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“I Know from Personal Experience”: Citizen News Discussions and Knowledge Sharing on Reddit

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore how citizens use news discussion spaces to share knowledge and provide alternative perspectives to be considered in understanding the events and issues of the day. When citizens gather in both the “official” and “unofficial” spaces of news to engage in commentary and discussion, added knowledge and perspectives are gained, sometimes in ways that can provide a counter to the framing of the story. Thus, an investigation into aspects of citizen knowledge sharing around news was conducted in the informal online community found on Reddit.com/r/news. It was found that: 1) incivility was not an obvious hindrance to knowledge sharing in this context, 2) tacit and explicit knowledge sharing occurred with about equivalent frequency, and 3) knowledge sharing, and specifically tacit knowledge sharing, was more likely to occur in deeper chains of back-and-forth exchange between smaller groups of participants.

Keywords: Online Communities, Knowledge Sharing, News Discussions, Incivility, Digital Public Sphere

Introduction

Conversation-based spaces created by interactive media and the Internet are increasingly recognized as common contemporary news sources. These spaces also offer citizens opportunities to share and receive knowledge on various topics, participate in public debates and discussions, and find like-minded others. On news sites, comments sections allow readers to react publicly to, and access a diversity of opinions about, a particular news story and the issues that it raises (Lee & Jang, 2010; Sindorf, 2013). Elsewhere on the Internet, via social media sites, blogs/microblogs, and discussion forums, citizens frequently gather to discuss the news in general, or to focus on a particular news topic, issue, story or event.

Through this type of shared news consumption, readers and citizens can not only be heard, but also share additional information and knowledge that may have been left out of the story itself, providing new perspectives and facts for consideration. For both the people who participate in these news-based discussions and those who read them, this exchange of knowledge can ultimately result in providing an alternative to, or at least a question about, the way the issue or event is being framed in the mainstream narrative. In order to learn more about how and in what ways these processes occur, the purpose of this study is to explore how citizens are using news discussion spaces to share knowledge and provide alternative perspectives to be considered in understanding the events and issues of the day.

Literature Review

One of the most likely places to find informal discussions surrounding news in the online environment is within the “official” spaces of news, such as the websites of journalistic outlets and news organizations. The spaces provided for discussion typically take the form of a comments section posted under every article or video, or a chosen subset of articles or videos published on the site, which allows readers to publicly discuss the news in its original context (Strandberg & Berg, 2013). Unfortunately, the anonymous and distanced nature of communicating via the Internet

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affords users the ability to speak without regard for social etiquette or empathy, which can lead to a discourse marred by incivility and disrespect (Ackerman, 2010; Baraniuk, 2013).

The problems associated with comments sections often result in them being viewed by institutional decision-makers as a headache to manage and a problem to solve, rather than an opportunity for participatory democracy in which the readers/viewers, and even the journalists themselves, can gain new perspectives and alternative understandings. The focus on these problems within news organizations has led to a kind of censorship of discussion, in which comments sections may be heavily moderated, closed, or shut down (Sindorf, 2013); users may be required to register with a confirmed email address; and individual comments may be removed or require approval before being published (Gsell 2009; Hughey & Daniels, 2013). The degrees to which user comments are allowed or not allowed, moderated or unmoderated, limited or unlimited, and given prominence or not, are completely determined by the host institution’s decisions and preferences, which are typically ambiguous and potentially arbitrary (Tanner, 2012).

Although the ethos driving journalism is deeply rooted in freedom of speech, journalists also act as gatekeepers of public opinion, and rancorous discussions in comments sections break down the mythos of an idealized, civil public sphere (Habermas, 1992). Journalists point to racism, sexism, and general incivility that is common among anonymous posters as reasons for moderating or removing comments (Reader, 2012). They feel a responsibility to their readership and subject matter, and thus see that they have a right to accordingly manage the discourse on their sites (Asakwa, 2013; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Schotz, 2007; Tanner, 2012). Although it is not the focus of our work here, it is valuable to note that the status of the journalist as “professional” has often been disputed, particularly since the advent of online news production (e.g. Meyers, Wyatt, Borden & Wasserman, 2012; O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2003; Weinhold, 2010; Zelizer, 2004). In order to avoid the potential threats online comments present for professional journalistic credibility, these comments are kept “at the margins of the core editorial process” (Marty, Pignard-Cheynel & Sebbah, 2017, 1979). Therefore, in these “official” spaces for discussion of news, professionally produced news stories are the primary focus, and citizen discussion is secondary.

However, “unofficial” spaces for discussing news abound on the Internet. While not achieving the same visual prominence as being placed within the context of the professionally produced source of information, sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit provide citizens who have an interest in discussing the news with a way of doing so, away from the intervening eyes of those professionals involved with, and invested in, the original news publication. Meanwhile, the news organizations producing the stories up for discussion are free from any responsibility for how the conversations in these “unofficial spaces” may unfold, yet they can still benefit from the promotion and visibility that results from the link sharing, re-sharing, liking, upvoting, and clicking that occurs when “news” is shared, received and distributed via interactive media (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). In addition, Rowe (2015) found that incivility was actually less likely to occur in an “unofficial” news discussion space than on the “official” site of The Washington Post, suggesting that its presence may be less problematic outside of the context of professional journalistic publishing outlets. In these “unofficial” spaces, citizen discussion is the primary focus, and professionally-produced news stories from a variety of sources may or may not be brought into the space via posts and links as a proposed point of discussion. Though minimal moderation is typically present in some form, there is no initial restriction on what can be posted to these sites, and content is only removed in the most extreme of cases. In addition, such “unofficial” spaces also provide, moreso than a single comments section under any given news article or video, online spaces for citizens to gather around a topic, issue, event, or even just “news” itself, without having to rely on a single source as the point of contact.

