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Comments in News, Democracy Booster or Journalistic Nightmare: Assessing the Quality and Dynamics of Citizen Debates in Catalan Online Newspapers

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Comments in news is the most popular feature for audience participation in online news sites. For citizens, it is a very simple way to react to current events and discuss about them, right after reading the story. For journalists is a very comfortable way to open-up their websites to participation, as it frames the audience as audience and does not challenge the professional identity of journalism (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

While the attitudes of journalists towards audience participation have been already researched in Catalonia (Masip & Micó, forthcoming), confirming the cautious and reluctant attitude found in other countries (Singer et al., forthcoming), there was no empirical evidence regarding the quality of the contributions of the audience, a crucial aspect to evaluate the significance of User Generated Content (UGC) to journalism. Professionals are usually worried about the hate-speech and lack of constructive discussions in news comments. This study was motivated by a query by the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya, the Catalan journalism ethical board, that felt that scholarly research could help in determining adequate guidelines to foster the quality of audience participation in online newspapers.

This study takes a critical and normative standpoint regarding public debate in order to approach the analysis of comments in news. Beyond the hype of discourses welcoming Web 2.0 as the rebirth of direct democracy, we argue for a performative analysis of online conversations in order to assess the actual quality of the debates promoted by participatory journalism. Several scholars have pointed out that the Internet fosters communication, but not necessarily fruitful political debate (Sunstein, 2002; Lin et al., 2005). We use normative principles based on the work of Habermas (1984) as a demanding benchmarking ground for comments in news. We believe this is a necessary step towards a rigorous assessment of user-generated content

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(UGC).

The other contribution of the project is to offer a mix of methodologies in order to achieve a multi-perspective approach that can provide a comprehensive understanding of the quality, dynamics and management strategies of comments on news. The triangulation of methods includes the quantitative analysis of comment dynamics, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content of comments, interviews with online editors regarding their UGC management strategies, and document analysis of the ethical and legal norms for audience participation in the studied websites. The sample includes seven online newspapers: *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *Avui*, *El Punt*, *Segre*, *Diari de Tarragona* and *Diari de Girona*. The first four print editions are distributed in all Catalonia, while the last three have a smaller regional target.

This paper presents an initial snapshot of the results based on a sample of 36,059 comments to 1,754 news stories collected in October-November 2009 and seven in-depth interviews. Quantitative content analysis to assess the frequency of terms indicating conflict or consensus was performed with adequate software. Discourse analysis was aimed at assessing the quality of debates based on Habermas' principles of communicative action. We evaluated if there was dialogue among participants, if they accepted the legitimacy of each other to contribute, if they adopted or backed the positions of others or, instead, attacked them or their ideas.

In order to interpret the results, we considered crucial to understand the framework within which participation is happening. We analyzed the legal texts of the websites and the instructions to participants, if available. The online newspapers are very cautious and restrictive in their contracts with readers, trying to keep clear that opinions are the responsibility of each user. We also interviewed the editor-in-chief of the online newspapers in order to assess the motivations they had to open up their websites to audience comments, their management strategies and their perceptions regarding the quality of audience contributions and how do they change or challenge journalistic practices and values.

1. Researching audience participation: from theory to practice and back

There is a growing scholarly literature researching active citizens participating in content production both outside (Jenkins, 2006), in the outskirts (Bruns, 2005; Allan & Thorsen, 2009) and inside journalism (Heinonen & Domingo, 2008). Recent empirical literature on audience participation in mainstream online news media addresses the implications of the phenomenon from different angles, from the ethical implications (Singer & Ashman, 2009; Singer,

forthcoming) to the attitudes and strategies of professionals (Thurman, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Williams et al., 2010; Bergström, 2009; Bækker and Pantti, 2009; Singer et al., forthcoming).

Comments in news are usually part of these studies, within the bigger picture of UGC management. Reich (forthcoming) provides a thoughtful overview of the literature and an analysis of the management strategies of twenty online newspapers in Europe and North-America. The online editors and community managers interviewed by him and his colleagues state that "comments are less thoughtful and more impulsive, shallow and aggressive than earlier forms of audience participation". There were two main strategies to deal with comments in news: an "interventionist" one, based on pre-moderation (prior to publication) and taking more responsibility on the quality of the contributions, and a looser one based on post-moderation, that considers comments as a clearly separated space from news production. Reich predicted that this second option would become the prevalent in the future, coupled with registration of users, as it requires less human resources, is coherent with the ideology of most journalists to consider audience contributions as a separate arena than news.

Despite of these fruitful approximations to the object of study, the actual dynamics of comments in news have been rarely analyzed. And there is a need to go one step back and rethink theoretical frameworks in order to effectively assess the implications of citizen debates in online newspapers. The work of Jürgen Habermas (1984) offers a fruitful departure point for a normative analysis. His theory of communicative action strives to discover what elements make a dialogue rational, what moral principles enable democratic debate. Habermas points out several requisites for an ethical and rational dialogue. Discourses need to be truthful (speakers says what they think) and each of the participants has to acknowledge that others have the same right as him/her to make arguments to defend their points. Debates should be based on the principles of universalization and of discursive ethics: All the people affected by a collective decision should participate in the process and accept its outcome.

The rules for an effective debate are relevant to our study of comments in news, as they set a standard to which compare the dynamics of those discussions. First of all, they strive for coherent argumentation:

- Participants should not contradict themselves
- An argument applied to a subject should be also applied to other similar subjects
- Different participants should not use the same expression to define different things

Second, they foster a collective search for truth, with the mutual recognition of participants as rational citizens:

- Participants should only say what they believe

- If new ideas are proposed, their relationship with the issue at hand must be explained

Third, they promote an agreement based on the best argument:

- Every person can participate in the debate
- Every statement can be questioned
- Every person can express their opinions, needs or wishes

Applying these principles to our research object, by observing the debate threads in each of the news stories, we tried to answer three main research questions:

1. Logic and coherence of the comments: Whether the speakers focused their contribution on the main subject of the debate and whether they supported their points with arguments.
2. Cooperative research of truth: Although truth is a very elusive concept sometimes, we wonder whether the readers or speakers recognised each other and respected the other participants' point of view contributing to a dialogue and exchange of ideas. Again, we tried to explain whether there was a presence of insults or contemptuous phrases, both addressed to other readers or to the agents involved in the news items (people, institutions, media or journalists). We checked the presence or absence of different points of view and references to other readers' reasons.
3. Outcome of an agreement based on the best reasons presented in the debate. Specially, whether the people intervening in the discussion agree on other people's reasons or whether they reinforce their reasoning by referring to some reliable information sources.

