UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Diversity below the line: Media pluralism through comments on public affairs news stories

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Timothy Benjamin Koskie, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Law at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Abstract

While media has long offered spaces for feedback and audience commentary, online news commenting has elevated this content into a widespread and complex contribution of diverse content. However, though comment sections often stretch on far longer than the articles they accompany, drawing in up to thousands of voices on their topic, their content remains out of scope of current approaches to media ecosystem assessments. Through this project, I sought to extend scholarship on media ecosystems and news commenting to demonstrate how their interaction carries implications for both. To explore this interaction, I adapted media pluralism metrics and indicators to incorporate news commenting as an extension of the media ecosystem in two countries – Australia and South Korea. I utilised qualitative content analysis to examine the most visible comments with the greatest reach in each media system, investigating 665 comment sections with 12,208 comments. I assessed this content for its contributions – and risks – for media pluralism, while simultaneously contextualising the outcomes in and as part of distinct media ecosystems. The results painted a complicated picture of what news commenting can offer or portend, bringing diverse viewpoints and information that competed with the content of the news organisations dominating their media ecosystems, while its distinct risks of silencing speech and redundant phatic commentary were broadly marginalised or entirely absent due to the sites' structures and approaches. Comments' constitution and presence in each case correlated to characteristics of the media ecosystem, suggesting that news commenting is significantly shaped by or reflective of its environment.