**Knowledge Sharing**
To begin to understand how knowledge sharing might occur in an online discussion space, we must first outline certain characteristics about knowledge sharing itself. Through communication, people share two types of knowledge with each other: explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is information that is easy to find, express, and share, such as repeatable facts and documentable information (Nonaka, 1994). It may even involve providing a particular information resource that one could refer to (Hislop, 2002). Sharing of explicit knowledge is a relatively straightforward process and, according to Nonaka (1994), it “is transmittable in formal, systematic language” (16). Tacit knowledge is a more personal type of knowledge that is embedded in our skills, values, and experiences (Ipe, 2003). It is more frequently expressed in peripheral ways, meaning that instead of being directly communicated, it “comes out” in the doing of activities, the expression of one’s identity, and the attempt to be understood by others (Nonaka, 1994). It is frequently implied, rather than overtly shared, when individuals engage in informal interaction, tell personal stories, and provide examples or comparisons for one another (Baumard, 2001).

The online environment is well-suited to the sharing of explicit knowledge. In fact, in online political discussions especially, the typical Internet user often expects, and even requests, hypertext support for claims made (Stromer-Galley, 2004). Thus, there may even be benefits in this environment for the sharing and transmission of explicit knowledge. The sharing of tacit knowledge through online communication is, however, less straightforward. Early literature on the topic suggested that communicating tacit knowledge via networked technology would be nearly impossible, or at least severely limited (David, 2003; Hislop, 2002; Lawson & Lorenz, 1999; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Because people feel more of a sense of ownership over their own, personal, tacit knowledge (Saetang, Theodoulidis, & Ekweozor, 2010), it has been shown that it is more likely to be expressed in an environment of trust (Hislop, 2002), and the characteristic incivility of tone that frequently accompanies online debate can interfere with the kind of trusting environment thought to be required for tacit knowledge sharing.

Yet, more recent studies have found evidence of tacit knowledge sharing in interactive media spaces, despite the lower levels of trust (Huang, 2007; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Yu, Lu, & Liu, 2010), especially in informal communities outside of the context of professional practice (Brossio et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2012; Roschke, 2014; Tewksbury, 2013). Some studies have shown that personal rewards unrelated to civility or trust, such as visibility and reputation, were the biggest predictors of knowledge sharing in informal online communities (Sun et al., 2006; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Yu, Lu, and Liu (2010) found that another strong predictor of knowledge sharing in the online environment was the perceived openness and fairness of the platform. Fairness has been shown to be an important factor in knowledge exchange in mediated environments (Collins, Deek, & Friedman, 2013), and thus may take primacy over trust in this context. The open platforms of “unofficial” news discussion spaces, with their low barriers to entry, limited moderation, norms of pseudonymity, and user-generated ratings indicators, give users a sense of equity (Alter, 2008), and negativity and incivility may be viewed simply as an acceptable consequence of the openness of the system (Massanari, 2017). Therefore, in the context of open, informal, “unofficial” spaces, it is possible that the incivility and characteristically negative tone of these online discussions has come to be an expected norm (Seely, 2018), and is not a hindrance to the sharing of knowledge among the users who choose to participate in them (Reader, 2012).

Finally, despite the challenges and problems associated with online communication, such conversation-based spaces have been repeatedly shown in the academic literature to be useful as a reliable source of data to learn more about people’s knowledge on various topics (Birthisel & Parameswaran 2013; Bosch & Mutsvaivo, 2017; Brissioe, Roberto, & Barrow, 2012; Brown, Bostick, Lim & Gross, 2012; Henrich & Holmes, 2011; Muñiz, Alvidrez, & Tellez, 2015; Pereira et al., 2013; Vestergaard, 2017). Knowledge sharing is clearly occurring in these spaces, and according to Hislop (2002), both tacit and explicit knowledge are expressed to some degree in any act of knowledge sharing. Thus, if knowledge is shared through informal discussion on the Internet, it is likely that both types will be expressed.
Citizen News Framing

In the sharing of knowledge through interactive media, citizens sometimes end up providing alternative news frames, or ways of presenting information that advance a particular perspective, to those put forth by professional journalists. Goffman’s (1974) framing theory has been applied to understand the ways journalists select story frames as a deliberate process that shapes how we think about events (Entman, 1993; Speer, 2017). Scholars contend journalists as gatekeepers use frames as powerful discursive tools to influence audiences’ perceptions of and contributions to news coverage (Gamson, 1992; Oh & Hudson, 2017; Singer et al., 2011). According to Brossoie, Roberto, and Barrow (2012), “reporters have relative freedom as to how they frame their articles, and newspaper editors decide which stories are news” (p. 800).

However, by sharing their own knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, around a news story, issue, or event, citizens can challenge those frames, and even provide alternative frames and perspectives. By providing their own knowledge and experiences, users of large informal online communities build up a kind of collective intelligence, drawing a more diverse, complete and informed picture than any one individual journalist or media outlet possibly could (Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2008). For example, in studies of news comments sections, readers have been found to supply information about personal experiences that shed new light on the event covered in the article (Brossoie et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2012; da Silva, 2013). Additionally, Lee & Jang (2010) found that having full view of comments displayed under news articles, specifically comments that provided a different slant from the article itself, influenced not only readers’ perceptions of public opinion, but also a certain subset of readers’ opinions on the issues themselves. Combined, these studies suggest that not only does tacit knowledge sharing occur within the “official” spaces of news discussion, but that shared knowledge can offer audiences alternative information and views from that which was put forth in the original publication.