This would be the core aim of our study, to assess the democratic quality of comments in news. An insight of the motivations, attitudes and strategies of online newspapers regarding audience participation is the necessary context to interpret the factors that have shaped citizens' contributions to that public space.

2. Research design

The research commissioned was limited to the online versions of seven Catalan dailies: *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *Avui*, *El Punt*, *Segre*, *Diari de Tarragona* and *Diari de Girona*. The sample is therefore based on a most-similar cases approach: online newspapers analyzed share the same media market and have the same background, rooted in the print journalistic culture. This allows interpreting commonalities and differences as consequences of the different strategies for UGC each medium has set in place.

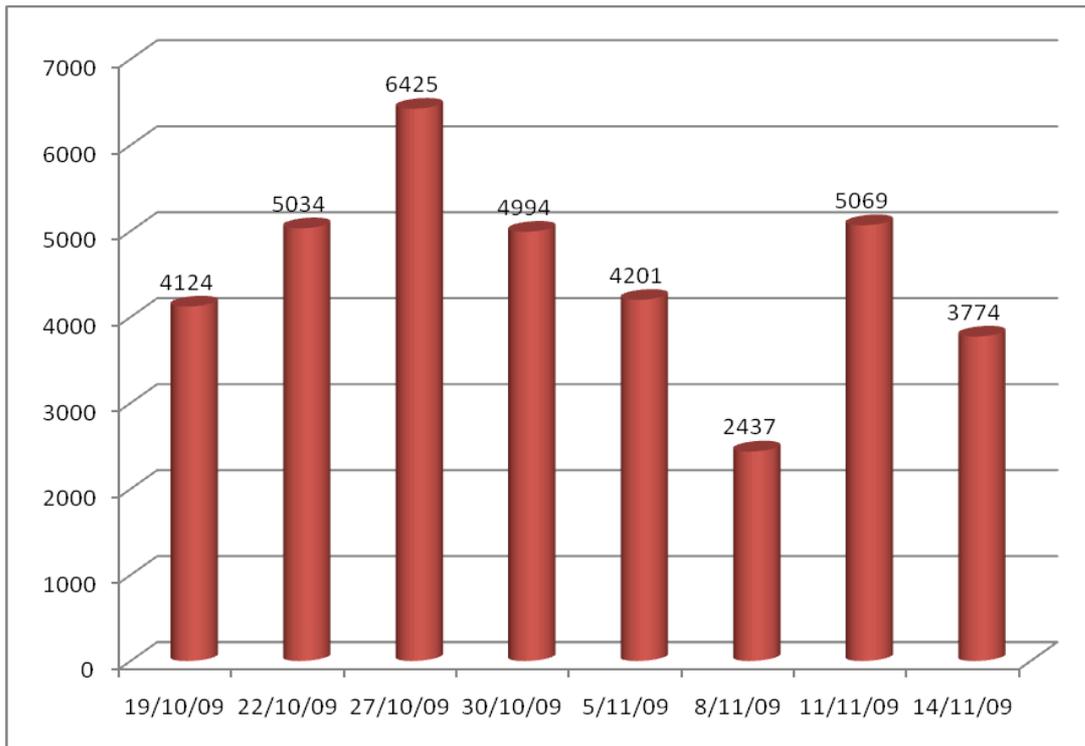
A holistic assessment of comments in news asks for a multi-method approach in order to evaluate not only the quality of the debates, but also the context that enables that debate: the audience participation management strategies of online newspapers and the legal framework they set up for such citizen conversations. The study involved in-depth interviews with online editors overseeing UGC management, reviewing the legal texts in the websites and quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of a sample of comments.

Interviews were conducted the fall of 2009 inspired in the work of Singer et al. (forthcoming). They focused on describing how comments in news are managed in the cases studied and assessing the attitudes in the newsroom towards audience participation and the motivations to develop UGC features. Interviewees were also asked to discuss the quality of contributions and how did they benefited or challenged professional journalism. Legal texts analyzed include the terms of service of the websites and the specific instructions for audience participation.

The sample for content and discourse analysis was collected between October and November 2009, constructing a composite week. We added an extra weekday to the sample for a total of eight days. Data was gathered at 8 p.m. CET and included the comments in the top story of the following sections: Homepage, Opinion, Politics, Sports, Most voted, Most read, Most commented. We collected 36,059 comments to 1,754 news items, or 4,507 comments a day as an average standard. The maximum volume of comments was on November, 27: 6,425 comments (Figure 1).

Quantitative content analysis assessed the trends in volume of comments in news per section and a group of news items were also analyzed using specific software (LIWC and Concordance) for term-frequency analysis. This method allows us to check whether some words are more commonly used than others and link their use to the relations between comments and the commented subject. Frequency analysis was applied just to the most visited six news items of the sample, and to the first news item of the front (home) page of November 5, 2009, in order to carry on a comparative study that would be sensitive to both popularity of news and synchronicity. With this strategy we intended to get a varied sample from all sections and not necessarily ideologically related to the political and economical corruption cases which dominated the information panorama in Catalonia during those days. In the end, this part of the study was applied to seven news items, two of them taken from *La Vanguardia*, two from *Avui*, two from *El Periódico* and another one from *Diari de Girona*. The rest of the analyzed newspapers had not enough volume of comments to justify the application of this technique.

Figure 1. Volume of comments per day in the sample



This method considers for further analysis not any kind of words, but precisely nouns, adjectives and verbs, and the most repeated ones. "Empty words" such connectors, articles or adverbs were not considered. For every news item, we have been able to determine which are the main keywords of the debate. We looked for keywords and their variants, as it is quite usual to find words and phrases not written according to correct spelling. Words repeated more than 15 times were considered to be significant, but it depended on the volume of comments received in each item, so when comment were scarce the number of repeated words –the frequency, in fact- was modulated in relation to the general amount of not empty words present in that specific news item's comments.

Term frequency allows for relatively easy identification of the main subjects treated on comments, but assessing what is the point of view of readers and the dynamics of debate is considerably more difficult, so qualitative analysis was used as well. Discourse analysis searched for such elements like the presence of dialogue, speakers' mutual recognition, respectful treatment of the others, acceptance of other speakers' reasons, etc. The sample for this qualitative analysis was chosen from two groups of news items: The first one consisted of the most commented news stories in all the media, actually related to the same subject: The imprisonment of some elected members of the municipality of Santa Coloma de Gramanet (the beginning of the so called Pretoria case), on October 27, 2009. The second one included the comments to the most read or most visited news item of each newspaper. If this news item was

coincident with that of the first group (about the Pretoria case) we chose the second one. This allowed for a transversal comparison of the same topic among newspapers and also for a more diverse sample, the one based on the most popular items.

