

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

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the degree of

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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.

## Chapter 1: News Commenting Meets Media System

In 2013, one of Australia's most widely read newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph*, carried a simple message across the length of its front page: "KICK THIS MOB OUT", signalling to readers that it would, from the first day of the election campaign, support the opposition party (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014). While not necessarily an anomaly – newspapers have a history of editors backing candidates – it was striking in its early presence in the election and its brazen messaging. The owner of this paper, News Corp, is a dominating presence in Australian media (Tiffen, 2014), in a country that has extraordinarily concentrated media ownership (Dwyer, 2017), giving it an influential position to comment on public affairs. The extent of this influence was visible right on that front page: at the bottom of the stark black backdrop, outsized bold writing, provocative headline and admonishing image, this newspaper article was not open for comments.

This moment showed the interplay of politics, media ownership and editorial direction, all important aspects in evaluations of and risks to media pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). It is to this concern that news commenting could provide a contribution which was absent from that newspaper front page – or introduce new risks. However, it has rarely been assessed for its potential for media pluralism, even though it has been found to yield heterogenous viewpoints (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho, Carvalho, & Castro Seixas, 2019) and contributors (Barnes, 2018b; Stroud, Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Such an assessment could gauge comments' capacity to augment the functioning of a complex and diverse society through relevant and representative media content. Comments have been investigated for diversity (Baden & Springer, 2014; Giannopoulos, Koniaris, Weber, Jaimes, & Sellis, 2015; Santana, 2019), contributing to the body of media diversity research that has variously investigated the heterogeneity of the media's content (Humprecht & Esser, 2018), producers (Sjøvaag, 2016), or representation (A. Jakubowicz, 2019). However, media pluralism investigates the structures and influences that can yield or restrict this diversity (Valcke, Picard, &

Sükösd, 2015). To date, few scholars (Gálik & Vogl, 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016) have considered the implications of comments from this perspective.

Through comment sections on online news articles, the participating public can not only challenge concentrations of communicative power but also bring diverse agonistic and non-agonistic perspectives as well as information to the topic, as produced by new voices and groups. While these comments are *below the line*, a reference to news websites' interface design placing them under a line after their own journalistic production, news commenting continues to be read widely among both readers (Stroud et al., 2016; Stroud, Murray, & Kim, 2020) and journalists (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). News commenting is now a broadly integrated form of media in online spaces, and its presence can pose benefits for journalism (Meltzer, 2015) and sustainability (Huang, 2016), though it can also bring reputational risks (Conlin & Roberts, 2016) and additional costs (Krebs & Lischka, 2019).

This and other potential has been interrogated in news commenting research, looking at content (Baden & Springer, 2014; Kwon & Gruzd, 2017; Wolfgang, 2019), the hosts and moderators (Chen & Pain, 2017; Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), the commenters (Barnes, 2018b; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015), and the readers as well as journalists who are key stakeholders (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; da Silva, 2015; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). Simultaneously, the way commenting interfaces are designed (Kiskola et al., 2022; Mollen, 2020), their contents and community are moderated (Domingo, 2014), and their text is sorted and presented (Giannopoulos et al., 2015; Suh, Lee, Suh, Lee, & Lee, 2018) can have a clear influence on the results. However, studies rarely contextualise these comment sections within their larger media ecosystems. This is crucial because media ecosystems face diverse challenges and comprise many different structures, as shown in the Media Pluralism Monitor operated by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom for the European University Institute (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) and through Hallin and Mancini's media system comparisons

(2017). The distinct and interconnected media ecosystems surrounding comments shape their contents and their impact.

Considering news commenting for its place in a media ecosystem raises difficulties, however. According to Napoli, Stonbely, Friedland, Glaisyer, and Breitbart (2012, p. 5), the media ecosystem is, “the primary context in which citizens are affected by politics, day to day events, community issues and events such as natural disasters,” but it comprises a variety of components across micro, meso, and macro layers, tying the concepts of media ecology and media systems. The concept considers the full range of media that informs people’s view of this context (Cali, 2017), from newspapers and broadcast through to newer forms of media such as news commenting and podcasts. Despite their role in informing and sustaining our information-reliant society (Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016), media systems are challenging to map and assess as public exposure and consumption shifts (Brogi, Carlini, Nenadić, Parcu, & de Azevedo Cunha, 2021). Digital media platforms have seen continued and rapid expansion as a focus point for the public’s attention across the globe (Newman et al., 2021) at the same time as other traditional forms of media have struggled to stay visible and relevant (Flew, 2019; Fray, 2018; Powers, Zambrano, & Baisnée, 2015). Digital native initiatives have arisen to fill gaps and exploit opportunities afforded by online digital media production, but in general terms these have not proven highly successful at penetrating their respective markets or achieving sustainability (Flew & Waisbord, 2015). Further complicating this picture is an emergence of “news avoiders”, according to Fisher et al. (2020), who reduce and avoid consumption of any news media. To get useful results, assessments of media ecosystems need to adapt to rapidly and relentlessly shifting conditions, particularly regarding the growing area of online forms of media.

In this research, I endeavoured to provide new tools towards bridging this gap, enabling a more grounded perspective for a part of online media’s distinctive role in modern media systems. Doing so required employing a new approach that integrates the decentralised production of web 2.0, which relies so heavily on the audience itself to produce, highlight, and

distribute its content while simultaneously establishing its own guidelines and impetus for production (Ruiz et al., 2011). Simultaneously, I emphasised the ways that this content is not situated outside of the existing media ecosystem but rather as a part of it and deeply affected by it. To do so, I focused on news commenting, that part of participatory media that sits most squarely and visibly on the boundary between legacy media and new online media innovations. Though this widespread interactive media feature lacks the global penetration or rapidly expanding popularity of digital online platforms like TikTok and Facebook (Newman et al., 2021), its proximity to journalistic production and focus on news topics mark it as a crucial bridge towards incorporating this larger sphere. Further, news comments remain highly popular in their own right (Stroud et al., 2016; Williams & Sebastian, 2021; Wolfgang, 2019), and are broadly included on many of the most visited news media sites (Huang, 2016).

By reconciling the specific challenges posed by assessing news commenting with the expansive and robust frameworks investigating media pluralism, I propose that this content is not an external addition to the media environment but rather an integrated part. To conduct this investigation, I utilised qualitative content analysis on select, highly visible comment sections in two media systems, in Australia and South Korea. The results were then situated in each country's distinct media ecosystem. Such content analysis is not broadly utilised in media pluralism and media systems analysis (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), but it is a vital part of analysing the implications of participatory media because the content is also a crucial context of production (Snelson, 2016). While Gálik and Vogl (2015) conceptually situate news commenting and other social media within pluralism of media types, the content itself remains an obscure contribution. It is this gap that I aimed to fill through multi-faceted qualitative content analysis.

The findings of the investigation are that news commenting does indeed offer substantive and consistent contributions to some key media pluralism indicators while the risks proved both minimal and manageable. Conversely, this potential contribution is attenuated by

the particular and distinct media ecosystems of each country, impacting their capacity to address existing media pluralism deficiencies. Further, the most dominant and visible of each country's online news sites presented news commenting that was influenced by the site's interface and approaches to moderation.

The diverse results confirm that views of news commenting need to accommodate their heterogeneity. Simultaneously, they indicate that these varying cases provide instructive insights about how structures and contexts can shape the content to achieve different outcomes. These shaping influences include decisions by the organisations to give visibility to commenters and comments, to pre- or post-moderate comments, or to enable comments to be opened on all, some, or any articles on their site as well as the kinds of content they moderate. The analysis highlights the importance of taking a media ecosystemic view when assessing the contributions of the diverse forms of online media.

### **New Factors for Media Pluralism Through News Commenting**

News commenting is not categorically new media – the earliest instances can be traced back to 1998 (Erard, 2013) – but it is a recent innovation compared to newspapers, the first version of which arguably dates back to South Korea's *Minganinswaejobo* in 1577 (H. Kang, 2021). While proving powerful tools and catalysts for change, innovations in digital media production and the widespread embrace of the internet have not been categorically beneficial for our social systems or deliberative democracy (Sunstein, 2018). Initially, media theorists suggested that digital and internet innovations would lead to a more engaged and educated public (Bowman, 2003; Fortunati, Raycheva, Harro-Loit, & O'Sullivan, 2005; Pavlik, 1999). There was a belief that the gatekeeping authority of major news organisations had diminished as the internet grew (Bruns, 2003), opening the way for decentralised news gathering and reporting through citizen journalism (Thurman, 2008) and news sources surfacing through social media platforms (Braun & Gillespie, 2011). This all promised a newly integrated public with a world of diverse information at their fingertips (Pavlik, 1999).



However, the public have since found themselves utilising a narrowing range of information sources to inform their view of public affairs (Trappel & Meier, 2022; Valcke, Sukosd, & Picard, 2015). Digital innovations have recently been contributing to, rather than abating, the decline (Sunstein, 2018), and the public are increasingly viewing their news through a small number of massive, international online media platforms (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Newman et al., 2021; Stroud et al., 2016). It is this context of threatened media pluralism, and its impact on social systems and deliberative democracy, that drives this study to uncover potentially overlooked sources of diverse and pluralistic forms of media.

This concern is especially important for a key object of this proposed research, Australian media. Even by the limited media pluralism metric of media ownership concentration that is its policymakers' main focus (Hitchens, 2015), policies have largely failed to ameliorate the issue, both historically (K. Lewis, 2001) and more recently (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). Indeed, recent policies have directly facilitated concentration. In 2018, Australian broadcaster Nine Entertainment bought Fairfax Media, one of Australia's two largest print news organisations (Meade, 2018), leveraging the *Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Broadcasting Reform) Act 2017* (Cth) that lifted restrictions on media ownership (Department of Communications and the Arts, 2017). While the 2017 Act required that this merged news organisation provide a minimum amount of local coverage in some of the regions where it operates, there are limited community or political expectations for it to provide a diversity of perspectives. This illustrates the lack of political will of the government towards maintaining media diversity, notably at the same time that these politicians rely to some extent on the organisations they are governing to provide them with positive public exposure (K. Lewis, 2001).

Given this relationship and the history of resulting media regulations, there is a clear need for an alternative approach to cultivating media pluralism (Viķe-Freiberga, Däubler-Gmelin, Hammersley, & Maduro, 2013). Comments on online news websites and on social media platforms could already be offering just such an alternative, but to date have received little

attention – indeed, Australia’s most visited sites (S. Park, Fisher, McGuinness, Lee, & McCallum, 2021) do not offer them at all. Scholars have already investigated the various ways in which these commenters might be part of the public sphere (or “public sphere 2.0” (Ruiz et al., 2011)) and how below the line commenting spaces can host diverse perspectives and debates on public affairs (Graham & Wright, 2015), even potentially playing an integral role in developing news stories (Morrison, 2017). However, the Australian government lacks a cohesive perspective on or approach to increasingly important forms of online media (Hitchens, 2015).

Simultaneously, news commenting has a history of presenting additional challenges to those news organisations that choose to host them. Perhaps the most visible of these has been a history of aggressive, offensive, and vitriolic commentary (E.-J. Lee, 2012; Wolfgang, 2018), which has put off not only readers but also would-be commenters (Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Vehovar & Jontes, 2021). Beyond this aggression, there are costs and effort required to moderate these spaces, which can put strain on the budgets of already struggling news organisations – though the profitable analytics can offset this cost significantly (Huang, 2016). For some, the worst concern is that news commenting can simply be of poor quality (da Silva, 2015; Koskie, 2018; Springer et al., 2015), while participatory media contributors can be so focused on community and identity as to be intentionally uninteresting (Miller, 2008).

This research consequently strives to create an understanding of news commenting that describes its contributions and risks as they relate to the larger media ecosystem on its largest and most visible platforms. However, to provide this nuanced picture, I needed to see how the contributions and risks can vary from media ecosystem to media ecosystem, a relationship that depends both on the constitution of the comments and the distinct environment provided by different national media. To this end, I undertook this study in two unique and relevant media systems, Australia and South Korea, in a comparative frame using a nation-as-context approach (Livingstone, 2003). I hypothesised that a part of news commenting’s characteristics was confounded with and emergent from the media ecosystem, given the divergent qualities of these

countries' comment sections. Both of these countries meet the criteria of polarised pluralist models (Jones & Pusey, 2010; Rhee, Cho, Song, & Jung, 2011), but they simultaneously diverge sharply in the highly relevant areas of concentration of media ownership, the adoption of media innovations, and the development of their journalistic professionalism. The similarities provide comparability that can highlight the impact of their differences, adding nuance to our understanding of the research object (Livingstone, 2003). Juxtaposing the potential impacts of news commenting with their relevant media systems enables this research to address this gap in our systems of assessment of media systems and supports further development of media pluralism frameworks.

### **Research Questions and Aims**

The hypothesis guiding this study is that visible news commenting plays a role in media pluralism that is missing from current assessments, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the media ecosystem. The key question I sought to answer was:

*RQ: To what extent do comments on online news articles contribute to media pluralism?*

However, finding the answer to this question required a view that acknowledged both the ways that comments could cultivate media pluralism as well as present risks. Further, I needed to contrast results in multiple media ecosystems to show the ways that news commenting's position is impactful upon and impacted by the larger media environment. This raised the following sub-questions:

*SQ1: In what ways do visible news comments contribute to media pluralism?*

*SQ2: In what ways do visible news comments present a risk to media pluralism?*

*SQ3: How do the differences between these distinct media ecosystems contextualise their news commenting's contributions?*

In answering these questions, I highlighted the extent to which reader comments on public affairs news stories offered a new way of achieving the goals of media pluralism as described by Valcke, Sukosd, et al. (2015). While these comments are by no means "sufficient"

(Gibbons, 2015) to achieve media pluralism goals in isolation, I sought to establish that their content is an important inclusion for media system assessments. Simultaneously, the study showed that news commenting does not take a singular form, but rather presents content, contributions, and risks that vary by site and system.

### **Positioning and Purpose of the Research**

This project straddles the line between media sociology and media pluralism research with a goal of demonstrating the mutual benefits the areas offer one another. While media pluralism comprises a robust and diverse range of concepts – its most prominent tool utilises four areas with 20 indicators that are themselves individually broken down into multiple sub-indicators (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) – at its core it represents an application of grounded and established media research towards a normative goal of a more effective and diverse media system that supports a public facing complex and dynamic concerns (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Sjøvaag, 2016; Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015). Some scholars note that media pluralism’s definition is an amorphous amalgamation of media diversity and ownership concentration concerns (Karppinen, 2013), but this research posits that there is a fundamental core to media pluralism that both is above this scope of inclusion and draws the concerns together.

What media pluralism ultimately entails is a characteristic of media systems whereby they systemically empower the public to partake of the benefits of a diverse media with a broader distribution of communicative power. Where media pluralism has a historic connection with concentration of media ownership (Hitchens, 2015), I argue that it is precisely because this concentration is a threat to this systemic effect. Conversely, while a diverse media is an essential part of this benefit (R. Collins & Cave, 2013), media pluralism is concerned with the mechanisms that engender and sustain this diversity. This abstract and complex conceptualisation of media pluralism necessitates a wide and expanding range of approaches, which can be seen in the many indicators discussed by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015), but they work towards this elusive normative goal.

Media sociology research plays a key supporting role in this regard, both providing evidence of how this characteristic can operate in practice as well as its effects on the media system. Shoemaker and Reese (2013) emphasise that the media seen by the public is a socially constructed and socially situated phenomenon, such that it cannot be understood as an untethered, disembodied artefact. This means that the media being considered, in this case news commenting, cannot be understood without a view of the impact of its social context and its impact on its social context. This necessitates both an understanding of the social contexts of its production, through methods like the newsroom ethnographies of Domingo and Paterson (2011), and a view of the implications of its content, utilising the content analysis approaches of Krippendorff (2018) or Baden and Springer (2017). The findings of this extensive field of media research can provide an impetus for and describe the impacts of media pluralism in practice.

If these concepts are wildly abstract and broad, news commenting provides a uniquely succinct focal point that draws them all together. Unlike for other forms of media production, much of the social context of participatory production is *within* the content produced, as the comment contributors negotiate to identify themselves (Lomborg, 2012), establish admissible production (Chua, 2009), guide the discourse (Ruiz et al., 2011), and provide a frame of understanding (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni, Vadratsikas, & Papa, 2012). Further, the producers here are also readers feeding back on other content (Krebs & Lischka, 2019). Unlike the newsrooms of traditional media, the interface influencing and guiding content (Mollen, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, the processes of moderation (Domingo, 2014) are visible to users directly alongside the space for participation. Consequently, these sections below (or beside) the line are able to encapsulate the range of media sociology concerns within their limited spaces and forms.

For media pluralism, news commenting portends a way to examine together both the media and the public that are affected by it, while drawing connections to the larger media system as it sits next to other media production. Ruiz et al. (2011) suggest that participants in these news commenting sections appear to have characteristics of a Public Sphere 2.0, in some

ways moving the Habermas' metaphorical café discussions into these online spaces – though with limits to the purview of their discussions, as Milioni et al. (2012) found that commenters rarely set or introduce their own topics for the conversations. Graham and Wright (2015) demonstrated that these participants can bring a range of views and new information to prominent public issues in the course of these discussions. Given that news organisations rely on a broad public to generate this content, over which they have some but also limited control (Bakker, 2014; Singer et al., 2011; Ziegele, Weber, Quiring, & Breiner, 2018), these comments have ramifications for the editorial control concerns of concentrated ownership. In these ways, news commenting can be tied directly to media pluralism indicators and concerns.

Online media researchers investigating diversity position the internet's various platforms and products in regard to their capacity to yield (Masini et al., 2018), add (Baden & Springer, 2017; Humprecht & Esser, 2018), or expand (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019) diversity. This is traceable back to the early days of internet researchers focusing on the introduction of these new elements (Deuze, 1999; Pavlik, 1999; Zittrain, 2006), but this view of online media forms as potential supplementations for diversity has persisted to varying extents since (Carpenter, 2010; Masini et al., 2018; Metykova, 2016). This is particularly relevant to news commenting, which specifically cohabitates with the traditional products of professional journalism, adding content that would not have been present to viewers of the same products in a newspaper or televised broadcast.

While this contribution of added diversity is a central concern for this research, media pluralism approaches introduce a crucial element that is often lacking from this scholarship. Where these forms of online media such as news commenting are now a part of the media ecosystem rather than a disruptive innovation, the ways they present and the content they contain need to be assessed for the ways their contents can also present *risks* – in some of the same ways other media are already being evaluated (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, & Cunha, 2018; Craufurd-Smith, 2015; Hitchens, 2015). When Beck (1992) asserted that our post-modern

systems can be characterised as a “risk society” with a rising concern for the catastrophic risks society’s ongoing development has introduced, he placed media in the central role of communicating these risks and what they portended (Cottle, 1998).

However, Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) have suggested that the media are a substantial component of that risk themselves due to the increasingly mediated way we experience our society, a particular concern for media pluralism scholars (Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015). Consequently, the Media Pluralism Monitor utilises a risk-based approach (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018), as advocated by Yohe and Leichenko (2010) – in their case, a response to the growing and complex threats of climate change and environmental devastation. Moving beyond Beck’s concerns for portentous and impactful events, the risk-based approach balances this potential against the extent to which the environment, in this case the media environment, has already been affected by these disruptions. For Yohe and Leichenko (2010), this meant adapting to the ecological damage that has already occurred while both preventing and preparing for impacts that could still be forthcoming. In this research, news commenting is such a disruption – if comparatively small in scope – that must be accommodated, while simultaneously serving as both a potential risk and solution for the continued functioning of our increasingly mediated society. The environmentally grounded conceptualisation of the risk-based approach raises it as an especially relevant consideration as part of an ecosystemic view of the media, which is instrumental to this research.

This project reconciles the extant scholarship positioning online media forms as contributions and the ways our dynamic media ecosystem can embody and portend societal risks by investigating news commenting on both of these fronts. It leverages work from Baden and Springer (2014), Milioni et al. (2012), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) to investigate how the most visible news commenting in separate systems adds to and expands on media pluralism, while also showing how it can, as a part of the public’s media exposure, introduce risks that marginalise diverse voices (Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016) and obscure views

and information through their extensive phatic interaction (Miller, 2008). In keeping with Yohe and Leichenko (2010), this adapts to the extent to which the potential for disruption is already being realised with the widespread inclusion of news commenting. It also outlines paths for mitigating the expanding societal risks that could extend from the changing media ecosystem, as the public increasingly looks online (Newman et al., 2021) in a society that is increasingly mediatised (Krotz, 2017).

Finally, this thesis addresses a gap in our understanding of the media ecology. Hitchens (2011) asserts that investigations and policies for media will increasingly need to take a more ecosystemic approach as longstanding methods overlook crucial details in the evolving media environment. While past approaches to media assessment had value for what was a more segmented media environment, modern media is much more interconnected through digitalisation, with a rising prominence of online media that lacks a well-suited historic precedence. In line with media ecological frameworks (Cali, 2017), news commenting cannot be studied as an individual and disembodied form of media – indeed, it is fundamentally tied to other forms of media production, both printed and audio-visual. Situating commenting in its context enables this study to provide carefully grounded results for both news commenting and media pluralism research.

### **Research Design and Theoretical Frameworks**

An investigation of the media pluralism in a media ecosystem as impacted by news commenting poses considerable challenges, particularly given that research on either media pluralism or media ecology already requires a broad range of approaches (Cali, 2017; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015) and methods for exploring news commenting are still evolving (Baden & Springer, 2017; Chen & Pain, 2017). To reconcile this scope and complexity, I utilised approaches already being used in these fields to demonstrate the ways these existing tools can be re-employed to accommodate the new forms of media online. As broad as the scope of the Media Pluralism Monitor is, its bevy of metrics and assessments have now been utilised



repeatedly with the help of a wide range of scholars (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). This enables them to catalogue the shifting systems and provide salient advice, though they have not yet substantively included such participatory content as news commenting as their focus is on national contexts and broad media markets. Similarly, Milioni et al. (2012), Baden and Springer (2014), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) have developed detailed content analysis methods for investigating news commenting which yield results directly relevant to media pluralism indicators, but they have not specifically leveraged media pluralism or media ecosystems to contextualise their results. Using approaches from Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2011) and Cali (2017) to map news commenting to the media ecosystems of Australia and South Korea, I applied these carefully grounded content analysis approaches to tie the news commenting content to the most relevant indicators of media pluralism.

To do this, I took a staged approach that built towards a grounded, empirical investigation of news commenting as it appears most visibly and impactfully within each media system. Using the Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2011) methods of assessment, I first compared Australia's and Korea's media systems but complemented that with the historical backdrop that Cali (2017) identifies as a crucial component to understanding media ecosystems. The comparison then goes further to include the contrasting presence and views of news commenting. This comparison highlights how each system uniquely positions and utilises news commenting and provides a crucial context for its content.

The next step of the method involved exploring immersively a small sample of comments to identify key categories and themes for the larger study, assessing the applicability of prior approaches to news commenting analysis (Baden & Springer, 2014; Kwon & Gruzd, 2017; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Ruiz et al., 2011). This required taking a strictly bounded sample of comments from highly visible comment hosting news websites that fell outside of the scope of inclusion for the main investigation due to their smaller readership. The websites, the online formats of Melbourne newspapers *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, both featured

in the top ten of Australian websites but their readership was a fraction of the higher ranked sites (Roy Morgan, 2018c). I qualitatively coded these sets of comments through various approaches to reconcile their content with the media pluralism indicators described by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) and Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al. (2018). Through this, I was able to identify a number of ways that the comments could interface with media pluralism concerns – as well as present relevant risks.

The final phase of the study involved employing this approach at scale, collecting and analysing the visible comments from the most visited comment-hosting websites as they appeared during their busiest times. I chose Korean websites *naver.com* (hereafter called Naver) and *daum.net* (Daum) and Australian websites for *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the Australian edition of *Daily Mail* (DM) because each of these websites contained the largest number of the most visible comments on public affairs articles and had extensive readership and potential influence in their media system. I scraped all articles on the front page of each website once a week for six weeks, with any comment sections on public affairs stories collected for coding and analysis. A crucial concern, however, was exposure diversity – commenters do not suggest that they broadly read through all (of often several thousand) comments (Stroud et al., 2016) and commenters do not value every comment equally (Baden & Springer, 2014; Suh et al., 2018). Given the importance of focusing on what media the public sees rather than full range of potential sources (Webster, 2009), I collected only the first 800 words of comments in each section, in line with comment readers' stated tendency to read as much or less of comments as articles (Stroud et al., 2016). In total, the full data set comprised four websites across six weeks, for 665 comment sections and 12,208 comments.

Using the coding categories derived from the immersive primary investigation, I then coded these comments to find contributions and risks for media pluralism. At the primary, most qualitative level, this meant uncovering the ways that individual comments, alone or in context, can hermeneutically be recognised as providing new viewpoints, new information, diverse

representation, silencing speech, or non-contributing phatic communication. However, readers indicate that their comment reading exceeds a single comment (Stroud et al., 2016), so the more important level of analysis was to take these comments as part of a visible comment section and identifying the range of forms these comment sections can take – from the highly diverse or vitriolic to the homogenous and repetitious. Finally, I tied these ranges of results to the websites hosting them as well as the media systems they inhabit.

Through these layers of method and analysis, the study was able to yield results that partially confirmed the hypothesis while also providing valuable problems and provocations. The results offered a compelling assessment at each level, but one that changes as the lens expands beyond the single comment, comment section, and comment-hosting website. While I found news commenting did make a complex contribution, the study lent credence to the need to consider media as an ecosystem (Cali, 2017; Hitchens, 2011) because its interconnectedness plays a crucial role in a practical assessment of its modus operandi, as influences can shape news commenting to diminish its potential benefit.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis comprises 10 chapters that fall into four distinct sections. The first section, which includes this introductory chapter, is an exploration of the body of research on news commenting, media pluralism, media ecosystems, and a comparative view of the specific media systems of Australia and South Korea (as North Korea is not a direct part of this investigation, South Korea will be called Korea from this point for the sake of brevity, though with acknowledgement of and respect for each of North Korea's and South Korea's distinct and complex media systems). Sections on news commenting and media pluralism explain the core concepts and understandings that underpin this research as well as exploring the ways that they intersect. Each section relies heavily on existing literature but also identifies the guiding definitions and highlights key debates around each concept. The chapter introducing the media ecosystems of the two countries goes a step further, utilising a wide range of literature to

generate new insights about the ways the media ecosystems of Australia and Korea relate to and diverge from one another through the use of Hallin and Mancini (2004) and other comparative frameworks (Ackland, O'Neil, & Park, 2019; Dwyer, Shim, Lee, & Hutchinson, 2018), using a nation-as-context framework for comparison (Livingstone, 2003). A comparison of their distinct media systems offers perspectives that go beyond this project's focus on news commenting while providing a relevant context for its core research object.

The next section comprises two chapters focused on the methodology of this work. The methodology takes on an elevated importance in this case because the gap I identified as guiding this project is partially focused on the lack of an applicable method of assessment rather than simply a dearth of information on the implications of news commenting itself. Chapter 5 outlines how I approached answering the research questions as well as the theoretical framework, the choice of method, and the research objects. In the second, Chapter 6, I address a gap identified by Callaghan, Mehmet, Simmons, and Curley (2021) and Baden and Springer (2017) whereby content coding methods, particularly those targeting news commenting, often lack the transparency that would enable their research to be better grounded and have more generalisability. Consequently, this chapter carefully details the step-by-step practices I used in this assessment so that these details can be re-employed or, better, expanded and improved upon for either further commenting research or investigations into participatory media more broadly. It also elaborates on the range of alternative methods of collection, coding, and analysis I explored and why they were ultimately amended or abandoned.

The third section, comprising Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, focuses on the empirical data I obtained through the method as it pertains to the contributions and risks of news commenting. Chapter 7 reveals not just the contributions as presented by the comment sections but also the implications of the body of data more generally, with a qualitative analysis that considers the formatting of the websites and their comment sections as well as the explicit and implicit structures that guided the results. Then I detail from the individual comment level, to the

comment section level, to the site level how contributions manifest – as well as where they do not. In Chapter 8, this approach is replicated to consider the risks of these comments, in terms of both the silencing speech and the phatic communication, distinct potential risks that commenting introduces and which have implications for news commenting's effects on media pluralism.

Finally, in Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, I draw the results and literature together for an analysis of the data and answers to the research questions. Chapter 9 has a broad view that integrates the early chapters with the results chapters, considering the implications of the data for the body of literature. In Chapter 10, I consider how this data reflects on the project's initial inquiry and intentions before outlining the contributions of the research, directions for further research, and the constraining factors limiting this study. It then closes with a summarising view of the project and its significance.

Before introducing the study and results, however, it is necessary to lay out the key concepts, definitions, and core debates. In the next chapter, I delve into the various perspectives on news commenting and how they provide the foundations for the research object at the heart of this project.

## Chapter 2: Commenting in the Media Ecosystem

One of the driving factors behind this investigation of comments is a need to reconcile the presence and popularity of user generated content (UGC), of which comments on news stories are a prime example, and the way media ecosystems are conceived and evaluated. This research is crucial not because UGC is a positive development for media, but because it is a complex and pervasive one. Comments in particular have proven doggedly enduring, with a continued presence on influential online news websites for *the Guardian*, *New York Times*, and *DAWN* (Huang, 2016) and widespread presence in many countries (Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Ribeiro, 2020), despite their poor reputation in news organisations and among some in the audience (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014, p. 147; Wolfgang, 2018). Consequently, working towards a functional conceptual framework for understanding them remains a relevant task.

This chapter delves into the body of research on news commenting, both past and recent, to show how comments have been described and positioned. From there, I highlight what work needs to be done to understand them for the substantive and impactful content they contain and their place in the media ecosystem. Finally, I draw together these conceptions and impacts to show how news commenting plays a role as both part of the diversity of content that the public consumes and as a kind of intermediation for other forms of media production. The chapter surveys the body of literature to outline gaps and conflicts in current understandings of comments and their place in the modern media ecosystem. This involves sourcing the most salient findings from academic journal articles and books, but also investigating grey literature – specifically industry and government reports – to find prevailing themes, trends, and conceptualisations of the content and value of user comments.

### Conceptualising Comments

In this project, I identify the central research object as *news commenting*, but it has many other labels. These include “user comments” (Reich, 2011), “online commenting tools” (Blom, Carpenter, Bowe, & Lange, 2014), “interactive features” (Hong & Cameron, 2018), “user

commenting forums” (Hopp, Santana, & Barker, 2018), “discussion threads” (Morrison, 2017), and “reply journalism” (Yoon, 2019). The variety of terms are generally used interchangeably – Chen and Lu (2017) employ “comments posted on a news story” and Blom et al. (2014) use “posts in a newspaper forum” despite the fact that both are investigating the civility of comments. Each phrase conceptually draws attention to different aspects of news commenting, from its participatory nature to its association with journalistic production, indicating the subtle complexity of its position, constitution and content. I use *news commenting* because this study explores commenting for its contributions to the news media ecosystem.

Whichever term is used, the broad topic is the same: the facility, text, and people involved in the user generated content appearing alongside online news articles. Facility here refers to the news organisations’ website design that allows and makes visible comments, the news organisations’ decision to open a comment section, and the gatekeeping of the comments and the commenters. Text, in the most prominent cases such as *The New York Times* (Huang, 2016), *The Guardian* (Singer & Ashman, 2009), and Australia’s (formerly) Fairfax news websites (Koskie, 2018), refers to the content, the arrangement of the content, and data about the commenter and time or place of comment production that constitute the comments audiences read. Researching the people tied to commenting has variously meant investigating the commenters themselves (Barnes, 2018b), the staff overseeing and moderating these spaces (Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), and the audiences that read the comments (Hopp et al., 2018; Stroud et al., 2016). All of these components have been productively studied in conjunction (Martin, 2015; Smith, 2017) and individually (Baden & Springer, 2014; Kwon & Gruzd, 2017; Milioni et al., 2012), providing a broad and empirically-grounded foundation for further research.

#### *A Typology for News Commenting*

To understand news commenting as a form of media, this study applies a typology used for other forms of media. The media analysis typology introduced by Stokes (2013), based on the encoding-decoding model from Stuart Hall (1973), illustrates how various media can fit the same

model Hall used for television. Stokes' approach employs the categories of *producer* (elsewhere referred to as *industry*) for those behind the making of media content, *text* for content itself, and *audience* for the receivers of the content (Stokes, 2013, p. 61) to create a larger picture of the messages and stakeholders of media. Applying her model to news commenting, research regarding comment moderation, for instance, would be regarded as producer analysis, while analysis of civility would be text, and reader analysis would be audience. In Table 1, the key concepts integral to news commenting research are placed in these categories. This typological grouping not only facilitates understanding of these terms but also places the concepts in relation to other relevant concepts. While other models, such as the five classifications of the circuit of culture by Du Gay et al. (2013), provide more specific ways of seeing news commenting that remediate the information to make it easier to understand and compare, Stokes' model provides its own vital benefit: it creates a simpler picture that is more relevant to news commenting's unique process of production and reception.

**Table 1**

*News commenting through the lens of Stokes' typology (Stokes, 2013)*

<b>Producer/Industry</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Audience</b>
Creates, shapes or distributes the message	Explicit, implicit, or symbolic message	Receives the message, its effects and its implications
Comment moderation	Discourse	Public
Community management	Frames	Audience
Commenters	Viewpoints	Reader
News websites	Representation	Commenters
News organisations	Information	Journalistic producers
Journalistic producers	Interactivity	News organisations
News staff	Platform	Non-readers
Regulation/regulators	Interface	



Stokes' categories (Stokes, 2013, p. 61) are able to differentiate the overlapping functions of several key facets of news commenting, shedding light on the multiple roles played by many of the stakeholders. Stokes discusses producers or industry, which, taken together, applies well to the comment moderation and community management for comment sections as well as the commenters themselves, as these are all crucial elements behind the production of comments (Chen & Pain, 2017; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Smith, 2017). Also significant are the news organisations that maintain news websites that can host this feature and often see moderation and community management as their role (Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), in some cases through their journalistic content producers and news staff. Grouping these components is crucial because each news comment section is the product of such a large range of stakeholders who, while not always directly creating the messages and content in the space, are directly influencing the creation through their decisions (Baek, Jang, & Kim, 2020; Gonçalves, 2018; Wolfgang, 2018). This role as producers has a separate impact from the place of these same stakeholders as receivers of the content.

The text that results from this production is more than a simple string of characters, however. Often missing from the numerous studies (Gonçalves, 2018; Kwon & Cho, 2017; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017) of civility in comments is that comments are a text that contains many elements extending beyond their discursive qualities, with other research finding the presence of unique frames (Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014) and viewpoints (Baden & Springer, 2017). New information – either distinct from or complementing what is in the accompanying article – can also present (Graham & Wright, 2015; Morrison, 2017). The content of comments can represent different groups (Martin, 2015; Meyer & Speakman, 2016) and their distinct positions on social issues (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). If nothing else, it can present a discussion between people, interacting with each other and employing phatic communication to construct identities for themselves (Lomborg, 2012) and their communities (Hopp et al., 2018) or debating the direction of their societies (Noci, Domingo, Masip, Micó, & Ruiz, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011).

These are written into the text of the comments and their arrangement in the comment section, which are widely displayed on the websites of some of the most prominent news organisations (Huang, 2016; Ribeiro, 2020).

Finally, as in Stokes' model, news commenting has a group of receivers of these texts. This receiver can be framed as, at simplest, the readers of comments, who have their own reasons and gratifications (Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). However, this category extends much further to include the audience of the website – despite the fact that they may not read the comments at all (Krebs & Lischka, 2019) – or even the public that are impacted by the debates embodied in the text (Ruiz et al., 2011; Smith, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). This is because the text can affect the reader, who can go on to affect a larger public, as well as receive beneficial input (or detrimental misinformation) that non-readers do not receive. As in the encoder-decoder model, the impact of a message extends beyond its reception (Hall, 2014). The commenters themselves, though producers, are also key readers, and they take cues on how to comment from the discussion and community interactions (Kwon & Gruzd, 2017; Santana, 2016). The journalists and news organisations are some of the most vital receivers of the text on top of their role as gatekeepers – the feedback they receive is one of their motives for hosting comment sections (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Koskie, 2018) and the audience's engagement with the space provides profitable analytics (Stroud et al., 2020; Vujnovic, 2011) and subscriptions (Huang, 2016).

Applying this analytical framework for understanding news commenting pays dividends in that it exposes how integral components, like the journalists and commenters, ultimately take on multiple roles rather than a single complex role. The news organisations, for instance, play a role by enabling news commenting (Domingo, 2008; Løvlie, Ihlebæk, & Larsson, 2017; Stroud et al., 2020), featuring in the text of the comments (Goodman, 2013), and receiving feedback and economic benefits from the comments (Domingo, 2011; Vujnovic, 2011), with each role proving a productive focus of research. In this research, I am focused on the text components of this

model, while also noting the visible presence and impacts of producer impacts such as site design and moderation approaches. However, a holistic and fuller map of news commenting, as undertaken by Hall (1973) for television or Du Gay et al. (2013) for the Walkman study, could pave the way for important future research into news commenting or user generated content more generally.

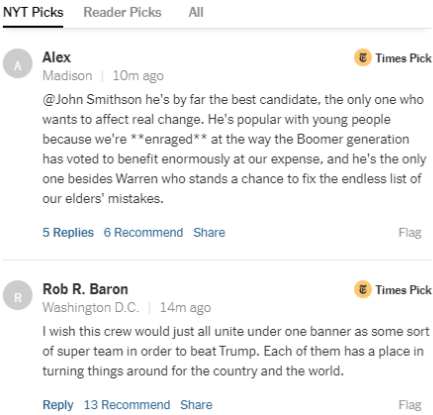
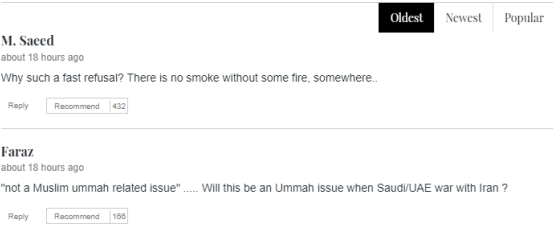
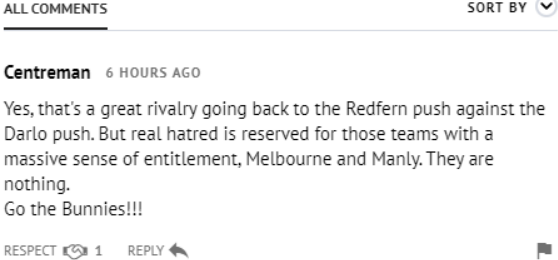

### *News Commenting as Media Text*

My study explores comment sections as a space for substantive content distinct to that of the articles and websites they accompany, a source of divergent opinions, information and representation. The content can give visibility to marginalised opinions or groups (L. Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Kangaspunta, 2020), present unique information (Graham & Wright, 2015; Morrison, 2017), and add new frames of understanding for public concerns (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). Understanding their content as a separate and significant form of media production can better enable us to see the place of comments in the media ecosystem.

The text of comments could take any form the organisation can manage to practically host and the commenting community can generate. Some news websites, such as *thebill.com*, even allowed users to upload video comments (Melton, 2020) – though notably *thebill.com* has since completely disabled all forms of onsite comments and none of the most visited sites in Australia or Korea offered video commenting as an option. In practice, there is little deviation from common physical structures (Goodman, 2013). Comparing comments from the websites that Huang (2016) noted as employing best practices, *Dawn* and *The New York Times*, with prominent news websites from South Korea and Australia, Naver and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, reveals far more similarities than differences [see Table 2]. Simultaneously, there are vastly different kinds and amounts of work behind this content, as revealed by Huang (2016) and Domingo (2014), as well as my own past research (Koskie, 2018). This comparison only reveals the physical and textual characteristics of the medium for this message – which McLuhan and Fiore (1967) suggest (for television) can be as important as or more important than the message itself.

**Table 2**

*Commenting formats across websites on the New York Times, Dawn, the Sydney Morning Herald, and Naver*

<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Dawn</i>
 <p>NYT Picks Reader Picks All</p> <p><b>Alex</b> Madison   10m ago @John Smithson he's by far the best candidate, the only one who wants to affect real change. He's popular with young people because we're **enraged** at the way the Boomer generation has voted to benefit enormously at our expense, and he's the only one besides Warren who stands a chance to fix the endless list of our elders' mistakes. 5 Replies 6 Recommend Share Flag</p> <p><b>Rob R. Baron</b> Washington D.C.   14m ago I wish this crew would just all unite under one banner as some sort of super team in order to beat Trump. Each of them has a place in turning things around for the country and the world. Reply 13 Recommend Share Flag</p>	 <p>Oldest Newest Popular</p> <p><b>M. Saeed</b> about 18 hours ago Why such a fast refusal? There is no smoke without some fire, somewhere. Reply Recommend 432</p> <p><b>Faraz</b> about 18 hours ago "not a Muslim ummah related issue" ..... Will this be an Ummah issue when Saudi/UAE war with Iran ? Reply Recommend 168</p>
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	<i>Naver</i>
 <p>ALL COMMENTS SORT BY</p> <p><b>Centreman</b> 6 HOURS AGO Yes, that's a great rivalry going back to the Redfern push against the Darlo push. But real hatred is reserved for those teams with a massive sense of entitlement, Melbourne and Manly. They are nothing. Go the Bunnies!!! RESPECT 1 REPLY</p>	 <p>순공감순 최신훈 공감비율순</p> <p><b>jjk3****</b> 댓글모음 &gt; 이런놈은 광화문 한복판에서 절도로 석독 죽을줄라야 죽은자의 영혼의 한이 풀릴듯하구나 2019.09.13. 12:36:28 신고 답글</p> <p><b>may1****</b> 아 추웠한놈 친발 받기 바라다 한 생명을 추월으로 숨지게 했으니 더러운 놈이 너도 오랫동안 반성하라 2019.09.13. 12:36:18 신고 답글</p>

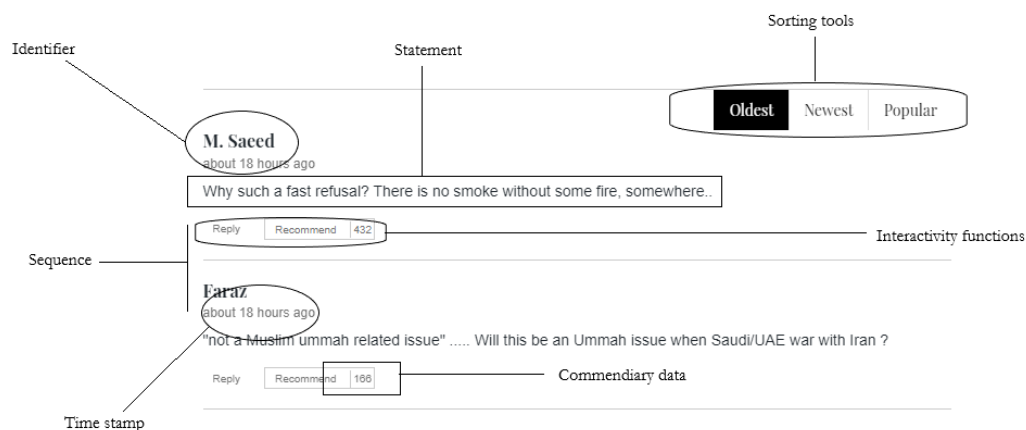
*Note:* Images are used under the education license and drawn from The New York Times (2020), Dawn (2020), The Sydney Morning Herald (2020), and Naver News (2020).

This simple and consistent format is nevertheless complexly layered and its messages contain many components [see Figure 1]. When users enter comment sections, they are presented with sorting options, though one option is chosen automatically (in this case “Oldest”). After that, the first line of comments reveals the user identification field (UIF), which can be a name, as at *Dawn* or *The New York Times* [see Table 2] or a username, as at *The Sydney Morning Herald* or Naver. “Centreman” shows how choice of username can reveal commenter details directly, but names themselves can also be indicative, suggesting certain genders or ethnic backgrounds (Barron, Hebl, & King, 2011; W. Liu & Ruths, 2013; Martin, 2015). While the statement or comment body provides the most diverse opportunity for creating a media

message, it is still bounded – none of these comment sections allows users to upload video, for instance, or even images. The time stamp provides significant context, as does the commendatory data (revealing past reader attitudes to message content), because comment sections are living documents. They can be sorted and rearranged based on this data, providing readers with different messages (Giannopoulos et al., 2015), and they are not finished until they are locked by the organisation or closed by the reader. Finally, interactivity functions provide a frame by their existence – *reply* is a conversational mechanism, positing comments as a discussion (Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2014), where *recommend* frames comments as production, as recommended reading (Möller, Trilling, Helberger, & van Es, 2018).