Though the news discussions that occur in the “unofficial” spaces are not given the same prominence to counter news framing as they are when placed within the context of the originating source of the news itself, they have been shown to be extremely influential in reframing news narratives (Nee, Shen, and Dozier, 2017). In fact, when it occurs in these spaces, the reframing of news narratives frequently shades into activism (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016; Marchi, 2005). Yet even outside of the context of activist movements, citizens have been shown to use the “unofficial” news discussion spaces to successfully provide counter-frames to those being put forth by the media and the powerful authority figures that influence them (Kim et al., 2011; Porter & Hellstein, 2014; Vestergaard, 2017).

There is no doubt that the unofficial spaces of news discussion have provided news consumers with alternative understandings outside of the frames provided by professional media. Thus, citizen knowledge, especially personal, tacit knowledge, shared through the online communities that develop in the “unofficial” news discussion spaces can be particularly powerful in shaping how the public understands current issues and events, sometimes in even more influential ways than the professional media outlets delivering the news.

Incivility

In the context of online discussions surrounding news and politics specifically, incivility is frequently studied in terms of its impact on deliberation and discourse (daSilva, 2013; Gervais, 2015; Sindorf, 2013), but its impact on knowledge sharing has not been studied very extensively. In addition, as noted previously, incivility has the potential to play a role in both the strict moderation practices of the “official” spaces of citizen news discussions and the hinderance of tacit knowledge sharing. Therefore, it is an important concept to understand for the purposes of the present study.

The concept of incivility in the scholarship is, at best, muddy. Scholars have yet to come to a clear consensus on how it should be defined, theoretically or operationally for the purposes of
research. Particularly in the context of online communication, a variety of different conceptualizations and models have been employed. Scholars have equated incivility with “disrespect” (Sindorf, 2013), “impoliteness” (Rowe, 2015), and “rudeness” (Herbst, 2010), however some combine all of these into one construct (Antoci, Delfino, Paglieri, Panebianco, & Sabatini, 2016; Seely, 2018), while others separate them out (da Silva, 2013; Gervais, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Rains & Kenski, 2017; Rowe, 2015). While most scholars acknowledge that incivility occurs along a continuum, the most conservative versions of the construct limit it to specific “democracy-threatening” acts (Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Strandberg & Berg, 2013) or expressions of clear “outrage” (Borah, 2013). As Reader (2012) points out, however, the rhetoric surrounding the term is in fact very broadly applied to include those comments with whom one disagrees or that reflect the position of a cultural minority, a kind of confirmation bias we risk when introducing the lens of human subjectivity in research. The combination of ambiguity in definition and subjectivity in coding suggest that, the less interpretation needed on the part of coders to identify the construct of “incivility” when it arises in these discussions, the more objectivity and consistency will be achieved. Thus, in this study, we adopt a liberal coding schema based on a combination of “indicators” of incivility, such as tone and expressive language, rather than more latent understandings of the construct reliant on human recognition.

Research Questions

While the above discussion underscores the importance of knowledge sharing within these citizen discussions and unofficial news spaces, it is not known exactly how common it is or what it looks like. The goal of this research, then, is to make knowledge sharing the focus. Two exploratory research questions guide this investigation:

RQ1: How often does knowledge sharing occur in response to postings of news stories in discussions on Reddit?

RQ1a: What is the relationship between knowledge sharing and indicators of incivility in these discussion posts?
RQ1b: When and where in these discussions do posts that contain knowledge sharing most often appear?

RQ2: How often do tacit and explicit knowledge sharing occur in response to postings of news stories in discussions on Reddit?

RQ2a: What is the relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and indicators of incivility in these discussion posts?
RQ2b: When and where in these discussions do posts that contain these types of knowledge sharing most often appear?

In order to learn more about how citizen knowledge is shared around news in an “unofficial,” informal online community, a sampling of “posts,” or public comments, submitted to the /r/news subcategory on Reddit.com was analyzed through a content analysis and the structural approach to sequentially mapping online interactions (Dalelio, 2010).

Methods

To address the research questions of interest, an exploratory investigation was made, looking at a subset of discussions sampled from an informal, “unofficial,” community centered around discussions of news online. Because of its popularity as a conversation-based space (Marantz,
2018), its role as a news source for a majority of its users (Holcomb, Gottfreid, & Mitchell, 2013), and its organizational structure, which fosters the formulation of communities around particular topics (Roschke, 2014), Reddit was chosen as the “unofficial” platform for news discussion in this study. A coding schema designed to identify aspects of knowledge sharing, such as indicators of tacit and explicit knowledge (based on the theoretical understanding of these two constructs), tone, and incivility, was developed and applied to the sampled posts (see Appendix A).