3. Results

3.1. Strategies for comment management

In their legal texts, online newspapers treat their users both as clients and as authors. They acknowledge that “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) is now potentially a content provider for the website. The terms of service try to protect the media companies from the actions users may do within the websites, stating that all responsibility for those actions is solely for the user, whom will have to bear with any costs derived from legal suits to the medium. *Diari de Girona* is the most specific: “[The media company] won't be held responsible for the opinions expressed by users through forums, chats or other participation tools”. The contracts with the users also state that media companies reserve the right to modify or delete content from the website. On the other hand, online newspapers require users that the material they contribute to the website is free of copyright (original) and that they grant permission to the media companies to use it without any compensation.

Most online newspapers determine what UGC is not appropriate and therefore subject to be deleted. This includes defamation, obscenity, racism and discrimination but also insulting, menacing and promoting illegal activities. Pretending to be someone else, sending commercial advertisement or personal data (telephone numbers, e-mail addresses) is also prohibited. In some cases, such as *Avui*, there is as well a description of the kind of contributions they expect: Users are invited to share their views while staying on topic, and avoid responding to provoking comments.

Despite these principles, our content analysis has detected contributions that do not respect them, especially in the websites with more traffic. Therefore, it is relevant to enquire about the management mechanism for comments in news. Technical solutions, such as software filtering keywords, may not be very effective, as many contributions are offensive without using obscenity. The complexity of semantic constructions is usually out of reach for software filters.

The attitudes among online editors regarding UGC are very diverse, ranging from prudence to enthusiasm. These attitudes end up defining management strategies that clearly shape the nature of audience participation, as they set a framework that exerts more or less control upon

the contributions. Management strategies are not neutral: They have specific intentions and tangible consequences. In order to understand the motivations of online newspapers to open up news to audience commentary, it is necessary to explore what are the expectations of the online newsrooms towards the benefits of UGC.

All the interviewees agree in seeing audience participation as an Internet feature, intrinsic to the technology, and a wish of the users. At *El Punt*, they took it for granted in the 2009 redesign of their website: "Nowadays, an online news site without participation does not have the same appeal or reach" (*Diari de Girona*). Even in the case of *Segre*, where comments in news was disregarded as a feature after facing legal problems, they acknowledge the importance of audience participation and have created a dedicated section for user contributions.

There are two perceived benefits of UGC: economic and journalistic. Each interviewee highlights one or the other. At *La Vanguardia* they consider "endless" the benefits audience participation in both facets:

To start with, it fosters user loyalty, which is crucial on the Internet, as users jump from site to site. If we are leaders in this strategy, that makes the user the protagonist of news, that makes them feel useful and influential, this makes *La Vanguardia* more useful and influential as well, boosting audience ratings and revenue. [...] For journalism, it is clearly positive. Readers have always been a news source for journalists. Now, they have even more options to let us know what is going on.

This enthusiasm is coupled with a very optimistic attitude towards the management of comments in news. The volume of comments (they have the most of all media analyzed) is not overwhelming for them, while other newsrooms feel that volume is precisely the reason that puts quality of contributions at risk: "Open comments can discredit your brand" (*El Periódico*). At several online newspapers the editors argue that quantity should not be the aim of comment management. For them, quality should be the main priority and admit that their human resources are too limited and force them to adopt strategies that limit participation in order to avoid being overwhelmed. "We prefer few but qualified contributions, than a lot without any quality. [...] Our users deserve respect whatever is their opinion, [comments in news] should not be a trench" (*El Punt*).

At *El Periódico* the UGC feature was seen as a costly investment (an effort involving scarce human resources) rather than a source of revenue. Instead, at *Diari de Girona*, they saw a direct benefit in the "increase of visits, unique users and user loyalty" after starting to allow comments in news. That was not the case at *Segre* in the few months they opened up for comments. Journalistic benefits were acknowledged by most of the interviewees: "Participation

means that we can better know if what we produce meets the [audience] expectations" (*El Punt*). It is a way for journalists to keep track of audience interests. Online staffers tend to be more keen to see comments in their stories, while print newspapers have mixed feelings. At *El Periódico* reporters "do not feel threatened [by comments], they like that people comment on their story". "We now have more sources, it is more work, but that's good news!", argued the online editor at *La Vanguardia*. At *Segre* they defend that audience participation should be incorporated in the news production process, be an input that ends up even in the print edition. "To have loyal users they need to feel useful". They do not believe that comments in news give that value to UGC.

Despite that the legal framework is the same for all media, perceptions on legal problems of comments in news vary among online newspapers. At *Diari de Girona* they feel that jurisprudence is "confusing and diverse". At *Segre*, based on the experience of a legal process against them for a comment in a forum of a subsidiary website, are very cautious: "We have a responsibility on content and comments, there is no doubt about it and that constrains our decisions". Therefore, as they do not have enough human resources on the online team (with just one journalist fully devoted to the website) to guarantee a thorough monitoring of contributions, they prefer not to have comments in news. Instead, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico* and *Avui* considered that the legal framework was not problematic: If they are prosecuted, they will collaborate with justice to identify the author of the abusive comment.

Nevertheless, comments are the most popular UGC feature in these online newspapers, and the only participation feature besides polls in some of them. Participation has grown over time, for example from 800 comments a day in 2006 in *La Vanguardia* to 8,000 in 2009. This was the first Catalan online news site to open up comments in news. In 2006 they redesigned the website and created a team in the newsroom solely devoted to UGC management, with many other features such as user blogs. The other online newspapers added comments in news between 2007 and 2008 and *El Punt* was last in 2009.

Moderation strategies have changed over time in some cases. At *El Periódico* they started off without requiring registration to comment, but they switched to a more restrictive policy when they realized that abusive comments were overwhelming their ability to moderate. "We now have less participation, but also less problems". At *Diari de Girona* they decided to outsource the moderation of comments, as the newsroom also felt overwhelmed. *Avui* switched to requiring registration to contribute after the company was bought by the owners of *El Punt* and their policies were applied.

Attitudes clearly shape the management strategies and the human resources devoted to UGC.

At *La Vanguardia* four people work full time and their optimistic attitude is materialized in post-moderation that does not require pre-registration to comment in news. This is the most open strategy, and the one that more volume of contributions generates. They rely on the audience to warn about abusive comments, and also intend to expand the participation team in the future. *Avui* devoted the six journalists in the online newsroom to do post-moderation. As it is an added task to news production, they also rely on the audience and the print newsroom peers to detect abusive comments they may have overlooked. *Diari de Girona* does pre-moderation without registration, as the outsourcing allows for a systematic control.