### Figure 1

*The components of a comment (using a comment from Dawn)*



*Note:* Image is used under the education license and drawn from Dawn (2020)

In addition to the comments themselves, the website, its interface, and its moderators' efforts are a visible part of the text. While the websites above provide similar affordances and remediate comment contents in familiar ways, the subtle but visible ways they distinctly design their interfaces (Kiskola et al., 2022; Mollen, 2020), sort their comments (Giannopoulos et al., 2015; D. Park, Sachar, Diakopoulos, & Elmqvist, 2016), and manage their communities (Baek et al., 2020; Koskie, 2018) are key examples of how comment sections provide both the text of

news comments but also the context of their production. Mollen (2020, p. 80) suggests that, for news organisations such as those used in this study that design their own websites in house, “the interface reflects the interests that providers pursue with their commenting sections.” The ways that they design these commenting spaces can facilitate or prevent contributions as well as access. Kiskola et al. (2022) found that even small changes to user verification can significantly impact the characteristics of commenters’ contribution, and news organisations told Huang (2016) that they benefitted from sorting the comment sections to highlight the kinds of comments they value as a guide for the commenting community.

Community management practices and policies can also be identifiably present in the text. Wolfgang (2018) found that journalists promote and reinforce community rules to guide commenters away from problematic discourse. Domingo (2014) recommends news organisations make clear their efforts to moderate spaces by highlighting appreciated commentary and providing tools, like flagging, reporting, and recommending, for users themselves to participate in moderation, and such approaches are widely employed (Goodman, 2013). This visible moderation has an impact; Meyer and Speakman (2016) report that minority groups are put off from commenting where moderation appears to be limited, and this moderation can also change how readers see the comment section and the article content (M. Duncan et al., 2020; Masullo, Tenenboim, & Lu, 2021). While the news organisations hosting comments also engage in a variety of processes behind the scenes to maintain their comments and undertake moderation (Goodman, 2013; Koskie, 2018; Wolfgang, 2018), their work is often visible in the text of news commenting.

Each of these comment components can provide rich data for content analysis in much the same way media content has previously been studied (Canter, 2013; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Martin, 2015). Various methods for analysing news commenting texts for their characteristics are already employed for news media. Studies of media framing (Brüggemann & D’Angelo, 2018; Robert M Entman, 2007; Robert M. Entman, 2010), looking at the way media interpret facts to

create meanings (Goffman, 1974), employ one of the most popular methods (Scheufele, 1999). Others have studied media content to show how it presents and represents groups (Ewart & Beard, 2017), utilises language (Hall, 1973; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), or sets agendas through the amount of coverage it provides of select subjects (Protess & McCombs, 2016). The researchers take a sample of content, such as discussions of Islam in Australian news media (Ewart, Cherney, & Murphy, 2017), and interrogate the text to understand its implications and nuanced meanings.

Such analysis has largely not been applied to news commenting – at least not on its own. For instance, while Milioni et al. (2012) look for new frames, information, and agendas in comments, they do so by comparing them to journalistic production – as do Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) and Toepfl and Piwoni (2015). While news commenting can contain new information or provide representation for marginalised groups, it does so partially at the behest of news organisations and journalists (Meyer & Carey, 2014; Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Morrison, 2017), whose moderation decisions and commenting approaches directly and indirectly impact who comments and the commenters' visibility. At the same time, the reverse relationship – where news contents are shaped by comments – is not explored, though Hanusch and Tandoc (2019) suggests such feedback is having an impact on journalistic production.

Conversely, one way that news commenting contents are considered on their own is in regard to whether or not users can behave themselves: can commenters be civil? This civility can be characterised by simple swearing and aggressive language (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017) or by more subtle and offensive personal attacks and discrimination (A. Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; Gonçalves, 2018; Rösner et al., 2016), but its myriad forms dominate research of comments. Editors discuss incivility as a key reason to turn off comments (Huang, 2016; Wolfgang, 2019), despite the fact that the implications of incivility have been found to be mixed and subjective. While Masullo et al. (2021) found consistently negative impacts of uncivil commentary, Kwon and Cho (2017) found commenting communities

accept varying amounts of aggressive speech, which can increase engagement and comment approval, and Reader (2012) found that journalists and audiences disagree about what constitutes incivility and its importance. Curiously, researchers are less concerned with the civility of journalistic production; while a search for “journalism” and “civility” turned up a wealth of results, the results returned were on the civility of news commenting. This is not to dismiss the significance of civility – it has been shown to have some measurable negative effects (Chen & Lu, 2017; Kwon & Cho, 2017; Rösner et al., 2016). The concern, according to Reader (2012), is the extent to which the language of civility is being used to marginalise news commenting, which many journalists see as pushing into their field (Wolfgang, 2019).

What remains for news commenting research is to apply the same kinds of content analysis applied to other kinds of media content, moving beyond the civility approaches common to current research. Where qualitative content analysis has been done on comments, it has tended to be an investigation of the public attitudes they evince rather than as media text that communicates its own ideas and messages (Callaghan et al., 2021). Taken collectively, comment sections can take on different shapes that vary by context and site (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). There is visible authorship both within and attached to the text of comments (Martin, 2015). The broad extant research into the ways news commenting text deviates from or conforms to the precedents of its accompanying journalistic production is valuable – indeed, fundamental for this research project – but there is scope to consider comments more for their intrinsic contributions and characteristics, even if it is never entirely divorced from its context.

Focusing on the content of news commenting while applying the same approaches we do to other forms of media production would allow us to have a better understanding of the comment sections as distinct texts, which contain messages that can impact readers (Chen & Lu, 2017; Rösner et al., 2016; von Sikorski & Hänel, 2016). They are a part of what media ecologists would call the *media environment* – the complex web of media that surrounds people and helps them make sense of and interact with the world (Cali, 2017, p. 7).



### **The Bridges and Gaps of Current News Commenting Research**

The body of news commenting research reflects several angles of analysis researchers have employed to better understand, contextualise, support and problematise this form of media. In early research, news commenting was often described as an affordance of the news organisation and its technical capacity (Domingo, 2008; Robinson, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009). From this angle, news commenting is the interactive feature on news stories that allows website users to comment. News organisations decide which comment sections to open, how the comments appear, and how they are moderated (Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), opening the door to significant influence by the news organisation staff and potentially owners.

Conversely, news commenting research also discusses the content in the comment sections, without regard for newsrooms' disposition towards them, because these texts are common and widespread (Chen & Pain, 2017; Huang, 2016) and are read (Hopp et al., 2018; Stroud et al., 2016), even if they are not universal. This regards the content of the text as the ontological object, because that text can carry distinct messages (Baden & Springer, 2014; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). However, much of the recent research in this area focuses what these texts might portend for journalism, looking to its various external and internal readers to see how comments might influence audience views (Chen & Ng, 2016; Hopp et al., 2018; Yeo et al., 2019) and journalistic work (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Wolfgang, 2018). This can extend to the producers of the UGC, who can be considered individually (Barnes, 2018b) or as an interacting community (Meyer & Carey, 2014).

Finally, there is research of news commenting's potential social functions. This can include its role as public debate (Ruiz et al., 2011; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), representation (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), or even as state-sponsored propaganda (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017), and political actors and interest groups have been linked to manipulation of comment sections for their own ends (Yoon, 2019). This research ranges from the theoretically grounded concepts of Carpentier (2011b) that consider the implications of participatory media more broadly to the

range of (mostly health-related) qualitative studies investigating how comments reflect and represent public views (Callaghan et al., 2021).

While some ambitious research covers a range of these facets (Ruiz et al., 2011), most chooses only one. However, each of these areas of study has contributed to an increasingly detailed and grounded foundation for our understanding of comments, paving the way for the broader scope investigation at the centre of this research project.

### *Comments as Journalism*

One of the most common lenses through which comment sections are studied is how they exist as an extension or by-product of online journalism, providing a crucial basis for why they are important for media pluralism concerns. Onsite news commenting only exists alongside a piece of journalistic production, and researchers have established there is a relationship between the comments and commenters and the organisations (Meltzer, 2015), the journalists (Wolfgang, 2018), their production (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019) and their readers (Hopp et al., 2018). These texts can evince journalistic values and even expand on other journalistic production (Graham & Wright, 2015; Morrison, 2017). However, these relationships can be problematised and this lens fails to capture some of the complex concerns within and around commenting.

Crucially, one of the reasons comments were adopted initially and continue to exist on news websites is that news organisations, journalists, and editors find they provide value for the organisations and for journalistic production. The World Editor's Forum, investigating 104 news organisations in 63 countries, reported that news organisations saw value in the feedback as well as reader information (Goodman, 2013, p. 5), views that were maintained in a follow up study for the majority (82%) of organisations that continued to host comments (Huang, 2016, p. 5). While there have long been resistance to comments (Robinson, 2010) and predictions of their inevitable demise, news organisations broadly continue to support them (Ribeiro, 2020; Williams & Sebastian, 2021).

Onsite news commenting's potential as a boost to revenue is a particular boon in the contemporary journalistic environment where traditional sources of revenue are disappearing – and with them a large number of news organisations (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018, p. 1; Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013; Compton & Benedetti, 2010, p. 490; Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, 2018, p. 23). News organisations suggest that proven ineffective approaches to comments and moderation are still prevalent but careful strategies and investment can yield significant returns (Huang, 2016, p. 14; Vujnovic, 2011, p. 146), including subscriptions and valuable user data and feedback. Stroud et al. (2020) found that news organisations that turn off their comments lowered their readers' on-site time and those that noticed comments' absence felt it made the site experience worse. While comment sections could also have negative economic impacts due to damage to the news organisations' brand from the presence of comments (Conlin & Roberts, 2016; Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2016), comments hosted in alternative platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, do not provide these benefits and their success is at the mercy of opaque platform decisions that can change without notice (Huang, 2016, p. 12; Napoli, 2015b) – but they can still hurt the perceived credibility of the news (Gearhart, Moe, & Zhang, 2020).

For some journalists and editors, there is also a journalistic value for hosting user generated content on their sites. A key journalistic value cited has been that of the role of journalism in hosting the public debate. This role of journalism has a long historical precedent, with the 1947 Hutchins Commission in the US demanding the press act as “A Forum for the Exchange of Comment and Criticism” (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 23). When Loke (2012) interviewed 30 journalists in the US, she found that there was an obligation to let readers “have a say” (p. 238), with the inclusion of comments being part of the “evolution” of journalism, a finding in line with my own research in Australian newsrooms (Koskie, 2018). For those journalists and editors that Robinson (2010, p. 132) identified as “convergers”, comments contribute to their sense that opinion sections serve as a kind of “town hall” for public

discussion. Pakistan's *Dawn* feels they are hosting a vital debate between Pakistan and India that could otherwise be decided by violence at the border (Huang, 2016, p. 14). While Ruiz et al. (2011) found this debate could lack some vital discursive elements central to the public sphere, journalists nevertheless feel some responsibility to offer and oversee this contribution (Chen & Pain, 2017; Meltzer, 2015).

In a more conflicted sense, comments are often tied to journalistic production – either as feedback or embodiment. The feedback on journalists' own production is often highly regarded by both journalists and editors (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Koskie, 2018), but views of comments as journalistic production are broadly critical (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Wolfgang, 2018). As feedback on the news organisations' production, journalists and editors often cite the positive potential for comments to improve both the quality of writing and the connection between production and the audience (Huang, 2016; Robinson, 2010; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Smith, 2017). As a form of journalistic production in themselves, providing an extension of journalistic content in the accompanying article or introducing new material, comments are often perceived to be of low quality (Løvlie et al., 2017; Springer et al., 2015; Wolfgang, 2018). However, this varies based on the subject, readership, and moderation – S. C. Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014), Morrison (2017), and Yeo et al. (2019) suggest that the news organisations play a key role in cultivating quality content through their moderation and engagement practices.

These journalistic frames for understanding comments are practical and valuable, and the connection between commenting and journalistic production is strong – Weber (2014, p. 950) and Ziegele, Quiring, Esau, and Friess (2019) found that comments are significantly impacted by the article they follow, to say nothing of moderation and cultural factors surrounding the news organisations. However, these frames miss a fundamental reality: readers can engage with comments separate from the journalistic production the commenting accompanies. Mullick, Ghosh, Dutt, Ghosh, and Chakraborty (2019) found that readers rarely read much of the article

before commenting, often focusing at most on a small section of the text. NPR ran an experiment (Moran, 2014) to illustrate the phenomenon, and the resulting commentary showed clear signs of people skipping article contents and moving to comment (on various platforms) after reading only the headline. Editors and journalists note this as a widespread concern among their moderation and community management staff (Koskie, 2018), leading NRKbeta, a Norwegian news website, to use a quiz prior to commenting to prevent this behaviour (Grut, 2017). This suggests that readers, to some extent, engage with comments directly instead of seeing them as feedback, an extension of journalism, or as news organisation engagement. Indeed, of the reasons why people read comments, Stroud et al. (2016) found a key gratification was simply because they were fun.

Further, as much as news organisations and journalism values can play a role in shaping the conversation, deciding the topic, and gatekeeping comment sections, they do not determine the contents or control the commenters. Commenters bring their own details and information (Graham & Wright, 2015; Morrison, 2017), apply their own frames (Miloni et al., 2012), and create their own narratives (Baden & Springer, 2017). Commenters can recast the public's sense of citizenship and orientation towards democratic governance (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). For those concerned about declines in the availability of regional journalism, like Canter (2013), it is precisely this capacity of commenters to bring independent content and perspectives that constitutes the positive potential of comment sections. While commenters are not strictly outside of the news organisations' influence, structural pressures work against intervention, as well: the news organisations want as many comments as possible (Huang, 2016) and heavy moderation can kill the conversation while also exhausting the moderators (Wolfgang, 2018).

Finally, some elements of comments fall entirely outside the purview of journalism, such as phatic comments and the interactions between the commenters. For Miller (2008), this interactivity is an integral and pervasive part of the internet and how it is utilised. Those commenters that spoke with Barnes (2015, 2018b) reveal that their interactions with the online

community are part of the reason why they engage in the activity of reading or writing comments. Milioni et al. (2012) categorically separates such content from commenting's contributions to journalism, and both journalists and audiences find comment sections often present content that provides minimal journalistic value (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014). For some users, commenting simply offers a way to interact with a community (Hopp et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, there is no denying the important links between journalism and news commenting, particularly as journalistic values play a role in their widespread inclusion on news websites. This bilateral connection, whereby the news organisations impact the comment sections (Suh et al., 2018; Wolfgang, 2018; Yeo et al., 2019) just as they are impacted by news commenting (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Stroud et al., 2020), is part of what makes them an important consideration for media pluralism research. Other frameworks applied to news commenting go further to highlight their relevance and importance to media pluralism, however – particularly the robust scholarship tying comments to Habermas' public sphere.

#### *Habermas and the Commenting Sphere*

Given how integral interactive discussions are to internet use (Miller, 2008), Habermas' model of the public sphere (1991) seems a natural fit, with those uncountable threads of discussion standing in for the nameless neighbourhood café as a place for public discussion – indeed, Habermas and Genel (2013) suggest such citizen feedback on the democratic process is vital for its continued functioning. The benefit of understanding comments as a mini public sphere (Zamith & Lewis, 2014) is that it looks beyond the immediate context of the comments to accommodate the readers and commenters as stakeholders as well as the implications of the comments for those stakeholders. Researchers like Ruiz et al. (2011); Zamith and Lewis (2014) and Toepfl and Pivoni (2015) see more than the contents of the comments; they see the potential (though often unfulfilled) for a deliberative discussion with implications for democracy. However, Carpentier, Dahlgren, and Pasquali (2013) suggest the connection between the public

sphere and comments (as well as other participatory media) is mostly superficial, as the news organisations mostly view the content as instrumental to their own needs and interests.

The capacity of news commenting to act as part of the public sphere, or as a mini-public sphere, is assessed in a few ways, but the methods have proven challenging and not entirely conclusive. Perhaps the largest of these attempts was conducted by Ruiz et al. (2011), when they looked through comment sections to find whether and when they adhered to the discursive ethics framework introduced by Habermas (1992). Drawing from a massive sample size (over 15,000 comments) and newspaper websites in five countries, they were able to arrive at a complex picture. On one hand, they found that comment sections can adhere to discursive ethics and present characteristics of a public sphere – sections they termed “*communities of debate*” (Ruiz et al., 2011, p. 482). On the other, they found that they certainly do not automatically conform to these standards, with some instead creating “*homogenous communities*” of users that explicitly pursued solidarity rather than debate (Ruiz et al., 2011, p. 482). Therefore, they found that comment sections are not, categorically, an extension of the public sphere but rather a potential avenue to achieve it – not an insignificant goal considering the normative value of public spheres for contributing to deliberative democracy (Flew, Harrington, Swift, & McNair, 2017; Habermas, 1992; Ruiz et al., 2011; Zamith & Lewis, 2014).

Conversely, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) explored the extent to which the content of comment sections creates a public sphere as they accompany journalistic content. While still referring to comments as a discussion – they label the sections’ content “political talk in comment sections” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 27) – they consider that discussion in a larger context that includes the website’s news articles and the news organisations’ position. They found that, as in Ruiz et al. (2011), comment sections often lack discussion or deliberation within themselves, but also that comment sections do often conflict with the framing and information presented in “mainstream mass-media reporting” (p. 28). This complements journalistic frameworks for understanding comments, highlighting the importance of their connection to

journalistic production even when understanding them as part of the public sphere. This is further supported by Wolfgang (2016), who noted the importance of the news organisation's policies for fostering the public sphere through news commenting.

These studies provide a valuable benefit for studying news commenting in that they give normative value to hosting and cultivating comment sections, whether the sections themselves constitute the public sphere or only a part of the story. Habermas' public sphere (1992) was not only an observed and considered mechanism in democratic societies, but an important one for achieving successful forms of deliberative democracy. Indeed, for Sunstein (2018), one of the threats to modern democratic societies is the extent to which user generated content spaces, as well as the corporations that dominate the internet, have failed to cultivate constructive debate. Pakistan's *Dawn* relates this value when they posit that their comment sections present a debate that is an alternative to violent conflict (Huang, 2016).

However, such research also foregoes some of the practical elements of comments. As with journalistic frames, it does not address the motives for the readers and writers in these comment sections. Interactivity in these sections, in terms of commenters responding to other commenters, is quite low (Ruiz et al., 2011; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014), problematising the extent to which these comment sections can be characterised as a conversation. Where there is interactivity, it can often focus on phatic interpersonal communication structures that provide social support to journalists and other readers (Koskie, 2018) or on personal attacks (Ksiazek, 2018; Rösner et al., 2016). Further, for it being an extension of the public sphere, comparatively few members of the public actually contribute (Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). Those that participate are often just interested in using the comment section to express their view on a subject rather than discuss it (Martin, 2015) or, concerningly, to use the platform to push propaganda on behalf of a government or organisation (Walter, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2018; Yoon, 2019; Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017). This means some amount of news commenting either does not relate to the public sphere or works against it.



Given that its potential as a part of the public sphere has not been entirely realised and the contextual factors that play a substantive role in news commenting content, the public sphere is less of a conception of what news commenting is than one possible normative goal of what could be cultivated. Conversely, Carpentier et al. (2013) suggest that participation bounded by the control and influence of the media organisations portends at best a “minimalist” contribution to public debate. However, these views of news commenting as journalism or a public sphere also overlook a core component of commenting: there is a community of people behind those comments.

### *A Community of Commenters*

Fundamental to understanding or cultivating comment sections on news articles as mini public spheres (Ruiz et al., 2011) or part of the public sphere (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015) is a view that the content of comment sections is more than a collection of written words – it is a product of the participating public. The words are representations of the viewpoints, ideas, and work of a community and the sections are the site of a “discussion” (Ziegele et al., 2018), “debate” (Gonçalves, 2018), or even “culture” (Barnes, 2018a) for the group of commenters. Consequently, a substantial part of news commenting research is dedicated to seeing comments for and alongside the individuals behind them, operating as a “community” (Hopp et al., 2018).

Research seeing news commenting as a product of an online community shines a light on both positive and negative qualities of this interaction that would otherwise be out of view. Many, particularly early, comment researchers collected valuable data from the news organisations and journalists that oversee comments (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Domingo, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009), but later researchers such as Springer et al. (2015) instead note the position of the online community on the value of comments and what drives people to read them and participate in the discussions. Barnes (2014) employs fan culture theories to show how these contributors have distinct personalities, approaches, and gratifications for engaging with these spaces. These distinct characteristics have an impact on how they engage with commenting

(Barnes, Mahar, Wong, & Rune, 2017) and their participation sets standards that can be taken up by the broader community (Barnes, 2014; Rösner et al., 2016). Canter (2013) and Meyer and Speakman (2016) suggested ways that news commenting can provide a voice for groups otherwise underserved by the current media ecosystem. These researchers offer a necessary complement to the journalistic view of comments and reveal the extent to which comment sections are a space of layered interactions between complex communities.

For this study, the most relevant commenting community research is that by Meyer and Speakman (2016) and Canter (2013) that shows how news commenting can provide a tool and the conditions for groups to be represented in media. While Canter (2013) found that journalists could be quick to dismiss the value of comments, the commenting community presented a high level of engagement with the contents and used the platform to raise concerns of personal importance. This included rural commenters that otherwise lacked a local news outlets – indeed, Kangaspunta (2020) found that comments could provide a vital and otherwise lacking arena for debate around geographically-bounded issues. Separately, Meyer and Speakman (2016) conducted a survey of 1000 online media users who explained that the conditions and context of commenting can encourage, or discourage, the participation of minority and marginalised groups as well as the contribution of minority opinions, whereby the comments and moderation could exert or alleviate a spiral of silence. In their survey, they found that users – particularly those from marginalised groups – could be drawn into or put off commenting spaces by the extent to which the news commenting was seen to be hostile and vitriolic or welcoming, the commenting community was internally focused or open, and their identity would not be revealed through policies that forbid anonymity. This unique potential suggests a crucial role for comments in cultivating media diversity.

However, the community's potential is not restricted to social inclusion or broad demographic representation. Zelenkauskaite and Niezgodna (2017) shows how the community can also be misrepresented by deceptive practices – in the case of this Polish study, by

presumably Russian state actors – while Yoon (2019) uncovered ways that political actors could work to manipulate comments to further agendas. While Stroud et al. (2016) discovered a wide range of groups participate in commenting, racial supremacists and ethno-nationalists can take on an out-sized voice (Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019; Vehovar & Jontes, 2021). Baek, Lee, and Kim (2021) and Martin (2015) find women are often widely underrepresented in comment content, and Hughey and Daniels (2013) and Bruce (2018) find that comments more often serve as a vehicle for abuse than representation for minority groups.

The context and conditions of commenting can limit the activity and diversity of the community, as well. Meyer and Speakman (2016) demonstrate that while minority opinions can find their voice in comment sections, these groups will eschew commenting in either highly restrictive or wholly unmoderated environments, and news organisations tend to host echo chambers rather than diverse forums (Walter et al., 2018). Further, commenters are constrained from providing this input because they live in a complex context themselves and their situation communicates acceptable positions and communication activities (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). While users and organisations have mixed views of anonymity (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Santana, 2016), Moore, Fredheim, Wyss, and Beste (2021) found that either complete anonymity or identifiability can lead to worse outcomes than durable, registered pseudonyms. Ziegele et al. (2018) found that the news organisations and comment sections substantively impact whether and how users choose to participate in the discussion.

Ultimately, particularly in the context of this research, what problematises a view of news commenting focusing on the community is that it ignores the much larger group – the readers of the comments. Stroud et al. (2016) show that, while comment reading is common, the number of people even rarely leaving comments is relatively small. S. Park, Fisher, Fuller, and Lee (2018, p. 8) discovered that marginally more people had been commenting than the year before, but it was a rise from 10% to 11%. While Barnes (2018b) demonstrates the unique and varied dispositions of this small group, research on the messages that the comments contain suggests that the

impact of news commenting extends far beyond the social groups that produce them (Prochazka et al., 2016; Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019; Vehovar & Jontes, 2021). It was these confounding concerns that led me to seek a different approach.

### **News Commenting in the Media Ecosystem**

The core concerns behind this project's orientation to news commenting are threefold: comments are a widespread form of media (Huang, 2016; Ribeiro, 2020) which contains impactful content (Chen & Ng, 2016; Kangaspunta, 2020; Krebs & Lischka, 2019) that people see (Hopp et al., 2018; Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2020). Whether or not they are aligned to journalism, prove a valuable part of the public sphere for debating societal issues, or contain an active and interactive social community, these three core concerns make comments an important area of study because they are a part of the media ecosystem.

The media ecosystem being described here is a view of media as a complex, holistic, and interconnected environment within which we interact with our increasingly mediatised society. Naughton (2006) used the media ecosystem concept to describe the dynamic of rapid disruption and the changes that the transition to online digital media were bringing to the media system. He presented its multiplying and interconnected parts as analogous to the living ecological systems we inhabit wherein new organisms cohabit with extant organisms, both impacting and impacted by other inhabitants and structures of the environment. Hitchens (2011) and Napoli et al. (2012) raise this concept as an important antidote to past policy and research approaches that focused on individual media forms or aspects that failed to accommodate issues around convergence, cross-ownership, and the public's layered media environment. Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) suggest such expansion and disruption portends a media ecosystem not only more interconnected but also more deeply penetrating and mediating people's lives, with online media increasingly resembling a living environment for the increasingly online public. News commenting demonstrates the relevance of this approach in the ways it introduces new connections between the public, news organisations, and media production and is therefore an

important consideration for evaluations of media pluralism. This empowers media ecology as a valuable framework for understanding its place in the media system.

Media ecosystemic thinking is rooted in the theoretical framework of media ecology, which posits that people exist within, participate in, and are affected by the media as an environment. Its most famous seminal text, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman (1985), focused mostly on one medium – television. However, media ecology presents an integrated theory of how media work together that both incorporates and explains the effects of media convergence and digitisation (Hitchens, 2011). For media ecology theorists, the lines between one medium and another – or, indeed, the lines between the medium and the viewer or the medium and the environment – were always conceptually ephemeral, with the interactions taking place between these objects more truly representing how we communicate and understand reality than anything on the medium itself (Scolari, 2012). McLuhan and Fiore (1967) provide a pointed example of this with their assertion that “the medium is the message”: the way that the medium of television alters our understanding of space, by showing us an event far removed from our field of vision, and time, by showing scenes that are not happening now, has vital impacts that extend well beyond those of the content of the program. It changes our ways of interacting with one another and has follow on impacts for other types of media.

This integrated system of impacts is what necessitates research on news commenting as a new form of media. It bears the hallmarks of a medium as described by McLuhan and Fiore (1967) for television. It pushes the system of communication of news organisations from a largely broadcast, one-to-many model to what is potentially a many-to-one and many-to-many (and, for ignored or deleted comments, many-to-none) system where readers have the capacity to talk to news organisations and each other (Ruiz et al., 2011). News commenting has, to some extent, changed our conceptualisation of journalists as figures of authority (Conlin & Roberts, 2016). Commenting also appears to have impacted journalistic production by the way its data influences their decision-making (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). It has become a defined and

measurable part of the media environment, and yet it is mostly being studied through the shadow it casts on the walls of other institutions, particularly journalism. Carpentier (2007, p. 117) dissects the ways that participatory media allow participation, but places less emphasis on their characteristics as a form of “alternative media,” with their own “alternative discourses and representations.” Seeing news commenting as part of the media ecology, we can move beyond questions of how it affects journalism or whether it represents democratic deliberation to questions of how the medium of news commenting fits into and changes our media environment and, thereby, the way we interact with each other and the media.

As media ecology provides an integrated understanding, its scope demands an investigation far larger and more complex than is practicable (Hitchens, 2011, p. 221). Consequently, Cali (2017, p. 17) suggests breaking the concept of media ecology into manageable pieces, such as its main themes, as a way to both understand and investigate it. The most important of these themes, according to Cali, is that of *consciousness*, which concerns the ways that media and other environments “shape human consciousness”. It is this theme that lies central to my study – that news commenting, as a part of the media environment, is in a position to shape human consciousness. While it is not my goal to identify a consistent and pervasive effect of comments – indeed, media effects research has long been found to be problematic at best (Livingstone, 1996) – a central tenet of media ecology is that the media exist as part of the environment that shapes and is shaped by people’s actions (Cali, 2017, p. 19). Researchers diverge about the form and severity of this influence, between cautiously deterministic views of media effects (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016) and more indirect senses of the media’s capacity to affectively impact viewers (Karppi, Kähkönen, Mannevu, Pajala, & Sihvonen, 2016; Martin & Dwyer, 2019, p. 192), but its potential to impact the public is a core concern underpinning normative goals towards media diversity and media pluralism (Helberger, 2011; Karppinen, 2018; Napoli, 1999). Knowing more about news commenting is a way of knowing more about what this consciousness is interacting with.

Also of immediate relevance to this study is the media ecology theme of *technology* (Cali, 2017, p. 23) as a way of understanding what news commenting constitutes. Not alluding to inventions or iterative processes of development, technology, with its ties to *technique*, is a way of referring to media objects and phenomena that encapsulates their potential as a mechanism or influence in the media ecology. Cali (2017, p. 24) refers to it as “that vehicle that functions as an environment that shapes human consciousness”. A primary goal of this research is to consider, of news commenting, “the formal properties of that vehicle – how it organizes and conditions interpretations of reality – beyond its content, meaning, or uses”. This means looking at the comments but also going beyond the words contained in the comments to look into the ways they are accessed as well as the conditions in which they are formed, whereby participants engage with it as a Foucauldian *technology of the self* to construct their ideas and representations of themselves (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012).

This look beyond means considering the implications of this medium for bringing new benefits and challenges to people in an evolving media environment. Just as McLuhan and Fiore (1967) noted how electric lights revolutionised our relationship with sports and the television changed our news diets, news commenting changes the way we interface with our news and the work of news organisations as gatekeepers (Miloni et al., 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011). News commenting exposes audiences to implications of violence and harassment (Rösner et al., 2016) and even state-sponsored deception (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017). With the ways they allow users to post content and to remediate the comment sections by time or commentary statistics, they exemplify key *Web 2.0* attributes described by S. Han (2012). Consequently, this study investigates what positive and negative impacts, specifically vis a vis media pluralism, can arise in this particular medium.

Grounding this understanding is that news commenting also exists in what Cali (2017) calls an *environment* and *culture*, and these themes need to be understood to properly consider the technology of news commenting and how it affects consciousness, in media ecology terms.

These two themes work together. Environment encompasses people's understanding of how the media, in this case news commenting, operate as part of their social reality. This can be seen in the studies that consider news commenting a discussion or a part of the public debate (Baden & Springer, 2014; L. Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011). This is larger than their physical presence as interactive text on an html document that is not broadly separated from either journalistic production or social media (Loke, 2012). Yet this conceptualisation is attenuated through the lens of culture, the groups' distinct understanding of social rules, journalistic ideals, and citizens' roles. News commenting in the UK (Singer & Ashman, 2009; Walter et al., 2018), for instance, is seen and used differently from that in Korea (Baek et al., 2020). Consequently, any understanding of the technology needs to also be contextualised, insofar as is practicable, in multiple environments and cultures.

Other media ecology themes, such as *balance* (Cali, 2017, p. 32) and *interconnectedness* (p.40) provide further grounding for news commenting, but their inclusion points to a particular challenge of media ecological studies – they exceed the scope of an individual study.

Interrogating news commenting in light of these themes means taking in entirely different research objects – in this case, a study of stakeholders such as the audience and the news organisations. Fortunately, these groups have been studied at some length (Hopp et al., 2018; Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Wolfgang, 2019; Ziegele et al., 2018), as this research is a further contribution to an existing big picture. More studies such as that done by Hanusch and Tandoc (2019), which specifically tie together different forms of media and their interconnected impacts, would further and specifically position news commenting in regards to these concepts.

By examining the text that this technology (in the media ecological sense) presents, this study can show how it has been integrated into the media ecosystem as an environment, affected by and intersecting with people and cultures. It not only outlines the ways that news commenting plays a role in media pluralism, but also highlights the importance of media pluralism concerns in our media ecosystem. This study can only present a narrow contribution to such an all-inclusive



picture, but in doing so it contributes to a significant pool of past literature and paves the way for further development in future research.

### **Commenting Towards Diversity**

News commenting does not need to serve any journalistic function or offer any societal contribution to be a part of the media ecosystem. People read comments and have fun with them (Ziegele & Jost, 2016) or verbally spar with strangers that have conflicting views (Springer et al., 2015). They form communities that serve social functions for participants (Hopp et al., 2018). Whether or not they have upended or complemented our public sphere and traditional media roles, their widespread presence and popularity have become a part of the media environment for many (Stroud et al., 2016), and these users notice and are frustrated when commenting is not available (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Stroud et al., 2020).

However, as portended from the earliest days of participatory online media research (Deuze, 2006; Pavlik, 1999), the open gates of commenting do open the door for a particular kind of contribution to the media system that could serve a crucial normative function: increasing media diversity. Users are a heterogenous group (Barnes, 2018b; Stroud et al., 2016) and their discussions can bring a wide variety of ways to see an issue (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012) and even reconsider how citizens interface societal concerns and democratic governance (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). This diversity has normative value for our societies, such as increasing accountability for governments (R. Collins & Cave, 2013), drawing marginalised groups into discussions where they are key but underrepresented stakeholders (Smoliarova, Bodrunova, & Ivantey, 2021), or providing additional information and insights that are not appearing in other news media (Graham & Wright, 2015; Morrison, 2017). Some researchers have found the problems that commenting brings – the extensive vitriol (Prochazka et al., 2016), the hate speech (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019), the poorly produced content (Ksiazek, 2018) – potentially outweigh the normative value of this increased diversity. As Singer et al. (2011) notes, these comment sections open the gates, which makes news commenting (alongside other

participatory media (Carpentier, 2011b)) predisposed to inviting both generative and disruptive impacts.

My study puts a focus on not just identifying the unique benefits and challenges of comments – as numerous scholars have already done (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019; Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017) – but further on applying the unique products of commenting to elaborate on the ways that they can play a distinct role within those media ecosystems they now widely inhabit.

### *Diverse Content*

Citing the potential for diverse content due to its relatively open gates, several studies have investigated the kinds of diversity that news commenting could portend, finding that comment sections can achieve a range of results. While the commenters themselves have received less attention (Baek, Jang, & Kim, 2022), the texts have proven a highly accessible source to explore for media studies research (Gonçalves, 2018; Ksiazek, 2018; Moore et al., 2021), public views (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), and even health and policy insights (Callaghan et al., 2021). If research is more pre-occupied with the content than with the producers, it is a practical imbalance as readers vastly outnumber commenters (Stroud et al., 2016), elevating the significance of the characteristics of the text.

For content researchers, news commenting consistently offers one key benefit: different ways of interpreting what has and should happen for society's shared concerns, or a diversity of *viewpoints*. Media policies have long been concerned with ensuring media systems provide viewpoint diversity, which has been vaguely described as reflecting a variety of perspectives (Ho & Quinn, 2008, p. 792), but the means of empirically grounding this in extant media production has been challenging. Baden and Springer (2017) note the lack of specificity for viewpoint diversity assessment and recommend an approach utilising components of framing analysis. To empirically ground viewpoint diversity, they propose frames as “issue-specific, selective, coherent contextualizations of a focal object, which are consequential for its appraisal and preferred

treatment” (p. 177). They propose a method to identify, qualify, and quantify the presence of this diversity in context by grounding frames in the diverse perspectives of diverse commenters, an approach I utilised in the methods for this study (see Chapter 6).

It is the distinct components of Baden’s and Springer’s framework (2017) that make it useful for identifying and understanding the presence and importance of diversity in comment contents. By seeing the focal object and how it is interpreted in different frames of evaluation, problem, cause, and treatment, readers can take on a new and distinct understanding of broad public issues – a core concern for media pluralism (Vermeulen, 2022). The interpretations they see in these comments form a viewpoint because they are grounded in the perspective of commenters that reside outside of the media organisation. Where these interpretations compete with the news organisations’ content or other commenters, they contribute to a diversity of viewpoints (Baden & Springer, 2017), or what Masini et al. (2018, p. 2324) call multiperspectivalness. Masini and Aelst (2017) find that such viewpoint diversity is potentially connected to actor diversity, whereby a wider range of voices correlates to a wider range of views. This makes news commenting particularly well suited for generating this form of diversity, and it has been found to consistently realise that potential (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019).

News commenting’s contribution to diversity extends beyond opinionated expressions of perspective, however, as these diverse actors can also bring new information, expertise, and first-hand accounts of the lived experience of events and issues. Graham and Wright (2015) found that some commenters bring a great deal of expertise and insight on some subjects, with commenters on climate change presenting salient details and advice alongside their impassioned perspectives, though extensive studies from Milioni et al. (2012) and Blom et al. (2014) found the introduction of new information was relatively rare. Nevertheless, this uncommon inclusion of distinct information and expertise is a sign of commenters’ potential to contribute as it is not intrinsically cultivated. One of the main practices for which journalists have historically been paid

is investigation and information gathering (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016), but no one is paying commenters to do this work (while some news organisations have requested that their staff participate in the discussions, it is rare and contentious (Huang, 2016; Koskie, 2018)). Milioni et al. (2012) demonstrates how comments can also be assessed for their capacity to introduce additional focal objects, adding new topics of discussion, though commenters rarely diverge from the topics set by the news organisation.

These forms of diversity are focused on the messages contained within the comments, but as discussed above, the media is more than its messages. As with McLuhan's electric lights (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967), comments offer a new way for readers to see and understand their community, and communities in comment sections have a way of communicating who they are and the context they are coming from (Kangaspunta, 2020; Van Duyn, Peacock, & Stroud, 2021). This is not a reference to the commenters themselves, who can be demographically diverse (Stroud et al., 2016) but simultaneously not wish to be identifiable (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), but rather to the text of comments, which can render visible different groups as the content producers (Martin, 2015). By being visible, they can represent the various populations that constitute layered and complex societies. This visibility as producer and source can have valuable impacts in multiple ways, as groups can feel disenfranchised by media which does not feature their voice (Ewart & Beard, 2017; Price & Payne, 2019) and authorship can broadly impact the ways the information is received (Bhandari, Emery, Scott, & Wolfgang, 2021). Media systems remain broadly dominated by male, ethnic majority voices (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2019), but every comment section presents opportunities for the visibility of diverse groups.

Identifying this representation in practice is confronting. Meyer and Speakman (2016) found that marginalised groups do not wish to be highly visible – a reasonable position considering they have a history of being poorly represented and even vilified (Ewart & Beard, 2017) and their presence in participatory media can be met with hostility (Kwon & Gruzd, 2017).

However, names, including usernames, provide an avenue for this representation (Martin, 2015), and users can provide details through the UIF and main text of comments (Canter, 2013). The visibility of commenters and their diversity is an area that merits further attention as diversity of representation is a core concern of a media system's social inclusiveness (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), which has broad impacts on the functioning of democratic systems.

A separate issue is that people can and do misrepresent themselves, a problem that can be especially common in participatory media (Barnes, 2018b; Bârsan, 2017; Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017). This draws into question not only the extent to which apparent representation is legitimate but also whether perspectives can be taken as genuine or information valid.

Conversely, this is precisely the benefit of onsite commenting spaces as opposed to other social media platforms. Many media professionals feel that it is their professional responsibility to moderate these spaces to prevent the worst of these offenses (Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), though there are clear limits to the extent to which they can intervene. Ultimately, this is a larger problem with the internet, where dubious emails, websites, comments, memes, and videos spread and propagate, presenting powerful challenges to how we organise our society (Park et al., 2018). This cannot be a barrier to examining this increasingly popular content but it must be considered as a confounding factor in the findings. For now, comments research must rely on the efficacy of news organisations' efforts to ensure that commenters are genuine. These news organisations have taken on this responsibility, with all having some measures in place (Huang, 2016) and others having complex, multi-layered approaches to verification (Koskie, 2018).

Diversity in viewpoints and representation as well as the inclusion of new information are an underlying potential outcome of news commenting, but their presence is inconsistent and debatable (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Wolfgang, 2018). Commenting often instead draws in what is considered low-quality discussion (Moore et al., 2021), which can be focused extensively on its own commenter community (Hopp et al., 2018) and phatic communication – a

characteristic common to participatory media in general (Miller, 2008; Sarjanoja, Isomursu, & Häkkinen, 2013).

### *Phatic Commentary*

Unlike a metaphorical soapbox used to broadcast concerns and perspectives, these online participatory spaces can also become a space of conversation and community building (Miller, 2008). It is this capacity for discussion that provides comment sections with the potential to be a new kind of public sphere, a channel for deliberating on issues of public concern (Ruiz et al., 2011).

Conversely, this same community-forming function can displace comment sections' capacity to yield diverse content and representation. News organisations find themselves in the position of having to police conversations between community members as well as curating their content (Meltzer, 2015), a burden that pushes some websites to drop the feature (Huang, 2016). According to Sarjanoja et al. (2013) and Miller (2008), though, these kinds of relationship defining, socially focused texts are a potentially inescapable by-product of online communities, a phenomenon that can be expected to increase as communication is increasingly moved to online spaces. They call these non-informational – even intentionally uninteresting – texts *phatic communication*. According to Miller (2008, p. 394), “phatic messages are not intended to carry information or substance for the receiver, but instead concern the *process* of communication.” Community-building is considered a cornerstone of successful onsite comments (Bakker, 2014; Domingo, 2014; Goodman, 2013), but this can only happen through text in these onsite comment sections. Phatic communication in participatory media can be as much about commenters building their own identity as communicating views or information to others (Dvir-Gvirman, 2017; Lomborg, 2012). Such material was accounted for by Milioni et al. (2012) with the inclusion of the “not applicable” category of coding, as it often does not offer viewpoints, information, or topics for discussion.

This phatic communication is not unimportant – people often turn to comments for entertainment (Stroud et al., 2016) and journalists value and are influenced by the feedback from the discussions (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Wolfgang, 2021). The problem that arises is exposure diversity: far more content exists than people have time to read (Webster, 2009), and phatic communication is competing with other potentially valuable news commenting content for our limited attention. Comment sections can have several thousand comments (Ruiz et al., 2011); even with short comments, this would constitute a significant time investment for readers. Highly active post-moderated comment sections on a single article can contain upwards of 10,000 comments and constitute more reading than a typical book. Further, most comment readers report spending less time reading comments than they spend reading the accompanying article, indicating that the bulk of large comment sections go unread (Stroud et al., 2016). Consequently, an increase in the number of purely phatic comments – comments that otherwise contain no content expanding the diversity of viewpoints or information – reduces the capacity of diverse comments to contribute to media pluralism. Whether the larger comment section contains this diversity is a moot point as the public can only partake in the diversity of media they are exposed to (Moe, Hovden, & Karppinen, 2021).

Consequently, I sought to find whether comments inadvertently sideline their own potential contribution through the prevalence of exclusively phatic content in their community interactions. However, while the presence of phatic communication appears to be intrinsic to such participatory media as news commenting, it is neither the most reputed nor controversial content invited through comment sections, which designation is reserved for its famed vitriolic aggression.

### *Silencing Speech*

Like any public space of discussion, comment sections provide a space not just for broadcasting views, but also for debating them, which is precisely what prompted Ruiz et al. (2011) to suggest they could be “public sphere 2.0.” While this is what makes room for the

diversity of viewpoints and ideas described above, some parts of participatory media have led to not just vitriolic and aggressive speech, but an environment that can foster hate speech and give a platform to extremist groups (Chua, 2009; A. Jakubowicz, 2018; Rösner et al., 2016; Vehovar & Jontes, 2021). This is also true of news commenting, which can feature high levels of incivility (Ziegele et al., 2018) and aggression (Gonçalves, 2018).

This is a crucial concern for media pluralism, as diverse representation and media sustainability are considered core components of a media ecosystem that disrupts concentration of communicative power and thereby helps society function (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), but Meyer and Speakman (2016) found that hate and hostility in news comments can keep users from commenting and even reading comment sections. Kwon and Gruzd (2017) demonstrated that aggression can lead to further aggression in response, and Rösner et al. (2016) noted such hostility can lead to hostile views among readers. That Martin (2015) discovered male commenter visibility far outnumbers female commenter visibility is not a surprising outcome when identifiably female commenters are disproportionately likely to receive uncivil and hostile responses (Kwon & Cho, 2017). Consequently, understanding the impact of news commenting means not only evaluating its potential for benefit but also examining its potential as a “vector of attack” (Koskie, 2018).