Reddit.com/r/news

Reddit calls itself “the front page of the internet,” (Reddit.com) and, although it has been around since 2005, it is only in the last few years that this self-agrandizing claim has begun to hold water. As of 2018, Reddit is ranked by Alexa as the number four most trafficked website, after Google, YouTube, and Facebook (Marantz, 2018). In the past few years, the site has been highlighted in professional media coverage of news events (Suran & Kilgo, 2017), and has even been known to influence the actual news agenda (Ingram, 2012; Marantz, 2018). Despite the notoriety of Reddit community discussions as characteristically combative and negative in tone (Marantz, 2018), it has certainly proven useful as a site of investigation into the ideas, perspectives and understandings of individuals or groups of people, even in the realm of academic research (Darwin, 2017; Douglas 2014; Gallagher, 2015; Ha et al., 2017; Kennedy et al., 2016; Marwick, 2017; Massanari, 2017; Meese, 2014; Milner, 2013; Mortensen and Trenz, 2016; Noguti, 2016; Pflugfelder, 2017; Piper, 2017; Roschke, 2014; Subtirelu, 2017; Suran and Kilgo, 2017; Vickery 2014; Wasike, 2011).

Reddit is a user-generated site, centered around posting links and discussing them without limits on word length. Users can also create “subreddits,” topical organizers for their posts and comments, and the site currently has over one million of them (Marantz, 2018). The site of sampling for this study, the /r/news subreddit, is one of the most popular on the site with over 15 million subscribers (http://redditmetrics.com/), and provides a gathering place for a community to share and discuss news stories. A typical /r/news discussion begins with a seeding post, in which someone provides a title and a link to a news source or article. This post is then followed by a list of response posts in a nested conversational structure. Thus, it mimics the “comments underneath the article” format found on news sites, but reverses the primacy of real estate, as, rather than seeing the article first and having to click or scroll to view comments, one sees the comments first and has to click to view the article. An additional unique feature that Reddit offers its users is the ability to vote “up” or vote “down” both the seeding post and each and every comment that is posted to it in response. The more upvotes a post gets, the more prominence it is given, whether that be within a single discussion itself or within the subreddit’s overall list of discussions. The more downvotes a post or comment gets, the lower down in the list it goes, losing prominence and visibility.

Sampling

Collecting discussions that share a similar time frame and length eliminates the need to consider potential variations in discussion characteristics based on things like the news cycle, community activity patterns on Reddit, and topic popularity. Thus, a point in time was chosen in which there were no major current or political events dominating the news, and that was between 8:15 and 8:45 am on Thursday, February 26, 2015. Criteria for inclusion included: 1) the age of the originating post (no older than 24 hours at the time of sampling), and 2) the number of posts submitted in response (between 100-200 at the time of sampling). Thus, all discussion threads chosen for study were comparable in that they were found in the /r/news subreddit, had seeding posts that were submitted within the 24 hours preceding the sampling time frame, and contained between 100 and 200 responding posts at the time of data collection.

Five comment threads met the sampling criteria. These threads were based the following news stories, which were linked from the original seeding post:
2) “Exclusive: China drops leading technology brands for state purchases,” *Reuters* (Carsten, 2015)
4) “Florida mother sends badly bruised child to school wearing T-shirt proclaiming ‘good woopin,’” *The Washington Post* (Izadi, 2015)

These stories span a diverse range of popular news topics including technology, religion, culture, health, law, international business, the economy, labor, politics, child welfare, parenting, and family. All of the sources they originate from are well-established legacy media outlets with international reach: two major news agencies, *Associated Press* and *Reuters*, and three major American newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. The posts that were submitted in response to these news stories were collected for the sample, and a single comment box, reflecting one submitted post, was the unit of analysis. Two coders then rated the final sample of posts according to the developed code sheet (see Appendix A).

**Knowledge Sharing**

In coding, knowledge sharing was considered present if a statement including the presence of a fact, information, or personal knowledge was made. An opinion provided with no supporting information was not considered knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing was coded with a binary measure. If present, the post was coded as a “1;” if absent, the post was coded as a “0.”

If a post was coded as including knowledge sharing, certain theoretical indicators of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing were coded for as well. Those indicating tacit knowledge sharing included: 1) information presented as personal knowledge (i.e. accompanied by uses of personal pronouns such as “I” “my” “we” and “our” etc.), 2) the use of an example or comparison, or 3) the telling of a story. These categories were based on theoretical assumptions about the ways in which people share tacit knowledge through communication (Baumard, 2001; Ipe, 2003; Hislop, 2002). The primary indicator of explicit knowledge sharing was the simple sharing of one or more facts. A secondary coding structure was applied using these indicators for tacit and explicit knowledge sharing. A post was coded as tacit knowledge sharing if it included at least one of the tacit knowledge indicators described above. A post was coded as explicit knowledge sharing if it was coded as having had a fact shared, but was also lacking in all three of the indicators of tacit knowledge sharing. This is not to suggest that posts with tacit knowledge sharing did not have the potential to include straightforward documentable information and facts, in fact in some cases they did, but it was a way to assure for mutual exclusivity in the data set. In addition, since the literature suggests that tacit knowledge sharing may be harder to achieve in the online environment (David, 2003; Hislop, 2002; Lawson & Lorenz, 1999; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002), this was the primary variable of interest, and thus it was crucial to ensure that each and every instance of it was captured in the coding. If tacit knowledge sharing occurred in a post in any way, it was coded as such. If a post supplied explicit knowledge sharing only, it was coded as an explicit knowledge sharing post. These coding decisions, while theoretically driven, were also justified via a statistical analysis of the determined indicators, as discussed in the “Results” section below.

To offer a sense of what tacit knowledge sharing coded in this way looked like, some example posts coded as tacit knowledge sharing (based on various combinations of its three indicators) are given below:
Post #45, coded as “personal knowledge,” and “example or comparison”:
Like I said, the structure isn't there. There is no central Vatican of the Jews. We have individual synagogues of all denominations. No juicy accounts just monthly dues to keep the doors open.