Other media require registration. It is the case of *Avui* since January 2010, but also of *El Periódico* and *El Punt*. They require the national identification number of the citizen, full name and telephone. "An opinion is as important for what you say as for who you are. Anonymous comments are less valuable. Debate is watered down, and those who want to contribute end up just being spectators of quarrels" (*El Periódico*). They argue that registration discourages abuse and they can afford to review comments just every 2-3 hours as part of the many other tasks of the online newsroom. In sensitive news they can activate pre-moderation or deactivate comments altogether. *El Punt* has a journalist from the paper Opinion section reviewing comments in news four times a day. *Diari de Tarragona* opted for the most restrictive option: pre-moderation with registration. They feel that it would be irresponsible to let users comment in news over night without any filter. Therefore, comments are only published during the shifts of the two online journalists devoted to produce content for the website.

Most online newspapers consider that comment moderation should not be left in the hands of the audience, because they would end up censoring comments they do not like even if they comply with the participation rules. "We have a very diverse readership, and if they are partly in charge of moderation other users may feel attacked" (*Diari de Girona*).

The perception about quality of contributions also seems to be very much influenced by the attitude of the newsrooms. At *La Vanguardia* they opt for a very relativistic attitude:

You find all kinds of comments, but most of them are valid. How can journalists decide what is best or worst, besides of insulting or abusive comments? [...] Shall we shut it off just because a minority abuses the feature? No, we have to foster it, take advantage of it to grow as a news medium and be responsive to a social demand.

At *El Punt* contributions are very much appreciated: "We have few comments, but they are from people that really have something to say". Other media are much more critical with what they get: "[Comments] are usually driven by passion, hatred or feelings of agreement or disagreement with a topic. Not much thorough reflections or the intention of contributing new

data" (*Diari de Girona*). At *Avui* they do a bittersweet evaluation: "Most of comments have little value, and we only care to delete them if they may bother someone. But, amongst the buzz, there are contributions which are interesting, curious, funny".

At *Segre* they argue that stricter criteria are to be put in place if the aim is quality of comments: "You cannot sell as a debate a collection of insults". At *El Periódico* they blame advertisers pressure for online media to increase their audience stats as the reason for relaxed quality standards in comment management in some news sites. "This cannot stay like this forever. [...] The audience should be more demanding".

Interviewees agree that participation will keep growing in the future, and still feel uncertain regarding the best strategies for UGC management, to foster quality and prevent it from affecting their media brand. "This is a brand new area, we have to keep exploring it, being careful that we do not banalize our work giving away too much power to users" (*Diari de Girona*). "We can't let the beast dominate us, we don't want to die out of success" (*Segre*). At *La Vanguardia*, future looks brighter: "We want users to feel that the medium is theirs, that they are actors not mere spectators, and that they can help us to improve everyday".

3.2. Quantitative analysis of comments

News items of the seven digital sites received an average of 20.6 comments each. Needless to say, variation is great amongst media. The volume of comments is more modest in local media, and much greater in metropolitan –or national, in Catalan terms- media, like *La Vanguardia* or *Avui* (Figure 2). Political affairs (imprisonment of the mayor of a town near Barcelona, Santa Coloma, accused of corruption) received no less than 871 comments from 11:20 a.m. to 8 p.m. in *La Vanguardia* and 560 in *Avui*.

The section where most comments could be found was systematically Politics (53.18% of all the comments). Further away came Society (14.43%), Opinion (8.79%) and Sports (8.46%) (Figure 3). Politics is, as well, the section where most news items were published: 31.5% of the analyzed news items come from this section. Second are sports news: 24.1%, and third, *ex aequo*, Society and Opinion (17% each). The importance of Society –where most local news stories are published- is greater in not metropolitan newspapers.

Figure 2. Distribution of comments of the sample among Catalan online newspapers (%)

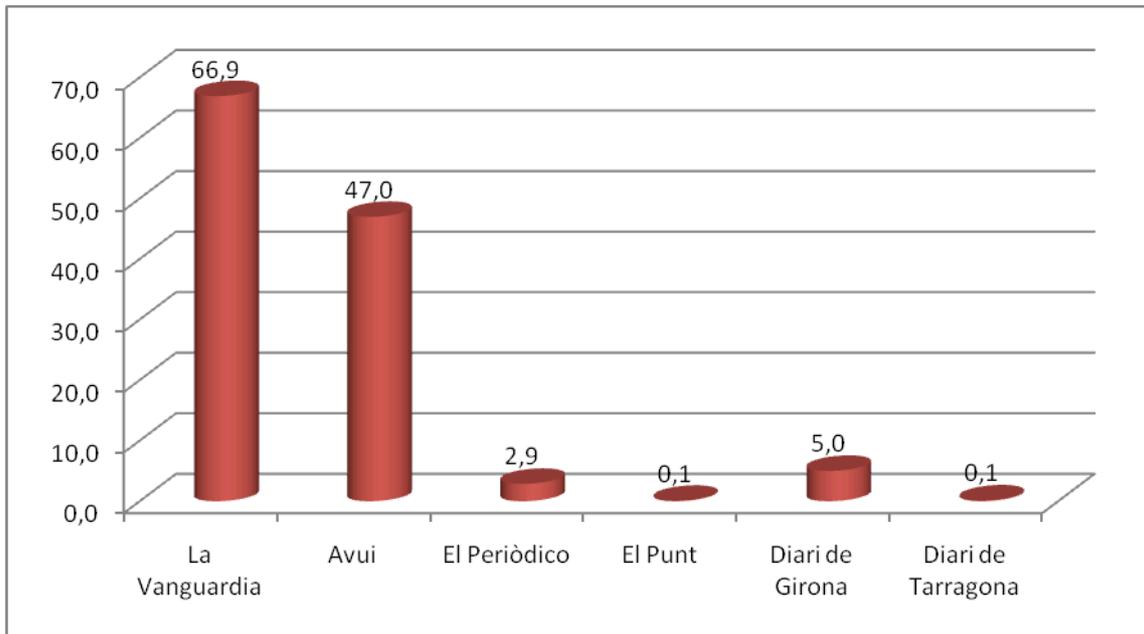
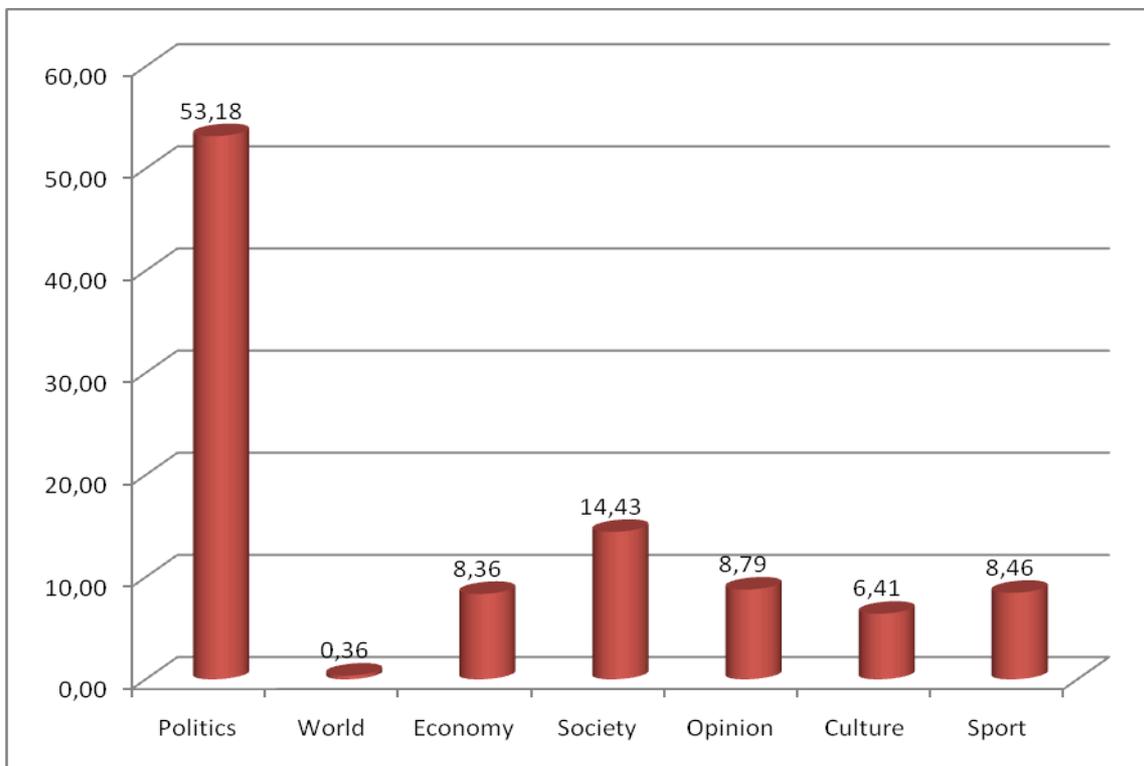


