts: How Much Does Accuracy Matter?

For all their *interest* value as loose measures of popular opinion around given news subjects, the partial or (in some cases) dubious accuracy of many evidence-based posts raises questions about how *factually* valuable they are as contributions to texts on which they comment. However, it also opens up a wider philosophical debate about whether—or to what extent—"professional-level" journalistic precision *matters* when the overall *essence* of a poster's assertion (if not every "fact" presented) is well-founded. A textbook example of the essential worth of evidence-based posts that, nonetheless,

are only partially accurate was a contribution made by "maias" in response to the afore-mentioned *www.independent.co.uk* story about a diplomatic row between the Irish government and Vatican over the latter's insipid response to allegations about paedophile priests (Day 2011, 22). "Maias" sought to consolidate the underlying message of the report—namely the Vatican's problematic attitudes towards sexual morality—by informing (or reminding) readers that "just a few weeks ago in the Philippines a nun was excommunicated from the Catholic church for attending a meeting in which a hospital board decided to approve an abortion because the mother's life would have been endangered if she had gone full term". She added, pointedly, that "the Church would undoubtedly have preferred her living children to have gone motherless". In terms of verifying this story, a series of thorough Google searches using a range of logical key words—including "Philippines", "Filipino", "Manila", "hospital", "nun", "excommunicated", "abortion" and "termination"—failed to turn up a single result validating this claim in its entirety (www.google.com, November 13, 2011). However, the terms "nun", "abortion" and "excommunicated" together *did* generate 26,700 results relating to the high-profile *cause célèbre* of Margaret McBride: a nun excommunicated in May 2010 for precisely the reasons outlined by "maias", but in Phoenix, Arizona, rather than the Philippines (Thompson 2010). These results included an entire Wikipedia entry devoted to the case. The inaccurate dating of the incident in "maias's" post is arguably forgivable (if not inconsequential): the McBride case had, after all, been periodically debated both in the mainstream media and on social media throughout 2011, making it difficult at times to distinguish precisely when it had occurred, without very close reading (e.g. http://conversationchamber.forumotion.net 2011). But does the erroneous reference to the Philippines, in *combination* with the bogus dating, have the effect of undermining confidence in "maias's" credibility to such an extent that it renders his or her contribution redundant? Conversely, is there not still inherent value in the fact that he or she cites an example of a real-world incident which *did* take place, largely as described, and *does* (arguably) demonstrate the point he or she is trying to make—even if the nitty-gritty of *precisely where and when* it occurred is obscured by poor attention to detail? There, of course, remains the question of how the Philippines came to be speciously confused with Phoenix, Arizona—a state lying on a different continent, thousands of miles away—though a glance at the way abortion-related discussions mangle disparate cases on forums on some conservative and/or Roman Catholic websites might go some way towards explaining this (e.g. Craine 2010). Nonetheless, should this spurious geographical reference *ipso facto* disqualify the (otherwise substantially accurate) description of events to which "maias" draws fellow readers' attention—or, more crucially, the point about Catholic morality he or she elides from it—from consideration as a serious contribution to the debate? This article would argue no, while acknowledging that the difficulties it presents should not be ignored.

Similarly problematic is the near-impossibility of substantiating the accuracy of posts drawing on readers' own asserted experience and/or knowledge of an issue or story. How can we be sure, for example, that posters claiming to have raised children in similar circumstances to the single "mother of 14"—let alone those claiming to have been involved in or to have directly witnessed news events on which they comment—are telling the truth? Even if we accept their claims, how certain can we be that their *memories* of these experiences, or the ways in which they interpret and relay them, are reliable? Equally, how is it possible to confirm the veracity of a post drawing on first-

hand experience of working for a particular organization, or living in a named place, without first knowing a poster's true identity (in most cases, obscured by an alias), then scouring that organization's personnel records or the electoral roll/census for the village, town or city concerned? More importantly (as with the previous conundrum), does our *inability* to authenticate these posts—by far the most common type of evidence-based contribution appearing on threads—undermine their value or, worse, render them redundant as meaningful additions to a narrative?