Quantifying and qualifying the effect of negative speech in news commenting has proven challenging, as different definitions yield different results. A big focus has been on the concept of *incivility*, which A. Anderson et al. (2014, p. 375) define as “a manner of offensive discussion that impedes the democratic ideal of deliberation.” This hews close to the goals for this study, with its focus on democratic functions, but its wide purview and lack of specificity includes content that has some value to readers and news organisations. Springer et al. (2015) found that aggressive and low-quality discussion can lower reader satisfaction but also increase the amount people read comments because a large part of comment readers are seeking entertainment rather than information. Similarly, Kwon and Cho (2017) found comments containing swearing can



often see a large number of responses, and the responses are not consistently filled with aggressive speech (conversely, female posters saw more aggressive responses regardless of what they posted). Consequently, maintaining thriving news commenting requires balancing encouraging users to participate as much as they like in the manner they prefer against being strict about preventing the worst abuses (Domingo, 2014).

The concept of the spiral of silence offers crucial insight into why such speech happens and is particularly problematic. Noelle-Neumann (1974) suggested that one of the dynamics affecting public participation in media, preventing some people from contributing their divergent views from public discussion, is the threat of negative attention they could receive for their differences, leading to exclusion and isolation. Meyer and Speakman (2016) connected this to news commenting spaces, exploring whether these hegemonic forces could be silencing minority and marginalised groups. Participants reported that key forces of this spiral of silence had a significant impact on their self-reported desire to participate, with respondents reportedly fearing identification with their minority perspectives and avoiding hegemonic and hostile commenting communities. Conversely, they reported being more willing to comment where news organisations invited minority views and groups. Similar research from Soffer and Gordoni (2018) discovered that this effect was potentially more prevalent and impactful with online media. M. Duncan et al. (2020) found that passionate commenters will comment specifically because their views diverge to a large extent, in line with the corrective action hypothesis, but this was specific to a group of strongly opinionated participants that increased the polarisation of the comment sections.

Those participants responding to Meyer and Speakman (2016) and Soffer and Gordoni (2018) have well-founded concerns, as the antipathy of some commenters has been well-documented. Journalists (Wolfgang, 2018) and users (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014) have decried the extensive hostility that characterises many comment sections, but female and minority journalists have experienced it firsthand, as they are disproportionately the targets of the attacks

(Gardiner, 2018). Unlike the community- and socially-orientated phatic communication, this news commenting content portends direct negative impacts, as it not only excludes diverse speakers and speech (Meyer & Speakman, 2016) but also affects how readers see these groups as a result (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019). While the commenters may not directly intend to stifle other speakers – though vitriolic commenters labelled *trolls* surveyed by Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) expressed taking enjoyment in the harm they might be causing for others – the silencing effect of this hostile speech is a concern for readers and news organisations.

Silencing speech appears to be a fundamental part of hosting comments (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Wolfgang, 2018), but researchers and news organisations have found ample ways to combat it. Indeed, Ksiazek (2018) has suggested that news organisations play a key role in the aggression appearing in their comment sections. Those organisations that have found value in news commenting point to the importance of vigorous intervention (deleting or rejecting over 20% of comments or more in some cases), transparency, and communication with commenters (Huang, 2016). Algorithmic approaches have also been proposed that can variously filter out unwanted comments or elevate diverse content (Giannopoulos et al., 2015; Wolfgang, 2021). Nevertheless, malicious comments and commenters persist (Baek et al., 2022; Gardiner, 2018), suggesting that ways to identify and remove silencing speech is an area for further development.

### **News Commenting and Media Pluralism**

News commenting is a valuable point of study for this research and beyond. This is not simply because it is a widespread phenomenon (Ribeiro, 2020) that can contribute to journalism (Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Wolfgang, 2019) and the discussion of public issues (Baden & Springer, 2017; Callaghan et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2011). It is also a rich and layered medium that offers potential contributions on many levels while simultaneously inviting specific new threats to the media system. It embodies many of the promises of web 2.0 (S. Han, 2012) and participatory

media (Carpentier, 2011a) in a way that draws particular attention to how they can disrupt and integrate with traditional media.

It is these characteristics that make approaching news commenting through the lens of media pluralism such an important consideration. Both the diversity and the risks have the potential to impact media pluralism. Simultaneously, news commenting has the potential to shore up some of the media pluralism issues presenting within media systems (Brogi et al., 2021; Núñez-Mussa, Karppinen, & Vandenberghe, 2022; Trappel & Meier, 2022). Applying these assessments to the systems of Australia and Korea, however, requires an exploration of media pluralism's concepts and how they can be applied to this specific content.

### Chapter 3: Defining and Identifying Media Pluralism

Fundamental to this research is finding new ways to see and understand media pluralism when looking at the dynamic conditions of the modern media ecosystem as it transitions to and develops online. This changed media environment invites a multitude of sources and new kinds of content, far more than any individual could consume, which greatly complicates the practical value of the availability of diverse media (Dwyer & Martin, 2010) while elevating concerns of how this translates into exposure to diversity (Karppinen, 2009). To better understand how the introduction of online media impacts these media pluralism concerns, the previous chapter focused on an innovation wholly unique to and afforded by the internet – news commenting. These comments embody the way the internet is now engendering spontaneous, unpredictable collaboration between media producers and their audiences (Morrison, 2017), often leading to vastly more content than was created by the media organisation itself (Ruiz et al., 2011).

Including news commenting marks an unorthodox approach to evaluating media pluralism, and it is not currently included as part of the MPM's assessments (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). As I discussed in the previous chapter, news commenting has rarely been studied for its own substantive and distinct content, likely because, unlike for traditional media, news commenting's messages are not independent. Comments are always adjacent and secondary to some other production – in this case, online print articles that contain fact and opinion-based content related to public affairs issues. These primary pieces of production have a determining impact on what topic is on the commenting agenda and what elements are discussed, according to Milioni et al. (2012) and Baden and Springer (2014). What is more, while comments are broadly popular and can build loyal audiences (Lischka & Messerli, 2016), they receive much less readership and attention than the articles themselves (Stroud et al., 2016).

When approaching comments as an aspect of and potential contribution to media pluralism, however, these concerns are moot – in media pluralism assessments like the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018), no media is self-contained. News commenting, as distinct

from the news articles, potentially intersects with many elements of media pluralism depending on how it is defined, though the definition can vary considerably (R. Collins & Cave, 2013; Karppinen, 2009; Klimkiewicz, 2009; Vermeulen, 2022). Commensurately, news commenting needs to be understood for its unique role as part of a pluralistic media ecosystem.

In this chapter, I reconcile media pluralism's diverse definitions to find a common ground for understanding and applying it to news commenting. I also demonstrate how the theoretical frameworks of media ecology explain the operation and importance of media pluralism. Finally, I discuss how this pluralism might be evaluated for contents and contexts where past and current assessments do not easily apply, as with news commenting. Achieving this will first require navigating the diverse scope of conceptualisations of media pluralism and its constituent elements.

### **Toward an Actionable Definition of Media Pluralism**

It is helpful to set a single definition of media pluralism in order to show the ways that news commenting performs an impactful role, as tying it to the wide range of definitions would yield inconsistent and inconclusive results. However, this requires consolidating the confounding contributions of a range of prominent scholars. Media pluralism has been presented as a concept with many faces and the term is sometimes used interchangeably with *media diversity*, which presents a challenge when employing it as a concept. Karppinen (2013) raises the concern that it has not consistently been given a separate meaning and Hitchens (2006, p. 8) notes that these two terms are not intrinsically distinct – what the European Union calls a pluralism concern, the US would call a diversity concern.

This apparent overlap can be misleading, however, as the various related terms have generally been tied to different media concerns. Even where the terms are not defined separately, media diversity more often refers to a somehow empirically quantifiable heterogeneity, be it in regards to contents or ownership and production (Karppinen, 2007, p. 9), where pluralism is generally used to refer to the media system's capacity to yield that diversity. Another related term

applied is media plurality, particularly in the UK (Arnott, 2010), which again features ownership as one of its core concerns as well as “ensuring that there is diversity in the viewpoints that are available and consumed, across and within media enterprises” (Ofcom, 2015, p. 1). Ofcom’s media plurality framework places a strong emphasis on concerns of exposure to diverse sources, as espoused by Napoli (2011), but only features a “consideration” of the qualitative differences that make content diverse (Ofcom, 2015, p. 11), offering a less detailed assessment of the diversity produced by the media system than does the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). Further distinct still, Vermeulen (2022) ties media pluralism to the concept of media freedom as well as issues of diversity of content and source. While all concern the media, they focus on different concerns and their scopes of study are distinct.

However, even those scholars working to apply media pluralism as a separate concept conflict – though their diverse understandings relate to a wider reaching central concept. Valcke, Picard, and Sükösd (2015) confirm the term is sometimes used indeterminately, primarily because “it is used as a proxy for more involved concepts” (p. 1), but assert that it does have value as an individual concept. For them, media pluralism encompasses the benefit and value of having access to diverse media. This access hinges upon the capacity and inclination of media systems to produce it and upon the capacity and inclination of the public to experience it. Conversely, Karppinen (2013, p. 60) puts forward the idea that media pluralism identifies a media system’s capacity to disrupt hegemonic communicative power, with diversity playing a supporting but not crucial role in this process. Dwyer and Martin (2010, p. 10) expound on this point when considering the usefulness of simple media heterogeneity for online media, in which access to diverse media is theoretically inexhaustible, suggesting that media pluralism operates on the level of desired impacts rather than empirical descriptions. Elsewhere, Klimkiewicz (2009, p. 47) notes that the term is mostly understood through several axes behind the diversity of media systems and their production, most often external/internal but also macro/meso/micro and others, but it needs to be seen as bigger than any of these particular divisions. Ultimately behind

each of these apparently distinct definitions is relationships between the media and people, including the people that produce media, those that influence it, and those that use it to engage with the world around them.

These conceptions of media pluralism share a tie to liberal democratic philosophies that underpin their understanding of the role of media and the way society organises itself (Karppinen, 2013, p. 151). According to Vermeulen (2022, p. 1), media pluralism aims to “ensure the availability and accessibility of diverse information and ideas, on the basis of which people can form and express their opinions and exchange information and ideas.” While this can attend to a number of models for liberal democracy (Karppinen, 2013), the ideas harken back to classic philosophies towards the value of individual choices and self-determination espoused by philosophers such as John Stuart Mill. He described the value of a state being constituted by the choices and actions of its individual citizens, “The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it [...]” (Mill, 1859, p. 207). In his consideration, a state that controls the actions of its citizens would thereby be deprived of the tools that sustain its worth – the self-interested decisions and labours of its individual citizens, who are best informed about how to organise their labours. Karppinen (2013, p. 6) posits that pluralism offers a way to negotiate between the competing interests and perspectives of a society’s heterogenous groups, making a normative value out of elevating a variety of views (while simultaneously evading the question of what to do about the challenges such heterogeneity can pose). This value is of great importance in modern society, which sees neo-liberalism as an entrenched and unquestionable global orthodoxy (Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016). Consequently, it is because of its relationship to liberalism that media pluralism is a crucial and applicable concept, though it can also be applied beyond the liberal democracies of Europe (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) to even totalitarian states such as China (Sükösd, 2015).

Bringing these concepts together, I propose that media pluralism constitutes a media ecosystem’s capacity to augment the functioning of a complex and diverse society through

relevant and representative media content. The specific terms chosen for this definition carry vital conceptual weight. For instance, *media ecosystem* covers both the content as available and consumed and the chain of production and delivery of that content, which are both integral to media ecology frameworks struggling to make sense of how societies interface with media (Cali, 2017). *Capacity* signifies that media pluralism focuses on the processes by which media is produced and consumed and on the extent to which that process can continue to serve the needs of a diverse public, a key concern for the risk analyses of the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018).

Crucially, *diverse media content* here does not mean “anything goes” (Karppinen, 2007, p. 12). Pluralistic media is grounded in its value and benefits (Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015, p. 1), which necessitate that the content is *relevant to* and *representative of* a diverse public. This need forms the basis of the social inclusiveness media pluralism indicators from Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015, p. 132), though they receive less direct attention in the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018, p. 55). Focusing on relevance, in this case, means focusing on the provision of news rather than the broader purview including the arts and cultural production considered by Valcke, Picard, and Sükösd (2015, p. 1). This is because journalism has a professional norm to inform people about the world that they live in (R. Collins & Cave, 2013, p. 315), unlike the arts, which no doubt perform this function but lack this formalised professional norm.

What particularly distinguishes this definition is the use of *augment*. The diverse content produced by this pluralistic media must actually contribute to the functioning of society – a concern missing from past definitions of media pluralism that focused on empirically quantifiable diversity, according to Karppinen (2015). For Dwyer and Martin (2010), this is the missing key for a practicable assessment of the current media environment, where media diversity online is in such a supply as to be overabundant, but the benefits of a pluralistic media are absent. Nechushtai and Lewis (2018) argue that online news readers are, consciously and unconsciously, relying on algorithms to remediate online content, which suggests that assertions



of abundance need to accommodate the intervention of new forms of gatekeeping. Further, study of online media has shown that some content actively detracts from diversity, disaffecting content producers (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), closing down community media spaces (Chua, 2009), and even harming the sustainability of media organisations (Krebs & Lischka, 2019).

The contribution of media pluralism to the functioning of a diverse society is rooted in the notion of radical democratic pluralism suggested by Laclau and Mouffe (2014), that society must reckon with the range of differences within its population, which dialectic deliberation – consensus building – can suppress. According to Karppinen (2007, p. 10) (citing Mouffe (2000)), this “end of a substantive idea of the good life” is a fundamental rationale for media pluralism, as modern democracies are governed by groups with sometimes irreconcilable and antagonistic differences. Consequently, in line with Karppinen’s interpretation, this project’s definition of media pluralism emphasises *dialogic public deliberation*.

However, while the definition above establishes the concept and value of media pluralism, it does little to lay out a clear picture of what pluralistic media looks like.

### *Seeing Pluralism in Diversity*

Karppinen (2007) discusses the potential value of conceptualising media pluralism separately from various forms of media diversity, but media diversity scholarship incontrovertibly does present productive avenues and data for studying the media pluralism components outlined by Valcke, Sukosd, et al. (2015) and Brogi, Nenadic, and Cunha (2018). In particular, international research has yielded insights into levels of ownership diversity (Humphrecht & Esser, 2018; Trappel & Meier, 2022) – though the implications of ownership concentration remain contested (Karppinen, 2015; Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015). On the meso level of organisations, journalism scholars have investigated the diversity of the journalists producing news media (Forde, 2005; Hanusch, 2013) as well as the users contributing to their forums and discussions (Barnes, 2018a). Dwyer and Martin (2010) and A. Jakubowicz (2019) have explored the way changes in media have impacted voice and standpoint diversity, while

others have measured how these developments have contributed to content diversity (Almgren, 2017; Baden & Springer, 2014). Napoli (2011) and Webster (2009) emphasise a concern of noted importance for media pluralism (Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015, p. 7): exposure diversity, the extent to which diverse content is actually received by audiences (van der Wurff, 2011). While many of these scholars do not refer to media pluralism directly, their scholarship provides salient results.

Concentration of media ownership research yields benefits for media pluralism research particularly because it is such a widespread concern internationally. While governmental considerations of media pluralism are limited outside of Europe (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015), ownership concentration policies have been taken up by a multitude of countries around the world (Noam, 2016). Competition laws often underpin media policies (Berry & Spittle, 2019; Stellios, 2012; Van Cuilenburg, 2007), despite their limitations for ensuring diverse media (Hitchens, 2011, p. 229). This prevalence paves the way for diverse instruments of measurement (Hindman, 2007; Napoli, 2015a; Ofcom, 2015), extensive and robust research (Craufurd-Smith & Stolte, 2014; Noam, 2016; Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016), and critical theoretical analysis (Baker, 2006; Doyle, 2015; Dwyer, 2019). Trappel and Meier (2022) find that this issue has only further expanded in the last decade and yet has received little attention in politics or policies.

Such research has often reinforced the importance of ownership diversity in cultivating pluralistic media, though scholars have suggested that its role needs to be seen as complementary rather than absolute or even predictable. Doyle (2015) finds ownership concentration remains crucial even with online and convergent media, as growing media giants continue to have the capacity to influence political systems in their favour – often to the ends of further expanding and thereby entrenching ownership concentration. Hitchens (2011, p. 229) suggests ownership and control regulations need to be seen as part of “the diversity regulatory basket” due to the risks inherent to media monopolies. Conversely, she notes that attempts to regulate in Australia and abroad have often met with challenges and existing policies have not taken into account media convergence, necessitating a rethink of how media ownership and control are

conceptualised and evaluated. Further, ownership diversity is not a stand in for a broad approach to media pluralism. J. Duncan (2015) found that ownership diversity in South Africa yields little perspective or content diversity, which the government does not actively support as they feel it could threaten stability. This complicated position of media ownership concentration reinforces the need for research into online additions to media – such as news commenting – to make clearer the impact of convergence on ownership and control concerns.

Moving away from ownership diversity, already traditionally tied to media pluralism (Dwyer, 2019), scholars looking for diverse media representation and voices also offer contributions. Public service media provide and bear a by far disproportionate burden for presenting diverse voices (Helberger & Burri, 2015), even though they are some of the most dominant media organisations in countries like the UK (Foster, 2012) and Australia (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). Helberger and Burri (2015) and Vermeulen (2022) suggest this role could be expanded into intermediation whereby a new emphasis could be placed on nudging the public towards exposure to diverse content rather than relying on expanded availability and optimistic views of consumer agency. This could prove a vital tool, as A. Jakubowicz (2018) found that current online platforms' algorithms actually empower the voice of hate groups and extremists and increase their exposure – arguably working firmly against the functioning of a democratic society.

Who gets to speak in the media environment has practical and visible effects on the functioning of societies, which is why it is an indicator for media pluralism (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). Public service and community media provides a channel where marginalised groups such as Australia's indigenous people (Ewart, 2012) are allowed to express and learn about local concerns, while participatory online media platforms provide a space for migrants and other minority groups to communicate with their communities (Roy Morgan, 2018b). Richards (2014) notes that local and community media are believed to play a facilitative role in empowering communities, though this function is under-examined. These studies and reports

suggest that the presence of diverse voices, representing diverse groups, is a key component to the functions of media pluralism and it is an area of research that shows where news commenting, with its low barrier of entry, can make a significant impact (Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Morrison, 2017).

Perhaps more so than ownership diversity, media content diversity has seen extensive scholarship and much of it is relevant to media pluralism – indeed, Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) lists this as an important indicator – but it is hard to qualify what constitutes useful diversity (Gibbons, 2015). Nevertheless, for theorists like Sunstein (2018), content diversity is a central concern. He notes that recent developments such as social media have left our public more fragmented, with people selecting and being exposed to less and less diverse media in a way that avoids encountering the widening range of information and views that are available. This suggests not only that content needs to be diverse but also that the diversity needs to reach the wider public – though diversity can take multiple forms. Van Cuilenburg (2007) states that effective media content diversity has two concerns, proportional reflection of preferences and openness to divergent views, that are in a dialectic relationship and difficult to prioritise. Consequently, a range of instruments are needed for measuring diversity (Hindman, 2007; Karppinen, 2015; Metykova, 2016) which informs media pluralism measurements like the MPM (Brogi & Parcu, 2014).

Conversely, this media content diversity research has been problematised by the limitless abundance of content on the internet (Karppinen, 2009). Expanded access to unprecedentedly diverse content has highlighted a practical concern of how much of this content is actually being consumed (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; van der Wurff, 2011). Dwyer (2019) suggests that barriers such as paywalls have restricted access to higher quality news content while opening unreliable news sources or misinformation for easy consumption, which adds new risks. Consequently, Napoli (2011) and Moe et al. (2021) have proposed emphasising the importance of exposure diversity when assessing the media environment and the impact of media sources. This concern

has contributed to the development of media reach assessments for the UK's media plurality framework (Ofcom, 2015) and was accommodated by the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). However, this line of diversity research demands further independent study (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Helberger, 2011; van der Wurff, 2011) before we can fully appreciate its significance as part of media pluralism.

These scholars study media diversity independent to media pluralism (though some of that can be attributed to differences of terminology (Karppinen, 2009)), but their ideas are fundamental for many of its core components. Increased diversity is normatively seen as a benefit and advantage that can be cultivated (A. Jakubowicz, 2019; Moe et al., 2021; Vermeulen, 2022) and assessed (Masini et al., 2018), and its presence is crucial to media pluralism. The range of objects these researchers have studied as well as their findings illustrate the difficulties of identifying and cultivating the diverse media that is fundamental to many media pluralism concerns and indicators (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). Conversely, media pluralism's purview extends beyond diversity, as well, as its broad view also accounts for the systemic risks that can threaten the media ecosystem's capacity to yield these benefits.

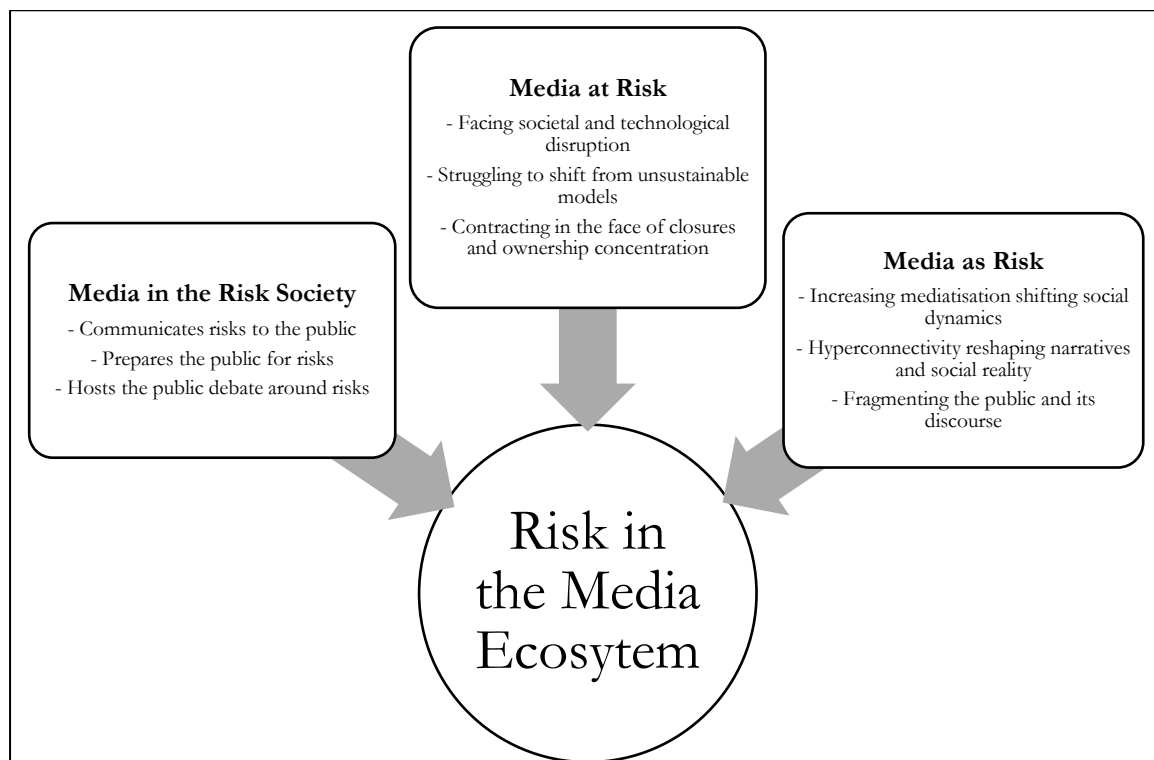
#### *Accounting for Risks to the Media Ecosystem*

Attention to the risks presenting to and through media systems is not unique to media pluralism. Indeed, Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) suggests the media plays a key role in our risk society, wherein we are broadly orientated toward the unpredictable crises engendered by our increasingly rapid technological and societal development. Beck (1992) positions the media as an essential channel for communicating complex but not directly visible threats to the public, but Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) go a step further to suggest that the media can portend just such a risk themselves as our lives are increasingly mediated. Accommodating this, the MPM (Brogi & Parcu, 2014) makes use of Yohe's and Leichenko's risk-based approach (2010), which focuses on our ability to adapt to and mitigate predictable and portentous changes – in this case focused specifically on developments in media. Using this approach, the MPM can analyse the ways that

media is at risk – facing disruption, unsustainability, and control – and embodying risk – by marginalising diverse views and representation while increasing the concentration of communicative power. Media interacts with the concept of risk in several crucial ways: as a means of communicating and preparing for risks, as a system facing risks, and as a vector for societal risk [see Figure 2].

**Figure 2**

*Types of media risk*



While not directly associated with media pluralism, Beck's risk society (Beck, 1992) emphasises the importance of a robust and diverse media system for the functioning of our modern society (Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016). According to Beck, people have come to recognise that their impact is leading to unpredicted adverse events, such as environmental damage and other existential threats, leading to what he called "reflexive modernization" (p. 21), in which risk is "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself." His view is that media is essential to communicate the problems, prepare

the public to respond, and host the debate over the most salient issues (Wimmer & Quandt, 2006). This reconciles with values germane to journalistic professionalism (Henningham, 1996), but it also interfaces with news commenting, which can communicate and evaluate broad societal challenges like climate change (Graham & Wright, 2015) and immigration (Masini et al., 2018). Indirectly, media pluralism is also concerned with risk society, though with a particular emphasis on *whose* risk is being presented as well as who participates in the discussion. This is especially relevant to the areas of social inclusiveness, which ensure that the problems facing the breadth of society's diverse groups are visible (Klimkiewicz, 2015).

However, our ability to rely on this system has, in several ways, become imperilled through the risks the media itself faces, a concern well addressed through the application of risk-based approaches (Yohe & Leichenko, 2010) leveraged by the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). Rather than contending with the concept of risk as a looming and unpredictable consequence that societies must prepare for as in Beck's risk society (Beck, 1992), Yohe and Leichenko (2010) focus on those problems that are potentially foreseeable and probable consequences of modernity, mirroring approaches taken by, for instance, policy makers considering the economy (p.31). Their risk-based approach presses that societies must balance mitigating these pending issues with sustainably adapting to the extent to which they have already impacted our systems. While acknowledging the difficulty of exhaustively identifying all possible future problems, media pluralism scholars (Brogi et al., 2021; Karppinen, 2018; Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015) note that many of the risks facing media are already identifiable – and partially actualised. A concern for the potentially predictable problems for increased concentration of media ownership must accommodate how much concentration has already occurred (Parcu, 2020; Trappel & Meier, 2022).

The breadth of the Media Pluralism Monitor's areas of concern provides an indication of the many ways our media system's functioning is imperilled by such risks. Contemporaneous to concentration of ownership issues is a threat to media viability whereby media organisations have

unsustainable revenues to continue their operations – an area where most European countries are facing a high level of risk (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). Transitions to online media and its platforms have upended the revenue-generating business models (Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013) as well as the journalistic routines behind the news (Holton, Coddington, Lewis, & De Zuniga, 2015; Loke, 2012). Covid-related consequences have exacerbated these problems (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), and any concern for future problems must be balanced with adapting to this challenging current environment.

However, there is another larger concern that this risk-based approach analyses: the potential for the media system itself to constitute a societal risk. Arguments that the social environment we experience is variously mediated through the evolving technologies and techniques we increasingly employ to navigate our society are fundamental to the theoretical framework of media ecology (Cali, 2017). This “interrelation between the change of media and communication, on the one hand, and the change of culture and society on the other” (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 7) is central to the analytical frameworks of *mediatisation*, and marks out media as a space and influence for society’s self-deliberations. While mediatisation concepts have deep historical roots (Krotz, 2017), Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) contend that this mediatisation has rapidly increased through current trends towards hyperconnectivity whereby social reality is increasingly constituted in highly mediatised spaces that displace offline, in-person interaction. Van Cuilenburg (1999, p. 202) foresaw an increasing potential for fragmentation and information overload that could be linked to the expanding abundance of content in the information age, necessitating new tools to ensure diverse production and access. It is in this context that concerns of the distribution of communicative power (Karppinen, 2013), the visibility and voice of diverse publics (Martin, 2015), and access to this space of societal negotiation (Moe et al., 2021) become potential risks for our increasingly mediatised society.

Media pluralism and the MPM’s risk-based approach place a high level of importance on all of these risks. While there is some concern that this risk orientation can create negative



associations that overlook opportunities and benefits that changes might bring (Valcke, 2011), including a consideration of risks paves the way for effective interventions against barriers and threats to a pluralistic media that may not be possible or feasible were the focus solely on opportunities. Media pluralism has a focus on those structures that can cultivate an effectively diverse media environment, and acknowledging risks plays a clear role in that analysis.

Consequently, while it should account for opportunities for expanding this capacity through new means to source diverse ideas and highlight diverse voices (Vermeulen, 2022), it needs to simultaneously explore these impediments. Using the risk-based approach (Yohe & Leichenko, 2010), the MPM is a tool to diagnose media ecosystems for such problems (Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015).

### **Recognising Pluralistic Media**

One of the biggest challenges, according to Karppinen (2015), is finding a way to establish meaningful indicators of media pluralism that go beyond empirical quantifying of diversity. All definitions of media pluralism, including the one espoused here, contain several key components that are challenging to measure individually, let alone together, making the level of pluralism in a media system especially difficult to conclusively assess. However, this is not a new concern and scholars and governments have usefully adopted a variety of approaches to this end (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018; Karppinen, 2013; Ofcom, 2015; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). When, as Karppinen (2009) suggests, media pluralism is taken as an ideologically normative goal, these indicators can provide a catalogue of successes, failures, threats, and opportunities for achieving that goal. The normative definition provided for this study, of a media ecosystem that augments the functioning of a complex and diverse society, shares characteristics with the normative concept of “promoting informed public deliberation” as evaluated by Karppinen (2009, p. 164), and ties to a similar variety of specific conditions for its realisation.

While the range of media pluralism indicators, even taken collectively, may not yield a final tally of what Gibbons (2015) calls “sufficient”, that may not be a worthwhile goal to achieve. If media pluralism is about the capacity or potential of a media system to yield this diverse media, then it is as or more concerned with how the structures, operators and organisations enable such a contribution than it is with the identifiable diversity of its current content. In that case, the MPM is especially well suited to the task – a collection of tools and indicators that is updated continuously (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) rather than a single encompassing barometer of media health, because while there is no simple and direct approach to realise this goal, a wide range of elements can play a contributing role. It is to this approach that this research contributes, by considering the new tools that are needed to assess the potential of today and tomorrow’s media, as exemplified by news commenting, rather than unveiling the final missing pieces of the big picture. Reconciling this contribution requires a review of existing approaches, however.

Media pluralism itself can be understood along a number of axes – what Klimkiewicz (2009, p. 46) called dichotomies or alternatives. In her research, she counted among them: “external/internal, proportional/open, organized/spontaneous, polarized/moderate, evaluative/descriptive or reactive/interactive/proactive.” However, the most prevalent dichotomy is that of internal/external (Núñez-Mussa et al., 2022; Trappel & Meier, 2022; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), which helps in identifying contributions and threats to media pluralism at the macro and micro levels. External pluralism issues include broad concerns such as concentration of ownership (Trappel & Meier, 2022) or media policy (Picard, 2017) which affect a wide range of media organisations and systems. Internal pluralism concerns are narrower in breadth, concerning such elements as diversity of staff within media organisations (Karppinen, 2018) or media content (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), but that have a more direct effect on the content being presented to the public.

While they categorise distinct elements of the media system, internal and external pluralism measures complement one another to create a holistic view, and the conceptual barriers between them can be blurred. External media pluralism derives from the relationship between the macro layer and meso layer – how policies and ownership impact the number of sources available to the public and the concentration of communicative power for those sources (Doyle, 2015), which includes publicly funded broadcasters like public service media (Helberger & Burri, 2015). Conversely, internal pluralism focuses on the micro layer of content as well as how that is presented and produced at the meso layer of organisations and their staff (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Klimkiewicz, 2009). This division can be further specified into discrete indicators. For external pluralism, these include the number of outlets/providers, their independence, the multiplicity of ownership and sites of production, and controls on distribution. A key external risk often overlooked, which is raised by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) and by the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), is the increasing challenges to market sustainability seeing many news organisations collapsing owing to failing traditional media business models, which has follow on impacts on market concentration and diversity of sources.

Internal pluralism, by contrast, focuses on “diversity of media contents, services, and sources” (Klimkiewicz, 2009, p. 47), though only that content that plays a representative and generative role. Quite aside from the “anything goes” concern raised by (Karppinen, 2007), where tokenistic diversity is counted empirically and uncritically (Karppinen, 2015), internal pluralism seeks content that gives voice to diverse views and groups, draws attention to new ideas and information, and that is produced by diverse groups (Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015).

What challenges assessments of internal pluralism is the issue of exposure diversity (Moe et al., 2021) – how much of this content, whether it is heterogenous or not, is ultimately received by the public and how many people see it? This is a crucial area of concern for the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), but Moe et al. (2021) point out that it is difficult to assess in practice and

must account for the wider range of media people now consume. Nevertheless, researchers Valcke, Sukosd, et al. (2015) and Bleyer-Simon et al. (2021) have been able to draw effective transnational comparisons of risks to media pluralism in distinct media systems for comparison, giving rise to actionable recommendations and predictions.

New forms of media introduced by the convergence of digital media innovations and the development of the internet, as exemplified in this research by news commenting, bring complications to these indicators (Hitchens, 2011, p. 222; Karppinen, 2009). On top of the existential challenges, such as the erosion of ad revenue once core to media business models (Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013), the increasing role of participatory social media introduces new dynamics by which media is produced (Carpentier, 2011a). A key fundament of the internet is generativity – the sourcing of unknowable content, contribution, and change from the participating public (Zittrain, 2006), the metaphorical equivalent of inviting the spectators onto the playing field during a match. This has implications for the power of owners and policy, for our understanding of whom is identified as a media producer, and for how we regard the spontaneous content the public produces. While this research is dominantly focused on news commenting’s affordance of internal media pluralism, extensive news commenting research allows reflection on how this addition to the media environment can interact with the range of internal and external media pluralism indicators.

#### *News Commenting by the Media Pluralism Numbers*

News commenting invites a range of new dynamics to the media system, so applying these internal/external pluralism concepts here requires exploring them individually more deeply, examining the assumptions behind them, and fitting them to the unique characteristics of this particular online digital media content. Here, internal refers to what K. Jakubowicz (2015, p. 34) called the internal pluralism of content, the “diversity of contents, services and sources within one content bundle, reflecting a broad variety of opinions, views, representations and values of social, ethical, political and cultural nature”, though Sjøvaag (2016) extends this to include the

internal conditions of production, as well. Simultaneously, external pluralism's "plurality of independent and autonomous media outlets and providers" also has relevance here, as news commenters are famously located outside the traditional gates of journalism, even if news organisations are still the ones guarding the door (Singer et al., 2011; Wolfgang, 2021). News commenting interacts with each concept in significant ways, with considerable ramifications if news comments continue to be popular and widespread, as surveys by Stroud et al. (2016) suggest – although this is by no means inevitable, particularly if news organisations continue to close and reduce commenting features (Huang, 2016; Stroud et al., 2020).

Internal and external pluralism concepts paint two pictures of how news commenting interfaces with media pluralism. Fundamentally, the traditional conceptions of internal and external pluralism still apply. Despite the revolutions that digital online media presented for media production, distribution, and business models, media on the internet came to be dominated by traditional media organisations – websites for traditional news media from Australia and abroad are the most visited online news sources (Mediaweek, 2021a; S. Park et al., 2021) – with a few new powerful players in the form of digital intermediaries and platforms. Conversely, online innovations like news commenting do draw into question some of the fundamental assumptions behind both internal and external pluralism that suggest ways their boundaries might need to be redefined.

An area where news commenting offers a particularly distinct contribution is with the external pluralism issue of ownership diversity, which is a crucial concern of media pluralism. In some cases, media pluralism is used synonymously with ownership diversity (J. Duncan, 2015), and it is a core component of media pluralism research (Doyle, 2015) and media policies (Hitchens, 2011, p. 228; Ofcom, 2015; Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, 2006). One of the main worries behind ownership diversity is that a smaller number of media owners with a greater concentration of power would restrict the diversity of content and views the media presents (Doyle, 2015; Trappel & Meier, 2022), though

incontrovertible evidence of this in practice has sometimes proven elusive (Karppinen, 2007). Doyle (2015, p. 298) suggests a structurally symbiotic relationship between powerful media owners wanting relaxed media policies and politicians seeking positive media coverage incentivises such media practices, and this concern is echoed across a range of media theorists (Baker, 2006; Harding-Smith, 2011; Noam, 2016; Picard, 2017). This risk also assumes that the news organisation editors and journalists have limited autonomous capital to operate from a position of professional norms that would undermine ownership influence (Champagne, 2005). Unfortunately, there is mounting evidence that the social and cultural capital supporting journalistic autonomy is being eroded (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016; Wolfgang, 2019), adding weight to this concern.

However, there are other practical issues that make ownership diversity a more complicated concern. Mergers and acquisitions reduce ownership diversity, but so do closures. This is often the rationale for these mergers and acquisitions: through economies of scale, whereby efficiency is improved by preventing duplication of the same materials across a range of media outlets and providing producers with a larger pool of shared resources (Hitchens, 2011, p. 225), media organisations that would otherwise close could potentially continue operating. This competing concern was on full display in South Korea's changes to media ownership in 2009 – the newspaper industry that maintained strong ideological ties and provided positive coverage of the incumbent government was allowed to acquire and develop broadcasting media outlets, but the newspaper industry was and is also undeniably facing existential economic hardship (D. Kim, 2018), a concern that was similarly raised in Australia (Department of Communications and the Arts, 2017). Thus, policy makers need to consider the range of threats to ownership diversity when considering its risks for media pluralism. However, as Doyle (2015) noted, politicians have little incentive to maintain such rules, and Australia has scaled back ownership controls twice since online news was introduced (Dwyer, 2012, 2019), having failed to deal with the increasingly complex and interconnected media ecosystem (Hitchens, 2011). Other nations have seen similar

results, with increasing concentration of ownership presenting a global issue (Noam, 2016; Trappel & Meier, 2022).

These ownership diversity concerns also interface with news commenting, but news commenting interacts with them in unique ways. The power of ownership and editorial control over comments is potentially existential – news organisations told Huang (2016) that they can and do turn them off entirely if they are not seeing the content and benefits they want to see. Conversely, reinforcing the importance of journalistic autonomy, comments are seen by many journalists as having a journalistic function by hosting the public debate (Chen & Pain, 2017; Meltzer, 2015), so the extent to which organisations have autonomy in the journalistic field correlates to their willingness to keep comments open (Loke, 2012; Robinson, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2011), despite the economic challenges of moderation and oversight (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016). Well-resourced and designed news commenting systems and moderation can buoy profits through subscriptions (Huang, 2016) and audience engagement (Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Vujnovic, 2011; Wolfgang, 2021), contributing to the sustainability of the news organisation, and Stroud et al. (2020) found they consistently lead to increased onsite time for users. With sustainability challenges cited as a cause for winnowing ownership diversity (Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, 2018), there are incentives for news organisations to open news commenting and to foster active comment sections.

The conditions required to generate engaging comments and source engaged commenters work against ownership risks, as well. A key concern of ownership concentration is the potential for ownership to influence the content their news organisation produces (R. Collins & Cave, 2013), and Trappel and Meier (2022) suggest that scholarship has found ample cause for concern in this regard. In the case of news commenting, however, owners and staff appear to have little control over the stories that attract comment (Koskie, 2018) and comments create their own distinct narratives and frames for the news (Miloni et al., 2012) – though the organisations' decisions can produce predictable results for characteristics such as civility

(Ksiazek, 2018). Their power to turn comments off works against the opportunity to profit from them as a metric of audience engagement and feedback (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019) and reduces on-site time (Stroud et al., 2020), while heavy-handed moderation practices can elicit a strong negative reaction (Koskie, 2018; Løvlie et al., 2017; Meyer & Carey, 2014). Further, even the most vigilant moderators leave up or publish the majority of comments that users post (Huang, 2016). With their potential to bring profit and resistance to editorial controls, the divergent and varied contributions of commenters have the potential to abate some of the risks of concentrated media ownership.

News commenting also contributes to the other external pluralism elements listed by Klimkiewicz (2009), particularly independence and multiplicity in sites of production. Commenters are notoriously independent and resistant to consequences for the materials they post (Wolfgang, 2018), and it is difficult to effectively reprimand a commenter for posts that go against organisational policies or defamation/vilification laws (Koskie, 2018); even banned users can open new accounts with a new name. With an Australian news organisation found to be liable for defamation in comments under their Facebook post (*Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd v Voller (HCA) s236/2020*, 2021; Rolph, 2021), this independence could be cause for some trepidation, though it is crucial to note that the news organisation had already been vigilant about preventing such defamation for their onsite news commenting (Koskie, 2018). Some governments and political actors have used the challenge of such moderation to their advantage – China and Russia have reportedly leveraged online comments’ anonymous character to post propaganda or subvert opponents (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgoda, 2017) and a political actor in Korea manipulated news commenting systems to highlight support for his candidate and reduce visibility of the competitors (Yoon, 2019). Unlike journalists and news organisations, the users making comments only extremely rarely see any practical impact for a post that crosses the line. This may change as websites, such as those in China, ramp up mandatory identification processes (Zhou, Liang, Zhang, & Ma, 2015), but these are not widespread. Extensive barriers to



posting, such as steep registration requirements, can put off would-be commenters, reducing the benefits of hosting comment sections (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014), and removing anonymity has not been shown to provide consistent benefits (Moore et al., 2021; Santana, 2019). This all suggests that it is both difficult to control which participants come through the gates and to guide them to produce valuable (and non-problematic) content.

One of the key promises of participatory media was its potential to increase multiplicity in sites of production (Deuze, 2003), and this has held true for news commenting. Comments allow centralised and increasingly urban media organisations to have an amateur media producer, in the form of the website users, providing on-site views and news from otherwise underserved regions (Canter, 2013). Indeed, isolation is one of the motivators for users to participate in comment sections (Barnes, 2015), and users proximal to news events can provide detail and perspective that could otherwise go overlooked (Morrison, 2017). While such users cannot make up for the declining presence of local journalism (Powers et al., 2015) and are much more invested in opining than in investigating or adding details (Miloni et al., 2012), Canter (2013) found that regional users writing from diverse sites contribute content for these news comment sections and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) found they can bring not only views on local issues but also different perspectives on the public's relationship to the events.

My focus in this research, however, is on the distinct impact news commenting could have on internal pluralism. This is the component of news commenting that has the most potential to contribute to media pluralism, in terms of both the diversity of content and diversity of producers identified as crucial indicators of internal media pluralism by Klimkiewicz (2009) and Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015). In many cases, news commenting has produced comment sections with limited diversity of information, perspectives, and representation (Baden & Springer, 2014; Miloni et al., 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011), just as earlier ambitious participatory media predictions (Pavlik, 1999) fell well short in practice (Domingo, 2008; Mosco, 2005). However, given the impact of organisations' moderation and community management decisions

(Bakker, 2014; Domingo, 2014; Koskie, 2018) and the developing awareness and behaviours of online readers and commenters (S. C. Lewis et al., 2014; Zelenkauskaite & Niezgodna, 2017), this potential remains, as exhibited by high profile examples like the *New York Times* and *Dawn* (Huang, 2016) as well as *the Guardian* (Domingo, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2011), which have cultivated active, popular and pluralistic media through their commenting features. Baden and Springer (2014) and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) show that this diversity is both common and multi-faceted.

An anticipated consequence of news commenting is of particular significance to internal pluralism – the introduction of the wider public as participatory producers of media content. This model could see diverse commenters adding perspectives, representation, and information (Morrison, 2017), bypassing the gatekeeping traditionally done by editors and journalists (Bruns, 2008) who have not traditionally been a highly diverse group (Forde, 2005). Evidence of this effect has not been strong, however (Barnes, 2018b; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Walter et al., 2018), and in some cases vitriolic comments, sometimes filled with threats and aggression (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Wolfgang, 2018), has put off diverse contributors (Meyer & Speakman, 2016). In some cases, over half of comments are posted by less than five percent of users – often called “super” participants or users (Goodman, 2013; Graham & Wright, 2014; Huang, 2016) – and users’ reasons for posting comments are often more about the emotional gratifications they receive than the perspective, information or representation they put in (Barnes, 2015).

