

JOURNALISTICA

2026, pp. 1-26

<https://doi.org/10.7146/journalistica.v20i1.159838>

Engaging in the digital public sphere

Citizens' perspectives on online news comments

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Abstract

This study examines public perceptions of user-generated news comments, focusing on three key research questions: how the public assesses their democratic quality, how they view the role of journalists, and how these perceptions relate to patterns of engagement, including reading, reacting, and contributing. The analysis is based on a survey conducted in autumn 2024, representative of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland. Findings reveal contrasting views on the democratic potential of comment sections. While some respondents – particularly older individuals and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – view them as vital spaces for civic expression and dialogue, a larger share, especially younger and more affluent participants, consider them toxic and lacking in respectful deliberation. Furthermore, the study reveals a broad support for journalistic involvement, both in the form of moderation and providing factual input, though views differ by gender, age, education, and income. Engagement is positively associated with perceptions of deliberative value and journalistic presence, while strict moderation may discourage participation. Overall, the study sheds light on the tensions between democratic ideals and actual user experiences, offering nuanced insights into how perceptions, demographics, and platform practices shape participation in digital public discourse.

KEYWORDS

deliberative quality, news comments, online journalism, public sphere, user-generated content

Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has transformed news distribution and news consumption, gradually replacing print and broadcast media with online news spaces. Along with this transformation, the possibilities for audience feedback have also evolved. Today, readers are able to engage with news content more effectively and more interactively than in previous, more traditional, forms of audience interaction (Ziegele, 2019). Among the several forms of digital engagement, comments sections of news articles have emerged as one of the most significant spaces for public interaction. From a normative perspective, comments sections may enable citizens to voice their opinions, provide opportunities for public engagement and dialogue, foster deliberation and constructive debate, and contribute to a more informed and more democratic society (for nuanced discussions, see e.g. Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005).

Despite these potential benefits, comments sections – and online news commenting more generally – face several challenges that may undermine their democratic potential. Among these are issues such as incivility and inflammatory behavior (e.g. Anderson et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2014; Szabó et al., 2021), the reinforcement of existing beliefs through echo chambers and selective exposure (e.g. Walter et al., 2018; Han et al., 2023), and the spread of mis- and disinformation (e.g. Anspach & Carlson, 2020). Additionally, comments sections often suffer from limited audience engagement, further hindering their effectiveness (e.g. Ruiz et al., 2011; Karlsson et al., 2015). Among journalists, these spaces are often viewed unfavorably (e.g. Santana, 2011; Bergström & Wadbring, 2015) and several media organizations have now opted to disable comments sections altogether (Nelson et al., 2021).

To ensure that comments sections can serve as meaningful platforms for democratic engagement, it is essential to explore both their opportunities and their challenges. Although prior research has generated valuable insights into user interaction within comments sections (e.g. Graham & Wright, 2015; Springer et al., 2015; Engelke, 2020; Liu & McLeod, 2021), “few [of these have been] survey based”, and there “remain significant gaps in our understanding of the factors that correlate with user behavior and perceptions of news-related comments” (Kubin et al., 2024, p. 8). More specifically, much of the existing literature focuses on the characteristics and effects of comments rather than on how ordinary news users perceive these spaces. Consequently, we know comparatively little about how perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement are structured at the individual level, and how they relate to different forms of engagement.

Drawing on novel survey data, this study addresses these gaps by examining three research questions. First, we examine how the public evaluate the (deliberative) democratic quality of comments: To what extent do news consumers perceive comments as fostering meaningful dialogue, diverse perspectives or constructive debate, and to what extent are comments seen as contributing to superficiality, rigidity, and hostility? Second, we focus on the broader democratic implications of journalistic involvement in comments sections: What roles do the public think journalists should play in participating and moderating these spaces? Our third and final research question examine when and why the public engage with news comments: What motivates news consumers to read, react and contribute to comments sections of news articles, and how does their perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement influence their willingness to engage in these discussions?

The study is structured as follows. First, in the following section, we review the relevant literature, clarify key concepts and refine the research questions in light of existing theoretical and empirical work. Next, in the section 'Context, data, and methods', we detail the data collection and the methodological approach used in the study. This is followed by the presentation of the results of our analysis, addressing each of the research questions in turn. Finally, the last section discusses the implications of our findings, draws conclusions, and proposes avenues for future research.

Background and research questions

Comments sections are platforms that offer users a space to voice their opinions on news content. From a democratic perspective, these platforms present both opportunities and challenges. Previous research has explored various dimensions of this phenomenon, focusing on the democratic quality of contributions, the role journalists play in comments sections, and the motivations for individuals to engage with, and via, comments.

Democratic quality

Democratic quality refers to the extent to which comments sections facilitate meaningful dialogue, encourage the exchange of diverse perspectives, and foster constructive debate. A particular interest has been devoted to the deliberative nature of these platforms. Deliberative democratic theory emphasizes the importance of rational discussion where participants can present and defend their viewpoints, listen to others, and revise their opinions in light of new arguments (Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1996).