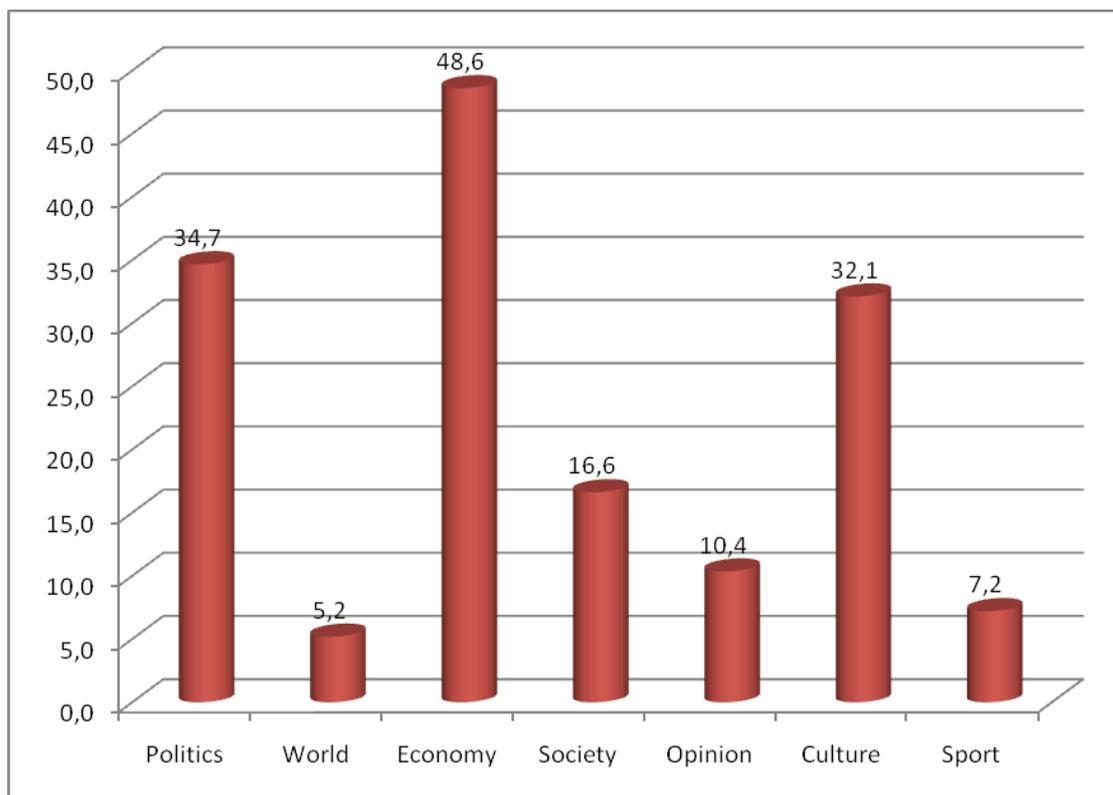
Figure 3. Comments per section (%)



Nonetheless, a relevant difference is to be found calculating the number of comments per story in each section (Figure 4). Economy is the subject that receives more comments (48.6 as an

average per item). Politics (34.7 comments per item) and Culture (32 comments per item) are next. Relevance of Economy is, however, to be relativized, since the appeal of this section in our study is given by the importance of just one news item published by *La Vanguardia* that received alone 1,640 comments (45.9% of all the comments of this section). Without this item, the average of comments per news item in Economy is just 22.16.

Figure 4. Average of comments per item and section (number of comments)



Term frequency analysis showed that insults are rare –since comments are, in some way, moderated by media or removed when considered inappropriate-, but words showing disdain towards newsmakers (mainly politicians) are widespread. Insults are more commonly found at *Avui*, where in the analyzed period comments were mainly removed by readers themselves –in 2010 this strategy changed. Accusations of censorship were widespread in the comments of (specially political) news items of *El Periódico*, which had a more restrictive moderation policy.