However, like Gibbon’s “sufficient plurality” (2015), this apparent lack of variety among commenters begs a question: how many distinct people need to comment for news commenting to pose a marked contribution to this component of internal media pluralism? For *Dawn* (Huang, 2016), operating a massive news organisation in Pakistan, their comment sections offer a way to give a voice to people across the country that would otherwise not be heard. Canter (2013) discovered people commenting from rural communities that have lost or generally lack a local outlet. The role of commenters is given special significance in South Korea, where media organisations and government announcements are not highly trusted, as news commenting gives

them access to alternative perspectives and additional information to get a more inductive sense of the news (D. Kim & Johnson, 2009). Meyer and Speakman (2016) suggest that this diversity of commenters conforms to the democratic missions of journalistic media, but this opportunity is highly imperilled. Reflecting on a US survey of 1017 users, they found that expressing minority opinions on online platforms presents a daunting challenge and the potential for conflict puts off potential contributors, though news organisations can moderate and manage their community to mitigate this effect. The presence of comment sections can open the door to potentially unheard voices from otherwise unseen groups, depending on the ecosystem that surrounds them.

According to Karppinen (2013), a central concern is the extent to which the various components of the media system are actually yielding usefully diverse media content, and it is on this measure of internal media pluralism that news commenting has shown some specific promise. While initial conceptions of the internet as throwing open the gates to all comers (Deuze, 2003; Pavlik, 1999) have proven mostly unfounded (Domingo, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009), massive studies of news comments have found that they do present additions to media diversity. Commenters rarely present thoroughly researched information – they are, after all, not paid to do the investigative work notionally central to journalism (Deuze, 2008) – but they do bring new narratives and frames to the existing information, according to Milioni et al. (2012). Conversely, Graham and Wright (2015) found that some commenters do indeed contribute new information and specialist knowledge, but it depends on the subject and readership. Baden and Springer (2014) found that news commenters typically shift the focus of the story significantly; where news organisations describe events as processes, news commenters often attribute them to individuals they perceive to be at fault. If, as R. Collins and Cave (2013) suggests, media pluralism is a means to ensure accountability for people in power, Baden and Springer's results provide evidence that news commenters are keen contributors to the cause. Ruiz et al. (2011) further find that news commenting can present a crucial next step for journalistic outputs: showing a public debate on how to consider the revelations. While their contribution is nuanced,

these expansive studies indicate that news commenting does consistently add to the diversity of media content presented to the public.

Unfortunately, what these studies are not designed to investigate is that last mile of the media system: they do not accommodate for or indicate how much of the diversity the public is actually exposed to. For Napoli (2011), it is this exposure that is the most important diversity to consider, as the functions the media can fulfil require that the public see the content. This is especially concerning for news commenting; individual stories can have thousands of comments (Ruiz et al., 2011) but the first comments visible can have a large impact on how readers perceive and contribute to the discussion (Suh et al., 2018). Large scale samples – Ruiz et al. (2011) studied over 15,000 (narrowed from a larger sample of 65,000) comments from four countries while Milioni et al. (2012) studied 3513 comments in Greece alone – were not stratified by time of comments posting or reading, meaning there was no accounting for the potential extent of exposure. These two concerns, the placement of comments in the order of reading and a practical cap on number of comments read, need to be reconciled to get a more representative picture of the diversity of both participants and content that readers could be exposed to.

Further exacerbating the concern over exposure diversity is that comments are received and valued differently to readers in different national media ecosystems, making a mapping of the media ecosystem vital to assessing news commenting's contribution. Ruiz et al. (2011) noted that the civility and frames of comment sections varied by nation and news organisations in ways that impacted debates and interactivity in the discussion, which suggests distinct audiences have their own responses to this new form of media. While no cross-national comparisons of audiences have been made directly, Stroud et al. (2016) found that avid comment readers were not the majority in the US, while I. Kang (2016) found South Koreans pay more attention to participatory journalism contributions due to higher levels of distrust in traditional media. In Ukraine, comments are read with the assumption that they could have been posted by Russian state actors hiding behind a false online identity (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodna, 2017), while

Portuguese comment sections can be seen as a part of the public debate (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). Consequently, identifying the impact of news commenting on media pluralism requires identifying how it relates to the distinct national media ecosystem, as media ecology theoretical frameworks ground media pluralism's impact on the way societal systems work.

### **Media Pluralism Through the Lens of Media Ecology**

Media pluralism is tied directly to the core concerns of media ecology, which considers media as an environment in which people make sense of their society and thereby constitute it (Cali, 2017). This is as much due to the ways the media transmits messages as due to the messages it transmits. When McLuhan and Fiore (1967) claimed “the medium is the message”, he was describing the ways the existence of television, completely apart from its programming, impacted the way people receive information and even organise their day. It contributed to the mix of media which people relied upon to make decisions in their daily lives and to make sense of what was happening – the media ecosystem (Postman, 2000). Television was competing with radio, newspapers, books, and countless other media to connect people to messages from a certain selection of voices, a selection constrained and enabled by the technologies behind the medium. These issues – the messages, the selection of voices, and the technology behind them – are all the central concerns of media pluralism (Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015).

Media pluralism benefits from media ecology frameworks' holistic view of media systems that assess their components as interconnected (Scolari, 2012), which is especially valuable for assessing rapidly converging and changing media. Hitchens (2011, p. 220) uses this characteristic of media ecology to assess the state of Australia's media ecosystem and highlight the importance of media pluralism assessments that accommodate the increasing interconnectedness of media. According to Hitchens, it is this interconnectedness of the media environment that makes current policies, which often consider each medium individually, ineffective at cultivating a national media system that effectively defends against the negative impacts of the main media pluralism concern it measures, concentration of media ownership. While some media pluralism

scholars, such as K. Jakubowicz (2015) and Sjøvaag (2016) use the term “media ecology” without reference to the theoretical framework, they no less are referencing the need to consider and assess media as an increasingly converged and internally connected system due to the influence of technological innovations.

Media pluralism has much to offer media ecology frameworks as well. Media ecology frameworks have been criticised for being overly technologically deterministic – with some good reason (Postman, 2000) – as they focus on the ways that technological changes impact our media environment. However, what is often missing from this argument is that the media ecology version of the term *technology* owes much to the term *technique* – a town crier serves as much purpose for revolutionising communication as does a fax machine (Cali, 2017). In this sense, interfacing the concepts of media pluralism and media ecology sees media pluralism describing the way this collection of techniques, from regulating ownership diversity (Doyle, 2015) to promoting social inclusion in production and content (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), yields specific changes to the media environment in which society operates.

Media pluralism, with its focus on the social, economic, and technological structures that affect communicative power and content diversity (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), provides further clarity on the forces that shape the media environment in which society functions. While, in line with media ecological frameworks, innovations in digital and online media have radically altered the way people interact with and perceive society (Scolari, 2012), patterns of ownership and the historied social capital of legacy media affect how access and attention is distributed even in this new space (Flew, Suwana, & Tam, 2018). An account that does not include an understanding of the contribution of media pluralism concerns would paint an incomplete picture, and Boczkowski (2004) finds that the social conditions are just as important as the affordances of the technology for how communication innovations are accommodated.

Finally, media ecology's normative foundation overlaps significantly with those underpinning conceptions of media pluralism in media environments. For media ecology, this harkens back to its metaphorical roots – to discuss the environment is to discuss repair (Cali, 2017, p. 4). This means taking into consideration the ways that media can damage the way societies operate and impair people's ability to interact with the world (Postman, 2000). While, as shown, media pluralism has proven elusive to define, Karppinen (2013) similarly suggests that media pluralism should be considered ideologically normative, abrogating the ways that media can be purposefully made to subvert the functioning of societies (particularly democratic societies) for communicative power while ensuring media content is sufficient and diverse as to make a positive contribution. Both are seeing the media as an environment for society to mitigate its negative potential and emphasise its opportunity. Consequently, a key concern for this work is to capture media pluralism through an ecological lens – a lens that would necessitate a study of “new media” such as news commenting (K. Jakubowicz, 2015).

#### *Gauging the Pluralism of a National Media Ecosystem*

Considering media pluralism as a part of a national media ecosystem means the individual assessments of its components, such as the MPM's media independence or financial sustainability (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018) to the larger whole of the national media ecosystem. As such, two countries may have similar levels of ownership diversity but the implications for media pluralism will be different in each case due to its interconnectedness with other media pluralism concerns. It is this contextualised view that enables the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018) and Valcke, Sukosd, et al. (2015) to make effective cross-national comparisons of media pluralism.

Consequently, understanding the contribution of news commenting to media pluralism requires seeing how it interacts with the media ecosystem in multiple national settings. This will necessitate applying media pluralism indicators suggested by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) and the internal and external pluralism measures reviewed by Klimkiewicz (2011) to the

Australian and South Korean environments individually by leveraging existing national media research. This grounding in the national media ecosystem can then illustrate how news commenting can be differently valued for its role in the media system.



## Chapter 4 – Australia and South Korea as Media Ecosystems

Chapters 2 and 3 illustrated not only that news comments provide a useful area of study but also that they can have practical implications for media pluralism. Indeed, given their popularity (Ribeiro, 2020; Stroud et al., 2016) and prevalence (Huang, 2016), media pluralism assessments overlooking the presence and contents of comments would provide an incomplete picture. However, Ruiz et al. (2011) demonstrate another crucial consideration for evaluating the impact of news commenting: each national media ecosystem was found to be hosting different kinds of comments which were playing a role in highly distinct environments. Later studies by the World Association of Newspapers bore this out (Goodman, 2013; Huang, 2016), revealing the unique factors individual organisations in different countries were facing as they sought to promote, utilise, and moderate the comments appearing under or alongside their news stories.

At the outset of this project, I hypothesised that the results of this study in each country would diverge, potentially greatly, but that this divergence would be rooted in the particular characteristics of the media ecosystems into which the comments were introduced and incorporated. Australia and Korea provide a compelling illustration of how distinct the media ecosystems surrounding news commenting can be and how this might impact their role. Incorporating this understanding into the assessment requires a way to compare the distinct media environments surrounding these comments.

Utilising research on cross-national media systems comparisons, media pluralism assessments, and media ecology analysis, this chapter identifies the distinct gap that news commenting fills in each media ecosystem and the implications of these gaps for the results of the research. I do this by utilising the methods and categories of concern raised by Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2017), Napoli et al. (2012), A. Chadwick (2017) and the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) to understand media systems' interactions with the recent digital innovation of news commenting. The chapter also highlights the bridges between the often similar challenges faced by each nation as their media systems are transformed by the

rapid development of online media (Hitchens, 2015; Youn & Lee, 2015). For each comparison, I consider the implications for news commenting.

### Mapping and Comparing Media

One key challenge for this project is assessing news commenting's contribution to media pluralism in a way that is relevant to the media ecosystem. Indeed, even the phrase *media ecosystem* is confronting given its inconsistent ties to concepts of media ecology and, conversely, media systems. For some media researchers, such as Hitchens (2011), this link is not only explicit but vital for the ways that it makes clear media exist as a holistic and interconnected system, where Napoli et al. (2012) use both “media ecosystem” and “media ecology” with no direct reference to media ecology theoretical frameworks. Elsewhere, Peterson (2011) provides a description of the media firmly rooted in media ecology frameworks but makes no use of the term media ecosystem, and Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose a holistic and longitudinal assessment of the media but call their object of study *media systems*.

Seeing a media system is seeing a society's interconnected communication components as “a whole of cooperating parts” (Bastiansen, 2008, p. 95). Using concepts of media ecology to see it as an ecosystem, though, draws attention to that process of disruption and dynamism that new and changing mediums can bring, exemplified by the ideas of McLuhan and Fiore (1967) on how the electric light reorganised societies' schedules by facilitating work and leisure at night. It is concern over this dynamism, the catalysts of change that Mancini (2020, p. 5764) calls “technology critical junctures”, that problematises the comparing media systems approach proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Media ecology highlights and contextualises that disruption or innovation for the ways it interfaces with the existing media environment (Cali, 2017) rather than taking a limitlessly broad perspective of all media and its interactions with society. Media ecology frameworks can rely on the existing information about media systems, such as that generated by Hallin and Mancini (2004), and narrow the study's own focus on the

disruptive and innovative new technologies as what Napoli et al. (2012, p. 5) refer to as an “independent variable.”

A cross-national comparison of the media ecosystem surrounding news commenting presents several key benefits for media ecology research. By looking at multiple media ecosystems, this research can show the ways that news commenting’s distinct contributions partially reflect the different media environments it inhabits. This approach both is in keeping with media ecology theories, which emphasise the role that media plays in changing the way societies communicate themselves to themselves (Cali, 2017), and expands on how changes can apply distinctly in different societies. A deeper analysis could investigate the ways the populations of these countries are culturally distinct – Australia’s media system is partially a result of its particular social environment as is Korea’s (D. Kim, 2018). However, this approach would be exhaustive and problematic; Livingstone (2003) raises crucial concerns that describing cultures risks painting large, complex societies as homogenous and thereby marginalising the diversity of their experiences and perspectives.

### **Comparing Korean and Australian Media Systems**

In this section, I use English-language academic texts and industry reports to leverage the approach suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004) for comparing media systems towards creating an understanding of the current media environment in each country – with a focus on those components that are connected to news commenting. Then, I evaluate the extent to which comments have ties to media pluralism concerns as outlined in Chapter 3. Finally, I compare the ways that each country serves as a context for news commenting, using the national comparisons for a nation-as-context view of the research object (Livingstone, 2003). For each component, I begin with a description of the Korean system followed by a comparative description of the Australian; as this is an English language document, the Korean media system is more likely to be unfamiliar to readers (Rhee et al., 2011) – though Jones and Pusey (2010) suggest the

Australian system is not as similar to the US and UK systems as could be expected given their close ties.

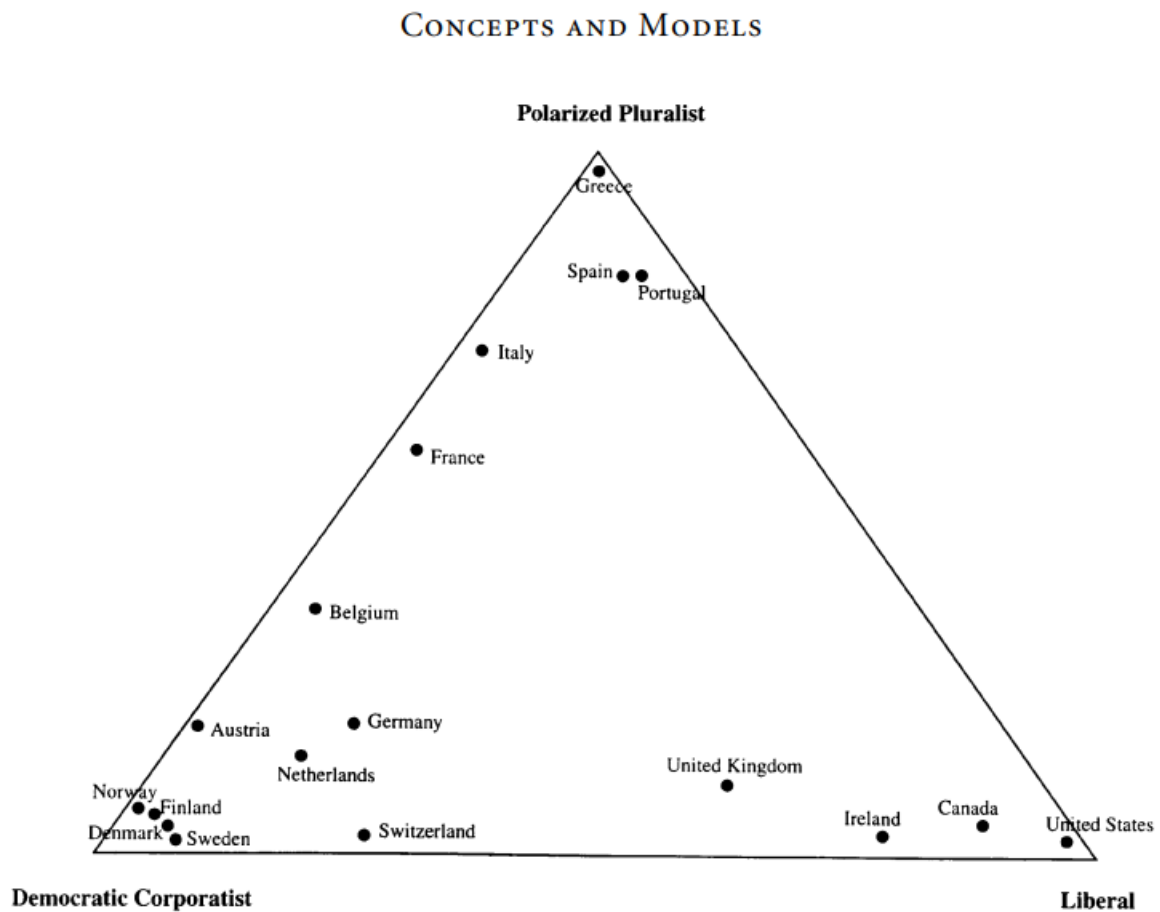
Providing a big-picture assessment of either of these media ecosystems would in itself merit a sizeable research project – let alone comparing the two – and would extend beyond the boundaries of this research project. However, Hallin and Mancini (2004) recommend some fundamental points of focus that can be used to understand this bigger picture using key characteristics of a nation's media, its historic development, and its ties to political systems. The four components they describe, which cover the development of media markets, political parallelism, the field of journalism, and government interventions into the media, provide a multi-faceted view of a nation's media that includes the most highly impactful components. A primary focus of their framework was constraining the otherwise limitless number of variables to make assessments more manageable (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 3). Consequently, I use each of these components in brief to provide a starting point for comparing the media ecosystem surrounding news commenting in these countries.

Assessing a media system through these criteria allows it to be mapped based on its relationship to three broad models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 67), facilitating comparisons of its similarities and differences to other nations' media systems. In Hallin's and Mancini's work (2004), these models are loosely tied to regions of Europe, with no individual nation offering a perfect example of any model [see Figure 3]. Later scholars have since expanded the applications globally (Hallin & Mancini, 2011) and suggested ways to update the assessment (A. Chadwick, 2017). Each model relates to distinct dynamics. The *polarised pluralist* model has a high level of political parallelism, weak journalistic professionalism, and limited legal oversight while the *democratic corporatist* model sees high levels of external pluralism, established journalistic professionalism, and strong legal protections for the press. By contrast, the *liberal* model is characterised by its orientation towards market-organised media, developed but non-institutionalised professionalism, and limited political parallelism. As shown in this chapter,

Korea and Australia have characteristics that tie to and deviate from each model, but one stands out as particularly relevant in each case.

**Figure 3**

*Nations mapped to the three models for comparing media systems by Hallin and Mancini*



*Note:* Reprinted under the education license from Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 70).

An obstacle to employing this framework is that it is based on “mostly similar systems”, with differences being the focus (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and Korea and Australia do not superficially present as mostly similar systems. Indeed, addressing the first point covering the development of media markets, the extent to which these two systems diverge appears substantive. Upon inspection, however, the metrics yield a comparable portrayal. Rhee et al. (2011) and Jones and Pusey (2010) have utilised the comparing media systems approach for each

country to create a portrait that enables a comparison between them while simultaneously highlighting their unique characteristics.

The three models approach employed by Hallin and Mancini did not cleanly and clearly fit either media system, but each analysis was able to use the anchors of these models as a starting point for building the bigger picture. For Jones and Pusey (2010), this meant placing Australia in the middle of the road between Polarised Pluralist and Liberal media systems, where Rhee et al. (2011) suggested creating a new model entirely, called the Democratisation model, which again bore some resemblance to both Polarised Pluralist and Liberal models. The fact that both systems were placed in the same relative position suggests there is merit to developing additional models that provide a better fit for countries further distinct from the European models that informed Hallin and Mancini (2004). Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018) go further to suggest entirely new models should be constructed that accommodate “hybrid media systems” (A. Chadwick, 2017) disrupted by the increasing influence of information and communication technologies. While the results of the comparison here give merit to this recommendation, my focus here is on using the models and the comparison framework as a starting point to provide a nation-as-context (Livingstone, 2003) description for news commenting. Consequently, this chapter is more focused on the discrete descriptors the framework enables.

Though the comparing media systems approach is grounded in media environments that mostly pre-date the rapid growth and increasingly dominant position of online media (Mancini, 2020), it still offers a valuable tool for comparison – provided it incorporates an analysis of the impact of ongoing developments within the media ecosystem (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). This was a crucial concern for this work, which adopts the expanded framework for comparing media systems suggested by Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018) and A. Chadwick (2017), with attention to the presence, visibility, and governing of the new media actors introduced through the internet. Conversely, they note that some components of the approach remain as salient as they were when proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), such as political parallelism and journalistic

professionalism, though these have also been impacted by the changes. The media ecology frameworks central to this project confirm the significance of the history behind the media system as a core influence of its current state (Cali, 2017), suggesting that Hallin's and Mancini's attention to the development of media markets, with a focus on the press, is a formative context for the media ecosystem today. Mancini (2020) raises the "technology critical juncture" as a transformative force for media systems, but such technologically deterministic concerns overlook the extent to which traditional media has also come to dominate online (Flew & Waisbord, 2015) and while people may have new sources of information, they broadly mistrust the information they provide (Newman et al., 2021). It is fundamental to media ecosystemic research to acknowledge change (Napoli et al., 2012), but national media system assessments are still relevant and important (Flew & Waisbord, 2015)

The goal of this chapter is to contextualise the different results and different implications of this news commenting investigation in the specific media systems they conjoin. This takes the emphasis off mapping each system against a broad range of other media systems, as done by Hallin and Mancini (2004), by focusing on a one-to-one comparison to draw out their most impactful distinctions and their implications. It also necessitates expanding parts of the analysis, specifically those that relate to the development of media markets, to go beyond newspaper circulation. While the development of mass circulation newspaper markets remains an important characteristic – in fact, this analysis generally reinforces the importance of that history – a view of the broadcast, terrestrial cable and satellite television, and online media markets adds crucial colour to the operation of the media market and the ways that the public interacts with it, and so these markets also bear description.

### **Traditional and Revolutionary Media Markets**

From a perspective of the development of media markets, the implications of news commenting appear to be more amplified for Australia than for Korea. To the extent that news commenting can add new voices (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), new views (Baden & Springer,

2014), or local insight (Canter, 2013), Australia would stand to reap more benefits due to the otherwise constrained range of sources available through traditional media. Conversely, the deleterious potential of comments to quiet contributors (M. Duncan et al., 2020; Meyer & Speakman, 2016) or to drown out their contributions through excessive phatic content (Miller, 2008) could also prove more impactful for Australians. They already see less and less news covering their local daily lives (Dickson, 2020) and vitriolic comments can put off potential sources (Koskie, 2018) while simultaneously preventing or obscuring contributions in the comment sections. Koreans have access to and utilise a wider range of news media across media types, though they are still dealing with the ramifications of a history of disrupted development for their media markets (S.-E. Kim, 2012). This disparity becomes clearer upon a closer look at the historical and current status of the countries' respective media markets.

The method for describing media markets initially employed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and to varying extents taken up by Rhee et al. (2011) and Jones and Pusey (2010) involves three elements. The first, the focus of Hallin and Mancini, is the historical background of specifically the newspaper market. The second element involves describing the character of the press in terms of who they communicate with and whom they represent. The third element is to evaluate the way and extent to which the public subscribes to their communication.

Consequently, this section entreats each, giving a brief history for each country's press, the range of organisations communicating on each media type, and the extent to which the public subscribes to each of these media types. This is intended only as a survey of existing literature and industry reports – more in-depth studies would improve the fidelity of this portrayal.

#### *The Development of the Korean Media Market*

The early development of mass circulation print media is a particularly unique element of the Korean media market. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the early development of this market was a strong contributing factor to the current media market, with late adopters having fewer readers and fewer options. While newspapers in countries like Norway have seen a



significant decline (Advameg, 2021) since Hallin and Mancini's seminal work in light of digital alternatives, countries with earlier mass circulation newspaper markets maintain comparably more developed newspaper markets and those older newspapers remain highly relevant sources of news (Lie, 2018). This is problematised in Korea, though it in some ways reinforces this proposition: circulation remains relatively high in the face of stunted development, potentially as a result of a historically early start to newspaper circulation.

Korea presents a case of early and then wholly interrupted development, followed by a period of aggressive growth. Korea published not only a mass circulation Korean-language newspaper but also even an English-language newspaper before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schmid, 2002), and by the time of the Japanese takeover in 1910, there were a number of diverse and broadly circulated newspapers. In fact, the *Chobo*, printed in 1577, could be considered the world's first printed daily newspaper (H. Kang, 2021), though it was short-lived. However, Korea's media system was entirely disrupted twice in its subsequent development, once by the colonial authorities under the Empire of Japan and then again later by the US military that pushed them out. In each case, newspapers that opposed the current regime were restricted and closed (S.-E. Kim, 2012). Further, after decades of being denied comprehensive education, Korean illiteracy rates were as high as 78% in 1945 (Sorensen, 1994), making this print media inaccessible to large portions of the public. These media trends of suppressing dissenting media continued until only recently, with Korea's revolt against the dictatorship under Chun Doo-hwan in 1986.

As a result of this history of disrupted development, the original news organisations from the turn of the century were broadly shut down and the oldest existing print media outlets were those friendly to and supportive of the US-supported dictatorships of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan (S.-E. Kim, 2012). These longstanding organisations continue to dominate the newspaper markets, with the print media market largely and famously skewed towards conservative parties and ideologies since their policy of leaving each province with a

single newspaper in 1981 expanded their influence and entrenched a newspaper oligopoly (D. Kim, 2018). There are a few prominent and notable exceptions, like the *Hankyoreh* – founded in 1988 by journalists removed from conservative newspapers, often by government censors, which has become the most highly trusted newspaper in the country (E.-K. Han, Lee, & Khang, 2008; Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andt, & Nielsen, 2020), but their readership remains relatively small (of note is that the *Hankyoreh* was also the first mass circulation daily to be printed entirely in the Korean alphabet of Hangul, with no English, Japanese, or Chinese characters).

This distinction – of having an early developing mass circulation newspaper market that was wholly interrupted by successive and conflicting foreign powers – has led to a perhaps predictably mixed result. While not having the circulation of the most developed European markets per Hallin and Mancini (2004), the newspaper markets of Korea have achieved and maintain a level of circulation, approximately 176 per 1000 people (Yonhap News Agency, 2019), in line with liberal media systems in countries such as Canada that have a longer history of uninterrupted newspaper market development. While Korean newspapers have a relatively recent history of being government mouthpieces and maintaining a conservative lean, the 172 newspapers of Korea now serve a wide variety of organisations, from commercial groups to labour unions (Rhee et al., 2011), and all of their biggest newspapers are national dailies that provide a majority of the population with a range of national and regional choices (S.-E. Kim, 2012), with emerging providers further augmenting this (Oh, 2016). In a comparably short span of time – just half a century – Korea came from what Hallin and Mancini (2004) would have labelled a markedly weak development of newspaper markets to one of relative strength.

For broadcast media, Korea shares more in common with other developed media systems. The first widely broadcast radio and television channels started from KBS, presently the Korean Broadcasting System, in 1927 (Choi & Kang, 2001) – this compares well with UK's BBC in 1922 and Australia's ABC in 1929 (though not formally called the ABC until 1932) (Mundy, 1982). Also like the UK and Australia (Debrett, 2015), public service and government funded

broadcast stations remain highly prevalent (Newman et al., 2021); three of the four broadcasters are either public service media (KBS, EBS) or government sponsored (MBC). Alongside the sole major commercial free-to-air broadcasting corporation, SBS, these four have television and radio channels in every market. Radio also presents several other channels available in select markets catering to specific groups (such as the Christian Broadcasting Corporation). While this ostensibly results in fewer television and radio channel options compared to newspapers, each of the public service broadcasters is markedly distinct: where KBS constitutes a more traditional public service broadcaster like Australia's ABC and UK's BBC, EBS (Educational Broadcasting System) carries exclusively educational programming (Takeda, 2020). The MBC maintains a separate governance structure, operating in many ways like a commercial television broadcaster, receiving its funding from advertising and having some amount of independence in their programming choices, though the government has a 70% stake and sometimes exerts a strong influence or even control (D. Kim, 2018). Further, SBS dedicates a much higher share of their budget to diverse and quality programming to differentiate them from the public broadcasters, and regional SBS channels run unique content of their own (despite this, KBS remains the most influential channel). This differentiation has seen each network maintain a prominent position, including online (Newman et al., 2021).

Korea has a prolific, successful, and diverse terrestrial cable and satellite pay television market (E.-A. Park, 2018). Initially, cable television was taken up to only a limited extent as a way to bring broadcast media to populations within Korea's extensive mountain ranges where terrestrial reception was insufficient, but content was strictly limited to existing broadcast media (D. Kim, 2018). This changed in 1990, when the Korean government formed the General Cable Broadcasting Promotion Committee to drive innovation and promote new media. Terrestrial cable and satellite television have since enjoyed a high level of take up in Korea, as high as 80%, thanks to prices kept low – basic plans are a small fraction of the price paid in Australia at approximately \$AUD 6 – by fierce competition and a much higher level of diversity than that

available on public broadcasters (Shim & Jin, 2007). As many as 77 cable operators offered access to programs from as many as 29 content producers, with vigorous competition keeping prices low and variety high. While most famous for its contribution to the “Korean wave” content that is now distributed globally (E.-A. Park, 2018), this media also dispenses news and information and generally plays a prominent role in the media ecosystem. One pay-television network, JTBC, is second only to KBS as a source for televised news (Newman et al., 2020). The government required that this market provide local and information channels, such as a network dedicated to broadcasting the Assembly, but these must-carry channels have been criticised for not allowing independent journalistic programming and instead playing a public relations role (D. Kim, 2018).

Finally, what makes Korea such a relevant comparison for this study is the most active and popular part of their media environment: online media. Unlike many Western media environments (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), Korean news consumers largely turn to digital native organisations to get their news online (Ackland et al., 2019). While technically news aggregators and not news organisations in themselves (they do not produce their own news stories), Naver and Kakao Inc-owned Daum have an outsized influence on news consumption in Korea, to the extent that their website policies are being implicated as a determining factor in elections (Baek et al., 2020; Dwyer & Hutchinson, 2019). The majority of Koreans turn to online media for their news (Newman et al., 2021) and the vast majority of them visit these two portals as well as streaming and social media platforms YouTube and KakaoTalk (online sites for the traditional broadcasters and newspapers remain popular, however). User interactivity is a mainstay on these portals, with social media playing a key role in the success of the e-commerce business of both Naver and Daum (S.-Y. T. Lee & Phang, 2015). As KakaoTalk is primarily a messaging and video telephony service and YouTube is a user-generated content streaming platform, Newman et al. (2021) did not include them as news websites despite their popularity as a source for news.

On the other hand, looking down the rankings, only few digital native organisations outrank established newspaper and broadcast news organisations, which remain popular online.

Taken together, Koreans now have a developed and developing media system despite their early challenges (and in some ways as a result of them), lending credence to Rhee et al. (2011) describing it as a dynamic and aggressively developing market. While they face the same issues of traditional media in decline as other countries (D. Kim, 2018), this is occurring alongside the development of robust online news media offerings, and their traditional media outlets have also shown a degree of resilience and flexibility (Newman et al., 2020; Yonhap News Agency, 2019). The Korean government has directly facilitated this diversity through its investments in infrastructure and, in some cases, direct funding, as well as, in 2000, enabling new channels and news websites to launch by moving from an approvals to a simple and cheap registration system, leading to a multiplication of sources for media and news (D. Kim, 2018). Koreans have access to and utilise a range of private and commercial organisations online, in print, and in terrestrial broadcasting as well as extensive public service media in radio and television.

A more complex picture emerges when focusing on newer sources of media, however, as suggested by A. Chadwick (2017), and this is especially crucial when considering Korea given its robust take up of media innovations (H. S. Kim, 2018). Dwyer and Hutchinson (2019) find that a view of Korea's external pluralism must also take note of the role and position of its unique online portals where news is dominantly consumed – Naver and Daum. They ostensibly feature a variety of articles from a variety of sources across Korea, but these online news portals leverage considerable and largely unaccountable influence in choosing which organisations are visible. Consequently, Dwyer and Hutchinson (2019, p. 28) suggest that there is “a very dynamic media market in Korea, and yet one still dominated by a relatively small set of players.” This further emphasises the importance of expanding the comparing media systems framework to consider the growing importance of new forms of media (A. Chadwick, 2017; Mancini, 2020).

*Australia's Established Media Market*

While Korea shares some of the above characteristics with Australia, there are also key differences, particularly regarding the development of mass circulation newspapers. Australia's newspaper market is a story of steady and sustained development, but its many newspapers are geographically separated. Though it technically started later than did Korea, Australia does have an early history of mass circulation newspapers, some of which are still in print (Griffen-Foley, 2014). *The Sydney Morning Herald*, launched in 1831 as *The Sydney Herald* ("A history of the Herald," 2003), remains one of the most read newspapers in Australia and has extended that relative position of strength online (S. Park et al., 2021).

However, Australia's geographical land mass is incomparably larger than Korea's. Australia covers nearly 8,000,000 square kilometres to Korea's 100,000, yet it contains approximately half the population. This means that, while Australia is supported by hundreds of newspapers (Waller, Hess, & Ricketson, 2014), many markets only see one local daily, including major metropolitan markets like Brisbane (O'Shea, 2019), with Covid's impact limiting this still further (Dickson, 2020). Where Korea combines a number of daily regional and national papers (S.-E. Kim, 2012), there are only two national daily newspapers in Australia, *The Australian* and *The Australian Financial Review*, and only *The Australian* marginally exceeds the circulation of some major metropolitan dailies despite their national reach (Roy Morgan, 2020). Australia's numerous newspapers also have extraordinarily concentrated ownership, with 99 percent being owned by just the top four publishers<sup>1</sup> (Tiffen, 2015) and over 90% owned by the top three (Dwyer, Wilding, & Koskie, 2021), further restricting the external pluralism of newspapers available (Dwyer, 2014a). Now, these publishers are shutting down hundreds of regional papers in the face of changes to their business model and the impacts of the pandemic (Dickson, 2020;

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<sup>1</sup> This media ownership has shifted recently due to sales and acquisitions, leaving long established newspapers like *The Sydney Morning Herald*, previously owned by Fairfax Media, under new ownership (Carson, 2018), but this has not diminished the level of ownership concentration (Lidberg, 2019)

Simons & Dickson, 2019). Nevertheless, Australia's daily newspaper circulation, at approximately 181 per 1000 people (Roy Morgan, 2019b), is slightly higher than Korea's and similarly in line with liberal media systems identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004), reinforcing the suggestion that earlier development of newspaper markets is a key component of news readership that may even exceed issues of newspaper accessibility and diversity.

Conversely, Australia has a slightly more externally diverse offering than Korea for free-to-air broadcast channels, though it is again limited by its geographical constraints. For television, Australians have broad access to the public service broadcaster, the ABC, as well as SBS (which includes the National Indigenous Television service NITV), which is focused on serving Australia's multi-cultural communities with non-English and/or community-specific programming (Debrett, 2015). They also have three distinct and competing commercial metropolitan and three regional networks plus one serving central Australia that both rebroadcast metropolitan content and augment or tailor it with their own local content (Australia Communications and Media Authority, 2020). However, regional television channels feature limited levels of local content, with the focus often on rebroadcasting metropolitan or international programmes.

Like Korea, Australia features a wide range of providers on radio, with commercial and community stations complementing an extensive ABC presence (media.info, 2021). SBS broadcasts across Australia but only has bureaus in the major metropolitan centres and frequently airs internationally sourced rather than local content, in several languages. As with newspapers, however, these radio broadcast offerings are spread over an incomparably vast area and consequently have diminished resources for their remote audiences. While they serve demonstrably useful community and local functions (Ewart, 2014; McNair yellowSquares, 2018; Zion et al., 2016), smaller local radio broadcasters are sometimes run by volunteers. Nevertheless, Australians are avid broadcast consumers: over half (52.6%) rely on television or radio as the top sources for news and information (Roy Morgan, 2018d).

Perhaps the most dramatic difference between Australia and Korea, apart from the geographical challenges, is in the area of terrestrial cable and satellite pay television. In Australia, the introduction of satellite and terrestrial cable pay television was met with resistance rather than opportunistic enthusiasm. There was a clash of policies designed to protect free-to-air broadcasters at the time of introduction, reconcile profit uncertainty, and navigate competitive conflicts between telecommunications providers – a process Tiffen (2007, p. 55) described as “one of the most convoluted, indeed absurd, policymaking processes that Australia has ever witnessed.” Where Korea features an abundance of diversity in its pay television, which is distributed cheaply by competing providers (Tiffen & Kwak, 2005), Australians pay substantially higher fees for usually the only provider available: Foxtel (Tiffen, 2007). However, few Australians elect to pay for the service – less than a quarter of Australians subscribe at all (Roy Morgan, 2019a). Korea features a diversity of content producers exclusive to Korean pay television, but, apart from its extensive sports coverage and news channels, Foxtel largely imports premium foreign English-language content (Foxtel, 2021), including for their news programming. The rapid rise of and high subscription rates for online paid streaming services such as Netflix in Australia (Dwyer et al., 2018; Roy Morgan, 2019a) suggest that pay television in Australia has not lived up to its potential demand, as Australians have elsewhere demonstrated a willingness to pay for content.

While Australia’s online media environment lacks dominant digital natives as a primary news source, it otherwise shares Korea’s focus on legacy news organisations for online news. All of the top ten news websites in Australia (Nielsen, 2021) are either the website for a legacy media organisation, both print and broadcast, or owned and operated by a legacy media organisation (News.com.au, owned by newspaper conglomerate News Corp Australia). The most visited, ABC news websites, expands the ABC’s already extensive television and radio presence into print, while *the Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* show not only Australian but also overseas legacy media play a dominating role online. Digital natives have been crowded out by traditional media



moving online (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), with websites like Yahoo and MSN disappearing from rankings where they were once prominent (Roy Morgan, 2018c) (it should be noted that both Yahoo and MSN had previously been associated with a broadcaster – Seven and Nine – and their decline followed their separation from these broadcasters). Further, Australians are less likely to rely on online news as their most trusted or primary source of news (Newman et al., 2021). This continued reliance on legacy media organisations as well as traditional media types adds further weight to the emphasis Hallin and Mancini (2004) placed on the historical development of media as a critical component when describing media systems – even with the increasing take-up of online media, traditional media types and sources maintain their role.

Taken together, this positions Australia as a media system relatively lacking in external pluralism, including for the online media most relevant to news commenting. While Australians appear to be relatively engaged media consumers (Jones & Pusey, 2010), the specific challenges of their geography and other factors put constraints on their access to a wider range of newspapers and terrestrial cable or satellite pay television. This pushes them more towards a polarised pluralist model, but it is important to note that this limited selection of newspapers has an established history and a relatively high rate of circulation, making a stark distinction between Australia and the Mediterranean polarised pluralist media systems described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Nevertheless, with traditional media organisations extending their dominance online (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), the constrained and shrinking range of news media available to Australians is a growing concern (Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, 2018).

### **Political Parallelism**

The second component of assessment, levels of political parallelism in the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), is also a central concern for both Korea and Australia, though it manifests itself in different ways. In Australia, there are calls for a royal commission into government relationships with the partisan press (Vincent, 2020), while Korean legislators have

literally come to physical blows on the Assembly floor over calls of press favouritism (D. Kim, 2018). The political parallelisation of the press plays out distinctly in each system, in part due to the differences in media markets described above. While Hallin and Mancini focus on a few key indicators of political parallelism – media content, organisational connections, partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices – this section will ground Korea’s specific political parallelism in its dynamic history.

### *Historical Political Parallelism in Korea*

Political parallelism in Korea, much like the media market, has seen dramatic shifts resulting from dramatic shifts in government. Koreans have long had an appetite for an independent press, and the first newspaper was shut down in 1577 because it brought unwanted scrutiny to the government (H. Kang, 2021). Alongside government-printed or sponsored newspapers circulating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were also newspapers advocating for government reform printed both in Korean and English (Schmid, 2002) with a focus on being independent, indicating more moderate levels of parallelism. Again, much of this changed under foreign occupations and dictatorships, when newspapers were rigidly controlled by censors and private, commercial papers feared crossing officials (S.-E. Kim, 2012). To this day, the major newspapers of Korea maintain a conservative line. The largest news agency, Yonhap, was also the product of a government forced merger (D. Kim, 2018) and the government’s capacity to influence their production weighs on the public’s perception of their bias (Y. Song, 2017).

Broadcasting began more recently, but also faced significant ongoing controls by the government of the day. KBS radio started as Keijō Hōsō (Jung, 2010), with Keijō being the Japanese name for Seoul, at the behest of the Japanese governor-general. KBS television was launched under US-educated pro-American dictator Rhee Syngman (Kwak, 1999). Up to the present day, newspaper and broadcast journalists have not only been arrested or blacklisted for going against censors but even labelled as North Korean spies (D. Kim, 2018). In the resulting media environment, polarisation has been pronounced, with newspapers seen to be supporting

conservative governments and broadcasters supporting progressive governments, though recent governments significantly purged public broadcasters of journalists opposed to a renewed emphasis on governmental editorial control. This relationship is not one-sided, however; Korea's political spaces saw the rise of numerous "poli-nalists" as the media market grew – journalists becoming politicians to join the governments they had been covering (and in some cases covering for) (S.-E. Kim, 2012). The government contributed directly to these journalists' welfare, with the Korean Broadcasting Advertising Corporation supplementing journalists' income and increasing their status to curry favour with the media (D. Kim, 2018). Consequently, Rhee et al. (2011) suggested Korean media was highly politically parallel in three of the four indicators proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), with only partisanship of media audiences being lower.

While Rhee et al. (2011) find a generally lower level of partisanship among audiences, there is evidence of a sharp generational divide. Hahn, Ryu, and Park (2015) found that different age groups sought out separate echo chambers for their news online, which increasingly do not overlap. Elderly audiences are turning to YouTube, which is now one of the top news websites in Korea (Newman et al., 2021), for extremely polarised conservative news, despite it being acknowledged as the biggest source of misinformation in Korea (Chan-ok & Mira, 2019). As Koreans gain access to more and more sources of news, they increasingly need to filter the news they receive in order to cope. H. Song, Jung, and Kim (2017) found people report avoiding news as a key strategy for what they perceive to be an overload of the news, and according to Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2019, p. 25), 24% of Koreans reported avoiding news. Compared to the past, when people had to rely on a much smaller number of newspapers and television and radio stations, Korean audiences are now able to be and are more susceptible to being more polarised.

More recent media organisations have not entirely mirrored this parallelism. The newspaper *Hankyoreh*, which was launched after Chun Doo-hwan was deposed (S.-E. Kim,

2012), maintains a mission for autonomous journalism, though Jiyoung Han, Lee, Lee, and Cha (2022) identify them with progressive liberal media. Newer cable news channels like JTBC offer news satire and fact-checking (Lim, 2017), elevating the importance of the “neutral information or entertainment” journalistic orientations that Hallin and Mancini (2004) associate with lower political parallelism; JTBC offers a particularly interesting case in this regard, as they are identified as having a left bias despite cross ownership with a longstanding conservative newspaper (유수영, 2014). Online news organisations, many formed at the nadir of the press’s political power following the 1997 crisis and subsequent IMF intervention, emphasise their lack of political affiliation, aggregating news for news organisations across the political spectrum (S.-E. Kim, 2012), though the aggregators rely on several polarised news outlets for content. Finally, the previous government renewed a push to reduce the political parallelism of public broadcasters, though they refrained from immediately removing the conservative government appointed heads in a bid to reduce the institutional instability caused by successive government turnover (Kwak, 2017); the broadcasters remain politically vulnerable. Journalists had collectively tried to elevate autonomous journalism and its practices and achieved some success, until changes to the media disrupted markets, as discussed in the professionalisation section below (Rhee, 2010).

Nevertheless, there remains a strong theme of clientelism between media and politics in Korea. Rhee et al. (2011) contend that the give and take between politicians and media organisations is more characteristic of the polarised pluralist countries on the Mediterranean than of the US-style liberal media system Korea occasionally seeks to emulate. JeongHun Han (2020) pins this clientelism again on a weakened institution, in this case the political parties themselves. Like Rhee et al. (2011), his analysis suggests that Korean political parties have less connection to the mass public and increasingly rely on media organisations and other businesses to remain in

power. The affiliation between specific parties and specific media types and organisations became a point of contention when reforming media regulations in 2009 (D. Kim, 2018).