Previous research on deliberative elements in online comments sections reveals a complex landscape. Some findings underscore that comments sections can exhibit signs of inclusion (Rowe, 2015; Esau et al., 2017; 2021) and rationality (Rowe, 2015; Esau et al., 2017; 2021), with posts remaining mostly on topic (Strandberg & Berg, 2013; Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Berg et al., 2026). In some cases, these spaces can also foster meaningful interaction among users (Zhou et al., 2008; Esau et al., 2017; Santana, 2011), and commentators can demonstrate respect and civility (Strandberg & Berg, 2013; Ksiazek, 2015; Berg et al., 2026). There are, however, also significant limitations that temper optimism about the deliberative potential of comments sections. There is no consensus on the extent to which these spaces consistently promote high-quality deliberation, and their performance often depends on contextual factors such as moderation, platform design, and participant norms. Beyond the more general skepticism toward the theory and practice of deliberative democracy (e.g. Mouffe, 1999; Shapiro, 2017), there are also findings that point to issues such as low-quality contributions (e.g. Zhou et al., 2008), absence of rational discourse (e.g. Strandberg & Berg, 2013), and a lack of meaningful interaction (e.g. Berg et al., 2026). Moreover, studies also report instances of incivility and hostility (e.g. Santana, 2019). All these factors undermine the effectiveness of comments sections as arenas for deliberation.

Given these mixed findings, it is essential to consider how these platforms are perceived by the public: Do readers view comments sections as spaces for constructive deliberation and reasoned exchange, or are they primarily seen as arenas for unproductive forms of conflict and hostility? Previous research suggests that a significant portion of the public is not highly engaged with comments sections (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015). Beyond this general disengagement, research presents varying findings. Some studies indicate that increased opportunities for participation can foster a more positive perception of news content (Yoo, 2011) while others suggest that people remain largely indifferent despite the availability of interactive spaces (Larsson, 2011). Notably, younger individuals and those with lower levels of education tend to hold more favorable views of comments sections, as do those with a higher level of trust in media (Karlsson et al., 2018). One of the few studies explicitly examining public perceptions of the deliberative quality of comments sections finds that these spaces are valued for their potential to foster meaningful discourse, even though they often contain many non-deliberative elements (Engelke, 2020).

Despite these insights, there is still a lack of comprehensive research on how the public evaluates the democratic quality of comments sections. This gap underscores the need for further investiga-

tion into public perceptions of comments sections as platforms for deliberation and democratic dialogue. Given the mixed findings in prior research, we propose research questions instead of hypotheses. Our first research question reads as follows:

RQ1: How does the public evaluate the democratic quality of comments sections, and how do these evaluations vary across sociodemographic groups?

Journalistic involvement

In the early days of the internet, the hopes were high regarding improved communication between news professionals (journalists and editors) and their audiences (Pavlik, 2001). Over time, however, a more nuanced understanding has emerged. Qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that news professionals view online engagement as having positive as well as negative implications. For some, comments sections are essential components of contemporary journalism, capable of fostering constructive dialogue and democratic legitimacy (see e.g. Loke, 2012; Graham & Wright, 2015; Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2017). Others are more negative, viewing comments sections as problematic platforms that do not contribute anything but hostile language speech and other undesirable phenomena (see e.g. Santana, 2011; Loke, 2012; Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2017; Wright et al., 2020). More recently, the latter perspective appears to have been gaining traction. The involvement of news professionals in comments sections is also in decline, and many news organizations have either limited or abandoned their comments sections, opting instead to outsource commentary to social media platforms (Nelson et al., 2021).

Despite the decrease in journalistic engagement, the public generally views journalistic involvement in comments sections positively. A Swedish study found that around three-quarters believe that journalists should join commentary threads, and the majority also thinks that abusive postings should be censored (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015). As shown by Løvlie et al. (2018), women and older individuals tend to be more supportive of journalistic restrictions compared to men and younger audiences. However, younger individuals are generally more supportive of the presence of moderators.

In light of these contrasting views, it is essential to not only explore how the public perceives the broader democratic quality of comments sections but to also seek broader understanding of how

they view the specific role of journalists in these discussions. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2: How does the public evaluate the role of journalists in comments sections, and how do these evaluations vary across sociodemographic groups?

User engagement

Public perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement provide important context for understanding the dynamics of comments sections. Building on this context, it is crucial to explore the underlying reasons and mechanisms that drive individuals to participate in these spaces: Do perceptions of democratic quality relate to public participation, and if so, how? Likewise, does perceived journalistic involvement correlate with engagement? And, if so, how?