Words related to political and economical corruption were very present at *La Vanguardia* (and in the other newspapers as well), specially referred to the fraud accusations towards the ex-director of an important cultural institution in Catalonia, the Palau de la Música [Palace of Music]. The most repeated word is “shame” –most probably, a predominant sentiment of Catalan society those days. This disdain or contempt related terms are addressed to the actors of the news items or institutions closely related to them such as political parties, the judicial

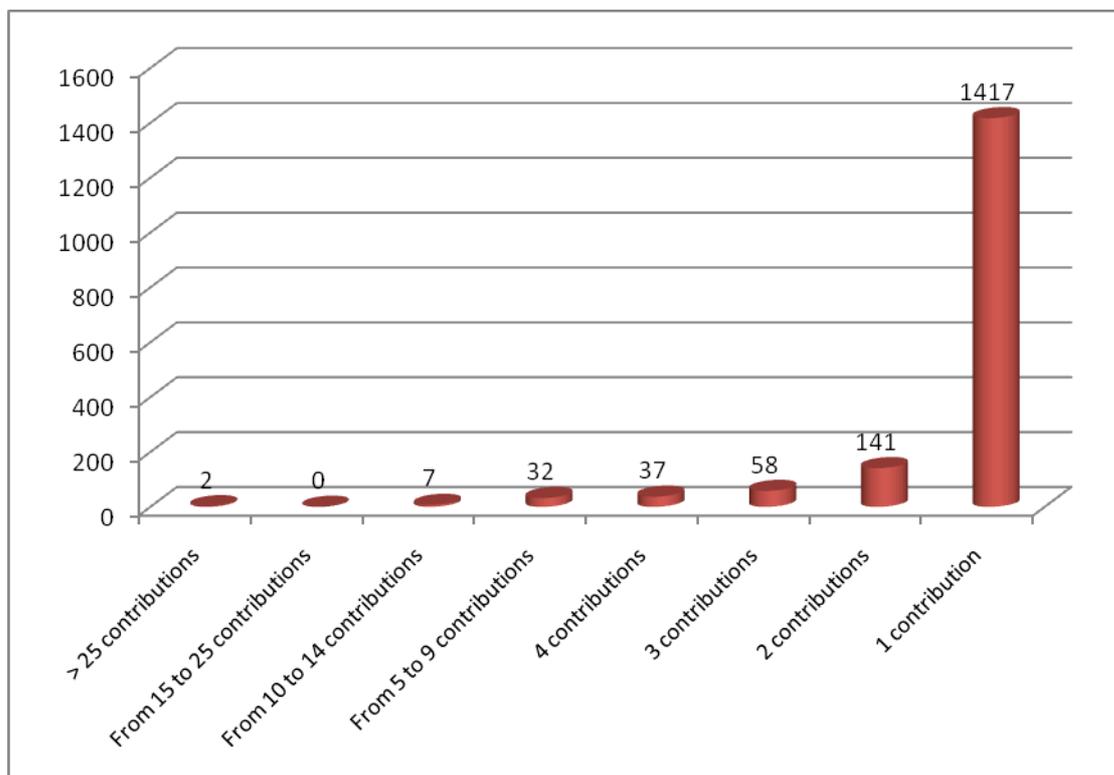
system and also the news media, including the outlets where comments are published; in every case, the recipients of these attacks are always identified as “the enemy” (Spaniards for the Catalan nationalist audience of *Avui.cat*, conservative citizens and politicians for the leftist audience of *El Periódico*, and the socialist government and their political allies at the conservative *La Vanguardia*).

3.3. Qualitative analysis of comments

The eleven news items on which we conducted discourse analysis included 1,976 comments, signed by 1,417 different nicknames. Due to the identification system of the authors used by media it is not possible to determine whether they correspond to 1,417 different persons, or, as it may be guessed, in some cases one person used more than one nickname.

Most (83.65%) of the users (or, if preferred, most of the individual nicknames) sent just one message (Figure 5). It is obviously quite difficult to have a real conversation when everyone participates just once and then quits the debate. Just 8.32% of the nicknames detected are used twice. The number of people that takes part in the discussion more than twice is really poor. A couple of times, both of them in *Avui*, there were two people that sent more than 25 comments. On the other hand, the newspapers that produce more comments are those that have a greater number of commentators.

Figure 5. Number of contributions per user in a single news story



Generally speaking, participants in conversations tended to focus on the subject of the news story they commented on, at least if we consider the topic broadly (Figure 6). In some cases, a specific story opened up a debate on the trustworthiness of politicians or on immigration policies. It is even more exceptional to find conversations in which some participants express a different point of view from the hegemonic one. Even when it happens, those minority comments seem to have no effect on the hegemonic position of the debate (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Do users focus their comments on the subject of the debate/dialogue?

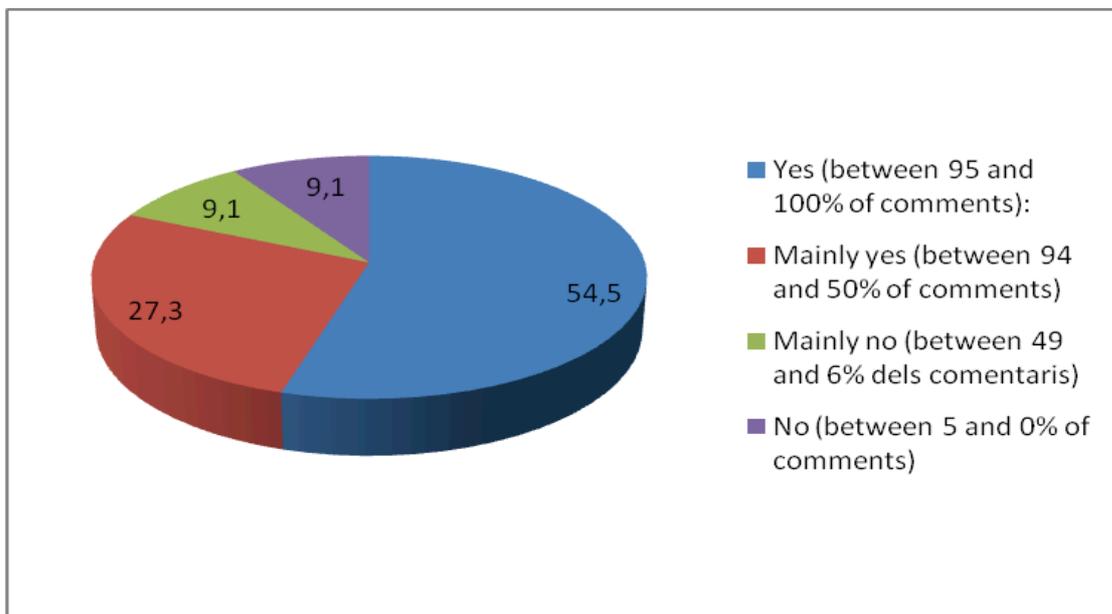
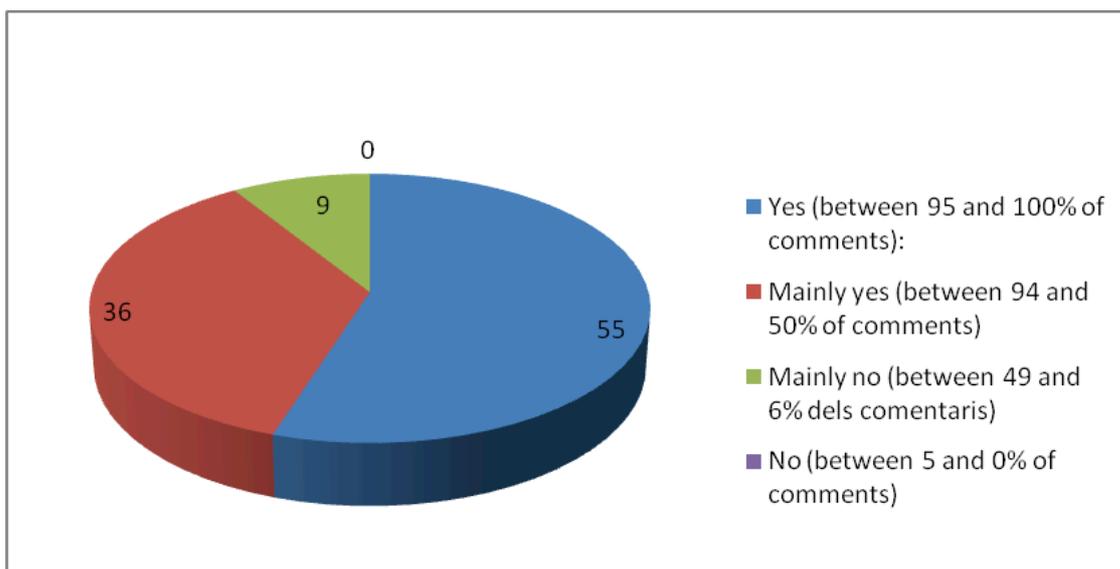