### *Balancing Parallelism in Australia*

Australia also faces a system with substantial political parallelism, but there are different causes behind this result. Where Korea featured extensive and heavy-handed involvement in its media organisations, Australia often left private media to its own devices or crafted policies that appeared to favour their “media mates” (P. Chadwick, 1989; Jones & Pusey, 2010, p. 457), particularly as regards concentration of ownership (discussed further in the media pluralism section below). The resulting media owners – which Gaber and Tiffen (2018) describe as “baronian” – can run media content that is unabashedly partisan and the public has little recourse to confront it (Dwyer, 2014b). Commercial news organisations across media types often maintain a high level of editorial content alongside their fact-based journalistic production whereby they can elevate the visibility of their framing of news and events (Jones & Pusey, 2010). With the lack of selection available to many Australians, this editorial political commentary gets an outsized audience.

As a result of the power of commercial broadcasters, there is a firmly established tradition of clientelism in Australia, as well. Media owners are in a position to advocate on behalf of the party that governs in their interests. Gaber and Tiffen (2018) note that Australia’s specific set of laws and rollout of cable and satellite pay television resulted in the media type being entirely dominated by one player, headed by the group that also owns the largest newspaper publisher. While politicians may decry the transactional relationship between the press and government, there is simultaneously little motivation to change it (Hitchens, 2015); the media offer positive coverage (and negative opposition coverage) thought to be a determining factor for winning elections (Jones & Pusey, 2010). News Corp papers as recently as 2013 ran a headline to direct voters to the party most favourable towards their business from the outset of the election campaign (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014). This clientelism is not limited to politicians –

prominent radio commentators were found to be accepting funds and favours from businesses for positive coverage and faced little fallout apart from temporary reputational damage (Gould, 2007). Consequently, Jones and Pusey (2010, p. 456) describes Australian media's clientelism as "well-known and, curiously, much tolerated."

However, Australia does not consist entirely of commercial media organisations, and its public service media plays a crucial role in moderating their level of political parallelisation. Australia's public media, from ABC and SBS, is available on television and radio across the country and has an established presence online, where it is both the most visited (Nielsen, 2021) and most trusted (Roy Morgan, 2018a) news provider. While politically vulnerable to changes in leadership, Australia's public service media has developed into a strong institution that is in a position to set standards for Australian journalism (Gaber & Tiffen, 2018; Jones & Pusey, 2010). The ABC has editorial guidelines for neutral reporting that must be maintained and it is subject to audit. SBS similarly adheres to a public broadcasting charter for which it is held accountable (Special Broadcasting Service, 2021). Among these standards is a regulated requirement for "objective journalism" for the ABC that has also been adopted by the SBS (Hitchens, 2006, p. 172). As the ABC and SBS are broadcast across the vast majority of Australia, media everywhere face a point of comparison that, Jones and Pusey (2010) contend, mostly prevents the country from facing the unabashedly polarised media so prevalent in polarised pluralist media markets like Italy and Greece. This dynamic may change in the future, as a sustained campaign by commercial broadcasters pressuring sympathetic legislators has eventuated in public broadcasting budget cuts (Wake & Ward, 2020), further illustrating the risks that clientelism poses for Australia's media system.

This distinction between commercial and public media has had an impact on Australian audiences, but part of this polarisation is an issue of demographics and changing media consumption habits. Australia has long seen polarised audiences (Bean, 2005), with commercial media audiences having more conservative views and the public broadcaster audience tending to

have a more progressive or centrist tendency, but new media types have exacerbated this difference (Young, 2009, 2010). While Australians remain generally more likely to turn to traditional news sources than online (Newman et al., 2020; Roy Morgan, 2018d), younger generations increasingly turn to online news and seek out additional sources (Fisher et al., 2020; Young, 2010). Consequently, while Australia has some indications of having a polarised audience, this polarisation could be tied to the development and adoption of new forms of media, which has brought both an increased variety of available content and the reinforcement of echo chambers like those seen in Korea (H. Song et al., 2017).

Both Korea and Australia are facing strong polarising forces that have been accelerated rather than abrogated by recent developments, and yet Rhee et al. (2011) and Jones and Pusey (2010) positioned the countries similarly in relation to the models described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This is because, while both systems have a strong presence of polarisation, the presence is counterbalanced with competing media sources. In Korea, the polarising force is current and historic government intervention that censors content and determines journalistic employment and routines, but it is partially balanced by the presence of diverse commercial media in cable and satellite television and online. In Australia, commercial media organisations are more aligned with political parties, but the public broadcasters' ubiquitous presence influences journalistic standards and provides content that is a contrasting pressure. In both countries, as in Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist nations (2004), clientelism is rife and appears to be expanding. Audiences have also appeared to get more polarised in both countries, particularly along the lines of age demographics. Where Australia appears to have an advantage in this regard, however, is in the influence and contested independence of its public broadcasting as a prominent and standard setting media organisation.

In each system, news commenting is likely to offer limited benefits in this regard. While they sometimes operate in a shared space, commenters are often extremely polarised (Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Walter et al., 2018), and they tend to seek out

communities that will conflict less with their views (Meyer & Speakman, 2016). News commenting could act as a limited public sphere (Ruiz et al., 2011), but they rarely offer impartial ideas or information (Miloni et al., 2012). Conversely, they do not exist in a vacuum, and the news organisations' standards and practices shape what comment sections yield (Domingo, 2014; Suh et al., 2018; Yeo et al., 2019). Consequently, it is also crucial to examine the professionalism and autonomy of journalism in each media system.

### **Established and Threatened Professionalism in Journalism**

For Hallin and Mancini (2004), journalistic professionalism considers the extent to which a system's journalism is autonomous from external influences, has a standardised set of expectations and practices, and is orientated towards providing journalism as a public service. It is a contrast to instrumental media, which is either shaped or used by various actors, such as businesses (including the media organisations and their owners) or the politicians themselves, to influence politics. This component bears much in common with the fields of cultural production described by Bourdieu (1993), who similarly placed a strong emphasis on the importance of history as a predicate to developing standards and practices (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Bourdieu's fields and Hallin and Mancini's media systems both posit that the journalism people receive is the product of shaping social structures, derived from successive generations of competing and interconnected journalists and their societal contexts.

#### *Rising Then Stunted Professionalism in Korea*

As might be expected given their interrupted market development and the aforementioned government interventions into media content and employment, Korea's journalistic professionalisation is markedly weak (Rhee et al., 2011). An explicit desire to build an autonomous journalistic field from the change of government in 1987 ran into a rapidly expanding and highly economically competitive commercial news media market (Son, Kim, & Choi, 2012). This saw brief gains in independence – for a time, editors were democratically elected by their journalistic staff, a hard and fast signifier of journalistic autonomy – undermined



by tenuous employment and existential economic imperatives. While newspapers and broadcasters established themselves and survived the dictums of successive authoritarian governments, journalistic professionalism is the product of the competing professionals conducting the journalism (Marlière, 1998), and Korean journalists have faced frequent mass purges (D. Kim, 2018). These purges were not on the grounds of poorly enacted journalism, but rather disagreement with owner and governmental oversight, which is a definitional sign that many Korean journalists categorically lack autonomy for journalistic practices. Beyond the purges, rapidly intensifying workloads due to competition made for a demonstrably poor working environment – between 1991 and 1997, the rate of journalists looking to change careers had doubled and job satisfaction had nearly halved (Son et al., 2012).

While this is a compelling indication that Korea's journalistic professionalism is weak (Rhee et al., 2011), which notionally pushes their media towards instrumentalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the broad presence of journalistic expectations and practices indicate that professionalisation has developed to some extent. Distinct from Australia (Hanusch, 2013), Korean journalists are highly educated – 97% have at least a bachelor's degree, and the most common degree was a journalism or mass communications degree, followed by overlapping subjects in the arts, law, and social sciences (Son et al., 2012), and journalists are overwhelmingly in favour of formal and continuing education in journalism. The public is also attenuated to journalistic professional norms, with websites like *ObMyNews* featuring curated participatory journalism that is a direct answer to the perceived lack of autonomy among commercial and public news media (D. S. Chung & Nah, 2014). This public awareness and public push for journalism that adheres to autonomous journalistic norms is in stark contrast to the general public disengagement with news media in the polarised pluralist countries described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). As shown by their profile in the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2021), Koreans are not disinterested, apolitical news avoiders, but Korea has not had the time nor the context to establish and stabilise a fully autonomous journalistic field. However, as it stands, the

aforementioned commercial and government threats to journalistic autonomy supersede this potential (Rhee et al., 2011).

### *Australia's Historied but Threatened Professionalism*

Australia also faces what O'Donnell and Zion (2019) call *precarity* in the stability and availability of journalism work, but it is arriving with a backdrop of Australia having several developed journalistic institutions, including journalist unions dating back over a century. History plays a key role in developing autonomous capital (Bourdieu, 1993), and the Australian Journalists Association – later merged with other unions for professional performers and entertainers into the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance – began in 1910 (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2021), making it approximately twice as old as the closest equivalent in Korea. Jones and Pusey (2010) suggest that Australia has lower levels of journalism education compared to the US and lacks some of the robustness of UK's PSM and regulations to ensure standards and encourage quality (Jones & Pusey, 2010), but Korea demonstrates that even limited institutional structures and professionalisation are difficult to develop.

Australian journalists (Hanusch, 2015) and news organisations (Morison, 2012) may disagree on the definition of journalistic professionalisation, but this is a part of the functioning of fields of cultural production, according to Bourdieu (1993), which has relevance to journalism (Benson & Neveu, 2005). The people that are doing the struggling and negotiating are journalists, editors or other news staff. That is a crucial indication of autonomy to precisely the same extent that the mass purges of journalists and staff by owners and government in Korea, in effect designating who is and is not a journalist, are evidence of a lack of autonomy. Complaints about newspaper content or their digital counterparts are adjudicated upon by a council of journalists, news organisation representatives and members of the public in a body known as the Australian Press Council (Australian Press Council, 2021), and they explicitly detail Standards of Practice for the press. *The Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (Cth) also established the creation of codes of practice for commercial broadcast media that governs journalistic production which is

overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, though the codes focus more on the resulting content than on journalistic practices (Breit, 2008) and the way codes are written makes them challenging to implement effectively (Hitchens, 2006). Between the editorial guidelines of the ABC and SBS, the adjudicating authority granted to the APC, the commercial and community codes of practice, and the professional guidelines and support of the MEAA, there is evidence in Australia of all three components of journalistic professionalisation discussed by Hallin and Mancini (2004): journalistic autonomy, distinct codes and practices, and public service orientation – though these institutions are limited in their capacity to implement and oversee such standards (Breit, 2008).

Historical is a keyword in this context, for those existing structures that would provide or safeguard journalistic autonomy, never sacrosanct (Bourdieu, 1989), have recently seen significant erosion in Australia. Both the country's largest newspaper publisher and the party they support have long derided (and in the latter case limited funding for (Wake & Ward, 2020)) Australia's public service media (Gaber & Tiffen, 2018), which are held more accountable to journalistic professional standards (Breit, 2008; Jones & Pusey, 2008). Further, while it is historic, only a minority of Australian journalists and news staff are a part of the MEAA union, and membership is declining quickly (Dwyer et al., 2021; McGann, 2018) while Australian journalists face increasingly uncertain employment (Joseph & Richards, 2020). Discussing the outcomes of the Convergence Review and Independent Media Inquiry, Flew and Swift (2013, p. 193) note that codes of practice were found to offer late and limited recourse for the public to dispute media content, and relevant bodies like the APC and MEAA are funded by the media organisations and journalists they are in a position to oversee, limiting their capacity to impose journalistic professional standards. Finally, the Australian government has recently retaliated against unfavourable reporting by both commercial and public media organisations, leveraging national security laws to interrogate journalists and uncover their sources (Sarre, 2020) – South

Korea, at war now with their immediate neighbour for the better part of a century, has only rarely used such laws in recent decades (D. Kim, 2018).

The transition to digital media has exacerbated Australia's journalistic professionalism issues. While Hitchens (2011) notes that existing traditional media approaches to ensuring quality have been extended online, the lack of an ecosystemic approach means online media has, to an extent, fallen between the cracks of oversight. The interaction between news and digital platforms brings a fresh challenge for resolving complaints (Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018) – where an inaccurate or otherwise problematic news story is shared widely, there is no way to ensure a correction or other response will see the same dissemination. Conversely, digital media has been empowered to impact journalistic professionalism, with a greater demand for immediacy and larger workloads reducing the time available for journalistic practices like information gathering and verification (Downman & Murray, 2017) and journalistic roles shifting to accommodate analytics, comments and feedback (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). The addition of blogs has given Australians a new source for news, but they lack the transparency and commitment to journalistic norms and standards (Wilding et al., 2018). As a result of the combination of forces eroding journalistic professionalism in Australia, the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2018) has offered a bleak picture of its autonomy and public service orientation.

Overall, Australia's relatively peaceful and stable history has given it the opportunity to develop a more autonomous and established journalistic profession. Korean journalists made a strong push, particularly following the switch to democratic governance, to develop autonomous journalistic professionalism (S.-E. Kim, 2012), but an oversaturated market and government interference led to unstable employment for journalists, greatly hampering progress and leaving professionalism decidedly weak (Rhee et al., 2011). However, these same forces are at work in Australia, and having similar effects (Jones & Pusey, 2010).

*Journalistic Professionalism With News Commenting*

How this contested professionalism interacts with news commenting depends on how journalism comes to define its relationship with this medium. As discussed in Chapter 2, some journalists and news organisations draw a deep line between participatory media and journalism while others see interacting with commenters and commenting spaces as a logical addition to journalistic practices (Koskie, 2018; Robinson, 2010; Wolfgang, 2021). Studies have demonstrated that news organisations' decisions, often informed by national media regulations, can have a decisive influence on comment sections (Domingo, 2014; Huang, 2016; Wolfgang, 2021), while journalists have shown that they are impacted to some extent by the comments they see (Hanusch, 2017; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). Consequently, news commenting has the potential to impact on professionalism and to communicate professionalism to the public. Bruns and Highfield (2015) suggest that curating journalism-adjacent participatory media is an emerging role of journalism, which they call "gatewatching", and Meltzer (2015) found that many in the newsroom see this as their responsibility. If journalism is a (limited) field of cultural production, such negotiation and reinvention is integral (Benson & Neveu, 2005), and this influence goes both ways as comments are evaluated with a journalistic lens (Koskie, 2018).

While not a part of the analysis conducted by Rhee et al. (2011) or Jones and Pusey (2010), news commenting practices have become a part of and partially constitutive of Korean and Australian journalistic professionalism. In Korea's case, a deep-rooted mistrust of journalists and media organisations, grounded in their history of clientelism and political parallelism, was a force behind the rise of participatory journalism sites like *OhMyNews* (D. S. Chung & Nah, 2014; Lim, 2017) – in effect, participatory media like news commenting is a response to weak journalistic professionalism. Simultaneously, organisations hosting these comments are being held responsible for how they are managed and moderated (Baek et al., 2020) and they are developing new techniques and strategies for doing so (Dwyer & Hutchinson, 2019; Suh et al., 2018), illustrating the way news commenting is both a result of and an addition to this

professionalism. Here again, government shifts undermine the autonomy of the hosting organisations, and the major news websites must change their tactics in response to competing political demands and concerns (Baek et al., 2020).

Predictably, Australia's introduction and management of comments has taken a different path, focusing on how to carry existing professionalism forward in dealing with this new medium. Much like UK journalists in Robinson's study (Robinson, 2010), Australian newsroom staff are split between seeing the potential of news commenting as a contribution and seeing news commenting as a chaotic playground for provocateurs (Koskie, 2018), but news organisations nevertheless find themselves having to engage in routines and practices to manage them, adding to the scope of their professionalism. Unlike in Korea, this is done with no guidance from the government, and a variety of approaches have developed – including the approach of turning comments off entirely or not hosting them in the first place (Martin, 2015). Conversely, Australian journalists find themselves internalising the feedback from comments to an extent and suggest it has an impact on their approaches to journalistic practice (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Koskie, 2018). In both cases, there is a grounding of approaches to the new medium in the pre-existing structures of journalistic professionalism.

### **Intervening With a Heavy and Light Touch**

Governments play a multi-faceted role in media systems, and Korea and Australia have established a different sense of what that role will be. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the government variously plays a role in protecting, promoting and restricting news media. For this work, reflecting models from Hallin and Mancini (2004) and informed by Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018), *protections* can include freedom of the press and freedom of speech laws as well as protection for sources and freedom of information access. *Promotion* includes support for public service broadcasting but also often extends to subsidies for non-public media organisation. *Restrictions* here refers to limits on ownership and licensing as well as the aforementioned security laws, censorship, and defamation/vilification laws that impact what

media content can be produced and distributed. While the literature on each of these points is extensive for each country, what follows is a brief description, in line with the works by Rhee et al. (2011) and Jones and Pusey (2010), of each point so as to make a summative comparison between the two media systems.

In terms of promotion, the Korean government plays a big role in making news media available to citizens, though their support often comes with significant contingencies. The government established a television licensing fee that gives its public broadcasters KBS and EBS a substantial and stable operating budget (D. Kim, 2018) (though it is majority owned by the government, MBC operates on advertising revenue). The government had until recently been one of the biggest sources of advertising funds, as well, particularly but not exclusively for broadcasting (Rhee et al., 2011). While often carving out ideological opposition, the government designed a number of subsidies to help, in particular, small or struggling newspapers and foster a diverse newspaper market through direct capital infusion (S.-E. Kim, 2012). The government played an especially aggressive role in the establishment of cable and satellite pay television (Tiffen & Kwak, 2005), launching satellites and building infrastructure – a role they would later similarly play for broadband internet (D. Kim, 2018). By turns and with dynamic focus, the Korean government has had no qualms about being an active participant in developing media markets.

The Korean government have similarly been active in applying restrictions. Until recently, few broadcasters had been allowed to enter the free-to-air television and, to a lesser extent, radio markets (D. Kim, 2018), and before democratisation the dictators applied strict rules that prevented dissent and ultimately limited the range of newspapers (S.-E. Kim, 2012). Where the past governments used censors to decisively shape news media content, modern governments now use other instruments but still to similar ends, such as leveraging tax audits that disproportionately affect unfavourable news outlets (D. Kim, 2018) and installing sympathetic or even party personnel as the heads of public broadcasters or commercial

broadcasters with significant government ownership, like YTN and MBC. Within the last decade, public or government-owned media outlets have purged their newsrooms of journalists not sympathetic to the current regime (Kwak, 2017). To an extent, many of these restrictions have been progressively lifted since democratisation (Rhee et al., 2011), but not evenly. Where the government under Lee Myung-bak deregulated media ownership, particularly regarding broadcasting and newspapers, they also reinvigorated censorship laws and greatly politicised control over public service media (D. Kim, 2018), a trend that did not entirely abate under recent administrations (Takeda, 2020). Through the KCC and KCSC, content such as nudity and defamation are censored or can open media organisations to penalties (D. Kim, 2018) – this can also apply to praise of North Korea. Both organisations were created after the transition to democratic governance.

Conversely, the Korean press and public do enjoy several protections for their media and news. Article 21 of their constitution guarantees freedom of the press – however, this was also true under the dictatorships and was certainly not effective in practice (S.-E. Kim, 2012). Later, media freedom was further guaranteed under the *Broadcasting Act* from the first president of the democratic transition (D. Kim, 2018), though not in the widest possible sense (journalists were free insofar as they were acting in the interests of democratic public opinion). This was expanded to newspapers and more broadly, and the rights grew in scope to include concerns such as readers' rights and protections for editorial control, again with the democratic functions of the media emphasised explicitly. With the exception of praise for North Korea, which has even recently placed journalists in legal peril (H. W. Park, 2021), South Korea offers its journalists numerous legal defences and its citizens rights of access to information. Consequently, the press freedom index ranks South Korea slightly above the USA, and well above its immediate neighbours in Japan, China, Taiwan, Russia and particularly North Korea (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).



Australia stands in contrast on each of these points. The Australian government also provides direct funding for media, particularly in the area of public broadcasting. Australian public broadcasters receive less funding and support than their UK counterparts (Gaber & Tiffen, 2018), but their direct financial contribution still exceeds that of more populous Korea's license-fee-supported public broadcasters and is significantly larger than that of liberal media systems like Canada and the USA (Warner, 2019). Their larger budget (compared to overseas counterparts) correlates to their larger purview: the Australian public broadcaster is tasked with providing diverse and accessible media across the country (J. Freeman, Hess, & Waller, 2017; Gaber & Tiffen, 2018; Jones & Pusey, 2008), with just a few other subsidies being offered to otherwise develop and sustain journalism. Where Korea engaged in large scale infrastructure development projects to enable wide access to new media as it arose (D. Kim, 2018), Australia's only similar project, the National Broadband Network, arrived two decades later marred by Australia's characteristic clientelism, protecting and benefiting large media organisations and telecommunications providers to the detriment of rollout and service provision for the public (McLaren, 2018). Faced with destabilised media markets resulting from the transition to digital online media, the Australian government has largely given preference to deregulation and free market and technological solutionism (Finkelstein & Ricketson, 2012; Flew et al., 2017; Jones & Pusey, 2010), but this has not produced the desired effect (Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, 2018).

Australia places numerous restrictions on media, speech and the press, as well, and it lacks a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press or freedom of speech (Jones & Pusey, 2010). Regarding the content itself, certain kinds of speech and production are explicitly prohibited. Hate speech and vilification, for instance, have on occasion landed speakers and journalists in court – though the results in each case varied dramatically by time period, offender, target, and context (Gelber & Stone, 2007). Similarly, defamation law is relatively strict in Australia, but its specific wording and application varies from state to state (Rolph, 2008), which

has a visible chilling effect on their press (Dent & Kenyon, 2004) – even satire is not protected (J. M. Davis & Foyle, 2017). Finally, like Korea, there have long been attempts, successful and not, to censor “offensive” content like pornography and violence as well as restrictions on advertising (Cetti, 2014). Media regulations (and deregulations) in Australia have often been connected to clientelism, targeting disagreeable organisations or benefiting sympathetic ones. This was especially visible in the recent raids of both the public broadcaster and a commercial news organisation, which the Australian Federal Police raided to investigate their sources after unfavourable news on the government (Sarre, 2020), under the guise of national security laws.

Conversely, Australia has been far more relaxed than Korea about restrictions for ownership of commercial media organisations, resulting in some of the most concentrated media ownership in the developed world (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). Restrictions on ownership have been complex and varied, with a greater emphasis on broadcasting than the press (Albon & Papandrea, 1998), as it was thought that broadcasting has the characteristics of a natural monopoly that were not inherent to newspapers due to issues like spectrum scarcity. Consequently, licensing and regulations shaped how broadcasters could be owned and operated (even after technology reduced issues of spectrum scarcity, ultimately benefiting incumbent broadcasters (Albon & Papandrea, 1998)), but newspapers were less restricted apart from limits on cross media ownership. Ownership restrictions for each media type including newspapers was broadened and refined in through acts in 1987 and 1992, but these new restrictions have been either partially or fully lifted (Dwyer, 2016).

However, there have historically been implied protections for both freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, as well (Barendt, 1994). The norm of freedom of speech, often derived from association with the USA and the UK, has achieved some amount of institutional authority (Gelber, 2019), historically leaving Australians with a far stronger de facto freedom of speech than was achieved with Korea’s explicit constitutional right. Less directly, citizens and journalists can defend claims of defamation “... on grounds such as the substantial truth of the

imputations conveyed or the fair reporting of public proceedings” (NSW Parliament, 2005), though this is problematised by Australia’s non-uniform speech laws. Overall, Reporters Without Borders (2020) ranks Australia’s press freedom at 26<sup>th</sup> in the world, well above Korea – though this represents a significant recent drop due to the aforementioned raids.

The resulting view of the state’s role in media is a mixed picture for comparison. Australia spends more for its public service media, but Korea spends more for promoting media overall. Despite its explicit guarantee of speech and press freedoms, Korea’s historical and recent heavy-handed intervention into media content and public service media staff stands in contrast to Australian media’s relative independence, but both commercial and especially public service media are vulnerable to political shifts in Australia as well. Broadly, Australian government interventions fall into the category of what Hallin and Mancini (2004) call a liberal role for the state, and Korea adheres to what they refer to as a social democratic, directive-orientated (or *dirigiste*) role.

In many ways, these roles have been replicated for news commenting. In Korea, the government’s push for broadband infrastructure and accessibility has brought many people online (Dwyer et al., 2018), and news commenting is nearly ubiquitous and widely accessed (Baek et al., 2020). Simultaneously, speech restrictions have increased the need for comment filtering (Haggard & You, 2015) and politically motivated groups have been actively involved in manipulating comment section contents (Lim, 2017), which Yoon (2019) found were ripe for abuse.

In Australia, the state has no explicit involvement with news commenting. While participatory media innovations have been discussed as a part of additions to the media system (Finkelstein & Ricketson, 2012; Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, 2018), guidance for the news organisations on how they should handle news commenting has been limited. As in other countries (Huang, 2016), Australian news organisations are loathe to test the waters and are cautious about the comments appearing on

their websites that have the potential to be seen as defamatory or offensive (Koskie, 2018), and the public service broadcaster has removed them from their website completely, showing the ways that the chilling effect of Australia's press laws (Dent & Kenyon, 2004) has continued online. News organisations were found liable for defamation occurring in comments on their articles on social media based on common law (*Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd v Voller (HCA) s236/2020*, 2021; Gordon, 2019; Rolph, 2021), but this was for content on a social media platform rather than in news commenting on the news website.

### **Adding Pluralism to the Media Systems Framework**

As demonstrated above and by Rhee et al. (2011) and Jones and Pusey (2010), the Hallin and Mancini (2004) framework for comparing media systems enables specific and revelatory comparisons between national media using impactful criteria. A comprehensible comparison using so many factors is necessarily brief, but each of these factors is the focus of extensive research. Including further consideration of other media types with a particular focus on new additions to the media, as suggested by Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018), can add fidelity to this portrayal, but this inclusion tended to follow and reinforce existing trends.

However, one element considered by Hallin and Mancini (2004) but given less attention is the issue of media pluralism. Brogi and Parcu (2014) demonstrate the ways that the qualities of pluralistic media can benefit societal and democratic functions as well as the risks of its absence, but only some of these qualities are discussed in a media systems approach. The basic protection and political independence areas of media pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015) overlap significantly with the political parallelism and role of the state sections discussed earlier. It is in the areas of market plurality and social inclusiveness that a media pluralism assessment can bring additional value to a media systems assessment, particularly in regard to focusing on diversity of news and representation. A depiction of Australia's and Korea's media systems would be arguably incomplete without attention to these areas.

The market plurality area (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) shares much in common with the development of media markets (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, where the development of media markets takes a longitudinal view across history, the market plurality area is more concerned with the diversity of media outlets and news sources present today, particularly with regards to ownership and its potential influence. While the effect of concentrated media ownership is contested (Horwitz, 2009), what effect exists is being amplified by the concentration increasingly crossing media types (Noam, 2016; Trappel & Meier, 2022). This is a crucial concern because it is one of the key ways that participatory media like news commenting can contribute to the media system, by adding diverse ideas and views not being presented by the news organisation itself (Milioni et al., 2012).

The area of social inclusiveness, conversely, is mostly absent from the media systems framework, yet it has a demonstrable effect on the value of the media to a society's distinct groups. In some countries, urban-based media can obscure the views and needs of regional groups, women are often excluded from news production or representation, and minority groups can face misrepresentation with no right of reply (Ewart & Beard, 2017; North, 2013; Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015). While the comparing media systems framework is not intended as a normative lens, it is a tool for identifying those aspects of the media systems that can lead to desirable and undesirable outcomes (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 14), and the inclusiveness of the system is a component that can have an impact (Klimkiewicz, 2015). This is another area where news commenting has the potential to play a role, so is a necessary component for the comparison of these media systems.

For each of Korea and Australia, issues of media pluralism have been studied and considered specifically by Hitchens (2015) and Youn and Lee (2015) in a way that contextualises media pluralism within the media systems, but individual factors have been further studied by a variety of scholars. Describing areas and elements of the media system that have relevance to both media pluralism and comparing media systems, these bodies of research show that each of

these national media ecosystems is a highly distinct environment. Adding these media pluralism analyses to this comparison of media systems adds missing detail to the descriptions, with implications for how news commenting contributes in each case.

### *Media Pluralism in the Korean Media System*

Market plurality in Korea is an area of explicit interest for government policies, though it is known under other names. In Korea, this concern is expressed as a “monopoly on public opinion” (Youn & Lee, 2015) in the heated debates about whether and how to deregulate media ownership (D. Kim, 2018). While Koreans have access to a wide variety of content on terrestrial cable and satellite pay television as well as a developed online media market (Tiffen & Kwak, 2005), free-to-air broadcast and the top established newspapers remain the major sources of news for much of the population (Newman et al., 2020); even top websites like Naver and Daum rely extensively on these for their news aggregation (Jeon, 2018). Until recently, cross ownership was strictly controlled or even prohibited entirely, which means, across media types, there are a large number of owners and ownership structures for broadcasters, which often operate news organisations available across the nation (Youn & Lee, 2015), though individual media types are often controlled by a small number of firms. Recent deregulation has allowed more cross media ownership (D. Kim, 2018), but it is still greatly restricted by comparison with Australia. While the trend has increasingly been towards concentrating ownership, ostensibly to save struggling traditional media organisations, there remain a reasonably wide variety of owners for prominent media organisations.

This apparent variety comes with an important caveat, however: the aforementioned weakly developed professionalisation for journalism means that owners exert extraordinary influence. According to C. Kim (2014), commercial media ownership and control in Korea, especially for newspapers, has long been “a family affair”, with generationally rich families, an elite group Koreans label *chaebol*, playing a key role in cultivating and sustaining the clientelism that Rhee et al. (2011) describes as a core component of Korea’s media system. Similarly, while

the public broadcasters have different structures and even some partial private ownership, different governments exert from moderate to strong influence over their contents (JeongHun Han, 2020; S.-E. Kim, 2012). Gibbons (2015) draws into question the specifics and strength of media ownership impacts, but Korea presents ownership control issues with little nuance, making “monopolising public opinion” a genuine concern (Youn & Lee, 2015).

Social inclusiveness is a complicated concern in Korea, and it is lacking in several respects. While not as explicitly multicultural as Australia, Korea has a growing number of ethnic groups as well as growing migration (Yi & Jung, 2015), yet there has been little multicultural representation in the media (Ahn, 2012), let alone multicultural media production. For women, it has long proven difficult to find employment and promotion in Korean newsrooms (Cho & Davenport, 2007; K.-H. Kim, 2006); this is a broad social issue, as it was found that male reporters are more likely to write negative stories and apply stereotypes to female politicians (K.-H. Kim & Yoon, 2009). More women enter journalism every year, but they report poor working conditions, particularly relative to their overseas counterparts (H. S. Kim, 2018). Regions and local communities are relatively well represented, with access to, representation in, and production of relevant media, though national news is highly concentrated in urban centres (Youn & Lee, 2015) – this was a target of explicit government policy (D. Kim, 2018). Overall, social inclusiveness is just not a prevalent focus for media pluralism considerations in Korea, such that Youn and Lee (2015) did not discuss it in their media pluralism review.

### *Australia's Media Pluralism*

In many ways, Australia stands in direct contrast to Korea, but in no ways more than for media concentration. Australia has, by many accounts, the highest concentration of media ownership in the world (Dwyer, 2017; Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). The largest newspaper publisher in Australia, News Corp, also has ownership of the only terrestrial cable and satellite pay television service (Australia Communications and Media Authority; Tiffen, 2007). The second largest newspaper publisher, Fairfax, was acquired by one of the three metropolitan

broadcasters, Nine Entertainment Co., in 2018 (Carson, 2018). There are high levels of cross-media ownership concentrated among a small group of people (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016).

This unprecedented level of concentration is made possible by a sparse regulatory environment regarding ownership (Hitchens, 2015). Australia has a history of disjointed media ownership laws that vary by media type (Tiffen, 2009), levying licensing restrictions on broadcasters, for instance, but maintaining a hands-off approach to the press apart from limits on cross-media ownership. Media ownership laws were reformed by way of amendments to the *Broadcasting Act 1942* (Cth) made in the *Broadcasting (Ownership and Control) Act 1987* (Cth), refining the conditions of cross-media ownership across media types, but it allowed for cross-media ownership up to double the extent proposed in the controversial reform in Korea two decades later (Youn & Lee, 2015). This proved too strict, however, and the restrictions have since been eased substantially twice (Dwyer, 2017) (the last reform led to the merger of Fairfax Media and Nine Entertainment – the largest media consolidation in Australian history – a year later (Carson, 2018; Dwyer et al., 2021)).

Simultaneously, Australian media owners arguably exert control of a qualitatively different order. The public broadcasters, for instance, are wholly owned by the government but the broadcasters are required to adhere to their code's standards for objective journalism (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019; J. Freeman, Hess, & Waller, 2018; Jones & Pusey, 2008), though the government can make political appointments to their board that audits and oversees their conduct. Similarly, a variety of organisations mediate the conduct and production of the media in other ways (Breit, 2008). The ACMA registers codes and hears complaints about broadcasters under powers set out in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (Cth) while the APC, alongside the IMC, formulate standards and hear complaints for print and online news organisations under self-regulatory schemes (Department of Infrastructure Transport Regional Development Communications and the Arts). In a non-regulatory sense, the MEAA also provides guidelines for ethical standards and professional conduct (Media Entertainment and



Arts Alliance, 2021). However, these existing methods of self-regulation have their limits according to Breit (2008):

The various codes utilized in Australia's system of journalistic self-regulation initially show some promise in that they acknowledge that the aim of journalism is to promote public interests and/or community values. But examination of adjudications and reports into the interpretation of these codes reveals that public interest is essentially conflated with audience interest and commercial viability. (p.521)

Finally, some media organisations adhere to their own editorial guidelines that go beyond these codes of practice, with a focus on autonomous and responsible journalism (Breit, 2008; Koskie, 2018), though without the means for complaints about breaches of their standards to be independently considered. To varying extents, these measures place limits on the capacity of owners to exert editorial control, though their influence can be weak (Breit, 2008).

Australian media is also held responsible for social inclusivity – though this is predominantly left to the public broadcasters (Hitchens, 2015). The SBS is dedicated to multicultural representation and production (Special Broadcasting Service, 2021), where the ABC has a commitment to presenting diverse views and people as well as regions (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). By contrast, commercial media, lacking these requirements, often misrepresent minority groups, particularly in the case of Muslims (Ewart et al., 2017) and indigenous groups (McCallum, Waller, & Dreher, 2016). Newsrooms are gradually seeing more diverse staff, in general (Forde, 2005), but news production is not categorically inclusive. Women make up a minority of news producers and still suffer discrimination and harassment, though some note improved policies having an effect (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2019). Visible female journalists are also far more common than in Korea, though they face discrimination regarding the types of reporting they are assigned to do (North, 2016). In comparison to Korea (K.-H. Kim & Yoon, 2009), Australia has made an explicit commitment to diversity, and this has variously paid dividends.

While Australian media may have become broadly better at incorporating different genders and ethnic groups over time, it has become progressively less able to accommodate its widely dispersed regional communities. Many regional papers, already shedding staff due to disruption of their business model (Zion et al., 2016) have turned off their presses in favour of a digital-only business model and closed regional newsrooms (Dickson, 2020), while several have faced closures (O'Shea, 2019) – which has been exacerbated in the time of Covid-19. In some rural areas, regional broadcasting works with meagre funds and public service broadcasting is run by volunteers (Zion et al., 2016). In response, the Australian government has marked this out as a particular area of concern (ACMA, 2017), even granting it a specially designated subsidy, though its small size is unlikely to make an impact (Carson, 2018).

It is in these areas of media pluralism that perhaps the sharpest differences between Australian and Korean media systems can be found. There is an irony in that Australia's commitments to media diversity largely revolve around ownership regulations (Hitchens, 2015), something they have demonstrated little appetite for, while its more developed journalistic professionalisation and inclusivity has yielded social inclusiveness benefits not found in Korea. Conversely, Korean government officials are steadfast in their opposition to limited deregulations of their relatively strict ownership laws (D. Kim, 2018) (for some good reason, considering weak journalistic professionalism and strong clientelism (Rhee et al., 2011)), yet pay little attention to including diverse groups in their news production or content (Yi & Jung, 2015). These countries may have room to learn from one another, but news commenting offers opportunities to compensate for the weaknesses and build on the strengths, as well.

### **News Commenting in Australian and Korean Contexts**

These distinct ecosystems present a crucial contextualisation for the results of news commenting studies. Where news commenting can bring diverse groups into view and into content production, that provides a valuable boost for countries like Korea, which feature relatively less social inclusiveness (Cho & Davenport, 2007; Yi & Jung, 2015). News commenting

sections that adhere closely to the editorial line of the story could in effect be reinforcing issues like clientelism or political parallelisation, adding to an already prevalent concern (Jones & Pusey, 2010; Rhee et al., 2011).

In the next chapter, I detail how these comments can be described and analysed. A crucial component of the subsequent analysis will be to tie the pluralism contributions and risks the comment sections present to the media systems that contain them.

## Chapter 5: Capturing the Pluralism in News Commenting

The previous chapters show not only the unique roles and contexts of news commenting in different media ecosystems, but also the potential ways that it can intersect with concerns of media pluralism. My focus in this research is to investigate their potential for a direct impact on internal media pluralism, with a specific focus on the ways that news commenting can present or limit diverse ideas, perspectives, and representation, but I also seek to demonstrate ways that external pluralism mediates this impact.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my method for performing this assessment. I start by connecting the research questions to methods of data collection and analysis. Building on this, I weigh the benefits of and approaches to qualitative content analysis as it can be applied to these comment sections to reveal some of their implications for media pluralism. The chapter concludes with a breakdown of the practices I employed to enact the study.

### Tying Methods to Questions

At its core, this research is about a simple hypothesis: these onsite comments that people are reading contain content that could impact the way they see and operate within society. To complement scholarship on the relationship of comments to journalism (Koskie, 2018; Wolfgang, 2019), the public sphere (Kangaspunta, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2011) or professional and commercial value for the hosts (Huang, 2016; Stroud et al., 2020; Vujnovic, 2011), I initiated this investigation of comments to identify the contribution of news commenting's content to the public's experience of the media ecosystem. Is there anything in these spaces, intrinsically good or bad, that can impact the way society functions? While similar questions have been asked of news commenting extensively to other ends (Kangaspunta, 2020; Ksiazek, 2018; Williams & Sebastian, 2021), I homed this investigation in on the specific forms of content that are important for media pluralism.

Media pluralism assessments typically extend far beyond the narrow views afforded by content analysis (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Karppinen, 2018), but news commenting presents a

special case. Where media pluralism researchers have access to the editorial processes, staff, and conditions of production for other forms of media (Karppinen, 2018; Núñez-Mussa et al., 2022) as well as data on ownership and market concentration (Trappel & Meier, 2022), there is less transparency for the people, production, and influences behind news commenting. The most accessible source for this data is the comments themselves, as they provide visibility for the producers (Martin, 2015) and the commenting community's own contributions are a key influence on the content its participants produce (Domingo, 2014; Huang, 2016). Additionally, due to its contributors residing outside of the bounds of traditional media (Singer et al., 2011; Wolfgang, 2019), comments' contribution portend ways to contribute to and threaten media pluralism that are distinct from the products of media organisations – to the extent of reframing citizens relationship to their government and public affairs issues (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). Content analysis offers a way to describe these distinct connections between media pluralism and news commenting. The research questions driving this project each seek to provide this assessment, but each question requires a separate analysis of the results to find an answer

*RQ – To What Extent Do Comments on Online News Articles Contribute to Media Pluralism?*

As shown in Chapter 2, the purview of media pluralism is a moving target, but Gálik and Vogl (2015) have already shown how participatory media, which includes onsite news commenting, provides opportunities for diversifying media types and genres. In this study, I sought to investigate ways that news commenting's contribution and impact extend to a wider range of the indicators and risks discussed by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) and Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al. (2018), with a focus on measures of internal media pluralism. In Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, I tie the results of this investigation to these indicators, but that required employing methods of qualitative content analysis to reveal the specific and broad implications of news commenting's contribution. This entailed tailoring the research design in distinct ways for each of the sub-questions.

*SQ1 – In What Ways Do Visible News Comments Contribute to Media Pluralism?*

The first sub-question examines how or if the contents of these comments play a role in cultivating internal media pluralism in practice on the most visited news websites. This research is concerned with whether each nation's major news websites consistently and/or extensively feature a diversity of representation, viewpoints and information, which Valcke, Picard, and Sükösd (2015) refer to as a "pluralism of content", though the visibility of the contributors themselves has implications for socio-demographic indicators (p.132). This assessment relies on identifying contributions in comments individually but then taking these contributions (or lack thereof) in aggregate to characterise the qualities of a news website's comment sections.

For this question, I examined comments individually and then collectively, investigating how comment sections and the collection of comment sections across a site might demonstrate value that is not visible at the level of single comments. Milioni et al. (2012), Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), and Baden and Springer (2014) have already demonstrated that comments can and often do present distinct viewpoints and information in their content. Using their extensive and detailed scholarship as a starting point, I sought to examine how applying lenses taking in a different scope add crucial nuance to the findings, which has ramifications for the value of comments for media pluralism.

*SQ2 – In What Ways Do Visible News Comments Present a Risk to Media Pluralism?*

Just as crucial to considering news commenting's potential for positive contributions is identifying its potential to invite risks for the media ecosystem. The MPM's risk-based approach (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) is especially salient here, as comments have been identified as a source of harassment and vitriol that silences other commenters, journalists and their sources (A. Anderson et al., 2014), which could hamper diversity both in the comments and in the articles they accompany. By identifying silencing speech in individual comments and then finding its prevalence across comment sections, I propose in this research a way to assess news commenting for the threats it can pose for a country's media pluralism.

Conversely, some comments can also limit news commenting's own potential by diminishing the visibility of its contributions and crowding out diversity through its discourse. The phatic speech that sometimes dominates participatory media (Miller, 2008) can offer community or conversationally orientated content that lacks any (or redundant) views and information. Given that readers cannot reasonably read all comments on extensive comment sections and that they tend to weigh comments differently depending on their placement in the section (Baden & Springer, 2014; Suh et al., 2018), this phatic content is a risk for news commenting's capacity to contribute. While it may offer opportunities for entertainment for the reader or engagement statistics for the news website (da Silva, 2015), it can push diverse content out of view.

Both the implications of silencing speech and the prevalence of phatic speech play a part in assessing the media pluralism risk of comments: both are creating a barrier to the production and spread of internally pluralistic content.

*SQ3 – How Do the Differences Between These Distinct Media Ecosystems Affect the Value of Their News Commenting's Contributions?*

The final question seeks to establish the ways that news commenting not only presents different results but also plays a distinct role as part of different national media ecosystems. The media pluralism implications of news commenting coincide with national media ecosystems with different advantages and risks of their own, as demonstrated in Chapter 4. These factors need to be considered to ascertain the contribution these news commenting sections are making. Consequently, I focused this research on the characteristics of Australia's and South Korea's news commenting on their most visited websites to find how their news commenting differs but also how the differences are contextualised by the contrasting media ecosystems.

Key to answering this question is positioning the results within the media ecosystems, which considers the nations as contexts (Livingstone, 2003). This is fundamental to the research design, which is why I focused the investigation on only the most visited websites in each system

and contextualised the results in what those prominent websites allow, display, and highlight, despite the fact that less prominent websites in each country offer a variety of approaches and results (Baek et al., 2020; Koskie, 2018). This further meant accounting for the visible moderation techniques and website and interface design that can have an impact on how comments are created. Finally, the results of the content analysis must be interpreted with a lens that has a view of the larger media ecosystem, as the contributions will not be standalone but rather part of the larger media environment surrounding each nation's citizens.

### Exploring Comments With Qualitative Content Analysis

Finding the answers to these questions means distilling countless words across thousands of comments into a set of data that can be analysed. To do this, I relied on *qualitative content analysis* to surface the concrete and illustrative ways that news commenting presents diverse viewpoints, information, and representation as well as risks to media pluralism. *Qualitative* here is referring to the ways the content on these sites must be tied to its context to reveal both the range of its meanings and its implications, though the analysis does not exclude descriptions and assessments based on quantification that are thought to be the definitional domain of quantitative research (Sandelowski, 2001). Rather, my study sought to both include and go beyond numerically-based descriptions of news commenting's complex content.