Previous research shows that participation in comments sections is driven by a mix of different factors, including information, personal identity, and social interaction motives (Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011). Mitchelstein (2011) observes that commenters are motivated by self-expression needs while Springer et al. (2015) highlight the role of social-interactive factors; commenters seek discussion and connection with other users rather than cognitive or deliberative rewards. In contrast, reading comments is driven by both cognitive curiosity and entertainment, with the entertainment aspect emerging as more important. Taken together, the findings by Mitchelstein and Springer et al. suggest that user engagement is often driven by identity and interaction factors rather than by deliberative intentions (see also Kangaspunta, 2021).

Studies have also investigated how personality traits influence commenting behavior. Wu and Atkin (2017) demonstrate that commenting is associated with narcissism and lack of conscientiousness, while Barnes et al. (2018) reveal that individuals who are less agreeable (less cooperative) tend to comment more frequently. Kangaspunta (2021) identifies the discussion-oriented “societal conversationalist” as the most typical type of commentator. Beyond personality traits, other factors influencing commenting include media consumption patterns, political ideology, and demographic characteristics such as gender and age. Kalogeropoulos et al. (2017) observe that individuals who use a wide range of social media platforms and have a strong interest in hard news are more likely to comment. Similarly, those positioned on either the left or the right of the political spectrum are more inclined to comment compared to those with more centrist views. Additionally, studies indicate that

women tend to participate less than men (Lee & Ryu, 2019; Küchler et al., 2023), and that both older adults and teenagers comment less than middle-aged adults (Lee & Ryu, 2019).

To gain a deeper understanding of user behavior in comments sections, it is important to explore the extent to which perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement shape engagement. This brings us to our third and final research question:

RQ3: How do perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement relate to reading, reacting, and contributing to comments sections?

Context, data, and methods

The study uses data representative of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland. The Finnish case, and particularly the Swedish-speaking context, provides a valuable setting for studying the democratic quality of comments sections and the involvement of news professionals. First, Finland stands out for its strong democratic traditions, its highly developed online media environment, and its high rankings in press freedom (Strandberg & Carlson, 2021). Together, these factors create a distinctive opportunity for active and deliberative public engagement. Secondly, the Swedish-speaking population is a well-defined linguistic and cultural minority, demographically similar to Finnish-speakers in terms of, for instance, gender, age distribution, and level of education (Eklund & Lindell, 2024), but served by a distinct Finland-Swedish media landscape.¹ Despite recent trends towards restructuring and consolidation, the Swedish-speaking population still has access to a relatively comprehensive media infrastructure compared to the Finnish-speaking majority, consisting of a mix of public service and commercial actors (Backström & Lindell, 2021; Stenberg-Sirén et al., 2023), and including numerous newspapers, two radio stations, and television programming (Stenberg-Sirén et al., 2025). The combination of a clear minority identity, relatively complete media infrastructure, and a concentrated audience provide a unique context for examining perceptions of the potential of and engagement in online discussions. At the same time, the role of comments sections in a minority context remains underexplored. This further contributes to making it a valuable case for studying online engagement.

Public attitudes towards the democratic quality of comments sections, and towards the involvement of news professionals, were captured using data from the online panel *Barometern* (for a general description, see Lindell & Sirén, 2020). The randomly recruited citizen panel consists of Swedish-speaking Finns from the entire country

(including the Åland Islands), aged 18 and above. The data used in this study were collected in autumn 2024, with a total sample size of 5,000 individuals. Of these, 2,516 responded (response rate: 50.3%). To ensure representativeness of the target population (the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland), the data included a weight variable adjusting for gender, age, education, and region.²

To investigate respondents' views on the democratic function and quality of comments sections (RQ1), we used 12 items (Q1_1–Q1_12). The questions were informed by key dimensions in deliberative democratic theory, emphasizing reasoned argumentation, exposure to diverse viewpoints, respectful interaction, and opportunities for dialogue (e.g. Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1996). Consequently, the selected items addressed the quality, democratic potential, interactivity, overall tone, rationality, diversity, and respectfulness of discussions. All items were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from Completely agree (1) to Completely disagree (5) and with an additional category for Cannot say (6).

Respondents' perceptions of the involvement of news professionals (RQ2) were assessed through 8 items (Q2_1–Q2_8), examining attitudes toward journalists' participation in discussions, their role in moderating comments sections, and views of enforcing discussion rules and handling offensive behavior. The items used the same five-point response scale as the questions in RQ1.

To measure respondents' engagement with comments sections (RQ3), we examined the frequency of participation through three dimensions: reading comments (Q3_1), reacting to comments (e.g. liking or disliking; Q3_2), and contributing by writing comments (Q3_3). The response options were Daily or almost daily (1), Often (2), Sometimes (3), Rarely (4), Never (5), and Cannot say (6).