Post #265, coded as “personal knowledge” and “example or comparison”:
You can order off of TJ Maxx's website though. They don't have everything listed and not everything is listed at all stores, but it's a step towards advancements in how to buy at these types of stores.
I shop at these types of stores, and I find checkout relatively easy so it works either way for me.
I agree it'd be too easy for people to steal, but, out of curiosity, where is the loss?

Post #432, coded as “personal knowledge,” “example or comparison” and “story”:
I disagree with this because my dad wrote "I'm a liar" on a sheet of paper and made me walk around walmart for 2 hours. It god-damn hurts when people stop and point and call others over to look at what an 8 year old has on the front and back of his shirt.
I know from personal experience that all this does is grow a resentment for the parent that won't be forgotten for a long LONG time.
If the parent really cared, they would have known that their child was struggling and fixed it before all of her grades got to Fs.

To offer a sense of what posts coded as explicit knowledge sharing looked like, some examples of posts coded as explicit knowledge sharing (in which a fact was shared but none of the indicators of tacit knowledge sharing were present) are given below:

Post #40:
By law your parents can not sign away your right to sue as a minor. When you are 18, you can sue.

Post #468:
The article said the gender of the student wasn't revealed but it did say the child couldn't have a 'boyfriend'...I'm guessing it's a girl.

Post #608:
All of the commissioners who voted on this have had the text for weeks. 300 pages of the text of the policy were public comments.

**Tone and Incivility**

As previously discussed, incivility is a somewhat vague construct that occurs along a spectrum and is difficult to identify. For the purposes of this exploratory study, the variable of incivility was kept relatively general and based on simpler, more manifest indicators of incivility broadly gleaned from the literature. These indicators included: 1) being negative in tone, borrowing most specifically from Gervais’ (2015) delineation of negative civil and negative uncivil political talk, and 2) containing the use of emotional or expressive language or formatting, a straightforward criterion, some form of which was used across studies employing this variable (Gervais, 2015; Pappachrissi, 2004; Rains & Kenski, 2017; Seely, 2018). The first indicator, tone, can vary throughout a single post submission. An individual post could, for example, start out negative, continue on in a neutral fashion, and end on a positive note. In order to keep the three levels of this construct mutually exclusive, tone was determined according to the dimension that was predominantly expressed in each post. The second indicator, the use of emotional or expressive language or formatting, was coded according to a binary measure of presence or absence. Examples of this construct were: use of all caps, bold, excessive punctuation, cursing, and the use of emotional descriptors such as “‘sigh’” “‘gasp’” or “‘facepalm.’”
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Results

There were a total of 654 posts in the final sample. Six of them had been deleted at the time of capture (it is not clear whether these were deleted by moderators or the users themselves), leaving 648 total posts for analysis. The majority of posts were coded as being predominantly negative in tone, (464 or 71.6%), very few were coded as predominantly positive (22 or 3.4%), and 162 (or 25.0%) were coded as neutral. Expressive language was used in 190 (29.3%) of the posts, and 172 (90.5%) of those were negative in tone, a significantly higher percentage than would be expected according to the null hypothesis, $x^2(1) = 53.19, p < .001$. As expected, there was certainly no lack of negativity and incivility in the sampled discussions.

Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability was assessed for two coders’ ratings of 20% of the sample, and Cohen’s Kappa reliability statistics were calculated for each variable. Because many of the variables that were coded for were relatively low in prevalence among the sample, Byrt et al.’s (1993) prevalence-adjusted Kappa (PABAK) was used for those with a prevalence index (PI) of .40 or greater. For all variables related to knowledge sharing, interrater reliability was “substantial” or “almost perfect” according to Landis and Koch’s (1977) guidelines for Cohen’s Kappa indicators. For those knowledge sharing variables with PIs below .40, $\kappa$ ranged from .68 -.71, and, for those with PIs over .40, PABAKs ranged from .64 -.92. For all indicators related to tone and civility, interrater reliability was “substantial,” according to Landis and Koch’s (1977) guidelines. Specifically, the linear-weighted Cohen’s Kappa for tone was .74, and the PABAK for expressive language (which had a PI of .42) was .67.

Tacit vs. Explicit Knowledge Sharing

Before addressing the specific research questions of interest, it is important to note that chi-square tests of independence were conducted on the variables assumed to be indicators of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing, as a validity check of the secondary coding scheme for “tacit” and “explicit” knowledge sharing posts. The three indicators of tacit knowledge sharing (“personal knowledge sharing,” “example or comparison,” and “story”) were found to have a significant positive association between them (See Table 1). This shows that all three of these characteristics were more likely to be found in posts that contained any of the others, suggesting that these activities are, in fact, related in some way. This supports the idea that they are all indicators of a similar activity, which is theoretically presumed to be tacit knowledge sharing. Meanwhile, posts that were coded as including a shared fact were found to be negatively associated with all three of the tacit knowledge sharing indicators (See Table 1). Thus, when posting knowledge, users had a tendency to either present tacit or explicit knowledge, but not as frequently both. This provides support for the theorized dichotomy between these two types of knowledge sharing, and further validates the use of these indicators for each in the coding schema.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Knowledge</th>
<th>Tacit indicators</th>
<th>Explicit indicator</th>
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</table>
RQ1: Knowledge Sharing Posts

In the sample, knowledge sharing was found in 299, or 46.1%, of the posts. To investigate the relationship between knowledge sharing and incivility in these posts (RQ1a), a combination of tone and expressive language were treated as indicators of incivility. Of the 299 posts in which knowledge is shared, the tone was coded as positive in only 8 of them (2.7%). A negative tone was found in 193 of the knowledge sharing posts (64.5%), and 98 of them (32.8%) were considered neutral. Compared to posts which did not contain knowledge sharing, a higher proportion of knowledge sharing posts were neutral, and a lower proportion were negative or positive, $x^2(2) = 18.90, p < .001$. The level of expressive language in the posts and its relationship to negativity in tone was on par with non-knowledge sharing posts (see Table 2 below). Combined, these results suggest that there was little difference in the incivility of the knowledge sharing posts, except that they were slightly more often neutral in tone.