Figure 7. Do users focus on the subject and offer different points of view?



In terms of insults and disdain in comments (see below), participants showed respect for others' opinions most of the time (Figure 8). They tended to contribute criticisms reacting against the opinions of other users, almost contributing any arguments to back their position. Asking other people participating of the discussion for further explanations is not usual at all (Figure 9). More than 50% of the contributions are just bitter criticism, pejorative in some cases. Therefore it is not strange that few people accept other users' reasons (Figure 10). Even more strange is to see users adopting others' arguments in their own reasoning or developing them further (Figure 11). On the other hand, the few questions addressed to the journalists that produced the news are never publicly answered.

Figure 8. Do users insult or disdain in their comments people or institutions related to the news item?

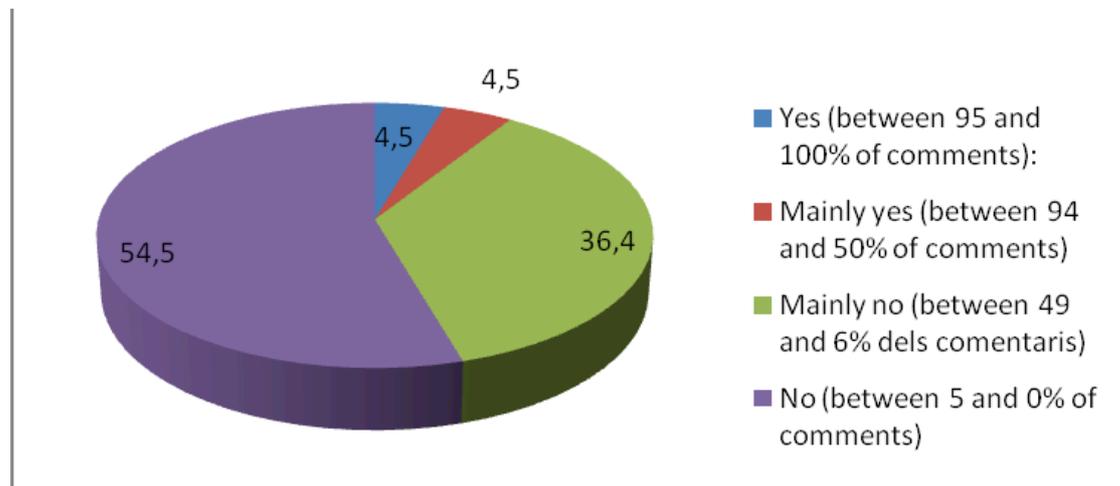


Figure 9. Do users ask other people in search of further explanations?

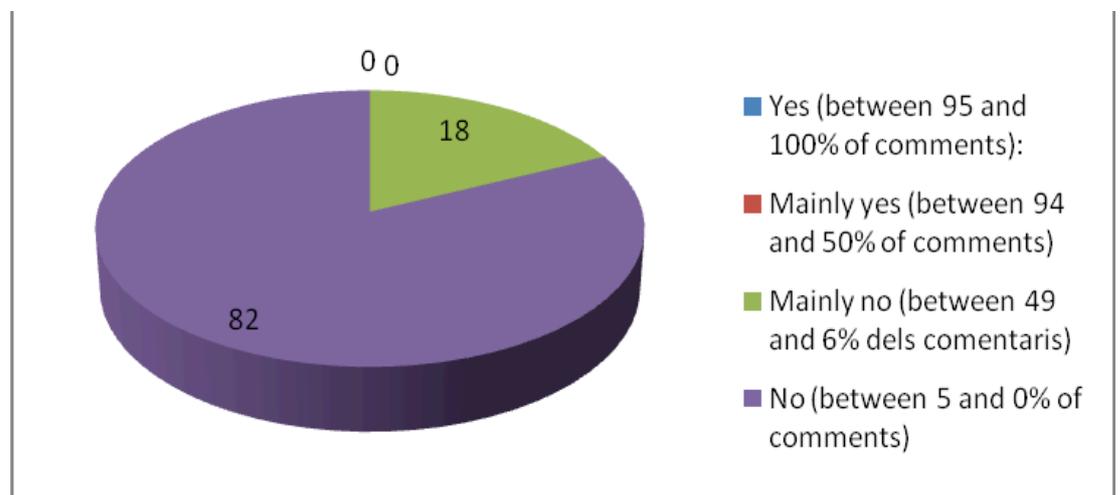


Figure 10. Do speakers show any interest towards the reasons introduced by other people?