The analyses for RQ1 and RQ2 proceed in several steps. First, the data is presented descriptively, to provide an overview of the individual variables (Q1_1–12 and Q2_1–8, respectively) and to illustrate their distribution across the sample. Following this, we conduct principal component analyses (PCA) to reduce complexity and identify underlying dimensions in the respondents' perceptions of democratic quality and the involvement of journalists. The components derived from the PCA are then used as dependent variables in (robust) linear regression models in order to examine how these dimensions relate to key background variables such as age, gender, education, and income. For RQ3, we first present descriptive data on engagement with comments sections (Q3_1–3). Following this, we perform ordered logit regression analyses where the dependent variables represent engagement levels. These are modeled using the dimensions identified for RQ1 and RQ2 as independent variables, alongside key background variables.

Results

In this section, we present the results of the analyses. First, we explore the public’s evaluation of the democratic quality of comments sections (RQ1). In the second subsection, we examine the perceived role of journalists in these spaces (RQ2). In the third and final subsection, we analyze how perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement relate to user engagement (RQ3).

Democratic quality

Figure 1 presents an assessment of the perceived democratic quality of comments sections.³ While some findings (the three items at the top of the figure) suggest that these forums may offer certain opportunities for democratic engagement, several other observations (the remaining items) raise concerns, at least from a deliberative perspective.

A significant majority of respondents view comments sections as open spaces where citizens can freely express their opinions. This observation aligns with the ideal of an inclusive public discourse. Over half of the participants also agree that these spaces facilitate interaction between different individuals, which is essential for promoting diverse perspectives and fostering dialogue. Additionally, over 40 per cent believe that comments can enhance the news experience by making it more interesting. This final observation may suggest that comments sections have the potential to generate public interest in current affairs.

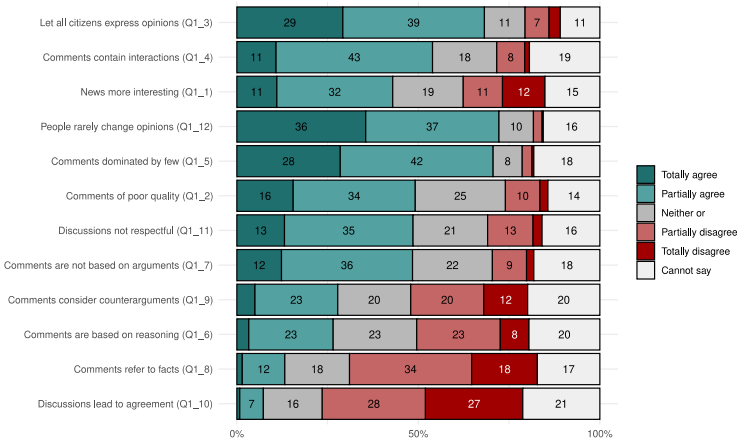


Figure 1: Respondents’ views on the democratic quality of comments sections (%)

However, the results also highlight several limitations that undermine the deliberative potential of comments sections. A strong majority agree with the statement that people engaging in these spaces rarely change their opinions, indicating a lack of openness to differing perspectives. Many also believe that comments sections are dominated by a few individuals, and nearly half perceive the overall quality of comments as poor. The perception that comments are not respectful in tone is also widespread, as is the view that comments lack rational argumentation. Few respondents believe discussions frequently lead to agreement, and rather few think that comments consider counterarguments and are based on reasoning. A majority of respondents disagree that comments are based on facts and lead to agreement. Taken together, these findings raise concerns about the factual accuracy and depth of discussions and highlight significant obstacles to considering comments sections as spaces for meaningful deliberation.

To explore underlying dimensions of respondents' perceptions of the democratic quality of comments sections, we conducted a series of PCAs (with oblimin rotation, and with responses in the Cannot say category excluded). The initial PCA included all 12 items listed in Figure 1. However, item Q1_10 displayed low loadings on both of the extracted components. As a result, the item was eliminated from a second, refined, PCA. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure from this analysis indicates a good sampling adequacy (0.860), with all individual item values exceeding 0.73. Bartlett's test of sphericity further confirms the appropriateness of the data for PCA (approx. $\chi^2(55) = 3674$, $p < 0.001$).⁴

The extracted components reveal two distinct underlying dimensions, consistent with previous findings about the dual nature of online comments sections. The first component, which we label *toxicity*, captures the negative aspects of the democratic quality of comments sections. It reflects a perception of these spaces as dominated by inflexible discussions (Q1_12), a small number of voices (Q1_5), and low-quality contributions (Q1_2), often devoid of argumentation (Q1_7) and politeness (Q1_11).⁵

The second component, labeled *vitality*, represents positive perceptions of comments sections and their potential contributions to democratic discourse. Here, comments sections are seen as fostering engagement (Q1_4), enhancing the appeal of news content (Q1_1), and facilitating the exchange of diverse viewpoints (Q1_9). This dimension also emphasizes the potential of comments sections as arenas for reasoning (Q1_6), opinion change (Q1_3), and factual information (Q1_8).⁶

In Table 1, we present results from two linear regression models predicting perceived toxicity and vitality in online comments sec-

tions. The dependent variables are represented by component scores from the PCA. Both models include age, gender, education, and income as independent variables. In Model 1, age is negatively associated with perceived toxicity, suggesting that older individuals tend to view comments sections as less toxic than their younger counterparts. Income, in contrast, shows a positive association with perceived toxicity, with individuals from high income households being more likely to perceive these spaces as dominated by toxic discussions than individuals from low-income residences. Gender and education do not show significant effects on perceived toxicity.