Table 2: Breakdown of Incivility Indicators in Knowledge Sharing vs. Non-Knowledge Sharing Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No knowledge sharing (n = 349)</th>
<th>Knowledge sharing (n = 299)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative tone within expressive language</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to learn more about the placement of the knowledge sharing posts within the overall discussion (RQ1b), a structural approach developed for the sequential analysis of asynchronous online discussions (Dalelio 2010; 2013) was applied. This analysis showed that, in the overall sample, 454, or 70.1%, of the posts were in “long chains,” defined as chains of back-and-forth exchange between smaller groups of individuals that go on for five or more posts. As for knowledge sharing posts, it was found that a higher than expected proportion of them occurred within long chains (77.9%), $x^2(1) = 16.37, p < .001$, suggesting a positive relationship between knowledge sharing and more in-depth exchanges between individuals. To demonstrate what this
looks like in context, a segment of one such exchange in which all posts were coded as knowledge sharing (KS), is given below:

(Post #122, with KS):
IBM has already had one shareholder lawsuit over concealing their demolished sales in the Asia sector. A bunch of US tech firms took a stock beating too. Parts of the world no longer trust our exports.

(Post #132 in reply to #122, with KS):
I never understood why this did not make the news. I realized that this was going to happen when the Klein AT&T scandal broke. It would only be logical to avoid imports of US electronics as well as various computing services we provide. I don’t think we have even seen the worst of it yet. Considering the media is all about money in the first place I was very surprised this did not make any significant news.

(Post #133 in reply to #132, with KS):
Yesterday I was googling around for OneNote/Evernote Alternatives for Windows which dont need a cloud and nearly ALL guides/howto or tests I was reading (im EU) warned bout clouds in U.S. or Tool is U.S. product or the tools is collecting data in U.S. before they talk bout the tool ...

I think this is good how people wake up and start to avoid american IT products here in Europe and I can only hope the americans wake up someday too and see what damage this security spying can do to U.S. economy/companies.

RQ2: Tacit and Explicit Knowledge Sharing Posts

Of the 299 knowledge sharing posts, 139 (46.5%) included tacit knowledge sharing, and 160 (53.5%) contained explicit knowledge sharing only. As with overall knowledge sharing posts, the proportion of neutral posts was higher than in posts with no knowledge sharing, both for tacit, $\chi^2(2) = 10.30, p < .01$, and explicit, $\chi^2(2) = 14.84, p < .01$, knowledge sharing posts.

There was almost no statistical difference between the frequency of tone for tacit knowledge sharing posts when compared to explicit knowledge sharing posts, $\chi^2(2) = .17, p = .92$ (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tacit knowledge sharing (n = 139)</th>
<th>Explicit knowledge sharing (n = 160)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was, however, a statistically significant difference found for the use of expressive language in these posts, in that expressive language was used more frequently than expected in the tacit knowledge sharing posts and less frequently than expected in explicit knowledge sharing posts, $\chi^2(2) = 4.87, p < .05$ (see Table 4). In addition, the explicit knowledge sharing posts containing expressive language were more likely to be negative in tone than those of the tacit knowledge sharing posts, $\chi^2(1) = 4.71, p < .05$ (see Table 4). In other words, tacit knowledge sharing posts were more expressive in general, but when explicit knowledge sharing posts included expressive language, they were almost exclusively negative.

Table 4: Breakdown of Incivility Indicators in Tacit Knowledge Sharing vs. Explicit Knowledge Sharing Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tacit knowledge sharing (n = 139)</th>
<th>Explicit knowledge sharing (n = 160)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative tone within</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expressive language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to learn more about the placement of the tacit and explicit knowledge sharing posts within the overall discussion (RQ2b), the structural approach was once again applied. It was found that, when compared to the overall sample, which had 70.1% of its posts in long chains, a much higher than expected proportion of posts sharing tacit knowledge occurred within long chains (82.7%), $\chi^2(1) = 13.55, p < .001$. Yet, no significant differences with respect to long chains were found for posts containing explicit knowledge sharing, $\chi^2(1) = 1.38, p = .24$. This builds on the previous finding in response to RQ1b that more in-depth exchanges between smaller groups of individuals are positively related to knowledge sharing, adding that this association appears to be unique to the sharing of tacit knowledge only. An example of such an in-depth exchange, including two posts coded as tacit knowledge sharing (TKS) and one post coded as explicit knowledge sharing (EKS), is given below:

(Post #284):
What, exactly, should they pay entry level unskilled workers in your opinion?

(Post #301 in reply to #284, with TKS):
My very first job started at 11 an hour and after two years I'm at 14. I don't see why 11 or 12 would kill someone. It's not like I had any useful skills.