In this research, *content* specifically refers to the text that appears in these comment sections. While Krippendorff (2018) suggests that the content of a content analysis can take many forms, the content of news commenting is broadly constrained to print, with image, video, and audio contributions typically unavailable. Occasionally websites allow images and animated images (gifs), like South Korea's ppomppu (ppomppu, 2022) and formerly *The Hill* in the United States (Melton, 2020) (who have recently stopped hosting news commenting entirely), but they are not widely visited websites with a prominent position in their media ecosystems (Newman et al., 2021). Even options like changing font, italicising, or highlighting are unavailable on the most visited sites in Australia and South Korea, leaving just the words themselves to convey meaning.



Consequently, the analysis done here relies on the meanings of the words and the juxtaposition of texts to identify news commenting's contribution to and place in the media environment, though visuospatial design considerations provide an important context (as I explore in Chapter 7). This entailed collecting three forms of data: the text of the UIF and body of comments in comment sections under or beside public affairs articles, the visible design of the website and interface that provides users with the path to reaching and reading the comments, and the text of the sites' headlines that link users to the relevant news commenting. While the comments themselves provide the data for the bulk of analysis, the other components play an integral role in understanding the results.

Developing this method required navigating the morass of content analysis definitions, which are not only contradictory but even antagonistic. At its heart, content analysis represents a systematic and replicable way of identifying the presence and prevalence of key features and/or concepts within a text in order to understand the meanings it contains (Neuendorf, 2002). However, the methods for doing this and what level of knowledge and understanding can be achieved are a source of historic debate (Haggarty, 1996). For instance, Neuendorf (2002) explicitly states that content analysis is a quantitative research method that does not include qualitative approaches, which she believes are better labelled as discursive analysis or textual analysis, while Hsieh and Shannon (2005) proclaim content analysis to be a valuable qualitative research technique. Positivistic researchers suggest that it is the scale, repetition, and replicability of the research that gives content analysis its viability (Macnamara, 2005, p. 4), and positivism's focus on directly observable and quantifiably verified results contributes to consistent reproducible results (Clarke, 2009). Conversely, qualitative researchers suggest that frequency is a poor substitute for intensity, impact, and contextual value (Morgan, 1993). This research takes the middle ground afforded by Macnamara (2005, p. 5), who sees a role for a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, with qualitative research being "necessary to understand their deeper

meanings and likely interpretations by audiences – surely the ultimate goal of analysing media content.”

Any research exploring media content for both what influence it may have on and for how it might reflect society – i.e. employing both behaviourist and humanist traditions – should use a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. (Macnamara, 2005, p. 6)

It is this view that most closely addresses this research’s goals of identifying the diversity news commenting presents and represents, particularly as it is exploratory research.

While content analysis has encountered criticism for being epistemologically ungrounded (Haggarty, 1996; Macnamara & Dessaix, 2014), its methods can employ a number of design decisions to ensure they are reliable and valid. A key component for this research is transparency of the systematic approach employed. While content analysis often relies on hermeneutic coding, which focuses on the interpretive skills of the analyst to identify relevant text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), this study’s assessment offers a more specific criteria and process for its identification of the comments, comment sections, and websites. It uses a detailed process for identifying the relevant text and determinants for coding that minimises the need for broad hermeneutic judgments by combining these with a deductive process [See Chapter 6]. The resulting guidelines mean the research can not only be replicated but also critically evaluated and further refined.

This project employs its content analysis for multiple countries to show the ways that it produces a distinct description that reflects their ecosystems’ differing qualities. I use two national media ecosystems, South Korea and Australia, to demonstrate the assessment’s capacity to capture similarity and difference. The goal is not to adjudicate on whether news commenting in each system is “sufficiently” pluralistic – a challenging if not impossible goal (Gibbons, 2015). Rather, the descriptions that this method provides allow for a comparative assessment that can be used to make purposeful decisions regarding and accommodating news commenting’s role in the national media system and as a component of the pluralism of that media system.

The content produced by a media system and consumed by the public is a crucial arbiter for media pluralism. Changes to ownership structures and media regulations play a vital role in ensuring that content is usefully diverse and able to empower societies to deal with their complex problems, but no individual component is required for or automatically leads to usefully diverse content for the public (Karppinen, 2007). Therefore, content analysis is a critical tool for assessing the efficacy of the systems and structures within a media system, and, according to Bourdieu and his theory of the fields of cultural production (Marlière, 1998), the content itself plays a role in setting standards and expectations for media producers – which has also been found applicable to news commenting (Ksiazek, 2018; Suh et al., 2018; Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018). Content analysis is a crucial complement to other media pluralism assessments for understanding the ongoing capacity of a media system to provide news and information that augments the functioning of a society.

Making this a qualitative content analysis – rather than the quantitative approach espoused by Neuendorf (2002) – enabled me to provide a nuanced description of a range of concerns within internal media pluralism, an important concern as no previous studies have yet investigated news commenting with this lens. Numbers play a role in these descriptions, to be sure – particularly in the form of ratios indicating the balance of content. However, in line with the in-depth descriptions of the factors behind each component of the MPM's report (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018), a layered description is required that provides quantifiably comparable data as well as a view of the specific characteristics that inform and contextualise the data. Quantitative content analysis provides insights through large and broad data sets, such as those leveraged by Ruiz et al. (2011) and Milioni et al. (2012). However, for this media pluralism research, disproportionate attention must be paid to the small number of sites that disproportionately dominate the public's online news consumption (Newman et al., 2021), and the smaller set of dominant sites in each country simultaneously resists quantitative approaches

and demands a more in-depth approach. These needs are best reconciled by a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Snelson, 2016).

### **Coding Contributions and Risks**

In line with other commenting research and central to media ecology frameworks (Cali, 2017), this study is more concerned with what comments can demonstrate rather than what individual comments say. Consequently, I employ coding processes that distil comments to meaning units (Krippendorff, 2018), identifying the extent to which their words and inferences embody contributions and risks to media pluralism, a process I cover more specifically in the next chapter. The meaning units of these comments are then taken together to provide an applicable and relevant description of the comment section, the website, and then the collection of websites that dominate online news consumption in the national media ecosystem.

I assessed the comment sections as initially presented by the site and limited to the number of words in a typical news article. Some websites, like Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald*, initially list comments chronologically by the order they are published, where Korea's news portal Daum frequently lists comments sorted for a balanced view, particularly for longer comment sections. This initial sorting matters – how websites list and recommend their content has a strong effect on what users decide to read (Spangher, 2015; Yang, 2016). While modifying the order would affect the prominence of contributions (or risks), the initial arrangement is the one most likely to be seen, particularly as users are increasingly passive consumers of online media content (Newman, 2016; Yang, 2016).

Expanding to a larger pool of comments could change the findings, but the limited research into comment reading habits does not suggest that people read every comment (Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2016) and such a habit would be impractical given the several thousand comments discussions can have on daily articles (Ruiz et al., 2011). This is what led Baden and Springer (2014) to only focus on the first and last five comments per comment section in their own research on news commenting. I take a different approach in this study,

however. Survey respondents told Stroud et al. (2016) that most read only as much of the comments as they do the article, or less. While it is often not fit for purpose, online articles typically stick to an old standard of 800 words (Ferne, 2017), and so I only included the first 800 words of a comment section as it was initially sorted – though the remainder of the final comment was included and took the word count to above 800 words for comment sections that exceeded the word limit. It was this selection of comments that I then coded for analysis.

For each of four categories of contribution and risk – diversity of viewpoints and ideas, diversity of representation, silencing speech and phatic speech – I applied a separate system of coding that starts at the level of individual comments and continues to the macro-view of the most prominent news commenting across the national media system. The descriptions listed briefly here are detailed in the coding guidelines that are a key output of this research project, with each described in more detail in Chapter 6.

#### *Identifying Public Affairs Articles and Their Comments*

Before comments can be coded, the data collection must target only those comments that are most directly implicated in the functioning of a democratic society: the comments on public affairs stories. This mirrors the criteria of the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) and past research on the impactful content of comments, which was similarly focused on public affairs issues such as immigration (Miloni et al., 2012) and climate change (Graham & Wright, 2015). Public affairs articles can have the direct effect of informing the public's capacity to operate within and make decisions about their society and environment, which is of expanded relevance in democratic countries (Ruiz et al., 2011). This is why public affairs news is a primary focus of the Media Pluralism Project that my work contributes to. Using the tools developed by project contributors and investigators empowers this research to examine a data set that aligns to the larger project and is simultaneously highly relevant to media pluralism concerns.

While the concept of public affairs articles is ambiguously defined and can variously include hard news, criticism, and explanations, Killenberg (2012, p. xv) contends it covers the

range of journalistic production that “keeps people informed as citizens and keeps our institutions, public and private, focused on the public good.” Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl (2019) find that consumption of this media plays a key role in spreading the political knowledge and informing the participation that underpins democratic societies in a way that incidental news exposure on social media platforms does not. Further, prior research by De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) suggests that this effect is increased with greater exposure to political content in the news. Comments can appear on a variety of news topics and some non-public-affairs topics can initiate lengthy discussions (Koskie, 2018), but the agenda-setting power of the news organisation even in the comments (Miloni et al., 2012) means the comments that pertain to the functioning of society will be under articles that initiate these discussions.

To target public affairs comments, this assessment uses measures refined in the Media Pluralism Project (Wilding, Dwyer, Hutchinson, & Bebawi, 2022 (forthcoming)), which identifies those articles that are most likely to impact the way society functions. This mirrors, in ways, the focus of the EU’s MPM, which looks at “news and current affairs” (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018, p. 1) and Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015, p. 68), which discusses news and information markets because of “the opinion-forming power of the media, namely the crucial role news and information play in forming people’s opinions on public matters.” Making this distinction involved identifying the key actors, objects, events, and situations discussed in the headline and establishing that they are impacting or responsible for the functioning of society and affecting the public, in a process I detail more specifically in Chapter 6. Examples of public affairs headlines flagged as relevant to public affairs issues are:

- “NSW Treasurer tables secret \$50m bid to keep Qantas in Sydney” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)
- “Every vaccinated Australian can now access a digital certificate to prove they had the jab - here is how to get your hands on one” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021)

Examples of excluded non-public affairs headlines are:

- “Baby SUVs are booming, is this a stand out?” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)
- “Has a South African woman given birth to TEN babies? 'Proud parents' claim mother has had world record brood a month after mum from Mali gave birth to nine” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021)

When I had identified all public affairs article headlines on the front page of the news website, I examined them individually to see if they had comment sections and what comments had been made. It is these comments that formed the basis of the analysis and to which I applied the coding. The first such coding tested the potential for diversity in the ideas and viewpoints commenters put forward.

#### *Identifying Diverse Viewpoints and Information*

The process of identifying viewpoints and ideas built on the research by Milioni et al. (2012) and Baden and Springer (2014) with some reference to Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), whose “citizenship positions” framework complements Baden and Springer’s viewpoints. Their approaches provide guidelines that can readily be applied to address media pluralism concerns.

There are two basic components to this part of the coding: finding the person, object, event, or structure that is the focus of each comment, and then noting the way that focus is being interpreted and understood. To identify the presence of new information, I took cues from Milioni et al. (2012), who coded each comment to identify “original and unreported” information. For viewpoints, the study relied on the detailed research design proposed by Baden and Springer (2017) for finding viewpoints by identifying framing elements, while also seeking any new focal objects they may introduce, if rarely (Milioni et al., 2012). Where commenters were introducing information that was distinct from the headlines, mass media reporting, or common knowledge, they had the potential to bring new information to the discussion through their comment (Milioni et al., 2012). If they were bringing a competing vision of how a focal object was interpreted and understood or placing the emphasis on a new focal object, then that was

coded as a new viewpoint that would potentially have otherwise gone unconsidered (Baden & Springer, 2017) – a significant contribution given news organisations’ historic power for framing the news (Robert M Entman, 2007). The keyword is competing, however – these ideas and viewpoints needed to be compared to other comments and the headline to see if the additions were presenting diverse content. Example comments are:

- Viewpoint: “This defendant is not passing my good character test. I hope he will try harder, but we are disappointed in him.” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021)
- Information: “Your odds of dying of complications of a SARS-CoV2 infection are still at least 2000 times higher than your odds of dying of the AstraZeneca vaccine.” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)
- Neither viewpoint nor information: “Best post I’ve seen in ages, spot on!” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)

### *Identifying Diverse Representation*

In addition to the internal pluralism metric of whether audiences are being exposed to diverse content, media pluralism is also, even dominantly, concerned with the extent to which there are structures in place that can yield this content and that can represent the diversity of the public (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). Nevertheless, news organisations have struggled to incorporate diverse voices into their journalism, despite increasing awareness of the issue (Núñez-Mussa et al., 2022). Here, too, news commenting offers potential, as it can invite a much wider range of people to produce the content (Stroud et al., 2016) – though its content and communities can also exclude (Meyer & Speakman, 2016).

Identifying the characteristics of commenters is difficult – a single comment section could have thousands of authors (Ruiz et al., 2011) and identifying the characteristics of these commenters relies on finding participants (Barnes et al., 2017) or using the cues they leave in their comments and in the UIF (Martin, 2015). The commenters’ identities can be more or less invisible depending on what they write and the names or images they attribute to themselves.



Indeed, offering self-identifying information can be a barrier to communication – identifiably female commenters are more likely to receive hostility in response to their comments in some cases (Rösner et al., 2016). Nevertheless, seeing diversity and seeing representation in the people that are making media impacts the way diverse groups interact with the media and their larger society (Ewart et al., 2017), and lacking visible representation places a barrier to people contributing their own voices (Price & Payne, 2019). Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters (2015) find such representation is important for informing how roles are enacted but also inspiring people to participate in the act and showing them that such participation is possible.

This research focuses on this diversity of representation as it is visible in the comment sections. I examined that content of comments which indicates that the commenter is part of a distinct demographic and is thereby giving voice to their concerns. I did this by viewing the contents of comments and the usernames provided to find descriptions and determinants of commenters' gender, region, and inclusion in a minority group (including disability) – the same aspects that are a focus for internal media pluralism research (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015).

The visibility of this is key – unlike for the professional staff of a news organisation whose names and pictures are often attached to the articles, comment readers only have access to the identifying information that commenters volunteer, which can be in the comments themselves or in a user profile feature available on some websites (Koskie, 2018). Examples of usernames indicating some form of representation are “FamilyMan,” “Bomaderry” [the name of a regional town in Australia], and “Châu Vương Xi Mãng” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021), and a comment body indicated representation in stating, “What can one say, lucky, we live in nsw [New South Wales, an Australian state], really” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021). The visibility of diverse representation plays a key role in the impact of that representation (Ewart & Beard, 2017; McCallum, Waller, & Meadows, 2012; Morgenroth et al., 2015), even if an author's background

as part of a minority group does not in itself lead to a diversity of viewpoints and ideas (Forde, 2005; Hanusch, 2013).

### *Identifying Silencing Speech*

Silencing speech here has a narrower definition than the sweeping view presented by Meyer and Speakman (2016), with a focus on comment content that marginalises and dismisses conflicting viewpoints and groups. As opposed to the more general concept of “negative reactions” cited by Meyer and Speakman (2016), I identified those components of the text that presented an attempt to dismiss, insult, or threaten a group or individuals that could otherwise participate in the discussion. This reconciles with the concept of silencing speech raised by Chua (2009), who discusses the ways silencing speech paints a part of the commenting community as adversaries and directs a variety of actions against them rather than debating or discussing their positions or ideas. The goal of these behaviours goes beyond debate, striving to remove speakers from the discussion entirely, conflicting with the distributed communicative power sought by media pluralism (Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015). These detractive comments also go against the discursive ethics considered by Ruiz et al. (2011) for how comment sections can present deliberative discussion spaces. Using this narrower definition of silencing speech enabled me to consider the negative reactions discussed by Meyer and Speakman (2016) without flagging the elements of the content that offer benefits to users reading and participating in news commenting for entertainment (Barnes, 2015; Martin, 2015; Springer et al., 2015).

I identified silencing speech in two stages. The first was to search for content that was directed at other present or potential speakers. This included other commenters in the comment section, the author and sources for the article attached to the comment section, or other stakeholders of the article that could use the comments to provide a reply. The second step was to determine whether this directed content attempted to preclude the other party from speaking, as with “Shut up. Come back to us when the hospitals are overwhelmed” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021). Also flagged were comments that denigrated them as unworthy to speak and be heard, for

example, “Please visit a doctor, Ukrainian babushka. You are hallucinating” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021). It is this aggression that can prevent participation in the comments (Domingo, 2014; Meyer & Speakman, 2016), but news organisations have also found it can put off sources for their stories, making it harder for them to produce their journalistic content (Huang, 2016; Koskie, 2018). Consequently, this is an area where news commenting can specifically introduce media content that shuts down the kinds of diversity that media pluralism initiatives would seek to engender.

### *Identifying Phatic Speech*

Finally, comments need to be assessed for their unique capacity to marginalise their own contribution. In much the same way as broadcast media’s contribution to media pluralism is limited by the geographic reach of its technology (Napoli & Yan, 2007), news commenting presents a risk for its own potential to offer diverse viewpoints, information, and representation because of the processes of its production. This is most visible with the prevalence of phatic communication and culture that is intrinsic to participatory media spaces (Miller, 2008). While some researchers evaluate the discursive characteristics of news commenting as a benefit (Ruiz et al., 2011), interactions among what is generally only a minimal fraction of the public (Stroud et al., 2016) could push out of view those comments that could otherwise offer readers some contribution to media pluralism.

This research seeks to go a step further than the work of Milioni et al. (2012) by including this material not just as an “other” category of content without informational value but also as an intervening factor in the accessibility of impactful commenting content. It requires its own separate analysis because it is an intrinsic element of such participatory media (Miller, 2008; Sarjanoja et al., 2013) – it is both constitutive of sustainable news commenting and disruptive of its potential value. This communication plays a part in the discursive ethics Ruiz et al. (2011) used to demonstrate news commenting’s potential as a new public sphere, but an excess of the creation, definition, maintenance and repair work done by phatic communication can lead to

what Sarjanoja et al. (2013) call a “nihilistic culture” devoid of practical communication. Consequently, this is the final metric of the assessment precisely because it only applies if the phatic comments exclude other contributions and risks by pushing them further down the comment section than most users are likely to read. Other kinds of content, such as spam and incomprehensible posts, may do this as well but these are not integral and predictable types of content for the medium, where phatic communication is (Miller, 2008).

Identifying problematic phatic comments involves noting where the content of a comment is dedicated to interaction with other participants (including the news organisation and their staff), social alignment of self or others, or establishing the rules of the discussion in comments that lack contributions or risks for media pluralism. This spans a range of content from agreement, such as “Good idea.”, to questions like “Eh?”, but also includes content such as attempts at humour, as with “Ha ha, half of them can't pick their own nose” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021).

Unlike silencing speech, these can be well-meaning and even appreciative (they include, for instance, a comment simply saying “Thanks for the article” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)). However, by imposing an additional burden for the audience, who will have other demands on their time and effort beyond reading comments, their presence could preclude readers from reaching comments that offer a contribution to media pluralism. Souza et al. (2014) demonstrated that, while social media platforms offer a lot of potential data on events – in their case disease events – there is a scarcity of useable data that is accompanied by varying amounts of non-contributing “noise” which can greatly impact its contribution. El Abaddi et al. (2011) suggest that the various forms of noise complicate the breadth of social media’s various forms, ranging from spam to hostility. If exposure diversity is a crucial concern (Moe et al., 2021), then the ways that news commenting could themselves reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints and information is a crucial context for its potential contribution.

*Evaluating the Characteristics of Comment Sections and News Websites*

After identifying the presence of diverse content as well as the risks, I brought together the prevalence of each kind of content in comment sections and across the news websites to make a broad evaluation and to characterise the role of news commenting in the national media ecosystem. As in research by Milioni et al. (2012), Graham and Wright (2015), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), these individual comments are not self-contained and separate production analogous to news articles, but rather pieces of a larger production that provides a range of description for a single topic. Consequently, a key goal of this study is that news commenting's contribution be viewed at the level of comment sections as collective productions. The breadth of contents in these sections could evince a different characteristic than that visible in comments taken individually or viewed in the aggregate without regard to their constituent context. Where many qualitative comment researchers use comments to examine the public's views (Callaghan et al., 2021), the goal of this study is to characterise news commenting itself. Comments are not the micro blogs of twitter posts (Houston et al., 2018) but rather a collection of interactions between commenters and the news, the journalists and their sources, and other commenters (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Wolfgang, 2019).

Focusing on comment sections as a unit of analysis is relatively rare – even for those researchers nominating comment sections as their unit of analysis. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) address “comment sections” extensively, but their unit of analysis was ultimately on individual comments, while M. Duncan et al. (2020) only studied comment sections reflectively, examining their impact on viewers. Weber (2014) pays more attention to impacts on a level specific to comment sections, though their analysis was still focused on interactions within the comment sections. However, Ruiz et al. (2011) emphasise that comments comprise a conversation, a discussion on an issue of broad importance. I contend here that the value of news commenting needs to be seen at the level of these collected discussions in the format they are seen by readers to accurately assess what value they offer. Such a view requires balancing the presence of diverse

content – content which could otherwise be completely absent without comment sections (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014) – with proportionality of content, as this presence can happen in a context where signals are far outpaced by the noise.

Surfacing these potential outcomes is a fraught task with few precedents to rely upon, unlike the coding of individual comments. Parallel approaches offer important considerations, however. While Baden and Springer (2014) and Milioni et al. (2012) examine comments individually, they are focused on specific topics rather than the breadth of comments across a site or period of time, so they are segmenting the body of comments in specific ways. Graham and Wright (2015) and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) have a similar approach with a more qualitative focus that draws attention to the impact of presence of relevant content rather than a sense of quantities of comment types. A frequent theme of these and other studies discussing comment sections (Gonçalves, 2018; Weber, 2014) is the role of numbers of coded comments in creating qualitative descriptions of the characteristics of comment sections, which Callaghan et al. (2021) found to be a common approach in qualitative commenting content analysis. Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) demonstrate how numbers and proportionality can play a guiding role in identifying prominent and less prominent themes and content in qualitative news commenting research. Similarly, I used the individual comment coding described above to create a qualitative description of comment sections that leverages proportions and presence to create a salient description of a comment section's characteristics.

These descriptions finally culminated in a description of the news websites. For this, I drew on the broad range of qualitative data available for each site. I started with a descriptive analysis of the front page, drawing out and describing those characteristics with direct relevance to the site's news commenting by employing website analysis (Brügger, 2010). I also included the visible structures contextualising comments, including accessible commenting guidelines, comment posting user interfaces, hyperlinking to comment sections, and adjacent content, as these components of the interface communicate standards and expectations to readers and

commenters (Mollen, 2020). These features are the product of a range of decisions within the organisations (Huang, 2016; Koskie, 2018), and their decisions have an impact on the comments that appear (Ksiazek, 2015; Moore et al., 2021; Wolfgang, 2018). The sites and interfaces also differed, sometimes sharply, from one organisation to another. However, the public are not exposed to every possible iteration of news commenting within their media ecosystem; a small number of organisations have far more visibility (Newman et al., 2021) and so their specific approach takes on an outsized significance.

From there, I drew together the collection of results for each websites' comments and comment sections to characterise the website. Taken together, the results for each pair of websites in Korea and Australia provide a view of the most visible commenting in each media ecosystem. As shown in Chapter 3, each of South Korea and Australia are facing different concerns with regards to media pluralism, but an assessment of each system's news commenting allows for a more accurate view that accommodates an element previously missing from analysis. This is facilitated, in this case, by the extent to which specific websites draw such an outsized readership in each country. In Korea, this means that studying just two websites enables a description of comments exposed to a majority of the population, as Naver and Daum have a dominance of online news media that outstrips any rivals (Newman et al., 2021). Australia's top websites do not share this dominance (S. Park et al., 2021), but describing only these two websites nevertheless provides a characterisation of Australia's exposure to news commenting because the top websites offer no public affairs commenting at all. This absence plays a key role in the findings for news commenting's contributions to the Australian media ecosystem.

### **An Investigation in Two Phases**

Establishing a reliable system of coding and analysis is a challenge for any qualitative investigation of media content (Callaghan et al., 2021; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), but this challenge is amplified when considering the unique characteristics of comment sections, whose contents shift with time and moderation practices and whose producers can prove unpredictable

and resistant to standards and guidelines. Consequently, I collected a preliminary set of data from a small sample on a pair of websites –the online sites for legacy print media newspapers *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* – that, while prominent (Nielsen, 2021), do not feature among the most visited websites used in the larger research. I conducted data collection and coding for the comments on these two websites to assess the method's value for the larger study. As a result of this preliminary trial, I was able to refine the coding systems and employ new techniques for data collection.

To conduct this preliminary analysis, the top 20 public affairs stories from the websites were collected at 9:00 a.m. on 24 August, 2020 – a high readership time (Lauridsen, 2015) and day of the week (Clatworthy, 2019) for online news readers. The articles containing comments were then manually parsed to save their comment sections' contents to files. I read the resulting comment sections up to 800 words, plus the remainder of the comment when 800 words was reached. In each comment section, I coded the comments for their contributions and risks, with a focus on identifying where coding systems could not appropriately be applied or where data collection presented obstacles.

This analysis highlighted problems for both the data collection and the coding. For data collection, one such problem was the highly distinct website coding both within and across sites, which led to formatting inconsistencies when comments were moved to Microsoft Excel and Word or NVivo formats. Further, there was an impractical inefficiency for the number of comments transcribed if the approach were to be applied at scale, particularly considering the importance of timing as an impactful factor on the results. For coding, one problem was that each framework was multi-layered and required complex judgments at multiple levels, which can lead to poor generalisability and reliability (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Further, a highly common element of comments, humorous content, caused conflicting results, which further confounded efforts to differentiate between viewpoints and identify diversity.



As a result of this preliminary analysis, I implemented a number of changes. Addressing the impracticalities of the data collection led to the adoption of ParseHub web scraping tools to automate part of the process and to allow for scheduled, simultaneous collection across the sites. While programming the collection required a significant time investment, the finished instructions could be deployed simply and as often as needed with minimal further intervention. The coding revision involved creating a system to extract the meaning units of humorous posts, which are an important vehicle for meaning in participatory media (J. L. Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018; Gal, 2019). Accommodating this humour facilitated coding and disambiguated otherwise borderline results. I also streamlined the process of coding to require less hermeneutic and deductive judgments, reducing the coding process from over 30 total steps to 12. Once I had applied the new coding systems, an additional measure was required to distinguish between similar viewpoints or similar representation that allowed for a more accurate assessment of not just prevalence of relevant content but also its level of diversity. For this, I paid further attention to the distinction of *competing* versus *similar* and *complementary* framing as proposed by Baden and Springer (2017). These changes resulted in the coding guidelines in Chapter 6.

Confounding factors like humour and similarity rarely created a practical challenge but provided valuable opportunities for refinement, though data collection still proved a substantial and time-consuming task. Once I implemented the changes, I applied the guidelines in a larger, multi-national phase of investigation.

### **Collecting the Body of Comments**

In the main data collection and analysis phase of this project, I collected a much larger body of content from the most prominent and widely seen news commenting in the Korean and Australian media ecosystem. In this phase, I examined Australia's five most visited news websites and then repeated the process for South Korea, with the help of South Korean media researchers for language and contextual reference. The number of websites were limited because readership, and thereby the potential reach of the comments, drops rapidly from the top ranked

sites: Australia's top website has quadruple the readership of the tenth (Mediaweek, 2021a), where South Korea's Naver and Daum overwhelmingly dominate online media, far outstripping any other national news websites (D. Kim, 2018; Newman et al., 2019). Naver and Daum are not traditional news organisations, but the Digital News Report (2021) labels them 'Top News Brands Online' due to their outsized role as the websites where the public goes to get their news, making their widely available and highly visible comment sections the most crucial sites for Korean news commenting research. While other news websites may provide distinct results for their news commenting, less visited sites would have a starkly more limited impact on the national media ecosystem – this is part of the reason why media pluralism dedicates multiple indicators to market plurality (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). This decision was to accommodate the vital concern of exposure diversity – that mix of media that the public actually consumes as opposed to the nearly limitless range of material that is technically accessible (Moe et al., 2021; Webster, 2009).

I also needed to limit the collection to a set number of comments that appeared at peak times. This meant applying the limit of 800 words of comments, but also to accommodate the impact of time of viewership, so comments and comment sections were collected from all sites starting from 9:00 a.m. on weekdays. News articles that end up with thousands of comments sometimes only had few or none during high readership hours. Reports suggest that the highest engagement with online news sites is on weekdays (Clatworthy, 2019) at around 9:00 a.m. (Lauridsen, 2015). The impacts of this on the data were inconsistent. SMH listed comments in reverse chronological order, so timing directly impacted results, but Daum initially listed comments for a balanced view for highly active comment sections which changed gradually if at all after initial saturation. Conversely, time has a much greater impact on which articles are on the front page of the website for Daum.net, which changes constantly throughout the day, than on SMH.com.au, where stories cycle much more slowly. Consequently, I used time of collection

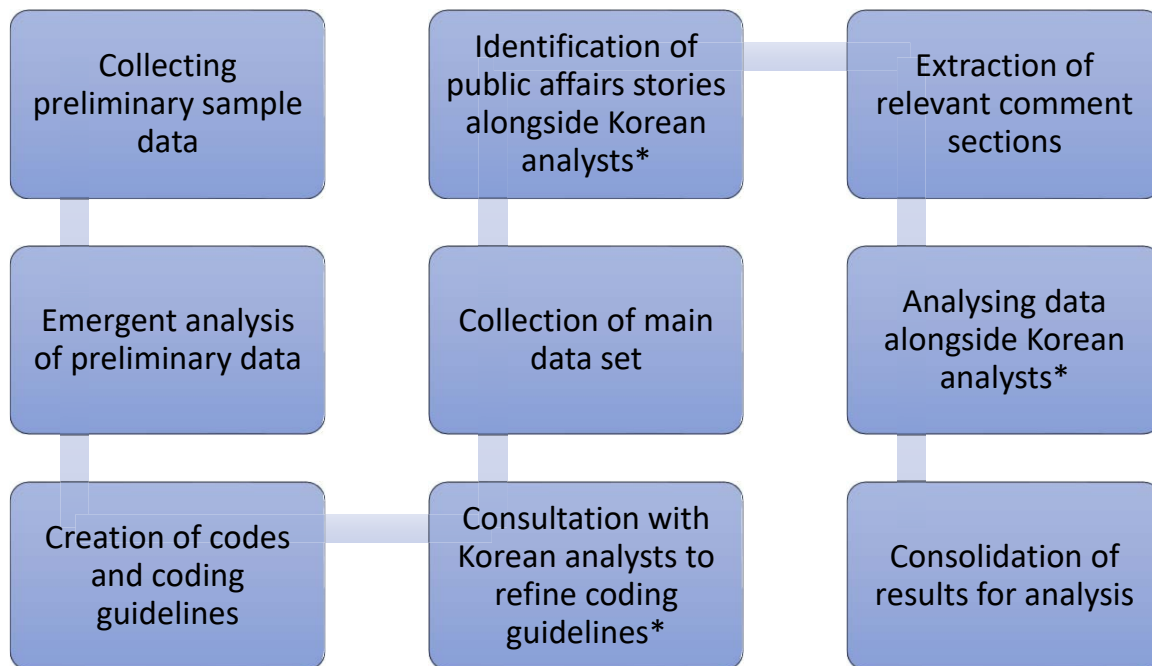
as a controlled variable to provide a representative view of these dynamic sections during times of high readership.

The data collection relied on a mix of programmatic solutions and manual approaches. For programmatic solutions, the research utilised web-scraping software ParseHub and qualitative coding software NVivo for identifying public affairs articles and collecting their comments. Comments are difficult to scrape – these websites each have a distinct design to comment sections and often do not store the comments on the article page directly – but the ongoing development of ParseHub offered a workaround to this problem.

Analyst intervention was also required across the process [see Figure 4]. After I collected the headlines, I checked for their relevance to public affairs for the Australian content while the Korean coding team leader Dr. Han Woo Park coded the headlines for the Korean sites (this saw him revisiting an approach he had already employed (C. Chung, Biddix, & Park, 2020) beyond his participation in the Media Pluralism Project (Wilding et al., 2022 (forthcoming))). The comments under these public affairs articles were then collected and manually placed into templated coding spreadsheets, truncated to the 800-word limit.

**Figure 4**

*Flowchart depicting the process of developing coding guidelines, data collection, and data analysis*



*Note:* \* denotes phases that included the input of Korean analysts headed by Dr. Han Woo Park

### **Determining the Sample for Adequacy and Saturation**

I repeated this data collection one day per week for six weeks on all websites. While this led to a collection of comment sections (665) and comments (12,208) far in excess of that used for comparable news commenting research (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), this was because my study was covering more sites and comment sections. I collected a sample size from each site that was comparable to research by Baden and Springer (2014), Milioni et al. (2012), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), but multiplying this by the number of sites resulted in a proportionally larger sample. Further, where each of the above studies were focused on specific news topics, this study is specifically trying to capture a broader view of comments that transcends commenting activity related to any individual news event.

By conducting the collection six times, this allowed for an assessment of data saturation (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018) whereby subsequent iterations can be checked

against the first collection to verify that the range of outcomes and whether a representative pattern of presentation had been established. More sampling could further establish “meaning saturation”, where the range of variation and nuance relating to each code and interpretation had been better captured, but meaning saturation is generally an inexhaustible goal with rapidly diminishing returns (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013) and studies of media pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) do not focus on precise and minute interpretations of individual texts.

Using a series of six collections ensured that the project is both practically achievable and academically rigorous. Past qualitative research projects (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013; Vasileiou et al., 2018) found that a majority of codes and categories arose from the first few sets of data and there was little variation after a small number of iterations, and the results here broadly confirm this. For instance, at no point did representation on Naver exceed that of DM and silencing speech was consistently higher on DM than at Naver. In both of these cases, these consistencies were tied to structures and support behind these organisations’ comments, which had a substantive impact on many of the results. One exception to this is with diversity of viewpoints on the first week of the Daum data set, when the presence of diverse viewpoints (38.6%) far exceeded the site’s average (26%), placing it above DM’s result for the same day (its lowest of any day), marking a deviation from an otherwise consistent trend, though their position relative to SMH (higher) and Naver (lower) remained the same. The small amount of deviation across the wide range of metrics and six days of collection suggests that this data set had achieved an appreciable level of data saturation so as to make empirically grounded observations [see Chapters 7 and 8].

However, identifying sample size sufficiency is a complex and often neglected task for qualitative research. There is a fundamental concern of subjectivity for assessing the quality of qualitative research that, at this point, simply seems not to have been settled over the course of nearly a century of debate (Tracy, 2010). O’Reilly and Parker (2013) posit that, “An adequate

sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research question.” That adequacy is indicated by sufficiency is undoubtedly true but this hardly offers a navigable path, as they note. Tracy (2010) offers eight criteria for determining the quality of qualitative work, but the criteria similarly layer subjective concerns, such as what constitutes a “worthy” topic or how “credibility” is determined. This is likely why, according to Guetterman (2015), a plurality of the top-cited qualitative research do not discuss their sampling strategy, and O’Reilly and Parker (2013) note that none of the articles published in a qualitative research journal over the 18 months of their study explained how they determined or achieved their expressed satisfaction with “data saturation.” Nevertheless, O’Reilly and Parker (2013) suggests that being transparent about this issue is key to positioning and utilising the benefits of qualitative research – a suggestion I endorse and strive to address in this project.

Given the lack of a clear threshold to meet or exceed, this research opts for the approach, as endorsed by Tracy (2010) and Nelson (2017), of pro-actively applying a set of criteria that address concerns of sufficient sample sizes and data collection. There is an argument that such a universal checklist of criteria is a poor fit for assessing qualitative research, which is specifically designed to take on research objects that are inadequately described or contextualised. It only serves to exacerbate the problem the study addresses, as our lack of knowledge means we would not be able to choose appropriate guidelines and constraints (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013). However, Tracy (2010) notes that such criticism generally provides the remedy of simply describing a different set of criteria, reinforcing the idea that criteria nevertheless provide a useful way of thinking about and grounding results.

Here, I take the approach proposed by Nelson (2017) to check the method against *conceptual depth criteria*, which propose five statements that should be in evidence in the data:

1. “A wide range of evidence can be drawn from the data to illustrate the concepts.”
2. “The concepts must be demonstrably part of a rich network of concepts and themes in the data within which there are complex connections”

3. “Subtlety in the concepts is understood by the researcher and used constructively to articulate the richness in its meaning.”
4. “The concepts have resonance with existing literature in the area being investigated.”
5. “The concepts, as part of a wider analytic story, stand up to testing for external validity” (Nelson, 2017, p. 559)

These points can then individually be scored, according to Nelson (2017, p. 567), on a three-point scale from low to high to provide an evaluation of in what ways the study design allows for higher or lower levels of data saturation. By these criteria, even the preliminary research suggests a broadly positive result for this sample size.

Demonstrating that a range of results in the data can provide evidence for the media pluralism concepts is fundamental to this research and the essential concern for its coding system. It does this by having diverse qualitative analysis derived from micro (comments), meso (comment sections), and macro (site-wide) levels on each of the four sites. Where Nelson (2017) relied on positional maps to position statements, I specifically sought the potential for diversity that exceeds what a matrix of dualisms could describe. However, Baden and Springer (2014) demonstrate a coding scheme that can reveal the more abstract point of the presence of diversity. By identifying those elements that present competing viewpoints, through introducing new concerns and agents or applying judgment, for instance, the coding system can tie something with an extremely wide range of outputs to an assessment of the content’s diversity. Similarly, using names and other self-identification (Kangaspunta, 2020; Martin, 2015), the study can assess the diversity of commenters and the various ways they reveal themselves. Taking this together, I assess that the first statement applies at a high level.

The second criterion, that concepts are part of a rich network of concepts, fundamentally works hand in hand with the first, in this instance. I analysed the content for the prevalence of multiple contributions and risks that each portend a distinct impact for media pluralism. Media pluralism is a concept that networks to myriad structures and concerns for media systems

(Valcke, Picard, & Sükösd, 2015) and my media ecology-grounded approach also has relevance to ecosystemic ways of seeing media systems (Hitchens, 2011). For Nelson (2017), concept contextualisation similarly meant correlating the different themes to create a larger description for the views of participants; working towards such a larger description is at the heart of the media ecosystemic view adopted here. It is in regard to these two statements that the study is most dedicated, with a goal of achieving what Nelson (2017) calls “high conceptual depth.”

My study placed less emphasis on the third criterion of subtlety and richness of the data. This was an important and visible characteristic of the research by Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), who found subtle and impactful distinctions between similar statements made in different ways – it was these differences behind similar content that formed the basis of the political positioning the researchers were able to identify between the lines of text. Nelson (2017) explains this identification of ambiguities and subtle difference as a fundamental component of qualitative emergent research. However, I was not trying to uncover subtle differences in this investigation, but rather broad distinctions that can portend broad impacts on a media ecosystem. The broad themes I used to identify the contents of comments are to correlate news commenting with assessments of other media types, while the discrete themes used to identify the presence of viewpoints, representation, silencing speech, and phatic communication are not applied between texts. In short, I want to emphasise not that the media pluralism contributions of news commenting are nuanced and subtly different, but rather that they are a prevalent presence (Huang, 2016) with an avid readership (Stroud et al., 2016) and can be variously identified for what they are bringing to the media environment for these readers. Consequently, this research method would be assessed as having low conceptual depth on the point of subtlety (Nelson, 2017), though this relatively low result is not an area of concern.

It is precisely to address the fourth criterion, resonance with existing literature, that the criterion of subtlety is not a crucial focus. Extensive research in international projects exists for both news commenting (Gonçalves, 2018; Ruiz et al., 2011; Wolfgang, 2018) and media



pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Núñez-Mussa et al., 2022; Trappel & Meier, 2022), but the two areas have not yet been brought together. The existing literature considering news commenting in relation to media pluralism only concerned its existence as a media type rather than considering its contents (Gálik & Vogl, 2015), and media pluralism assessments generally put much less emphasis on media content than on other more structural concerns despite its importance to the area of social inclusion (Klimkiewicz, 2015). The lack of existing media pluralism frameworks to capture the contribution of news commenting is a fundamental reason for this work. News commenting research has demonstrated that a range of valuable insights can be drawn from comment contents, however (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Ruiz et al., 2011), providing a path to assessing news commenting for its media pluralism potential. Simultaneously, the research design has had to disproportionately rely on news commenting research rather than media pluralism research due to its orientation towards content analysis. Despite its focus on exposure diversity (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), which is necessarily focused on the content the public actually sees in practice (Napoli, 2011), there are few precedents within media pluralism scholarship for this kind of content analysis. This means that the research design can best be understood as having medium conceptual depth regarding the criterion of resonance.

The criterion of validity presented a challenge because I investigated the research object at multiple levels, each of which covers a distinct scope with varying quantities of relevant content. On the one level, I set out to identify the range of ways comments can present content within four relevant typologies – diversity of viewpoints and information, representation, silencing speech, and phatic content – among several thousand comments. Then, I created typologies for classifying hundreds of comment sections, enabling a view of how a website's comment sections can be assessed for their contribution to media pluralism. At both of these levels, the sample sizes far exceed the qualitative sample sizes discussed by O'Reilly and Parker

(2013) and Snelson (2016) and exceeds that utilised by qualitative comment researchers Baden and Springer (2014) and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019).

However, at the macro layer, that of capturing a snapshot of a website's commenting as presented to users at peak times, the sample size is bounded by practical barriers. On one side, while a media system may contain even hundreds of media sources (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the fact that a small number of news organisations have unparalleled reach and influence is one of the fundamental concerns of media pluralism (Trappel & Meier, 2022). This means that expanding the number of sites would have rapidly diminishing returns in terms of describing the exposure of the public to news commenting. Further, every day of data collection multiplies the number of comments and comment sections, which would quickly reach a size untenable for qualitative research from a practical perspective. By capturing six days of comments, each of which can be compared to the others to assess the day-to-day variation, I sought to address the criterion of validity at the macro level without compromising the nuanced assessments at the more micro levels. While this allows it to provide a window at the extent of variation on a daily or site basis, an assessment on the criterion of validity for this study could best be described as medium: stronger on the micro and meso layers but weaker at the macro layer.

The development of the method was iterative – initial approaches lacked the range and validity of initial conceptions, which used a smaller number of days and consequently a smaller sample size. The goal of changes was to bring an evaluation per the conceptual depth criteria more in line with that achieved by Nelson (2017) [see Table 3]. There is certainly room to expand on the subtle variations of how content can differently relate to the specific elements of media pluralism, and that can be the focus of more narrowly targeted studies, but such a study would not explicitly tie into the existing media pluralism scholarship that this study is connecting to news commenting. Conversely, a larger, quantitative study could expand on these results with more attention to validity, and one of my goals is to make such a study an attractive area of

research. Pushing to capture further conceptual depth for this project, however, may prove to be a fraught exercise.

**Table 3**

*Comparison of conceptual depth criteria evaluations*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Nelson (2017) rating</b>	<b>This study rating</b>
Range	High (3)	High (3)
Complexity	High (3)	High (3)
Subtlety	High (3)	Low (1)
Resonance	Medium (2)	Medium (2)
Validity	Medium (2)	Medium (2)
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>

*Note:* Table adapted from Nelson (2017)

The task of evaluating the conceptual depth of the research design raised difficult and useful questions and led to an expansion of the scope. It also added to the practical demands of its execution. However, the changes ultimately led to a more valuable study and a data set that offers a wealth of potential insights at every level. Nelson's (2017) approach offers a useful response to the concerns of Callaghan et al. (2021) and Baden and Springer (2017) about establishing robust and transparent methods for qualitative content analysis, particularly in regards to news commenting.

### **From Methods to Instructions**

This chapter provided an overview of the core concepts and frameworks guiding this research's approach. This methodology intends to show the ways that diversity of viewpoints, diversity of representation, silencing speech, and phatic communication can present and be detected in onsite comments as well as the extent to which their prevalence can vary. By identifying these, policy makers, news organisations, academics, and the public can evaluate the

value of news commenting as part of the national media ecosystem as well as the best ways it can be managed to increase this value or accommodate its presence.

In the next chapter, I provide the specific and detailed process for lifting meaning from comments by providing transparency for the methods used for coding the content.