	Toxicity^a (Model 1)	Vitality^b (Model 2)
Intercept	0.760*** (0.105)	-0.202 (0.105)
Age	-0.015*** (0.002)	0.010*** (0.001)
Gender: Female	(ref.)	(ref.)
Gender: Male	0.010 (0.052)	0.037 (0.052)
Education: Primary or secondary	(ref.)	(ref.)
Education: Post-secondary	-0.054 (0.056)	-0.254*** (0.056)
Income: Low-income household^c	(ref.)	(ref.)
Income: Middle-income household^d	0.100 (0.066)	-0.182** (0.066)
Income: High-income household^e	0.215** (0.076)	-0.355*** (0.076)
F	20.83***	22.73***
R²	0.07	0.07
Adjusted R²	0.06	0.07
n	1438	1438

Table 1: Factors influencing perceived democratic quality

Note: Unstandardized linear regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Unweighted data. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

^a Higher values indicate greater perceived toxicity (regression scores from PCA).

^b Higher values indicate greater perceived vitality (regression scores from PCA, reversed).

^c $\leq 3000\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

^d $3001-7000\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

^e $\geq 7001\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

Model 2, focusing on vitality, reveals a contrasting pattern. Age is now positively associated with perceived vitality; older individuals tend to see online forums as spaces that foster engagement, reasoning, and the exchange of diverse viewpoints more than younger people. Education and income show negative associations with vitality, suggesting that individuals with post-secondary education and individuals from middle- and high-income households are more critical of the potential of comments sections than people with lower education and people from low-income households, respectively. Again, gender shows no significant effects.⁷

Journalistic involvement

Descriptive data on respondents’ views regarding journalistic involvement in comments sections are reported in Figure 2.⁸ In line with previous research, we find that a substantial portion of respondents support active journalistic participation in providing accurate information (the top five items in the figure). A clear majority agree that journalists should remind participants of discussion rules, and a similarly strong majority believe journalists should provide additional facts to enrich discussions. Nearly as many think journalists should inform readers about their work, and a clear majority also support journalists explaining their guiding principles.

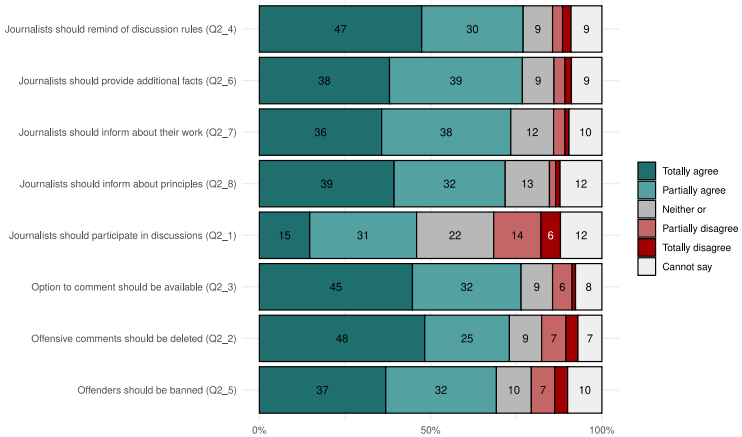


Figure 2: Respondents’ views on journalistic involvement in comments sections (%)

Overall, there is strong support for journalists taking on a supervisory and informative role. However, the idea of direct journalist participation in the discussions themselves receives more limited support. There is also significant support for the regulation of offensive behavior. While support for the general accessibility of comments sections is high, a clear majority of respondents endorse the deletion of offensive comments. A clear majority also support banning individuals who repeatedly violate community standards. Taken together, these findings suggest a broad support for journalists taking on an educational role in comments sections, as well as actively moderating discussions to maintain order and uphold community standards.

To further explore the dimensions underlying respondents' perceptions of journalistic involvement, we again conducted a series of PCAs (with oblimin rotation, and with responses in the Cannot say category excluded). First, we included all 8 items listed in Figure 2. Due to substantial cross-loading, item Q2_4 was, however, removed from the analysis.⁹ A second analysis shows good sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.716), with all individual item values exceeding 0.56. Bartlett's test of sphericity also indicates that the data is appropriate for PCA (approx. $\chi^2(21) = 2989$, $p < 0.001$).