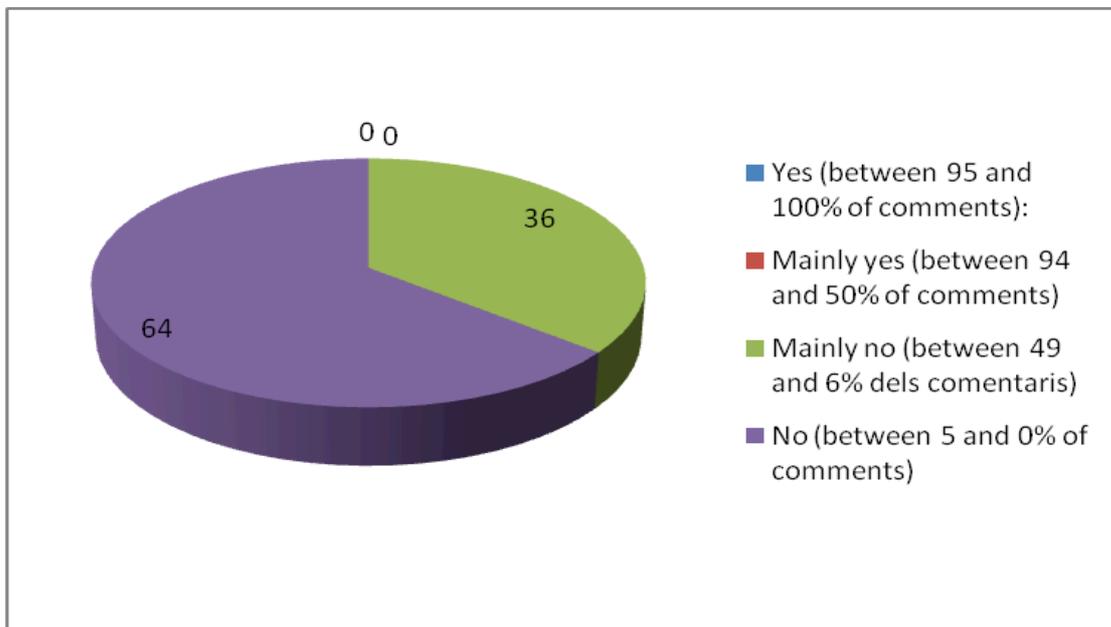
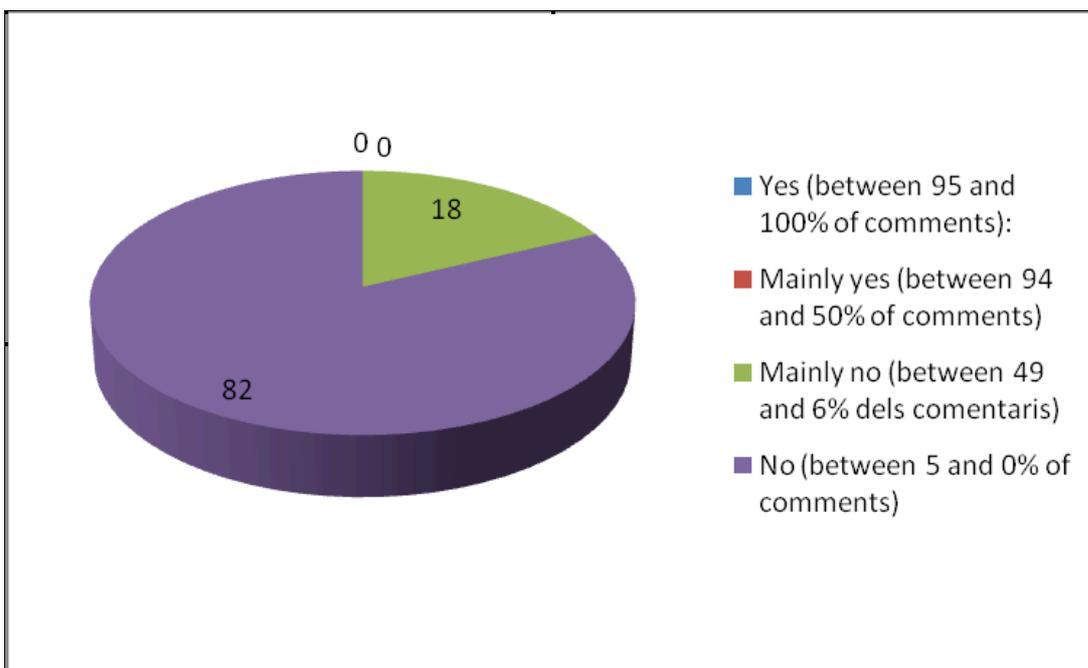


Figure 11. Do speakers accept or develop other people's arguments?



Participants in the discussions do not often mention complementary information sources to complement, clarify or strengthen their own point of view or to correct or support other people's arguments. When it happens, the precision of the reference is not the rule. References are usually quite general and with no rigor. Deviation of the conversation towards promotional or advertisement elements is also common when references are offered.

4. Conclusions

The discourse analysis demonstrates that comments in news are not fostering a democratic dialogue. They hardly meet any of the Habermasian principles. The fact that most users make a single contribution is a first drawback, but also the lack of respect for each other, the lack of diverse perspectives or the lack of mature arguments. The majority of comments are not abusive, but they are neither fruitful contributions to a rational debate. It is relevant that the Opinion section, the most natural to foster reflections, does not receive the most comments: Politics and Economy (and Society in the local outlets) concentrate most reactions.

The motivations of Catalan online newspapers to open up news to user comments are economic and journalistic, but the perceived benefits are far more tangible in the first case: user loyalty and increased audience figures. Journalistic benefits of comments in news do not revert directly in the news production process. Interviewees acknowledge that they can know their users better through their contributions, but use other channels for newsworthy inputs.

The main problems online editors see in user comments are related to the legal responsibility of the company if users commit abuse and the risk of being overwhelmed by UGC management. The main appeal of comments, their popularity among users, becomes the main source of trouble for media companies. Interviewees point out lack of human resources as the most common limitation for effective comment moderation in most newsrooms.

Participation norms and legal frameworks in the studied online newspapers aim to guarantee comments in news that are compatible with the principles and values of democratic societies. Users are implicitly subject to these norms from the very moment they start surfing the website, but in many cases the legal texts are not easy to find. The problem is not a lack of principles, but a lack of commitment from the media companies to guarantee that users comply with them.

Most online newspapers have human moderation after comments are published, in some cases with the collaboration of the users to report abuse. From an ethical normative standpoint, the ideal situation would be that comments would be moderated before publication, so that only those that comply with the legal framework would be actually posted on the websites. This puts a big burden to the newsrooms in terms of human resources, but may be the price to pay in order to guarantee a democratic debate. Online newspapers have mainly incorporated comments in news as a strategic business decision: They are popular among users and therefore a good way to foster their loyalty. Only after deploying this UGC feature have they

realized how burdensome is the management of contributions. This is not a criticism to a legitimate business strategy, but to the weak ethical commitment of the newsrooms to guarantee that the participation rules they have set up are respected.

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