## Chapter 6: Coding News Commenting Contributions and Risks

In this chapter, I provide the guidelines and framework I used for assessing news commenting contents for their contributions to and risks for media pluralism and ground this approach in relevant literature. My goal is to provide a layered and comparable assessment of the most prominent news commenting in a national media ecosystem, with results that can be used to understand the general state of the most visible news commenting in the system. The results can also be used to identify ways that news commenting systems could be changed and developed to achieve societal, organisational, and/or policy goals. An assessment of this type already exists for traditional media types, with extensively developed and refined frameworks for describing media framing (Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018; Robert M. Entman, 2010; Goffman, 1974), agenda setting (Protess & McCombs, 2016; Schlosberg, 2016), representation (Ewart & Beard, 2017; Starkey, 2006; Sutherland, Eastal, Holland, & Vaughan, 2019), and, most crucial to this work, media pluralism (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Trappel & Meier, 2022; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). These diverse methods have enabled valuable insights that formed the basis of constructive approaches to expanding the benefits and mitigating the problems arising from and within the media ecosystem. However, research has tended to overlook news commenting as a medium that delivers specific and unique packages of content to its readers as part of the media they consume.

The earliest research designs for news commenting often focused on the ways that established media groups and the public viewed the addition, through surveys, interviews, and observation (Deuze, 2008; Domingo, 2008; Robinson, 2007). Later, attention moved on to what kinds of content news commenting, again as a broad innovation, could potentially produce (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), as well as how to deal with and what to make of its specific set of challenges (Chen & Pain, 2017; Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Wolfgang, 2018). This valuable and often large-scale research has yielded extensive insight

into not only the medium itself but also how the public and the media interact with and adapt to their changing media environment.

The potential for disruption and the difficulties and promises of hosting news commenting aside, what faces the public in these comment sections is a straightforward offering: a collection of generally small print texts containing information about and interpretation of the news which varies by article and by website, alongside intracommunal social interactions, aggression, and humour (J. Kim, Lewis, & Watson, 2018; Ziegele, Springer, Jost, & Wright, 2017; Ziegele et al., 2018). The comment sections are living documents that expand and develop the longer they exist, but the individual reader is not presented with the potential past, present and future of a given comment section – they see what is on the page when they open it and only so far along as they care to read. That text is bounded practically and temporally, and it can be analysed and described by looking at the words on the screen (Baden & Springer, 2014; Ksiazek, 2018).

In much the same way that scholars can use one of several descriptive frameworks to describe the news media content that a media organisation produces, coding frameworks can also describe the sort of news commenting a news website hosts. When applied to the most visited news websites, those that reach a significant portion of the population, such a study can develop a sense of what kinds of news commenting people from a given nation or population generally see. This description can show the diverging characteristics of, for instance, Portuguese news commenting (Gonçalves, 2018) and Lithuanian news commenting (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017) and leverage these accounts to draw applicable comparisons.

The following coding guidelines detail an approach to describing news commenting content that balances its contributions with the distinct risks that the medium brings. This assessment is not to address news commenting as an innovation; rather, I intend here to find ways to situate news commenting as part of a larger media ecosystem, a part that makes its own distinct impact. By providing details and transparency here, this chapter invites forms of critique

and recommendation that can help advance methods for qualitative content analysis (Snelson, 2016), news commenting research methods (Callaghan et al., 2021), and media pluralism assessments (Brogi et al., 2021).

### **Collecting and Identifying News Commenting Content**

Before describing the system of coding, I need to elaborate on some key terms and processes that pertain to collecting and identifying the data. While such processes and concepts are well covered in qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2018) and social media methods (Bakir, 2010; Snelson, 2016) literature, this study makes particular and distinct use of them and the distinctions provide an important context for the results achieved. Fundamentally, this research was bounded by what it looked at and what it looked for, so transparency on these points is important.

#### *Collecting Texts*

One of the main reasons why researchers engage with news commenting is because it presents a highly accessible research object (Callaghan et al., 2021), whereby thousands of individual comments can be collected from multiple organisations and countries at once (Ksiazek, 2018; Ruiz et al., 2011). However, in line with more recent news commenting researchers (Baden & Springer, 2014; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Suh et al., 2018), this research project accommodated the vital concern of exposure diversity – that mix of media that the public could practically consume as opposed to the nearly limitless range of material that is technically accessible (Webster, 2009). This meant limiting the scope in five ways: focusing on two specific media ecosystems (Korea and Australia), utilising the websites that are the most prominent and visited for each, selecting comments with relevance to public affairs topics, collecting comments at a high readership time and setting a limit to the number of comments taken from each section. Other news commenting research imposed similar limitations. Baden and Springer (2014) limited their scope by topic (financial crisis) and nation (Germany) and to the first and last five comments of comment sections. Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) and Milioni et

al. (2012) similarly limit by topic and country, though they do not limit the size of comment section sampling (one section coded in the latter study had 305 comments (p.31)). However, my research is distinct from these studies on each point.

My first and most crucial concern was that this research is not fundamentally describing news commenting, but rather adding further elaboration to larger media ecosystems. Choosing which media ecosystems to utilise as the focus for the study was a fraught task because of the range of valuable potential options. The USA, for instance, presented an attractive option because much of the crucial literature that informs my study, such as that discussing exposure diversity (Napoli, 1999) and investigations of online communities and participants (Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Stroud et al., 2016), was conducted there. This would facilitate resonance of this study with other research – though this applies to the EU as well (Miloni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019). However, Korea and Australia intersect in vital ways with the concerns at hand – media pluralism and news commenting.

As explained in Chapter 4, media pluralism is an especially relevant concern for Australia (Hitchens, 2015) because of its unique position of having some of the most concentrated media ownership in the developed world (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). Adding to this, it also has strict defamation laws (Rolph, 2008) that have evolved over the past few years in their application to social media spaces (Rolph, 2021). Simultaneously, Korea also has significant media pluralism concerns (Youn & Lee, 2015), but it presented as the natural choice for another reason: the internet and online media have an unrivalled presence in their media system (Newman et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2011), in which news commenting has a ubiquitous and potentially powerful role (Yoon, 2019). Further, scholarship for both countries offer a solid basis upon which to build a comparison of their media ecosystems (Hitchens, 2015; Jones & Pusey, 2010; Rhee et al., 2011; Youn & Lee, 2015). It was their respective relevance and distinct characteristics to these core concepts that made them the most applicable scope for this comparative study.



Compounding this were my own ties to both nations. My previous study, an ethnography of newsroom staff and practices for comment moderation (Koskie, 2018), granted me extensive exposure of not just the sorts of comments Australians see but also the moderation practices behind them. The MPP project behind this work (Wilding et al., 2022 (forthcoming)) provides further insights for both Australia and the ways it compares with media systems internationally, while my part in a collaborative chapter for the Media Democracy Monitor (Dwyer et al., 2021) was instrumental in informing the view of the Australian media system presented in Chapter 4. Simultaneously, I maintain personal and professional ties to people and groups across Korea, who were able to inform a view of the Korean media system that situated it both academically (Heo & Park, 2014; H. W. Park, Park, & Chong, 2020) and from the perspective of lived experience, which is crucial to qualitative analysis of the media (Ostertag, 2010). My familiarity with the language and personal history living and working in Korea also aided in this. Finally, using these two countries enabled this study to fit squarely with the larger studies and goals of the Media Pluralism Project, which drew insights from across the globe about how nations approach the concerns of media pluralism.

While this contributed to an understanding of the nations as contexts, each of these media ecosystems presents far more than two sources of media to study (Newman et al., 2021). However, studying every media outlet in each ecosystem poses a stark and insurmountable challenge. More importantly, one of the fundamental concerns of media pluralism is distributions of communicative power (Karppinen, 2013) – some media organisations have far more reach and influence than others, highlighting the problem with highly concentrated media ownership (Doyle, 2015; Trappel & Meier, 2022). A comment on a news article for the top sites could have four times as many readers as the same comment on just the tenth highest ranked site (Newman et al., 2021), a ratio that gets significantly more disproportionate the further the site is from the top ranking. Studies collecting comments from the less visited sites would face rapidly

diminishing returns for describing the media ecosystem alongside a rapidly expanding investment of resources.

This led me to choose DM and SMH for Australia and Daum and Naver for Korea. At the time the research design was being implemented, websites for Naver and Daum were by far the most dominant in Korea (Newman et al., 2020), which has remained the case in more recent reports (Newman et al., 2021). Australia's case is more complicated as focusing on only its most visited news websites would have made for a highly limited news commenting study. ABC News online, news.com.au, nine.com.au and 7News – the top four news websites in what was then the most recent ranking (Mediaweek, 2021a) – hosted no comments to study (news.com.au hosts some comments, but none were on public affairs articles). Consequently, the study had to extend to the highest ranked sites for commenting, SMH and DM, while including the absence of comments on these other platforms as a crucial concern.

It bears noting that the Korean online media market is vastly more dominated by its top site, Naver (62% weekly usage), than is Australia's by ABC News online (26%). SMH and DM audiences were not dissimilar in size to the higher ranked sites, according to the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2021) – though ABC News online and news.com.au see far more traffic (Mediaweek, 2021b). Were it not for the absence of comments on the top sites, a broad view of extant news commenting would have been harder to characterise with only the top two sites containing comments, as the four higher ranked sites are providing an implicit description through their exclusion of commenting. Given the extent to which concentration in media markets can vary (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), future studies could need to expand their scope to several more sites to capture a similarly broad view of the news commenting within the media ecosystem.

My study collected the scope of comment sections under public affairs articles rather than selecting only those relevant to specific issue topics. This allowed it to better accommodate the diverse range of content that news commenting could offer, though this scope sacrifices the

results' generalisability to other conceptual frameworks. By restricting their topic to specific issues such as climate change (Graham & Wright, 2015) or health (Callaghan et al., 2021), researchers were able to catalogue some sense of the public's discussion of these issues, bearing some significance to conceptions of comments as a part of the public sphere (Kangaspunta, 2020). However, Ruiz et al. (2011) demonstrates how a broader approach taking in multiple topics enables a characterisation of news commenting as a medium, instead, and media pluralism is not concerned about whether or not the media ecosystem is able to provide robust discussion of a specific issue. Rather, it is concerned with whether the media ecosystem is structurally and practically capable of yielding a usefully diverse view of the range of public affairs issues that its people might face (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Valcke, Sukosd, et al., 2015). While I excluded articles on topics such as entertainment and sports if they lacked relevance to public affairs, this approach enabled a focus on the wide range of topics that discuss how individuals interact with their society and environment in a democratic society (Ruiz et al., 2011). This filter only operated at the level of the article topic (which has a strong agenda-setting effect for the discussion in the comment section (Miloni et al., 2012)), allowing for the diversity that the news commenting might itself engender as well as capturing the presence of phatic communication and silencing speech.

My goal of capturing exposure diversity also meant controlling for high readership hours for data collection. Moe et al. (2021) emphasise that capturing exposure diversity means having a view of the ways that the public are consuming the content, but fewer readers are visiting their favourite sites in the middle of the night (Makhortykh, de Vreese, Helberger, Harambam, & Bountouridis, 2021). Pew Research Center (2012) found that users tend to access news at peak hours, with mobile users tending to look in the morning between 8:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., and Clatworthy (2019) finds weekdays are the most popular. While these provide wide ranges, they also provide a guideline for when to capture representative content, where a view outside of these hours could yield diversity or risks that would not be present when people are most likely

to see the comments. For this project, I chose 9:00 a.m. on Tuesdays for SMH, Naver and Daum, and 9:00 a.m. Wednesdays for DM. DM required a separate day because its website's complexity dominated the parser so it could not be run at the same time as the other three, but all sites were collected on weekdays. Time of collection had a substantial impact on the visibility of comments in the largest sections, where viewers could be presented with an entirely different set of comments depending on their time of access.

As noted in Chapter 5, the final limit to the scope, restricting the sample size to 800 words, is unique to this study and has limited direct precedents. Callaghan et al. (2021) note that methods for determining sample sizes often lack transparency in studies of news commenting, and while Baden and Springer (2014) provide a valuable guideline, there is no apparent source for their decision. Suh et al. (2018) provide evidence that the first comments could be particularly impactful, though Rösner et al. (2016) find this is not always the case. What is needed is an ethnographic study of comment readers that observes their reading habits in context and provides an indication of how readers interact with comments, how much they read, and how they consider the content, but such ethnographic studies are resource intensive and ethically challenging (Singer, 2009).

To test the impacts of this limit, I conducted coding on 1200-word samples of the sections in the Australian data set, as well, as a basis for comparison (the Korean data set was coded by a team of Korean investigators and expanding that data set would have required more resources than were available). This was not needed for the majority of comment sections – only a minority of comment sections reached either limit on any site. For those that did exceed the maximum sample size, the resulting rates of viewpoints and information, representation, silencing, and phatic communication did not differ substantially between the 800- and 1200-word samples. The overall number of comments decreased, obviously – SMH went from 2393 to 1832 comments and DM went from 7955 to 5857. The number of comments relevant to each indicator also decreased, where phatic coded content was found in 503 comments of the larger

set and 396 in the smaller set for SMH, for instance, but the rates remained consistent (from 21% to 21.6% of total comments). Consequently, while it is not certain that readers take in more or less than 800 words of comments, there was an apparent consistency to the rate of diversity and risk they would be exposed to – though this would still require verification through a larger quantitative study. If verified, it would suggest that it is less important to know how much readers consume than it is to know the relative rate that news commenting yields impactful content.

Each consideration for the scoping of the data collection had impacts on the results, which I cover in more detail in Chapter 7, leading to a data set that reflects a specific and strictly bounded view of each media ecosystem’s news commenting. The resulting data set connects to media pluralism and provides a picture that reflects the media ecosystem while accommodating concerns of exposure diversity.

#### *Directed Qualitative Content Analysis*

Coding for content analysis, whether it is qualitative or quantitative, can take a wide variety of forms. Which approach works best depends heavily on the form of content and the theoretical framework being applied (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015), and can include deductive, inductive, descriptive, hermeneutic, and linguistic approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Karlsson & Sjøvaag, 2016; Macnamara, 2005) that can further be broken down into focused sub-categories. A large portion of content analysis is quantitative (Neuendorf, 2002) and increasingly relies on algorithmic approaches to “augment” human assessments (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013, p. 270). Such studies have been instrumental for increasing the body of knowledge on what media texts can present (Macnamara, 2005), but rely on pre-conceived and predicted notions of the content a text will yield (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

By contrast, qualitative analysis is often focused on the emergent themes and ideas arising in the course of the study (Tracy, 2010). Qualitative content analysis can rely on inductive creation of categories not predicted a priori, letting the data suggest the impactful and significant

ways it communicates ideas and perceptions (Mayring, 2004). Conversely, qualitative content analysts can pursue what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) label “directed content analysis” whereby the analysis will “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (p.1281). A key and relevant example is the research conducted by Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche, De Wever, Soetaert, and Valcke (2016) in their study of online forum discussions of video game playing. They used a starting point of a constructivist theoretical framework – “New Rhetoric” – that considers how people construct and conceive of situations and phenomena using the discourse and rhetoric of their social environment but applying it in a way that reconciles with their distinct sense of it. The researchers sought, through 1615 forum messages, the diverse and emergent ways that posters used language linked to “playing” to construct distinct senses of the concept. They found not only that it is an important concept that sees frequent application but also that its construction was highly diverse. It is this method that has the most application to this study, which is less focused on the nuanced qualities of the medium and more concerned with connecting news commenting to conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have not been applied to it in the past.

To identify and analyse the varied contents of these comment sections and tie them to media pluralism, my research design employs hermeneutic coding. Analysts were tasked with grounding comments in the culture, history, and media ecosystem to make deductive determinations about whether their content tied to media pluralism concerns. Other approaches, such as linguistic analysis, take parts of the text as the unit of analysis and meaning (Roberts, 1989), but hermeneutic analysis acknowledges that the meaning of a text extends far beyond the constituent words (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 88). This meant coders needed to tie comments’ messages to the broader cultural knowledge and media environment to consider the ways the comment could be invoking or tying to other content, knowledge, and views that readers would likely have been exposed to – a central focus of hermeneutic approaches (M. Freeman, 2014).

This broader view takes on heightened importance for news commenting, the contexts of which are generally strongly intertextual and referential (Milioni et al., 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011) and can embody broader community-orientated interactions (Hopp et al., 2018; Kangaspunta, 2020). A key to understanding the contributions and impact of this new form of online media, according to Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), is noting the ways that its contributors can offer unique ways of viewing issues that diverges from the frames and structures presented by other media. Such a constructivist view of the texts is key to understanding the new forms of media arising from digitisation and the transition to online platforms (Schmidt, 2008).

Each of the codes described below elaborates a set of deductive judgments analysts used to determine whether comments presented a contribution or risk. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), such deduction allows coding to identify relationships between codes and among variables, as well as to identify “variables of interest.” Comments can offer multiple meanings, but the research’s questions and focus can enable deductive identification of particular salient characteristics. Using a deductive approach refrains from having analysts remediate and explain the contents of a comment and instead uses their hermeneutically grounded understanding to decide whether comments and content are connected to the key media pluralism concepts being investigated – typically with a *yes/no* response.

The resulting directed qualitative content analysis comprises three key design elements. The first is the designation of the hermeneutic units, which are the comments, comment sections, and websites that each provide a view of how comments can be conceptualised and perceived (as demonstrated by the codes below). While each comprises very different forms and extents of content, they are all ways that news commenting is conveying its contributions and threats to the public, as discussed in Chapter 2. The second component is the set of deductive criteria that were used for identifying the content that has relevance to the research questions as well as to determine the form of the output of analysts’ decisions. The final, crucial element was in deciding which analysts were most appropriate for the coding, including their backgrounds

and familiarity with the concepts. While I coded the Australian data set myself, leveraging my English-language background and familiarity with Australian media and news commenting (Koskie, 2018), I lack the cultural and historical knowledge required to make well-grounded hermeneutic determinations (Bergman, 2010) for the Korean content despite my familiarity with the language and culture. This necessitated employing a team of Korean media researchers, headed by Professor Han Woo Park, with a history of coding participatory media content (C. W. Kim, Park, Lee, & Park, 2019; H. W. Park, 2021; H. W. Park & Lim, 2020; H. W. Park et al., 2020). Their familiarity with Korean forms of humour, public views and common knowledge was invaluable for analysing the Korean data set.

While this approach to the research design ostensibly invites subjectivity, a common concern for qualitative and hermeneutic research (Bergman, 2010; Tracy, 2010), the results of this study proved consistent and reliable – Chapters 7 and 8 reveal that the results for each website present a trend that can be tracked across the six days of data set for each site. Further, the Korean team found a high level of inter-coder reliability using Cohen kappa ( $\kappa=0.71$ ,  $P=.03$ ). Directed qualitative content analysis offered many advantages for this research, but the findings need subsequent verification through relevant quantitative research, as recommended by Bergman (2010) for all qualitative analysis.

#### *Identifying Meaning Units in Text*

Collecting the comments was a pivotal step, but more crucial was finding a way to distil the characteristics of the comments and comment sections so they can be understood in relation to media pluralism. Where news articles have been found to communicate subtle frames and agendas through their word and story choices (Robert M Entman, 2007; Protesse & McCombs, 2016), comments often lack the coherence to communicate at all (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Moreover, comments have a different approach to interpreting and communicating ideas (Baden & Springer, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2011), and so analysis of comments needs to accommodate



these confounding differences in order to identify the salient meaning units applying to each of the metrics.

Frequently, commenters do employ direct mentions of and reference to people, issues, objects and events to discuss the news, the news organisation and its staff, and other commenters. In this case, identifying the meaning units is straightforward: commenters mention them directly by name, pronoun (where the antecedent is clear), or noun phrase. This can be highly visible in cases where commenters are introducing new and sometimes expert information (Graham & Wright, 2015). References can be so direct and explicit that they can leave news organisations concerned about defamation (Huang, 2016; Koskie, 2018; Smith, 2017). Commenters can also directly apply evaluative judgments in support or criticism, with and without nuance and subtlety (Y. Kim, 2015).

Often, however, commenters infer their meaning through implication, which presents a specific challenge for analysis. Using specifically charged language and coded language, commenters can infer meanings and create frames that readers can identify and accept (Conlin & Roberts, 2016; Holton et al., 2014), and inference marks a particular challenge for content analysis (Karlsson & Sjøvaag, 2016). However, a sophisticated reading that identifies all inferences runs into a practical problem: there is no indication that comment readers are engaging in a deep reading of commenting texts that would pick up on this range of inferences (Springer et al., 2015).

Consequently, this research focuses on a specific kind of inference in the form of deductive inference. While all content analysis infers the meanings and implications of texts (Krippendorff, 2018), deductive inference is only possible if the inference is “logically conclusive”. For the purposes of this text, that would include structures like passive speech where the actor is assumed but omitted, *i.e.* if something *is done* then someone must have done it and must have been able/empowered/responsible to do it. It would also cover cases where a pronoun is used without antecedent, but the antecedent is deductively implied in the context.

Comments are not self-contained productions; an individual comment may use he/she/it/they for something or someone mentioned in a previous comment or the article itself.

An added difficulty heavily present in news commenting as a text is the extensive use of irony and humour. Participatory media and ironic, humorous statements are frequently inextricably intertwined (J. L. Davis et al., 2018). Often, the irony and humour of participatory media are not intended to be entertaining or funny at all, but rather a method of identifying affiliation with a group or ideology or of excluding and marginalising others (Gal, 2019; Miller, 2008), and can play a role in silencing speech (Chua, 2009). At any rate, these humorous statements serve a communicative function.

The function served by the humour is variable, and its presence can flag contributions, risks, or both. Some humorous comments focus on the phatic social element of identifying group inclusion and boundaries (Gal, 2019) while others apply evaluative judgments to make political statements (J. L. Davis et al., 2018), and both of these functions carry implications for the media pluralism impacts of news commenting. My focus was on the presence, through this humour, of an interpretive frame that effects a viewpoint, new information, representation, or silencing speech, following the same guidelines used to code non-ironic speech. The difference is that the ironic element often inverts the meaning while also ridiculing an implied target (Gal, 2019), whereby comments' potential contribution can be wrapped in silencing and vitriolic speech.

Whether content is attempting to be humorous is a judgment people process readily and often, especially online, but it is also a difficult judgment to model. Everyone experiences it differently and there are many different varieties (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). There are common threads, however; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) indicate that irony and the presence of the unexpected play a central role in the various types. In practice, content analysts often rely on the audience and platform to do the work of identifying humour hermeneutically. Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong relied on participatory media that

specifically elicits humorous contributions while Gal (2019) had online participants identify relevant posts. Closest to this research, J. L. Davis et al. (2018) used the deductive capacity of the analysts, whose judgments they used to train an algorithm. In this study, where they encountered humour, analysts needed to identify primarily whether the content still presented a viewpoint or information or if it was instead focused on phatic communication, orientated at interacting with comment readers. As with J. L. Davis et al. (2018), whether the coder felt the comment was funny was immaterial, as the goal of this study was to identify the characteristics of the content. From there, the meaning units of the comment needed to be discerned, either through direct mention or deductive inference as above.

However, a final step remained that is vital to this research, which was identifying the presence of silencing intentions through the use of humour. This is important because humour is often used to imply that certain social groups or beliefs are silly and irrelevant and do not need to be acknowledged (Gal, 2019). While this can present a viewpoint, it can also represent silencing speech. Consequently, this implied target and evaluation need to be noted as an additional unit of meaning.

While these three layers of meaning units within the comments – direct, inferred, and humorous – enable an extremely complex and nuanced picture of individual comments, the codes being applied do not require a level of depth that would make assessment impractical. That is because this research is not focused on whether certain viewpoints are presented or certain strategies of silencing speech are employed, but rather whether they are present and, for the contributions, heterogenous. Coders did not need to note the target of silencing speech or catalogue the diversity of their interactions, nor the variety of themes presenting through the viewpoints. Higher levels of complexity and a wider range of outputs make the coding system harder to implement (Baden & Springer, 2014) and can make the results harder to generalise (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Consequently, while meaning units could present complex challenges, the individual coding judgments worked towards narrow determinations which were repeated for

a wide range of codes. This also played a role in the first step of the coding process, coding the headlines to identify which comment sections to include in the study.

### *Identifying Public Affairs Article Headlines*

In line with the Media Pluralism Project that this research contributes to, I focused on that part of news that is of particular concern when considering the societal impacts and roles of media: public affairs media. People access media for a variety of reasons and this research in no way dismisses the importance of the consequent wide range of media they access. However, media pluralism, in this work and elsewhere (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018; Doyle, 2015; Picard, 2017), is focused on the role that media plays in the way society functions and some content is less directly implicated in that regard. Readers have demonstrated an understanding and application of relevant and irrelevant material in their discussion of public affairs issues in comment sections, even if they do not consistently agree (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; D. Park et al., 2016), providing evidence that commenters are also engaging with these kinds of interpretation and classification themselves. Media that focuses on reporting on entertainment, for instance, offers less relevant content informing societal decision-making than does political news – though individuals sometimes see wider implications for society in the entertainment news (Giannopoulos et al., 2015).

In this thesis, there are two steps to deciding whether a headline – and its comments – should be excluded from the data set. The first step is to categorise the headline for its relevance to public affairs or non-public affairs topic areas. The public affairs topic areas are government, public administration, politics, and business, including education, health, science and other matters that have broad social significance. Examples are items that cover contentious public debates on climate change, immigration, and land use. The non-public affairs topic areas comprise entertainment, art and culture, leisure and lifestyle, including topics such as sport, wellbeing, fashion, and music. The analyst does this by identifying the focal objects in the title, including any actors or events, and then assigning the topic that is most relevant hermeneutically.

This was facilitated with a list of news topics which was expanded emergently where no previous topic could accurately apply. In a spreadsheet, coders either chose an existing topic or added another, then decided whether the topic was relevant to public affairs. Where this was the case, they marked *PA* for public affairs, mirroring previous work done in the Media Pluralism Project (Wilding et al., 2022 (forthcoming)).

Where this work deviated from prior Media Pluralism Project frameworks was in including relevance as a consideration for non-public affairs headlines. Giannopoulos et al. (2015) note that readers can perceive valuable information about the functions of their society from a variety of sources, including content ostensibly dedicated to topics such as entertainment and sport. This is especially relevant in the time of Covid-19, which has had society-wide impacts on nearly every part of our lived experience (Alaszewski, 2021; Nyilasy, 2020; H. W. Park et al., 2020). Consequently, for those articles that are excluded on the first step, analysts looked beyond the focal object to the stated context of events and actors to see if the news was related to a broad public concern. It is in this area that hermeneutic coding is particularly important as there may be culturally or historically relevant contexts that are not presented in the words of the text itself but would be clear to the analyst living within that culture and media environment (Bergman, 2010). An example of this could be a sports player being charged with a sexual assault scandal at the same time as other public figures being separately implicated in their own scandals – the comments on that article could reasonably be expected to make a connection between them and make that sports article of relevance to public affairs. By contrast, an article about a sports team winning or losing and a review of that match would lack any relevance for public affairs and its comments would be excluded from analysis, as the news organisations' influence on agenda setting (Miloni et al., 2012) would predictably preclude comments introducing their own public affairs content. The following table using preliminary data illustrates this process [see Table 4].

**Table 4***Sample public affairs coding of headlines from the Herald Sun and the Age*

<b>Headline</b>	<b>Topic area</b>	<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>
Government to assure Australians 'Treasury data gives 'cause for optimism'	Government		Yes
Road congestion could worsen in a post-pandemic Melbourne	Public administration		Yes
The meaning of life: Australians praying more during COVID-19	Culture or Lifestyle	Yes – public health	Yes
Bloody Monday: AFL's massive job cuts	Sport	Yes – impact of health issue	Yes
The Tackle: Time for AFL to ban players for staging	Sport	No	No
The couple who renovated a fairytale house in the Adelaide Hills	Lifestyle	No	No

*Note:* Headlines drawn from front pages for Herald Sun (2020b) and The Age (2020).

Applying the public affairs filter accomplished two goals for this study. For one, it reduced the size of sample required for the work with limited loss of relevant data. Second, an analysis of a website using all available comment sections could lead to a website appearing to offer additional opportunities for pluralistic opportunities when, in practice, news comments are not allowed on the articles most relevant in terms of media pluralism. This is a well-founded concern, as news organisations are often more hesitant to open comment sections for articles on contentious issues (Wolfgang, 2018).

### **Coding Comment Sections for Diverse Contributions and Risks**

Having established the hermeneutic units of data, the scope of data collection, and the meaning units for analysis, I needed to find a way to connect this content to the particular concerns of media pluralism. A key challenge is that each comment can have relevance to all of the coding categories or none – a comment can offer representation, information and/or a viewpoint, silencing speech and phatic community interaction in a single sentence, while other

comments could consist of a single word offering none of the above. It was not possible to code comments into a single category of the four. Rather, I needed to code the comment separately for each point, with each category focusing on a different aspect of the content.

This became more complex at the other levels of analysis. A comment section potentially draws together a range of content on a single issue, complicating findings of the existence or absence of a category from any individual comment. The implications of a single comment that includes female representation would differ from the implications of an entire comment section featuring only female representation or one where the female voice was a singular presence surrounded by male voices. Similarly, a single vitriolic comment section would have limited influence for evaluating a website which had no other uncivil discussions. It was important to this study that a variety of approaches could be explored for these distinct forms of content to demonstrate their different characterisations of news commenting as part of the media ecosystem.

#### *The Multiple Lenses of Qualitative Analysis*

The analysis for this coding, in line with the other coding frameworks in this research, leverages the benefits of qualitative content analysis to provide a view from multiple angles – both as a description of these systems’ news commenting and as a provocation for future research methods engaging with this material and conceptual framework. The data feeding into qualitative research, suggests St. Pierre and Jackson (2014, p. 715), is more than “brute data” systematically studied to yield an objective, positivistic reality. Rather, the data itself is a multi-faceted and contextualised object that can and should yield multitudinous results in a qualitative study. It is there to provide useful questions as much as to yield descriptions and answers. M. Freeman (2014) posits that such a “thick description” of the object is not merely a subjective and relativistic account but rather a more appropriate representation of the way objects and experiences are variously and complexly understood.

Working towards achieving this thick description, the goal of this coding method is to build towards a view of news commenting that accommodates its complexity at multiple levels. While St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) show that both data and analysis can take on unlimited dimensions, this research focuses on just four levels of analysis for each of the four codes. The first layer, before a single comment is coded, takes a broad view of the context of the website with its structures, limitations, and facilitations for commenters and comment readers. It is this context that bounds the second layer, which focuses on the specific text of each comment to surface the ways that their words and composition can embody (or fail to embody) the concepts behind each code while noting their relative and proportional frequency. The third layer looks at the collection of comments using comment sections as the unit of analysis. This places more emphasis on concerns of proportional description, using the relationships between frequency and proportionality within the comment section to create relative descriptions for each code. Simultaneously, the analysis of the comment sections shows how specific kinds of comments add nuance to how comment sections present. The fourth layer of analysis characterises each news website's collection of comment sections and, due to the sites' prominence, provides a macro view of the most visible news commenting in the media ecosystem.

The complex context supporting news commenting has received extensive attention in news commenting literature and numerous researchers provide cues on how to accommodate the effects of website design, news organisations and their moderating staff on comments. Ksiazek (2018) has grounded extensive quantitative commenting studies (Ksiazek, 2015; Ksiazek et al., 2014) in the contexts of article topics, journalist interventions, and organisational policies and found that organisational contexts can have a demonstrable effect on the comments that arise, and Wolfgang (2021), Huang (2016), and Mollen (2020) have found these decisions are intended to influence the outcomes. My research steps away from the news organisation- and journalist-orientated contexts well described by Wolfgang (2021) and Meltzer (2015) to focus on the ways that websites themselves act as intervening actors for the visibility and facilitation of



certain kinds of news commenting. For this, I utilised the website analysis technique described by Brügger (2010), which focuses on the medium and text. While the producers and users are vital concerns, the website is a crucial site of actions for online media, according to Brügger (2010):

The user is confronted with a text which, in each case, has already been produced, structured and presented in a specific way, with particular possibilities embedded for reading and use, irrespective of the manner in which it has been produced, and irrespective of how it will actually be used when read by a specific reader. (p.10)

It is those characteristics of this space that direct people towards commenting – and particular sorts of comments – as well as guide people in commenting that are crucial contexts for news commenting.

Websites as contexts of news commenting were coded emergently with an eye towards a specific aspect of the content: those elements of the website that constrained, facilitated and shaped access to and production of news commenting content's contributions and risks. This meant studying the front page, article pages, and accompanying content around comment sections for the text and systems that enabled readers to reach and commenters to post their comments. It also required studying the websites' published and visible guidelines and policies. These descriptions pulled double duty, as they were a part of the public's experience of commenting but also have the capacity to influence the kinds of comment that appear or to facilitate or hinder potential readers (Mollen, 2020). This larger context had relevance to each of the codes.

With that context established, I then sought, for each code, the diverse ways that codes were embodied in comment texts in practice. This step mirrors work done by Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019), which leveraged the semiotics and language used in individual comment texts to identify the presence of the distinct citizenship positions commenters presented. Through this, they were able to distinguish separate conceptions of how commenters positioned themselves in regard to processes of public deliberation, but they ground these identifications in the empirical examples

of the comments themselves, drawing on a subset of original texts that illustrate the distinctions in practice. Graham and Wright (2015) engage in a similar investigation with a focus on revealing posting behaviour characteristics relating to public debate. In their approach, highly analogous to the multi-layered approach I use in this study, they began their description with a quantitative presentation of frequency and proportion, which was followed up by a list of comments as examples for each of their several codes. Such illustrations through individual comment analysis both grounded their own research and provides a basis for such coding in future research (such as this one). For practical reasons, mostly English content is displayed in this work, though Korean coders also engaged with comments individually as part of their assessment.

Simultaneously, Graham and Wright (2015) demonstrate the descriptive value of numbers in providing a broader description of news commenting that bears relevance to this study's focus on comment sections as a unit of analysis. Numbers play a highly contested role in qualitative research, which faces a somewhat unwinnable dilemma, according to Maxwell (2010, p. 476). Groups criticising the absence of numbers to deride the credibility of qualitative studies frequently do so as a rejection of non-positivistic and quantitative research rather than concern over the research itself, but qualitative researchers have a history of rejecting the use of numbers on philosophical grounds (despite using verbal references to numbers such as *most* and *usually*). Hegelund (2005, p. 651) suggests such a description as "There were six people in the room" provides an ostensibly objectively verifiable description that can potentially provide an empirically grounded credibility to qualitative observations, though the lack of interpretive framing can complicate its value. Indeed, for Sandelowski (2001), numbers play a crucial role in understanding a qualitative data set and shape our understanding of the data, provided they are not decontextualized or mis-sampled. Maxwell and Chmiel (2014) posit that such "empirical generalization" is often used to demonstrate the representativeness of the sample. Reluctance to use numbers as a method of description in qualitative analysis is often rooted in a philosophical resistance produced through long decades of disregard for qualitative research (Morgan, 1993),

to where *most* is more conceptually qualitative than is *six*, despite the fact that both are demonstrably descriptive and the latter provides the grounds for comparison (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

As in Graham and Wright (2015), the coding for comment sections leverages a variety of numerical and non-numerical descriptions to provide a view of the contents of comment sections. The first is the non-numerical description of presence – describing whether specific codes of comment are present in any number or absent entirely. Where there is presence, the first numerical description is the controversial but fundamental content analysis of count – how many comments are there for that code in that comment section? These have separate values depending on the code – the presence of minorities might be more significant given the challenges they face in being seen and heard (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). This leads to the final consideration, that of proportionality. Where one comment section has 10 phatic comments and another has 20, the first comment section features a much more significant presence of phatic communication if it only has 12 comments in total while the other has 48. It is these kinds of comparisons that illustrate the ways that numbers can provide a practical and empirically grounded description in qualitative content analysis (Morgan, 1993).

The final layer of the analysis draws all of the information together to characterise each website for its distinct news commenting. This is a key point of distinction for this research, as it distinguishes news commenting as a broad media type (Gálik & Vogl, 2015) from a view of news commenting as a kind of content that is differentiated by site and context. Ruiz et al. (2011) noted that comments could vary considerably from site to site and country to country, but their focus was on providing a view of news commenting's broad function as a discursive forum. By contrast, this assessment is to determine if separate news commenting sources can exhibit site-specific renditions of content analogous to, as an example, the ways that Australia's various broadcasters can be seen to offer different content (Thurlow & Griffen-Foley, 2016). Whether these sites offer distinct contributions and risks is a necessary consideration when assessing

whether news commenting can contribute to media pluralism, as the websites do not have equal reach (Nielsen, 2021). One rendition of news commenting will have more visibility and potentially influence than others.

As for the above, the analysis of news websites will draw together a number of factors for each code, both numerical and non-numerical. The emergent website analysis has a key role, here, because the websites' distinct disposition facilitating or limiting the content is a necessary context for each result. In addition, the website analysis describes the proportionality of each site's aggregate comment sections across each day of the data set. Finally, it provides a comparative value for the site as a whole on each of the codes so they can be compared against each other or collectively by media ecosystem.

This final layer of the analysis is not the overriding goal. Rather, each step, from the initial emergent coding of news commenting systems to the narrow and specific reading of each comment, is another lens for seeing the central object: contributions and risks for media pluralism through news commenting. Each of the codes provides a different provocation for how this content can be identified and considered, with the intent of paving the way for a variety of purposive and specific research in the future – often the central concern of such qualitative research (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Each of the codes also entailed a distinct approach.

#### *Coding for Diversity of Viewpoint and Information*

Each part of the coding was a layered and complex process, but coding for diversity of viewpoints and information was intrinsically more complex. This is because, unlike silencing speech and phatic communication and partially distinct from representation, the assessment was for *diversity* rather than simply viewpoints and information. Consequently, identifying its contribution to media pluralism was multiple steps removed from coding individual comments, and it is for this reason that coding at the level of comment sections was so important.

Coding for viewpoints and information involved three phases. The first included identifying frame elements and information in the headline, which readers would need to have

seen in order to reach the comment section on each of the sites used for this study. The second phase required checking each comment to see if it stated a viewpoint or information. The final phase involved checking to see if the comment's information and/or viewpoint was similar to or "competing" (Baden & Springer, 2014) with the dominant elements of the headline. Both the second and final phases provided data for analysis.

First, coders needed to identify the objects and ideas that are the focus of the headline and each comment. These are "the *concrete*, instantiated objects, actors, or situations" (Baden & Springer, 2017, p. 182). From there, they identified the role or position attributed to these objects, relying on both "surface resources" (Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019, p. 738) encoded within the choice and variation of words in the text as well as implicit relations underlying the text. As with Baden and Springer (2014), coding for this study used only the most dominant, central organising idea for the comments and headlines (where two or more are identified as being dominant, the coder used the first one mentioned). Given that comments often feature and even promote interactivity between commenters (Ruiz et al., 2011), these focal objects and their role or position can also be inferred through responding to existing content.

The next step was to determine whether the comment introduced information, a viewpoint, or both. For Milioni et al. (2012), this entailed coding both the extent to which comments deviated from the topics of the headlines and the extent to which comments introduced information that was not in the article. Baden and Springer (2014, p. 545) focused on the diversity of viewpoints, noting that "genuinely different" information was rare, but Ruiz et al. (2011) and Graham and Wright (2015) conversely found that commenters had occasion to provide information that reflected their personal and even professional experience with the topic. The presence and prevalence of both were important for identifying the extent of this contribution to media pluralism.

What constitutes a statement of information is hard to define, but Merpert, Furman, Anauati, Zommer, and Taylor (2018) leverage the concept of "checkable facts", which includes

historical data, comparisons, legality, and statistics. This view integrates well with Milioni et al. (2012, p. 32), whose inclusion of personal accounts and “eyewitness” data has relevance to “historical data”, even if such data would be hard to check. In order to qualify as a contribution of information, the comment must introduce something that causes, contextualises, or results from the issue under discussion, presenting the details as a fact rather than conjecture or opinion. Only information that is not present in the headline, previous comments, or widely communicated common knowledge (in the case of Milioni et al. (2012), this meant knowledge not already prominently communicated by other media organisations) could be counted as contributing something new. While the headline could provide cues, much of this information relied on coders leveraging their familiarity with the news’s history and cultural relevance, emphasising the importance of hermeneutic coding (M. Freeman, 2014) to this process. Note, though it was a pre-requisite that information be ostensibly checkable, it is not the purview of this study to check the headlines or the comments for accuracy. Misinformation can often present through comments (Kolhatkar, Thain, Sorensen, Dixon, & Taboada, 2020) and constitutes a valuable line of research (Lazer et al., 2018; Pennycook et al., 2020), but would require a different and expanded research design. In this case, if a comment presented checkable facts and that information was not widely known or previously reported, it could be counted as contributing new information.

Separate to this information, comments can introduce viewpoints with a distinct and nuanced frame (Baden & Springer, 2014). Through this, comments can contribute to media pluralism by providing politically independent media and demonstrating commenters’ potential for editorial autonomy. According to Baden and Springer (2017), a viewpoint bears much in common with the frames used in framing analysis, which they define as “issue-specific, selective, coherent contextualisations of a focal object, which are consequential for its appraisal and preferred treatment” (p. 177). Through the texts, commenters can hierarchically place some interpretations over others, highlighting some aspects of the perceived reality as being more

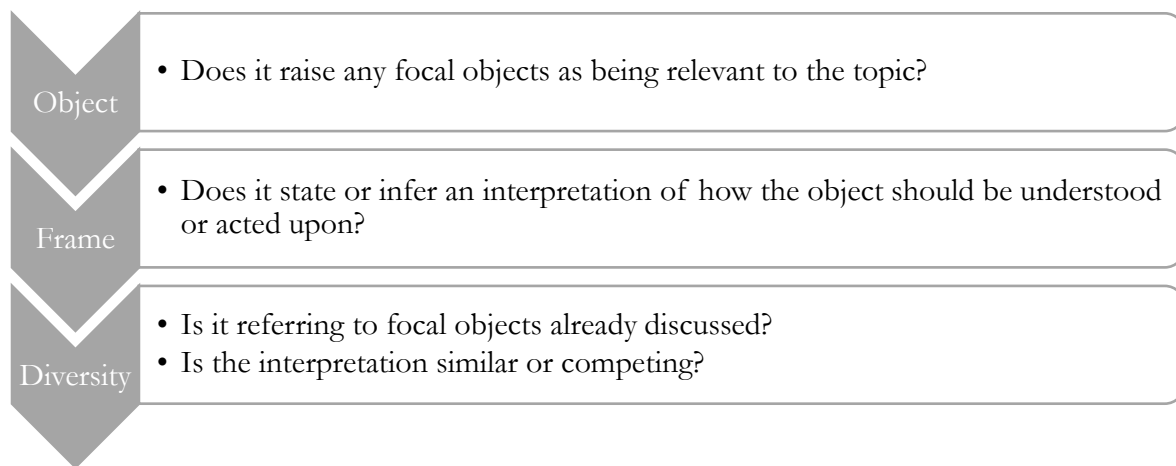
important or more impactful than others. What separates the many approaches in past framing studies (Matthes, 2009) from Baden and Springer's concept of viewpoint is of central concern to comments: the different frames in these comments are not just a way of remediating the information surrounding an issue, but also different ways of seeing the issue by the heterogeneous population contributing to comment sections, who can come from a wide variety of backgrounds (Stroud et al., 2016). Where a single news article might contain multiple frames provided by a single producer, commenters provide different viewpoints of that object that go beyond a difference of interpretation as their perspective is rooted in a different lived experience and environment. Baden and Springer's approach entailed identification of specific characteristics of the focal objects, identifying frame elements, and categorising the underlying logics of the frame element. This allowed for a highly descriptive characterisation of the diversity within news commenting.

Despite its precision, this method introduced concerns that would not integrate well with the goals of this study, as the level of complexity would struggle to translate to a larger scale study (Baden & Springer, 2014) and requiring coders to make specific determinations across many levels can impact reliability (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Instead, I utilised the more basic level of Baden and Springer's research, leveraging frame elements as a deductive tool to assist coders in making a single assessment: whether a comment offers an impactfully diverse viewpoint. Matthes and Kohring proposed that frame elements could be broken down into four broad categories – defining the problem, identifying a cause, recommending a treatment, and explaining how the issue can be evaluated. With the frame element and the focal object, coders could more quickly determine whether a viewpoint was present and this frame element and object could more easily be compared to prior objects and frames. This streamlining had a multiplicative effect, as more complex frames would require more complex comparisons with past complex frames.