The extracted components reveal two underlying dimensions. The first component, which we label *participation*, captures respondents' views on the role that journalists should take in comments sections. This dimension reflects the belief that journalists should enrich discussions by providing additional facts (Q2_6), share insights into their work (Q2_7), participate in discussions (Q2_1) and inform the audience about the principles guiding their reporting (Q2_8). In addition, the component also reflects the expectation that journalists should ensure the availability of the option to comment on news articles (Q2_3).¹⁰

The second component, labeled *moderation*, represents attitudes toward journalists' role in regulating the quality and appropriateness of discussions. This component emphasizes the necessity for journalists to intervene in comments sections to maintain community standards, notably through actions such as banning offenders (Q2_5) and deleting offensive comments (Q2_2).

Table 2 presents two robust regression models predicting attitudes toward journalistic participation and moderation in online comments sections. The dependent variables are represented by component scores from the PCA reported in table B2.

	Participation^a (Model 3)	Moderation^b (Model 4)
Intercept	-0.298** (0.093)	0.068 (0.100)
Age	0.010*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Gender: Female	(ref.)	(ref.)
Gender: Male	-0.113* (0.046)	-0.306*** (0.044)
Education: Primary or secondary	(ref.)	(ref.)
Education: Post-secondary	-0.106* (0.048)	0.089 (0.046)
Income: Low-income household^c	(ref.)	(ref.)
Income: Middle-income household^d	-0.110* (0.055)	0.099 (0.054)
Income: High-income household^e	-0.162* (0.068)	0.079 (0.064)
F	17.20***	14.78***
Pseudo-R² (McFadden)	0.08	0.07
n	1791	1791

Table 2: Factors influencing attitudes toward journalistic involvement

Note: Unstandardized robust regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. Unweighted data. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

^a Higher values indicate more positive attitudes toward journalistic participation (regression scores from PCA, reversed).

^b Higher values indicate more positive attitudes toward journalistic moderation (regression scores from PCA, reversed).

^c $\leq 3000\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

^d $3001\text{--}7000\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

^e $\geq 7001\text{€}/\text{mth.}$

As independent variables we again use age, gender, education, and income. In Model 3, age is a statistically significant predictor, with a positive coefficient. This indicates that older individuals tend to have more positive attitudes toward journalistic participation. Gender also seems to play a role, with males exhibiting less positive attitudes compared to females. Individuals with post-secondary education tend to have more negative attitudes towards journalistic participation than individuals with primary or secondary education, and individuals from middle- and high-income households tend to have less positive attitudes toward participation compared to those from low-income households. In Model 4, which focuses on moderation, gender is the only significant predictor. Again, males

have significantly less favorable attitudes toward moderation than females. Age, education, and income have no significant effects.

User engagement

Figure 3 presents data on respondents' engagement in three different activities related to comments sections: reading comments, reacting to comments, and contributing with comments.¹¹ In terms of reading, a substantial portion of the respondents (33.6%) reported reading comments daily or often while 27.1% read comments sometimes. 38.9% read comments rarely or never. Regarding reacting, the engagement is notably lower. However, 22.4% react to comments at least sometimes (i.e., daily, often, or sometimes). 26.3% react to comments rarely, and 50.3% never react to comments. As for contributing with comments, the frequency of engagement is even lower. Only 8.4% of respondents contribute with comments at least sometimes. 19.1% contribute rarely while the overwhelming majority, 71.8%, never contribute with comments. Taken together, the data suggests that while reading comments is relatively common, reacting to or contributing with comments is far less frequent.

Table 3 examines factors associated with user engagement with comments sections by means of ordered logit regression. The dependent variables in the models are the frequency of reading comments (Model 5a and Model 5b), reacting to comments (Model 6a and Model 6b), and contributing with comments (Model 7a and Model 7b).¹² As independent variables we include toxicity, vitality, participation, and moderation, along with the demographic factors age, gender, education, and income.

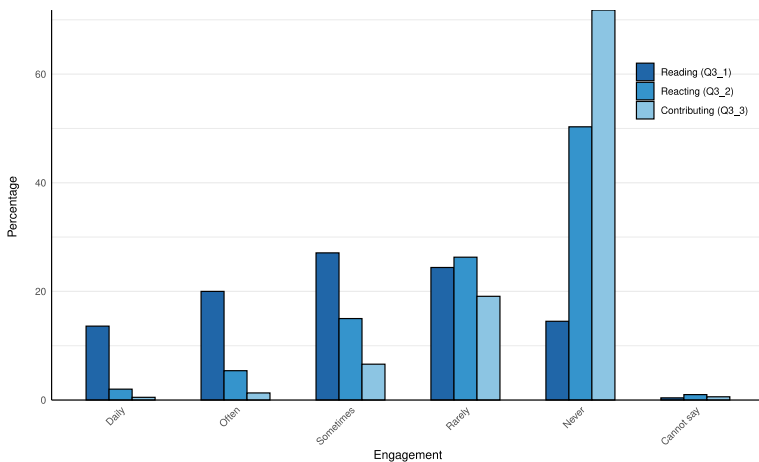


Figure 3: User engagement in comments sections (%)