(Post #305 in reply to #284):
Minimum wage should be set at the living wage for each state and then adjusted for cost of living each year.

(Post #306 in reply to #305, with TKS):
How exactly would that work, though? I mean, I live in Bergen County, NJ and the cost of living is through the roof. It's at least 50% higher than, say, rural south Jersey. Do we just do an average for the state? I'd think that if we did that then the people in the south would have a higher wage than they'd "need" and be living pretty good while the ones in the north would be dragged down by cheap southern land and would get screwed. Lots of states would have this problem. Maybe we could calculate a living wage for each town? Sounds like something the government would be really efficient in running.

(Post #307 in reply to #306, with EKS):
That's how it currently is. Each state has their own and cities can change their own.
Maybe use something like this then:
http://livingwage.mit.edu/ and have it by county
Finally, it should be noted that no statistically significant differences were found in the posts of long chains compared to the others with respect to either of the indicators of incivility, $x^2(2) = 1.64, p = .44$, or expressive language, $x^2(1) = 1.23, p = .27$.

Combined, the findings presented in this results section paint a picture of citizen knowledge sharing in response to news discussions on the /r/news subforum on Reddit, in which it occurred with relative frequency regardless of incivility and is more likely to be found within in-depth exchanges, particularly for tacit knowledge sharing. Figure 1 below demonstrates an estimation of the relationships between the significant variables found in this study.

Figure 1: Variables Related to on Knowledge Sharing in Posts Responding to Linked News Stories on Reddit.com/r/news

![Figure 1: Variables Related to on Knowledge Sharing in Posts Responding to Linked News Stories on Reddit.com/r/news](image)

**Discussion**

In this exploratory study of citizen discussions surrounding news stories on Reddit.com, it was found that knowledge sharing activities are quite common, despite the overall negativity in tone and lack of civility that can occur. While knowledge sharing posts did tend to be slightly more neutral than those that do not contain knowledge sharing, they are still mostly negative and frequently reflect indicators of incivility. Both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing were found to occur with relative frequency in these posts, and these were also not found to be significantly affected by incivility. This refutes prior literature suggesting that knowledge sharing, particularly tacit knowledge sharing, would be significantly inhibited by incivility in the online environment (David, 2003; Hislop, 2002; Lawson & Lorenz, 1999; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

These findings echo what prior research has discovered with respect to deliberation – that it can occur in the online, politically oriented context despite the presence of incivility (daSilva, 2013; Gervais, 2015; Sindorf, 2013) – but showing similar findings in the arena of knowledge sharing instead. They also undermine the *a priori* assumption made in theory, and in practice by journalists and institutional decision-makers at news organizations, that incivility is a characteristic of public commentary that should be avoided and deterred for the sake of deliberation, which involves the sharing of knowledge (Habermas, 1992). Instead, at least in the context of informal,
online communities surrounding news stories, it supports the notion that incivility is accepted and tolerated as a characteristic norm of the discussion (Reader, 2012; Sindorf, 2013; Seely, 2018).

One important difference with respect to incivility indicators was found between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing posts, namely, that tacit knowledge sharing posts were found to use more expressive language than explicit knowledge sharing posts. This is in line with theoretical assumptions about knowledge sharing, which suggest that explicit knowledge sharing is typically characterized by the simple reiteration of facts and straightforward information, while tacit knowledge is expressed tangentially through more active communication, like telling stories and making comparisons (Nonaka, 1994; Ipe, 2003). These kinds of communication activities may tend to include more expressive indicators in the online environment. Interestingly, when explicit knowledge sharing posts were expressive, they were almost exclusively negative. Thus, in the context of explicit knowledge sharing in particular, expressive language appears to be an especially strong indicator of incivility.

It was also notable that, according to validity checks for the indicators of tacit vs. explicit knowledge, personal knowledge sharing, the telling of a story, and the use of an example or comparison, were all positively associated with one another, while the inclusion of a fact was negatively associated with all three. This means that people tended to demonstrate either tacit or explicit knowledge sharing activities within their comments; less frequently both. This is an indication that, at least in the realm of informal online discussion, tacit and explicit knowledge sharing tend to be two distinct activities. Whether that reflects an internal mode influencing communication at a given point in time (i.e. a participant is responding in either left brain or right brain mode), or an artificially imposed dichotomy resulting from the constraints of online communication, is unknown.

While incivility had little impact, what does seem to be influential over knowledge sharing in this context is the level of interaction between individuals. Knowledge sharing, specifically tacit knowledge sharing, was found to occur more frequently in the more in-depth, “long chain” exchanges (those containing five or more posts between smaller groups of individuals), as highlighted by the structural approach. Two examples of these provided in the results section demonstrate evidence of how a lengthier back-and-forth interaction may be more conducive to the conditions required for tacit knowledge sharing. The questioning and sharing of opinions that occurs in these longer debates seems to incite knowledge sharing, as information, personal experiences, and examples are used to correct and broaden the perspective that is encapsulated. This is especially salient in the second example, where commenters began sharing their personal experiences and local knowledge in order to identify and solve problems around the issue of minimum wage. The present study, then, builds upon prior findings by adding “depth of exchange” as another possible predictor of knowledge sharing in informal online discussions, in addition to personal rewards (Sun et al., 2006; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) and perceived openness and fairness (Collins et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2010).