To reach a judgement on this dilemma arguably requires us to address the deeper question of whether the accuracy of posters' comments actually *matters*. The central argument of this article is that, rather than being viewed as responses and/or adjuncts to the stories and features on which they comment, discussion posts that draw on (asserted) evidence, rather than mere opinion, should be seen as *part of* the finished texts themselves. In this context, does it necessarily matter whether an evidence-based post—or claim—contributed by a reader is factually *correct*, or can be independently verified or proven, or does its relevance to our case lie simply in the fact that it is, *prima facie*, adding to/modifying/challenging the journalist-led narrative on which it comments? To put it another way, does the self-evident fact that a news story or feature published in the pre-internet era was (to all intents and purposes) *finished*—because of audience-members' inability to directly or immediately contribute to/alter it—make it any less likely that at least some of the facts and figures contained in it were incomplete, contestable, even untrue? If "evidence" posted by readers is considered worthless unless or until it is shown to be 100 per cent accurate, then surely at least the same standard should be applied to that asserted by the *professional* journalists whose texts those posters presume to affirm, embellish or contest. To turn the problem on its head, if we accept (as have many academics) that it is impossible to independently verify every truth claim contained in a piece of journalism by drawing up a totally "objective map" of all the facts (Frost 2016, 75), then it must surely follow that evidence-based posts have as valid a claim to be viewed as part of the holistic, "finished" version of a journalist-led text as the original article—however partial (or even doubtful) their credibility might be.

Conclusion

Qualitative textual analysis of newspaper discussion threads demonstrates that, far from simply *commenting* on articles, posts often supply additional *source material* that consolidates, clarifies or (at times) contests the facts they contain. As "evidence-based" posts quoted in this article illustrate, the more substantial contributions to threads provide us with valuable background, context, detail and even alternative viewpoints that add layers of understanding and complexity to news texts that would otherwise be left more "unfinished" (Secko et al. 2011). Discussion posts are not, then, mere adjuncts to articles that do nothing more than offer snap-shots of the immediate public *reactions* they provoke—snap-shots that could, in any case, only be partial (if not wholly unrepresentative), given the self-selecting nature of online discussions. On the contrary, threads should be seen as vibrant, often useful, occasionally crucial *extensions* of articles, which—*taken together with* the journalist-authored narratives—have the

power to strengthen and/or reshape our understanding of, at times, vitally important public-interest issues.

The debate about the role discussion threads play in news construction and framing, then, pivots around a central paradox. On the one hand, discussion posts have the potential to expose just *how* "unfinished" a news narrative typically is at its point of "completion" by the journalist: by giving vent to a far greater number and diversity of informed voices than would ever be included in an article produced in the traditional gatekeeping tradition, they expose the (often yawning) gaps in such closed texts. On the other hand, the very fact that posts enable this plurality of voices to be *heard* or, rather, *read*—with the most valuable adding genuine context and meaning to the texts on which they "comment"—gives news publishing the potential to edge much *closer* to producing "finished" versions of stories than was ever possible in the pre-digital era.

All this said, reconceiving of discussion threads as contributions to the *substance* of news texts is hardly unproblematic. Quite apart from the messy, sometimes tangential, often ungrammatical forms they take, posts can be factually selective, one-sided, superficial—even partly or largely inaccurate. In such circumstances, they may have no more validity (or considerably less) than truth claims made by the agenda-driven protagonists journalists rely on—rendering those posting them less citizen journalists than, at best, citizen *sources* or (counter) claims-makers. Nonetheless, where the *essence*—if not detail—of a poster's truth claim can be verified, it surely remains as valid a contribution to the overall narrative of a news text as any other (often equally contentious) claim made by sources cited in the article itself. As examples of partial inaccuracy cited here bear witness—from marginally incorrect figures on the *extent* of declining infant mortality rates to erroneous details about the *location* of a Catholic excommunication that definitely took place—discussion posts can be meaningful and largely "truthful" even when undermined by weak research, poor fact-checking and/or Chinese whispers.

In the end, while the public might reasonably expect a higher degree of accuracy —and closer attention to detail—from professional journalists who frame the narratives on which posters comment, this is not something one should ever take for granted. Indeed, assumptions about the objectivity and factual accuracy of news-gathering and reporting processes engaged in by news organizations have been persuasively challenged by numerous studies (e.g. Maier 2005; Shapiro et al. 2013). For this reason, if we are to subject evidence-based discussion posts to tests for accuracy and provenance before according them any value, a logical extension of this principle would be to apply the same tests—with equal or greater rigour—to the claims made by journalists and their sources in articles themselves. For now, though, the practical impossibility of such an approach means that these two sides of the new news equation—"journalist-led" article and "evidence-based" discussion post—might best be viewed as mutually (if not always equally) valuable contributions to the negotiation of "facticity" (Tuchman 1978) in the digital public sphere.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

NOTES

1. The October 2012 sample was only drawn from a single day—2 October—because it took the form of discussion threads published in response to a live unfolding manhunt, which were closed by the publishing newspapers at or around the point that a suspect was arrested, to avoid the risk of contempt of court.

2. To preserve their authenticity, all reader posts on discussion threads are quoted verbatim in this article, as originally published—including any errors of spelling and grammar.

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AQ11

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AQ12

20   JAMES MORRISON

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