Model 5a and Model 5b assess frequency of *reading* comments. In both models, vitality shows a positive and statistically significant association with reading frequency. This suggests that users who view comments sections as valuable arenas for discussion and opinion exchange are more likely to engage with them. Participation also demonstrates a significant positive effect on reading behavior. This, in turn, indicates that individuals who value journalists' involvement in comments sections are more inclined to read comments. Toxicity and moderation, in contrast, lack meaningful influence on reading frequency. Among the demographic factors included in Model 5b, age is negatively associated with reading comments, indicating that younger individuals are more likely to read. No significant effects are observed for gender, education, or income levels.

Model 6a and Model 6b analyze factors associated with *reacting* to comments (e.g., liking or disliking). As with reading, vitality and participation are strong positive predictors, suggesting that users who value democratic engagement (vitality) and journalists' active involvement (participation) are more likely to react.

Moderation, in contrast, has a negative effect, implying that those who favor stricter regulation by journalists are less likely to react to comments. Again, toxicity is not a significant predictor. Among demographics, age has a small but significant positive effect, with older individuals slightly more likely to react. While gender and education show no significant impact, individuals from middle income households are less likely to react than those from low-income households.

	Reading ^a		Reacting ^b		Contributing ^b	
	Model 5a	Model 5b	Model 6a	Model 6b	Model 7a	Model 7b
Toxicity	-0.047 (0.052)	-0.084 (0.056)	-0.019 (0.055)	0.030 (0.058)	-0.059 (0.059)	-0.022 (0.064)
Vitality	0.414*** (0.055)	0.431*** (0.058)	0.296*** (0.057)	0.301*** (0.061)	0.080 (0.062)	0.108 (0.066)
Participation	0.175** (0.053)	0.197*** (0.056)	0.183*** (0.055)	0.158** (0.057)	0.286*** (0.063)	0.285*** (0.067)
Moderation	0.005 (0.050)	0.031 (0.052)	-0.166** (0.053)	-0.167** (0.055)	-0.128* (0.055)	-0.087 (0.058)
Age		-0.010** (0.003)		0.009** (0.003)		0.004 (0.004)
Gender: Female		(ref.)		(ref.)		(ref.)
Gender: Male		0.039 (0.104)		-0.106 (0.110)		0.458*** (0.122)

Education: Primary or secondary		(ref.)		(ref.)		(ref.)
Education: Post-secondary		0.020 (0.111)		-0.149 (0.117)		0.126 (0.129)
Income: Low-income household^c		(ref.)		(ref.)		(ref.)
Income: Middle-income household^d		-0.161 (0.132)		-0.312* (0.139)		-0.454** (0.149)
Income: High-income household^e		-0.209 (0.153)		-0.309 (0.161)		-0.431* (0.174)
τ_1	-1.091*** (0.063)	-1.784 (0.220)	-0.406*** (0.056)	-0.269 (0.224)	0.608*** (0.057)	0.826*** (0.246)
τ_2	0.332*** (0.055)	0.355 (0.215)	0.958*** (0.061)	1.107*** (0.226)	2.175*** (0.088)	2.375*** (0.256)
τ_3	1.591*** (0.071)	0.913 (0.217)				
AIC	3732.68	3515.97	2903.83	2715.12	2379.85	2212.35
Pseudo-R^2 (Cox-Snell)	0.07	0.08	0.05	0.07	0.03	0.05
Pseudo-R^2 (Nagelkerke)	0.08	0.09	0.06	0.08	0.03	0.06
n	1398	1317	1366	1286	1383	1302

Table 3: Factors associated with user engagement in comments sections

Note: Ordered logit regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Unweighted data. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

^a Rarely or never = 1, Sometimes = 2, Often = 3, Daily = 4.

^b Never = 1, Rarely = 2, At least sometimes = 3.

^c $\leq 3000\text{N/mth.}$

^d $3001-7000\text{N/mth.}$

^e $\geq 7001\text{N/mth.}$

Models 7a and 7b, finally, examine factors associated with *contributing* to comments sections. Here, participation shows a significant positive effect in both models. This suggests that users who expect journalists to engage in discussions are more likely to contribute. Moderation has a negative and significant effect in Model 7a but becomes non-significant in Model 7b, suggesting a weak (non-robust) discouraging effect of stricter regulation. Vitality and toxicity

do not significantly predict contributing behavior. Among demographics, gender is a strong predictor: men are significantly more likely to contribute than women. Income also plays a role, with middle- and high-income individuals significantly less likely to contribute than those from low-income households. Age and education do not show significant effects.