These demonstrative examples of “long chain” exchanges also exhibit the role of knowledge sharing in challenging the ways an issue is framed in the public sphere. This is especially clear in the first example given, in which commenters are questioning “why this did not make the news” and hoping consumers will “wake up” to what is presumed to be the hidden reality not being discussed. This supports initial findings in prior research that suggest citizen knowledge can enhance, build upon, or even counter information provided in a news story (Brossoie et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2012; da Silva, 2013). The present study’s findings underscore prior research on citizen reframing showing that it involved the sharing of knowledge both personal and informational (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Jackson & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Kim et al., 2011; Marchi, 2005; Porter & Hellenstein, 2014; Vestergaard, 2017). This research demonstrates that, not only did this kind of knowledge sharing occur relatively frequently in the “unofficial space” of reddit.com/r/news/, but gives some further insight into what it looks like when it does. These findings can offer new insights into the quandary faced by journalistic organizations hosting online
citizen discussions of news. Those interested in gathering citizens’ knowledge and using it to their advantage (as in participatory or open journalism) may want to consider loosening the reins on hindering incivility. It does not, as they might assume, appear to be a hinderance to knowledge sharing in discussions surrounding news online. Instead, they should look to the “unofficial” spaces as a model for open platforms in the online environment, or perhaps more intentionally and directly use them as sites of information gathering. Journalists may find that these discussions even serve as sites of alternative frames to represent or address in their reporting.

Beyond journalism, any practitioners interested in encouraging online knowledge exchange or increasing online engagement within their communities may find these results useful. Most important, perhaps, are the implications this study has for the platforms hosting these “unofficial” spaces of citizen news discussions. There has been a recent uptick in the control exerted by the platform owners over posted content, particularly in the realm of political discussions (Kraus, 2018). In an effort to quell criticisms that they support the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech, sites like Twitter, Facebook, and even Reddit have begun moderating content more stringently (Maratnz, 2018). The findings from this study would suggest that it would be a mistake to take this too far, as these “unofficial” platforms provide an alternative space with the freedom and openness required for both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing among citizens, outside of the more controlled context of professional news sites (which serve a different purpose and stakeholder community).

Limitations and Future Directions

This exploratory study was not without its limitations, and these are important to note here so that others may acknowledge and improve upon them in future scholarship. Firstly, although Reddit is a popular site, its users’ demographics are not obtainable, and cannot be assumed to be representative of a broader population, or generalizable beyond the boundaries of the site itself. In fact, to assume any sort of representativeness or generalizability to a larger group would almost certainly be fallacious, as Reddit has its own culture, norms, and characteristics that tend to attract certain types of people and repel others. In addition, it has been found that online discussion in general is dominated by a small group of superparticipants that can significantly influence measured characteristics (Graham & Wright, 2014), so one should be very careful about making any broad reaching conclusions. Secondly, some of the conclusions made in the previous section were based on aspects of the discussion within a small subsample, derived from drilling down into the data. For example, there were very few positive toned posts overall on which to base conclusions – only 22 to be exact. Findings regarding the use of expressive language in tacit versus explicit knowledge sharing posts were also based on subsamples of fewer than 100 posts. Thus, these findings and conclusions should not be used to make confident claims about what is occurring, but rather to point to results that could be further tested or verified in a more intensive study focused on those particular attributes. In particular, comparative studies focused on incivility or tone should seek out discussion-based spaces that have demonstrated a higher degree of variability with respect to these conditions.

Based on what was learned in this study, several additional areas for further research are suggested. The finding that incivility seems to have little to no relationship to knowledge sharing in these discussions implies that there may be very different effects of incivility based on context. Future research studies could look deeper into this by comparing incivility’s effects on these activities in professional versus informal communities, for example, or based on variations in platform or topical focus. It is also recommended that further research should be conducted in order to better understand the identified dichotomy between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing indicators, in that they do not frequently co-occur within one post. It would be interesting to learn if this is also a phenomenon that occurs in offline knowledge sharing, or if it is in fact a result of the more structured nature of online discussions. Finally, the role of knowledge sharing within
citizen reframing of news should be further explored. It would be prudent for researchers interested in citizen reframing through online discussion to code for the specific frames used or for indicators of alternative framing such as the questioning or refuting of information or knowledge presented from an outside source. Researchers might also find it fruitful to look within communities that have a more specific focus, such as subreddits created for the discussion of a particular issue, topic, story or event, in order to find more saliency with respect to knowledge sharing counter-frames.

Overall, this study provided some initial insights into the role of knowledge sharing in news discussions on Reddit. It is hoped that the findings and conclusions of this study can serve as a starting point into discovering more about the indicators of citizen knowledge sharing in informal news discussion spaces and its relationship to reframing news, as well as the norm of incivility and its effects on knowledge sharing in online communities.

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Wendy M. Weinhold, PhD: Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Media, and Culture, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC, USA
APPENDIX A: CODE SHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Know_shared</th>
<th>Is knowledge shared (if it is an opinion with no supporting information, it does not count)? If so:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Is it a statement presented as fact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Is it presented as personal knowledge (use of personal pronouns like “my,” “I,” “we” or “our”)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>Is it a story told?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Is it an example or comparison given?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Exp_lang    | Is emotional or expressive language or formatting used (use of all caps, excessive punctuation, cursing, “sigh” “gasp” “facepalm” etc.)? |

Is the majority of the post:
| Tone_pos    | positive in tone?                                                                                 |
| Tone_neg    | negative in tone?                                                                                |
| Tone_neutral| neutral in tone?                                                                                  |

| Notes       | Anything else of note, related to knowledge or knowledge sharing?                                  |