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to explore public perceptions of comments sections in news media through three research questions. First, we investigated how the public assesses the democratic quality of comments sections (RQ1). Second, we explored how the public perceives the role of journalists within these sections (RQ2). Finally, we examined how these perceptions relate to patterns of user engagement, specifically reading, reacting, and contributing (RQ3).

With regard to RQ1, the findings offer a somewhat divided perspective. On one hand, some respondents recognize comments sections as arenas for public expression and discursive exchange, resonating with deliberative democratic ideals of inclusiveness and engagement. This perception, captured by the vitality dimension, is more common among older individuals, those with lower levels of education, and those from low-income households. On the other hand, a substantial majority – particularly younger respondents and those from high income households – perceive comments sections as toxic environments, as reflected in the toxicity dimension.

This pattern may point to emerging inequalities in participation in digital public discourse. If, as this study indicates, participation is unevenly distributed across different sociodemographic groups, comment sections risk becoming arenas where certain voices are systematically more present than others. This, in turn, may shape which perspectives, experiences, and concerns are articulated.

Turning to RQ2, the data indicate widespread support for an active (though not necessarily dialogical) journalistic role in comments sections. The public largely endorses both journalistic participation and moderation. Participation – understood broadly as journalists' providing additional facts, clarifying journalistic practices, and ensuring the availability of comment features – is particularly supported by older individuals, women, those with lower levels of education, and those from low-income households. Moderation – defined here as deleting offensive comments and banning users who violate community standards – is generally viewed positively, although men are more skeptical of this practice.

From a journalistic perspective, these findings suggest that audiences expect journalists to play a facilitating role in comment sections, rather than acting as discussion participants. The strong support for moderation and factual clarification indicates that news organizations may strengthen the legitimacy of comment sections by focusing on transparent rule enforcement and the provision of contextual information.

The results related to RQ3 contribute to the existing literature by highlighting how perceptions of democratic quality and journalistic involvement shape user engagement. While previous research (e.g. Mitchelstein, 2011; Springer et al., 2015; Wu & Atkin, 2017; Barnes et al., 2018) emphasizes identity and interaction as key drivers, this study shows that users engage more when they view comment sections as meaningful forums for discourse and when they value journalistic participation. Interestingly, toxicity does not seem to significantly deter engagement. Finally, moderation shows an ambivalent effect – negatively associated with reacting and weakly also with contributing.

Taken together, these findings provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between perceptions, engagement, and demographic factors in comment sections. At a broader level, they highlight how the perceived quality of discussion spaces may influence the extent to which comment sections function as arenas for public discourse. If users engage more when they view these spaces as meaningful, and when journalistic actors are present, this suggests that institutional design and moderation practices may play an important role in shaping the democratic potential of online discussions.

Finally, we note that the study has several limitations. First, while the regression models provide valuable insights into underlying dimensions and associations, they cannot establish causality. To address this limitation, future research could employ more experimental designs to test, for example, how different forms of journalistic engagement or moderation strategies influence user perceptions and behaviors. Second, the modest (pseudo-) R^2 scores in the regression models suggest that other, unmeasured, factors may play a significant role. Engagement in comment sections is, hence, likely shaped by a wider range of factors, beyond those captured in the present study. Longitudinal studies could help uncover these additional factors and explore how perceptions and behaviors evolve over time. Finally, the generalizability of the findings may be constrained by the specific cultural or media context in which the study was conducted. Future research should aim to replicate these findings in different contexts to assess their broader applicability. Additionally, qualitative approaches could further enrich our un-

derstanding by exploring how users interpret and experience democratic practices in online comment sections.

NOTES

¹ Some 285,000 Finnish citizens (5.1% of the population) speak Swedish as their mother tongue (Official Statistics of Finland, 2026). The Swedish-speaking population is mainly settled in the western and southern regions of Åland Islands, (Coastal) Ostrobothnia, Southwest Finland, and Uusimaa.

² The weights were calculated using the *anesrake* package for R.

³ For survey wording, see Table A1 in Online Appendix A. Detailed numerical data can be found in Table A3 of the same appendix.

⁴ The results from this second analysis are shown in full in Table B1 in Online Appendix B.

⁵ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$.

⁶ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$.

⁷ For a discussion on regression diagnostics, see Online Appendix C. Robustness is discussed in Online Appendix D, confirming the general stability of the models.

⁸ For survey wording, see Table A2 in Online Appendix A. Detailed numerical data can be found in Table A4 of the same appendix.

⁹ The results from the second PCA appear in Table B2 in Online Appendix B.

¹⁰ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$.

¹¹ Detailed numerical data can be found in Table A5 in Online Appendix A.

¹² Responses of Cannot say have been excluded, and certain categories have been collapsed. For reading, the categories Never and Rarely were combined, resulting in four categories: Daily, Often, Sometimes, and Rarely or never. For reacting and contributing, the categories Daily, Often and Sometimes were collapsed. This resulted in three categories: At least sometimes, Rarely, and Never. Note also that the scales have been reversed to simplify interpretation.

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