While the focal object and framing serve to identify the *presence* of a viewpoint, it does not indicate a *diversity* of viewpoints (as opposed to a simple abundance of content). This assessment needed to provide a view that avoids cataloguing tokenistic differences that can represent a kind of content diversity but offer little benefit to the public receiving these messages (Karppinen, 2009). Pursuant to this, Baden and Springer (2017) identify diversity in comment contents by considering the nature of each comment's content: does it have a similar or competing interpretation to previous content? If this viewpoint would in some way negate or supplant previous assertions, it could be considered an addition to the diversity of viewpoints. This impactfully competing distinction provided a way to separate diversity in the comments from the redundant and homogenous content that frequently characterises comment sections (Kolhatkar et al., 2020).

Reflecting this approach, coders for this study assessed whether a comment contained a viewpoint and then compared the viewpoint to those of previous comments listed in the individual comment section and the headline. If there was a new focal object from all previous comments and the headline, then the comment was bringing new ideas to the conversation and was counted towards diversity. If the focal point was the same, then the interpretive framing is compared to similar comments, and coders consider whether the interpretive framing is offering a similar or competing view, where a competing view would supplant or negate some part or all of the previous comment's assertion. Consequently, the process of coding individual comments for diversity of viewpoints involved three steps: identifying the presence (or lack) of a focal object, identifying the interpretive framing, and comparing the object and frame to previous comments [see Figure 5].



**Figure 5***Identifying Diversity of Viewpoints and Ideas*

The study then rated each comment sections' contribution to diversity of viewpoints and information at one of four levels: No contribution (when no additional viewpoints or information are presented), low contribution (when more than one but less than a quarter of comments offered a point of difference), moderate contribution (when more than a quarter but less than half of comments offer a point of difference), and high contribution (when half or more offer a point of difference). While Baden and Springer (2014) presented their results as direct percentages, I attempted to emulate the assessments used in the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), which uses interpretive categories of "low risk", "medium risk" and "high risk" [see Table 5], though the interpretive language I used was modified to accommodate the distinct positive and negative characteristics this study is identifying. Baden's and Springer's approach allows for a more detailed and specific description of both viewpoints and their presence among the collection of comments, but the simplified approach I employed was to enable a comparison to MPM assessments and other media pluralism literature.

**Table 5***Coding the rating for contributions to diversity of viewpoint and information*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Comment section</b>	<b>Website</b>
High contribution	Half or more of comments offer information/diversity	A majority of comment sections feature high or moderate contributions
Moderate contribution	Between a quarter and half of comments offer information/diversity	A majority of comment sections offer moderate or low contributions
Low contribution	At least one but less than a quarter offer information/diversity	A majority of comment sections offer low or no contribution
No contribution	No additional viewpoints or information are presented	The website does not allow comments or has few comment sections with low and no contribution

Finally, I applied this assessment to the fourth layer, the most visited websites, to assess the extent to which news commenting contributes diversity of ideas and viewpoints to the national media ecosystem feeding into the functioning of each society. This assessment is not an indicator of best outcomes for comments – there are many gratifications for the news organisations (Huang, 2016; Stroud et al., 2020; Vujnovic, 2011) and other benefits for media pluralism (Gálik & Vogl, 2015) beyond the potential for diverse perspectives. Even a limited contribution offers diversity that would be absent if comments were disabled entirely. Rather, the result offers a point of comparison in a bigger assessment of news commenting's role, to be considered alongside its challenges and other benefits – either of which could weigh more heavily than a prevalence or lack of diverse viewpoints and ideas.

*Coding for Diversity of Representation*

While coding for diversity of representation requires an entirely different approach than for diversity of viewpoints and information, its method entails more straightforward, deductive, and directed identification. In the first level of coding, looking at individual comment texts as the

unit of analysis, there are several opportunities for representation to be apparent – indeed, the UIF is dedicated to self-identification. Commenters can also be identified by location, onsite profiles and social media links, thumbnail images and in the text of the comment itself. Through this, they can identify their region, their gender, occupation, ethnic identity, or socio-economic status (Barnes, 2018a; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Stroud et al., 2016), or any other characteristics they wish to provide to contextualise their comment in their lived experience. These demographic descriptions reconcile with media pluralism indicators and the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, & Cunha, 2018; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), especially those of gender, minority and region, making them a focus for this research.

There are three steps employed in this step of the analysis of comments. The first is to identify the presence of self-reference, which can be in the UIF or the text of the comment and can be by means of direct textual self-reference or deductive inferential pronoun use. K. Liu (2022) finds that comment writers not only identify themselves through their texts but also that they invest value in these identities. For this research, direct textual self-reference includes statements such as “I am a single mother” or “South Sydney Resident” and includes providing a name, where the author has directly provided information on some part of their identity. Deductive inferential pronoun use includes use of pronouns that deductively identify the author through deterministic implication. This includes cases where a headline or prior comment is tied to a relevant description, such as a region, and the commenter aligns themselves to the group through their use of pronouns [see Table 6]. By contrast, commenters often refer to themselves with their pronouns but their self-reference is not tied to self-description, as in “Sadly, I think you may be right.” Some sites feature user profiles, but a focus of this research is on the incidentally visible content – user profiles require navigation to a new part of the website and an active reader, but participatory media users are often inclined towards passively scrolling and reading through content (I. Anderson & Wood, 2021).

**Table 6***Examples of coding for representation*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Included</b>
Direct reference	I live in a rural area and am eligible for the Pfizer vaccine	Yes
Inference	had we locked down every time we had a few cases we'd be in and out of lockdown regularly [under article about Sydney]	Yes
Non-deducible inference	No one will get within a mile of me with the poison..(it is not a vaccine)	No
No indication	China already has the US by the throat.	No

*Note:* Examples drawn from comments on The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Names are a complicated but rich source of direct self-identification – while they can be reliable indicators of demographic information such as gender (Martin, 2015) where no alternative source of information exists (Karimi, Wagner, Lemmerich, Jadidi, & Strohmaier, 2016), they can misrepresent people from minority language backgrounds. Simultaneously, readers also connect names to inclusion in ethnic backgrounds (which can have deleterious effects on social inclusiveness in areas such as employment (Barron et al., 2011)). Coders need to leverage their own linguistic resources to identify names that are culturally and historically correlated with only one gender or minority group and then check the rest of the text to ensure there are no contrary indicators. Karimi et al. (2016) note that image text can be especially valuable in this instance, but that is often lacking for comments. This partially hermeneutic approach does not reconcile the problems of under-representation, whereby women are both less present and less inclined to indicate their presence in participatory media (Baek et al., 2021; Van Duyn et al., 2021) but it does mimic the experience of readers, who will be applying their own hermeneutic processes of identification.

Where present, the explicit or deductively inferred information is then coded for what category of information it provides: gender, minority status, region, and/or disability. Each of

these categories sees specific reference in the MPM assessment (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), and Klimkiewicz (2015) noted that inclusion of these groups plays an important role in effectively representing the diversity of the public. Gender includes not only a male/female binary but also other concerns of sexuality and gender identification – this is the only metric not to utilise a yes/no code because ratios of representation play an important role in this case. Minority status covers all ethnic and cultural attributes such as race, religion, or language background, but also disability. I note that some sociological researchers, such as Gonta, Hansen, Fagin, and Fong (2017), discuss sexuality in relation to minority status; there are benefits to this approach, but these categories of representation were chosen due to their relevance to the MPM framework. Region is for when commenters identify themselves as coming from or inhabiting a bounded geographic area within the country (but not generally from the nation itself or from another country). Disability could be noted in the text reference or through the UIF, with a focus on those elements covered by the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) such as blindness or deafness or others that would impact access to media.

Finally, I investigated this representation on a broad scale to identify both presence and proportion at the level of comment sections and sites. For gender, I recorded both presence and prevalence, as each carries distinct but important implications. As discussed in Chapter 4, it is not the case in either of these media systems that women are entirely excluded, but rather that their roles are significantly less established and less visible than men's (Cho & Davenport, 2007; Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2019). In the case of comment sections as a unit of analysis, however, this representation is more complex: even if a comment section has less representation of female voices (as is often the case (Van Duyn et al., 2021), a comment section that has a female voice is introducing female voices into the media ecosystem where they might not otherwise be heard. Further, their comments are evaluated differently, with users potentially imbuing the statements of perceived female commenters as having more credibility (Bhandari et al., 2021). Consequently, comment sections were coded in three categories for gender: the

proportion of any gender identification, the proportional presence of non-male voices (including women and other gender identities) [as in Table 7], and the ratio of male to non-male voices [see Table 8].

**Table 7**

*Proportional representation coding*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Comment section</b>	<b>Website</b>
High contribution	Half or more of comments identify representation	A majority of comment sections feature high and moderate contributions
Moderate contribution	Between a quarter and half of comments identify representation	A majority of comment sections feature moderate or low contributions
Low contribution	At least one but less than a quarter identify representation	A majority of comment sections feature low or no contributions
No contribution	No representation identified	A majority of comment sections have no contribution with few comment sections (under 10%) containing any contribution or no comments on site

**Table 8**

*Categorising sites for gender representation ratios*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Website</b>
Highly Male/Non-male Dominated	The majority of comment sections featuring gender representation are highly dominated (over 75%) or dominated (over 50%) by Male/Non-male voices
Male/Non-male Dominated	The majority of comment sections featuring gender representation are dominated (over 50%) by Male/Non-male voices or balanced (presenting in equal numbers, plus/minus 1)
Balanced	Comment sections with gender representation feature a majority of comment sections that are dominated by both groups or balanced.

Region identification presents a different challenge for social inclusiveness in news commenting. Kangaspunta (2020) demonstrated the ways that news commenting can play a particularly vital role in hosting local and regional public spheres and Canter (2013) found that regional groups can use news commenting to participate in discussions where their regions are underserved by media, but the alignment of the commenter to their area played a key role in contextualising their comments in both cases. In both Korea and Australia, the most prominent media is focused in metropolitan areas with smaller and regional markets underrepresented (Rhee et al., 2011; Simons & Dickson, 2019), so news commenting offers an important channel for this group. Further, news commenting can invite input from international groups, but their presence in comment sections does not represent the citizens – regional or metropolitan – that dominantly utilise these media sources.

Given this dual role of providing context and representation, I categorised regional representation based on the presence of any regional identification at all without focusing on coding for non-metropolitan classification. The coding counted any instances where users indicated their location, provided that location was limited to a distinctive region (such as a town or geographic feature) and was located in the relevant country for each data set. The prevalence of this identification was then coded by the proportional representation coding schemata in Table 7 above.

Minority representation is an area of particular concern to media pluralism, and it covers a wide variety of groups on the basis of religion, language background, ethnicity, and disability (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). These groups can greatly struggle to have their voices heard or to receive media in an accessible form, which leads to misrepresentation (Ewart & Beard, 2017), marginalisation (Meyer & Speakman, 2016) and even vilification (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019). As in the MPM, people contending with a disability receive specific attention here because of the ways their personal background impacts their ability to interact with the media (though language would also constitute such a barrier, this study is only looking at comments in the dominant

language of each country). Consequently, I focused on whether these voices could be perceived in comment sections in any form, not whether minority voices were appearing in majorities of comments [see Table 9].

**Table 9**

*Minority representation presence rates*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Website</b>
High contribution	Half or more of comment sections contain any minority representation
Moderate contribution	Between a quarter and half contain any minority representation
Low contribution	More than a tenth but less than a quarter contain any minority representation
No contribution	Less than a tenth of comment sections contain minority representation

Of intrinsic importance to this representation is that news commenting can, itself, embody a structure that marginalises it. Being visibly part of a marginalised group online can lead to abuse and dismissive responses (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Rösner et al., 2016). It is for this reason that this metric needs to be weighed with the other crucial concern of the prevalence of silencing speech, which can both prevent diverse representation in the comments and make comment sections less inviting spaces for readers (A. Anderson et al., 2014).

*Coding for Silencing Speech*

These adversarial comments that direct others to stop contributing to the discussion or who dismiss and marginalise groups of potential commenters are here labelled silencing speech, following on work done by Chua (2009) studying the interactions of virtual communities. Identifying it in comments relied on elements similar to those for representation, with a focus on exclusion instead of inclusion and speech targeting others instead of highlighting the



commenters themselves. First, coders needed to identify that a communicator or group of potential communicators was being named or directly inferred from the text. These communicators could be other commenters but also included others such as the journalist, their sources, the news organisation or their presumed collective identity. The naming or inference could be through pronouns, such as *you* but also third-person pronouns like *he*, *she*, or *they* if the antecedent for these pronouns was a potential contributor to the discussion. This also included communication directed at groups implicated in the discussion, such as those populations affected by the relevant news or discussed in the comments, as the silencing speech had impacts on their right to reply.

If communicators were addressed, the coder then needed to assess whether the text presented an attempt to silence. Silencing speech can take a number of forms (Chua, 2009; Santana, 2016), but only a few are relevant to comment sections – others, like “flaming” and “noise” are more specific to unmoderated forums (Chua, 2009). The most obvious is also the simplest: telling people that they should not speak (labelled *stifling speech* in this study). However, other aggressions are also relevant to this space, as the fear of getting attacked by other commenters is a substantial disincentive to participation (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), though Gonçalves (2018) notes that aggression goes beyond simply being impolite as this may not indicate a specific intent to disrespect. This could be constituted by attacks on the identity of other speakers, such as the abuse directed at female commenters (Kwon & Cho, 2017), but also appears in the form of assaults on their competence (“uneducated” or “ignorant”), their credibility (“propaganda” or “Russian troll”), or their qualifications to speak (“outsider” or “privileged”).

This label did not apply to all criticism, negativity, or disagreement – only that content connected with communication and inclusion rights (which includes bigoted statements disparaging relevant demographic groups (Gonçalves, 2018; Meyer & Speakman, 2016)). Further, it did not cover other forms of uncivil speech such as swearing (Kwon & Cho, 2017), low quality

discussion (Hopp et al., 2018), or generally aggressive speech (Chen & Lu, 2017). While these are implied in the “negative reaction” discussed by Meyer and Speakman (2016) as marginalising potential contributors, they lack the adversarial quality Chua (2009) indicates as threatening the sustainability of online participatory spaces – the same quality moderators consider as grounds for removal (Koskie, 2018). The label also did not apply to content directed at individual public speakers that are not engaging with the comment section. As above, coders hermeneutically applied the final judgment on this identification, as exemplified by Gonçalves’ “reasonable person” test.

If these conditions were met – identification or implication of other speakers in order to stifle them or denigrate their position to contribute – then the comment was coded as containing silencing speech. An example of each code can be found in the preliminary data [see Table 10].

**Table 10**

*Silencing speech examples from the Age and Herald Sun preliminary study*

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Directed</b>	<b>Silencing</b>	<b>Type</b>
I thought only the Labor party had these issues....pfft	No		
The simple way to stamp out this behaviour is for more people to get involved in branch level politics. The bigger and more diverse the base is, the less it can be utilised to individuals gain.	Yes	No	
This consistently happens in all areas of local politics, whether it be liberal, labor, greens, or some minor group. It happens in community groups, like soccer clubs, swimming clubs, golf clubs, fishing clubs, knitting clubs etc, the one who are active in the community are the ones who control what happens.			
Get involved!			
Preaching to your base, Mr Bolt, and very base it is.	Yes	Yes	Insulting
give over people getting tired of reading dictator Dan needs to resign. old news. I am sure one if you are ready to take on his job.	Yes	Yes	Stifling

*Note:* Examples drawn from The Age (2020) and Herald Sun (2020b)

With individual comments coded, the comment section was again assessed based on the prevalence of this silencing speech. Each comment has the potential to include this adversarial content, but a comment section could also contain no silencing comments. This risk needed to be assessed for the comment sections, the news websites as a whole, and the collection of most visited news websites in a nation, which can be identified as presenting a high incidence, moderate incidence, limited incidence, and no incidence of silencing speech. However, silencing speech plays a complex role – even a single instance of hostile speech can have a measurable impact on readers (Rösner et al., 2016), and the silencing speech has implications that extend well beyond the commenting community (Gardiner, 2018). The metric used in this study balanced proportion and presence, providing a description of the various levels of hostility presenting through individual comment sections but using a presence-based result for the website [see Table 11].

**Table 11**

*Silencing speech proportional coding*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Comment section</b>	<b>Website</b>
High incidence	More than half of comments employ silencing speech	A majority of comment sections contain silencing speech
Moderate incidence	Between a quarter and half of comments employ silencing speech	Between half and a quarter of sections contain silencing speech
Low incidence	At least one but less than a quarter employ silencing speech	More than a tenth but less than a quarter of comment sections contain silencing speech
No incidence	No silencing speech employed	Less than a tenth or no comment sections contain silencing speech or no comments

I was only focused on the comments themselves and the ways they could potentially silence other communicators. Headlines and articles can and often do marginalise groups or criticise other speakers, including commenters (Ewart et al., 2017; Gonçalves, 2018), but that

material is covered in other ways as part of existing media pluralism metrics (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015) – though not directly through the lens of silencing speech. However, this is not the only way that these commenting spaces can mitigate their potential for contribution; another important area of focus is the nature of participatory spaces and their social systems.

### *Coding Phatic Speech*

The final concern of the coding was where news commenting risks marginalising its potential contributions to diversity of viewpoints, information, and representation due to the ways its discussion is constructed and its community maintained, which involves sometimes extensive phatic interaction (Miloni et al., 2012). As discussed in Chapter 2, phatic communication is that text of comments where commenters are addressing each other, responding to each other, building rapport with their community, and aligning themselves within the community to achieve interpersonal social goals (Miller, 2008). This is the final assessment of comment sections because, while it is a common part of participatory media (Lomborg, 2012; Miller, 2008; Sarjanoja et al., 2013), it is only relevant in comments that do not contribute to media pluralism. Where phatic communication occurs alongside diversity of viewpoints, its presence is not detracting from news commenting's potential for contribution and risk – indeed, its community-reinforcing effect serves to make these impacts more sustainable. Consequently, the first step for assessing the prevalence of significant phatic communication is to exclude those comments that offer a viewpoint or information.

For the remaining comments, coders analysed their text for relevant content to code as phatic. This text can be identified by its attempts to engage, align or disalign the commenter with other commenters, groups, the article's author or sources, or the news organisation – this includes attempts at humour and questions. Sarjanoja et al. (2013) identify such content as the non-informative but potentially interesting interaction between participants – though Miller (2008) notes that it can also be redundant as the purpose for individuals is to align and dis-align

themselves with communities and groups. It also includes attempts to state, alter, or reinforce the rules or the process of communication. Finally, and overlapping with the previous two, it includes comments that are socially transactional, such as by displaying gratitude or making demands. This assessment considered phatic comments' relative prevalence as a proportion of comments, in line with other codes, presenting at high, moderate, and low rates of incidence [see Table 12].

**Table 12**

*Rating the proportion of phatic communication*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Comment section</b>	<b>Website</b>
High incidence	Over half of comments are phatic	A majority of comment sections with high or moderate incidence
Moderate incidence	Between a quarter and half of comments are phatic	A majority of comment sections with moderate or low incidence
Low incidence	Less than a quarter of comments are phatic	A majority of comment sections with low or no incidence
No incidence	No phatic comments	Less than a tenth of comment sections with any incidence

The next step was to determine the extent to which the identified phatic commentary mitigated the comment sections' impact on media pluralism – a measure I label *phatic displacement*. Phatic commentary in itself is not an inherent risk and can potentially offer some benefits; the risk identified here is when a comment section is so filled with phatic communication that contributions are obscured. Therefore, a key criterion was if there are additional comments beyond this sample of approximately 800 words; otherwise, the phatic commentary would not be playing a role in obscuring contributions and risks. I measured phatic displacement by presence – the number of comment sections on the site that featured phatic displacement [see Table 13]. Websites with higher levels of phatic displacement have commenting communities whose

interactions between each other and with the news organisation are potentially precluding contributions to the discussion of the public affairs issue.

**Table 13**

*Phatic displacement rates*

<b>Result</b>	<b>Website</b>
High displacement	Half or more of comment sections contain phatic commentary that displaces contributions
Moderate displacement	Between a quarter and half of comment sections contain phatic commentary that displaces contributions
Low displacement	More than a tenth but less than a quarter contain phatic commentary that displaces contributions
No displacement	Less than a tenth of comment sections contain phatic commentary that displaces contributions

Though this content can have benefits, research indicates that this community-orientated and redundant content can dominate comment sections, reducing their value for readers and news organisations (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014; Jiyoung Han et al., 2022; Ksiazek, 2015). While some approaches have been considered to reduce their visibility and impact (Kolhatkar et al., 2020; Santana, 2016), I was not concerned with the range of potential outcomes. Diverse and informative content crowded out of these spaces is being pushed out of the most visible and prominent forums for discussion of the relevant issue.

### **Overall Assessment of National News Commenting**

The results of these codes, as applied to DM, SMH, Daum, and Naver, appear in Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 focuses on the potential contribution to diversity of viewpoints and information as well as representation, but also provides a view of the news commenting conditions and structures for each site. Chapter 8 weighs the risks presenting through the sections against these benefits. These chapters aim to provide the thick description (M. Freeman,

2014), taking a multi-faceted lens to the research object to show the many ways its contents can have implications for media pluralism. They combine emergent analysis, hermeneutic coding, and directed content analysis to paint a layered picture.

### **Chapter 7: Revealing and Contextualising Comments' Contributions**

In this chapter, I provide the detailed and specific results obtained using the previous chapter's approaches to show a grounded view of how comments can be a platform and engine for diverse views from a diverse public. As I covered in Chapter 2, comments present in only limited formats and specific contexts, yet their texts can offer opportunities to provide and foment relevant diverse media content in a way that other forms of social media do not. The extent to which this appeared to happen in practice was mixed, but there were contributions in a variety of ways.

There are three main sections to this chapter. The first section describes the context of the samples, including the websites and their features, which has relevance to the contributions of diverse viewpoints and information as well as representation presented in this chapter but also the risks described in Chapter 8. For this, I start by noting the distinct characteristics of the websites as they relate to news commenting, which had crucial differences that provided structures and context for the resulting comments. From there, I look at the most common category of comments identified, those that provided a diversity of viewpoints and information. Finally, I investigate the visibility of the participants for these participatory spaces to assess whether they demonstrably augment the voices and representation within the media ecosystem. Each of these plays an important role in determining whether news commenting can provide benefits for media pluralism and the functioning of these media ecosystems.

#### **The Macro View of the Commenting Sample**

In a broad view of the comments and comment sections, there is striking consistency to the contributions of each website across the samples, but the results are different from one website to the next and one country to the next. This shows that the decision to host comments, and how to do so, is not a neutral and impartial decision, but rather an integral component of how comments can make their contribution (or present risks). This had substantive impacts on news commenting's potential impacts for media pluralism. These dominant websites have



influence over the structures that cultivate news commenting, even if they did not produce the content directly.

Below, I identify six ways that the websites structurally differed and indicate how those distinctions impacted the results. The following view of the structures surrounding and shaping news commenting on each site serves as a vital underlying context for the comments, comment sections, and websites. The main areas of broad difference I found related to commenting platform visibility, comment sorting, the commenting process, user identification fields, comment frequency, and comment length. Aspects of the results for each coding category can be tied directly to these outcomes of the website analysis.

### *Commenting Platform Visibility*

In most cases where they were present, comments appeared *below the line*, that designated space below the relevant journalistic production (the professional print, image, and sometimes streaming audio-visual content). The only exception was the breaking news feeds on SMH, which placed comments on the right side to make room for newsfeed scrolling. In every case, including the side comments, there is a literal line that separates the comments from the professional journalistic content.

However, for each website, the flags and paths for users to see the comments was distinct. For all websites, users could click through a headline on the front page to open the article and then scroll to the bottom of the article to see comments if they are present (side comments excepted). However, of the four websites, only one – DM – tells users whether comments are present on the front page before clicking through to the article. On Naver and Daum, this is less of a concern, as commenting was possible on every article in the sample, but SMH offered it on less than half (45.6% overall), meaning users typically had no way of knowing if they would have the opportunity to read or post comments until they had opened the article. After clicking through to the headline, there were further differences: Daum and Naver both displayed a link to comments as well as the number of comments directly below the headline

high on the page, before any print or image content, but DM placed this after varying amounts of article headline and by-lines as well as behind all other social media sharing links. SMH users would often have to scroll and search for a link straight to comments on either side of the story, and this was the only website where users had to scroll down articles to see whether comments were present. Compounding this, SMH's mobile phone app does not list comments or make them visible in any way for anything but live feeds – a crucial concern considering the large and growing number of users that access via mobile devices (Newman et al., 2021, p. 131). Further, SMH website users can only see comments if they are subscribed after they finish their allotment of free monthly articles. Of the four, SMH imposed by far the most limitations on access and visibility to its comments.

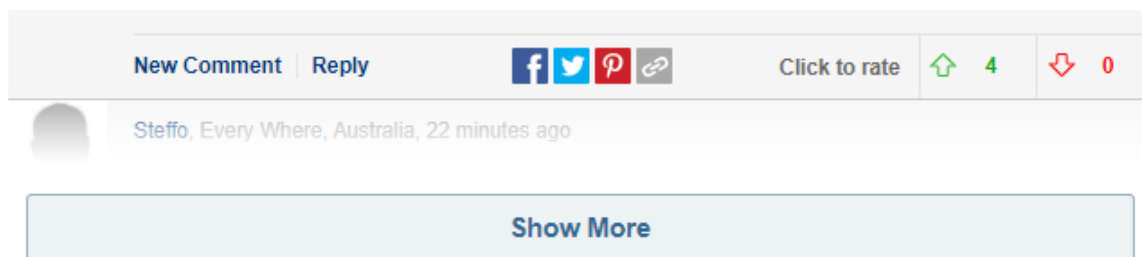
Once users reach the comment section, none of the websites provided full and immediate access to the full range of comments at initial loading. For SMH, Naver, and DM, users were provided with a small subset of the comments, between three and five comments (Daum also did this at the time of data collection but has since changed). These appeared after a short delay by scrolling down or clicking the link beside the headline. No website loaded the comments at the same time as the article; users' browsers had to trigger the retrieval by scrolling or linking to the comment section. On Daum, even a truncated list is now no longer visible – users need to click an “off” / “on” switch to activate the feature, though this switch does display a streaming tally of the number of comments that updates in real time.

To expand beyond these strictly limited comment previews, another button needed to be clicked (using variations of the phrase “view more”), necessitating further user interaction that would inevitably appear in the websites' analytics. DM's version was particularly provocative in this regard: the bottom comment in the preview was faded halfway through the text, leading to the load button [see Figure 6]. The elicitation for this interaction was notable from the top of the article – all websites featured the number of comments as the link, a number that was sometimes in the thousands, but then go on to only display the 3-5 comment preview, requiring user

engagement to see the full list of comments. Finally, this fuller list of expanded comments was again limited pending further interaction. For Daum and Naver, large comment sections were algorithmically sorted by various metrics, such as recommendations or by “likes.” Going beyond the initial list of 5-20 comments required further clicks of “view more” and then eventually moving to a separate page dedicated to the comment section. For DM and SMH, users had to click a button to view more again after seeing 10-20 comments, which continued to load on the same page for the users to scroll through.

### Figure 6

*DM fade to prompt interaction in a comment section*



*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

On the whole, DM offered the most accessible and visible comments and, like Daum and Naver, offered comments on nearly every article – over 90%. While Naver and Daum allowed comments on every article, users needed to engage with the website to reach more than a few comments, necessitating more user interaction to read further. This had an impact on the results of this study because of its focus on exposure diversity. There is no evidence that potential comment readers are highly motivated to pursue comments off the page of the article they accompany, so the data collected for this study focused on those comments available on the page. Incorporating these differences into the study’s metrics would be subjective and complex (for instance, despite the paywall, SMH remains one of the most visited news websites in Australia, so the paywall’s effective restriction of access is debatable), but they provide a distinguishing portrayal of how comments present within the websites’ structures.

*Prearranging Discussions and the Impacts of Timing*

A similarly impactful factor when looking through the results is in the way that these sites initially arrange comments, as there was a sharp distinction between the websites in the Australian and Korean samples. This is an organisational decision: each website offers similar sorting options but chooses how the comments will initially be sorted.

For Daum and Naver, this decision is made by the website or the news organisation that wrote the accompanying article, but the comments used in this study were often sorted algorithmically rather than chronologically by default (users can use the interface to rearrange the comments chronologically or reverse chronologically on both sites). The algorithmic filtering done by Korean websites Daum and Naver has clear implications for their contributions to media pluralism. In practice, the sorting means that Daum and Naver can have unpopular comments automatically pushed to the bottom of the comment section or off to a separate page. This has the potential to limit anti-social silencing speech or low-quality phatic speech but also to limit diverse viewpoints with less popular support, and this was born out in the results of the study.

Both SMH and DM opt for straightforward chronological arrangements that list the most recent initial comments while offering users the option to sort by metrics such as user recommendations. SMH reverses this for comment replies, but DM makes newest replies visible and hides discussions with more than two replies, though users can see more by clicking a “load more” button. This does not serve to highlight popular comments, but it also does not sideline comments because they are unpopular (though SMH reserves and exercises the right to reject comments that do not follow its house rules (Koskie, 2018)).

Comment visibility differences were compounded by publication timing, as well. On SMH and DM, only 2-4 public affairs articles per day had been published within the two hours before data collection, where the majority of stories featuring on the front pages of Naver and Daum had been published for less than two hours. Further, comments are rarely posted less than

an hour after publication on Naver and Daum, where articles posted on DM in particular but also SMH could see comments appearing within several minutes in highly active sections (those that exceeded the 800-word sample size), despite the fact that SMH comments are pre-moderated. At DM, this meant both more comment sections exceeding the 800-word limit as well as a higher number of comments on average. While SMH saw a lower number of comments per section on average than Naver, this is a direct result of the length of the individual comments – the average comment had over triple the number of words – which would entail a greater investment of time for both the commenter and the moderation staff.

Consequently, the algorithmically populated front pages of Naver and Daum featured articles with comment sections that contained less content than those beneath the articles placed on the front pages of SMH and DM by their staff. Time was a crucial factor here, as comment sections continued to grow after data collection, but comment sections would continue to grow for up to several days after publication, long after the articles have left front page exposure. Highly active comment sections reached hundreds or thousands of comments eventually, but readers clicking on the top stories on Naver and Daum during their morning commute did not have access to these eventual discussions, and the nascent comment section available to them often had no comments at all. This indirectly reinforces the gatekeeping role discussed by Singer et al. (2011) and Bruns and Highfield (2015), with journalistic staff effectively both drawing attention to and enabling more active and visible comment sections.

#### *Commenting Boxes as the Portal to Posting*

The comment posting functions on each website had implications for both contributions and risks as users have to engage with varying instructions and guidelines in order to submit their content. At one end, SMH has the most explicit direction of these systems. Posting requires a login and agreement with the terms and conditions. When in the comment section, text above the comment box relates directly to key components of this research: “Subscriber comments are moderated first. Respect others. Criticise ideas, not people. No offensive language.”

Consequently, for every comment being posted, there is clear advice to contribute to the diversity of ideas and to avoid silencing speech, and there is a mechanism to hold offenders accountable (though the existence of a subscription could constitute a disincentive to reprimanding subscribed users for infractions). There is also a link to house rules that re-iterate this advice in more detail.

While Daum and Naver have similar house rules, their visibility is much lower as part of the commenting feature. Guidelines are agreed to when opening the account but are not posted in or near the commenting box. Instructions below the box explain how comments are sorted and thereby provide implicit guidelines on how users can make their comments more visible (for instance, Daum notes that the “Safety Bot” algorithmically removes offensive comments, though it does not explain how the determination is made). Conversely, threats to ban accounts for violating terms and conditions would be more impactful on these websites because the account for each serves a wide range of important functions – Naver’s account is for an extensive and heavily trafficked online shopping and entertainment platform, where Daum’s accounts are shared with KakaoTalk, Korea’s most ubiquitous social media and messaging service and the owner of Daum. However, this additional potential accountability is not flagged near the comment box or in the process of commenting.

DM has the least instruction and accountability for posters. Users provide an email address and name and click accept to terms and conditions. Banned users can sign on to a new account with a different email and will even choose usernames to boast that they have done so. When posting, logged in users click “add comment,” type their comment, and hit “submit.” There are no explicit instructions fomenting diverse ideas or information or against silencing speech outside of the terms and conditions during account sign up and the house rules that are linked below the commenting box. Where SMH instructs people on the rules and to read the rules above the commenting box, DM states, “By posting your comment you agree to our house rules” (with a link for the rules) below the box, explicitly stating implicit consent.

*User Identification Fields as Content*

Users of each site were granted different tools for identifying themselves as the producer of comments that affected both their representation and their expression of viewpoints and information. While all sites guided users not to divulge personally identifying information, user identification fields (UIF) offered multiple ways that users could represent themselves and their views.

DM was at the forefront in this regard. Usernames ranged from regional references and gendered names all the way to political ideologies and information statements. Further, all commenters were also asked to identify their region (DM is an international website and comment sections frequently saw a range of nationalities in a single comment section). Mysteriously, it also features the shadow of an avatar next to each username, but no way to upload an image or modify the avatar in any way. Each UIF was also a link to a poster's commenting history, though it otherwise provided no further identifying information.

At Daum and SMH, the UIF was limited to self-selected usernames – though this provided vastly more information than the Naver UIF. As at DM, Daum and SMH users often gave gendered names, regions, and viewpoints as their usernames, but lacking a dedicated region field meant user location was mostly omitted. Daum provided usernames as links, but this was again a link to commenting history rather than further self-identification or expression of views. SMH usernames were not linked.

The Naver UIF contained only four English characters each followed by a series of asterisks (\*\*\*\*). The combination of character limits and the non-Hangul character set meant no self-identification was possible in the Naver UIF, limiting its potential for recurring identifiable contributions to media pluralism.

*Length and Size Differences of Comments and Sections*

A final concern that shaped the differences between these websites was that the findings for each were based on highly distinct comment characteristics that varied by site consistently

across the samples. These differences resulted in different sizes of comment sections as well as different sizes of comments.

One of the key methodological issues in this study was in considering how many comments would fall within the range of a visible comment sample for typical comment readers, leading me to restrict samples to 800 words. However, Hangul and the Korean language do not follow the same syntactical and grammatical rules as English. As a particulate language, function words like *of* and *this* in English are combined with their relevant object in Korean (For instance, *it has been a long time* in English translates to a single word, *오랜만이야*, in Korean), and 800 words of Korean-language content expresses more ideas than 800 words of English content.

However, differences exist between the websites within each country as well as between the countries. For instance, Naver featured approximately double the comments per sampled section as Daum on average: 19.6 comments versus 11.5. While this was often because of the sorting differences – Daum sections featured a small selection of recommended comments from highly active discussions, with the rest of the comments being available on a separate page – it is also because Naver frequently had more comments overall. Conversely, Daum comments were consistently larger individually, with 15 words per comment versus 13.7 on average, not even accounting for the lack of representation and expression in the Naver UIF.

Australia's differences were starker. DM featured more comments per section at 23.7 versus 14.3, but SMH comments were nearly twice the length (43.2 words per section versus 24.4). Even considering the language differences, SMH comments were by far the longest of all websites studied. Single-word or even single-character comments like “lol” and “.” were frequent on Daum, Naver, and DM, but completely absent in most samples at SMH.

This has implications for the definition of *viewpoint* or *information* as regards this content. At SMH, new viewpoints and information in comments were generally expressed with much more text, providing more details and support. At DM and Naver, viewpoints and information



were often expressed with only a small number of words, but the text still expressed a viewpoint or information that was distinct from that presented in the previous comments or the headline of the article posted by the news site. I made no distinction between these expressions of viewpoint and information, because that would place an unbalanced burden on comments versus that of journalistic production: Australian media policy and governance provides no explicit benchmarks for what constitutes a higher or lower quality journalism product. Nevertheless, these differences merit consideration as a context for these results, which tended to reflect this contrast – SMH comments featured the most contributions for diversity of viewpoints and information by a large margin.

#### *Finding Meaning in Limited Content*

Despite these differences, there are some clear commonalities, with these websites in quite different contexts showing similar features. This was particularly the case in regard to the technical aspects of how comments present.

In each case, the UIF was at the top, with the text in bold. DM and Daum displayed the UIF as hyperlinks which changed their colour [see Figure 7] (Naver UIF were also hyperlinks, but their font did not reflect this). The time of posting was also above the comment body. None of the websites used a real name policy and all had guidelines against revealing identifying details (a small number of users at SMH, DM, and Daum were nevertheless potentially using a real name, though the name was not verifiable). Comment bodies consisted of text in a single font, with no images apart from emojis users incorporated into their text, though the individual fonts rendered these emojis within the text to different extents. Comment interactivity options were below the comment body and included options for reply as well as positive and negative flags (for SMH, however, the negative flag was for reporting a comment that violates commenting guidelines, rather than indicating disagreement or disapproval). While the UIF were hyperlinks for all but SMH, clicking through the links offered no additional information on the users apart from their commenting history.

## Figure 7

Sample comments of (from top) DM, Daum, Naver, and SMH

The screenshot displays four distinct comment threads from different social media platforms:

- DM (Daily Mail Australia):** A comment by 'Steffo, Adelaide, Australia' posted 'less than a minute ago'. The text reads: 'How would you like it if people all trolled & bullied you Alison Langdon? Media promoting bullying, disgraceful.' It includes a 'New Comment' button, a 'Reply' button, and social sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and a link icon. There are also 'Click to rate' buttons with up and down arrows, both showing a count of 0.
- Daum:** A comment in Korean posted '3분전' (3 minutes ago). The text is '가이 인간 쓰레기들이로군!' (Gay humans are trash!). It has a '답글 작성' (Write reply) button and shows 0 likes and 0 replies.
- Naver:** A comment by user 's838\*\*\*\*' posted on '2022.01.31. 12:10'. The text is '선거조작 하려고 술술 시동거는구나' (You're smoothly starting the engine to rig the election). It shows 14 likes and 0 replies.
- SMH (The Sydney Morning Herald):** A comment by 'ZW' posted '17 HOURS AGO'. The text asks: 'How do you know if loss of smell is a key feature of Omicron? My daughter has it. The main symptom for her is a bad sore throat. After a week it is still there. Work mate said his sore throat lasted 8 days before he got better. Then he took his family hiking in the mountains in the week after.' It includes a 'RESPECT' button with a count of 1 and a 'REPLY' button.

*Note:* Images reproduced under educational license from Daily Mail Australia (2021), The Sydney Morning Herald (2021), Naver News (2021), and Daum (2021).

An additional, and fundamental, feature of these comments was that they exist interactively and responsively to another text, and this interactivity was also a source of information about the commenter and their views. The most common interaction was with the corresponding journalistic text, but commenters often interacted with each other as well in a way that could be revealing of their background or views [see Table 14]. However, as visible in the table below, instances of representation and viewpoint/information diversity were expressed more by the content of the comment than through comments' inter-textual reference to prior comments. Simple expressions of agreement or disagreement most often resulted in phatic

commentary while others veered into insulting and stifling speech, which are further discussed in Chapter 8.

**Table 14**

*Comment examples of contribution by coding category*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Comment example</b>
Representation through article interactivity	Yep, this is why over 50s are refusing AZ. We'll wait until we can get pfizer thanks very much. No-one in Australia wants AZ over pfizer, not even the QLD premier. I refuse to be bullied by the govt to get AZ. I'd rather go unvaccinated then be bullied.
Representation through comment interactivity	I don't quite understand this concept of 'greed' that everyone's talking about. Greed from whom? I own a house in one of those areas where every house sells for over 1 million. [...]
Views/information through article interactivity	But if you read the detail in the article it actually says that there is no evidence that it is either more infectious nor more dangerous than other strains including Delta. Its just another scary headline not supported by the article (or the facts).
Views/information through comment interactivity	I was literally about to say/write the same thing. Historically, this has definitely been the case. I think there's a cultural component and also a good policing component.

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021).

Consequently, for the group of websites used in this study – the comments of which were by far the most visible in each of their national media ecosystems – contributions to media pluralism were visible in just three ways: the UIF, the comment bodies, and, to a lesser extent, inter-textual reference. Examining these by comment, by section, and by website highlights the extent to which contributions to media pluralism can be seen through news commenting.

### **Results for Contributions to Diversity of Viewpoints and Information**

As I discussed in the coding chapter, identifying viewpoints and information in these comment sections was a layered challenge because of the complexity of identifying viewpoints and information in diverse comments as well as the need that any viewpoints and information be distinct from the accompanying headline and other commenters. Nevertheless, there was

evidence of this content presenting in comments in high quantities and at length in all of the samples. I describe these findings at each level, from the layer of the individual comments through to the layer considering the extent to which the diverse viewpoints and contributions of information were adding to the media system through these prominent sites.

#### *Viewpoints and Information in Individual Comments*

The first coding applied to each comment was for identifying viewpoint and information. Searching for statements of information, where users were introducing new details as important and objective facts to further or to alter the discussion in the comment section, required identifying patterns of language. Most comments did not fall into this category, not because coders sought to exclude misinformation or weighed the comment's informative value, but because most commenters simply did not try to state facts objectively, tending instead to provide opinions and conjecture.

As discussed in Chapter 6, identifying information required identifying structures that created objective relationships between phenomena in direct, non-propositional language (propositional language indicates conjecture). Where that was found, the statement or collection of statements was compared to the headline and previous commenters to see if this information was already present. Finally, coders hermeneutically considered the broader cultural context for the news story to determine if this information would be common knowledge for the relevant audience of readers. If neither of these was the case, then the comment was marked for providing information. In the table that follows, I use two examples from one section within the SMH and DM data set to demonstrate these outcomes [see Table 15].

**Table 15***Sample information coding*

<b>Content</b>	<b>SMH example</b>	<b>DM example</b>
Headline	Even after borders open, international travel will be a nightmare	Why Australia will have to live with lockdowns and border bans while Europe and the US return to normal and even Singapore outlines a plan to live with Covid - so when will we finally be free? - Americans, Britons and Europeans - who have endured 15 months of restrictions - are now enjoying concerts, sports matches and summer holidays.
Information	Hi John, If you do not have a Medicare Card you can do the following: 1. Ask the provider who administered the vaccine to give you a hard copy of the type of vaccine along with the dates. This is performed at the providers discretion, they are not obligated to do so. [...]	STOP SAY INCREDIBLY RARE BLOOD CLOTS!! 3.1 per 100,000 or 1 per 32,258 is not something to be dismissed so easily.
Non-information	should have titled europe & america, there is no Asian country listed	Deathly silence on false positives. What is the REAL number of infections.
Redundant	And for Canada also.	Other countries returning to normal but watch out because so was Australia and look what happened
Common knowledge	There are 450 people dying every day from covid in USA. Australia 900 total deaths. Why so many restrictions for Australians	It has worked. Just compare the death rate between countries,

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021)

In some cases, the information was tied to a statement of personal information, either due to having contended with or been witness to the focus of the discussion or relaying the information of a third party. These are inherently not redundant or common knowledge, for the most part [see Table 16].

**Table 16***Information types identified in comments*

Type	Example
Personal account	I live in a rural area and am eligible for the Pfizer vaccine. There are no GPs in my area administering Pfizer. There are no appointments available even if I make the drive to Sydney. We have a hospital in my town, and a large base hospital less than an hour away. I cannot understand why every regional hospital doesn't have a vaccination centre, rather than overloading GPs. I am sick of hearing the get vaccinated line when it is not possible
Witness	Just back from an exercise walk. Saw tradesmen working on at least 6 new homes. All workers in close proximity to each other and to the adjoining homes. No masks. Since when is home building an essential work?
Third party account	We are incredibly lucky. I remember listening to a woman relate a story that she had an under-skin heart starter device inserted because of irregularity issues. She basically forgot about it when seven years later she felt like she had been kneed in the chest. It turned out that the device had been sitting there for 7 years and then kicked in and did the job it was designed for. Danish footballer Christian Eriksen is having one fitted. [...]

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021)

This study did not set out to address misinformation or disinformation in the comment section. However, there was a manifest potential for it to be present and prevalent, because many statements of fact were in no way corroborated with supporting information nor were they interrogated by subsequent comments. Indeed, responses could respond to the claims as matter of fact [see Table 17 – the first statement has been the subject of numerous fact checks (Farley, 2019)]. The MPM did not cover misinformation and disinformation until the end of 2021, which it now covers under the heading of illegal and harmful speech protections, but it assesses the adequacy of policy frameworks rather than the impacts and prevalence of disinformation within the system. Here, these statements were coded as statements of information, on the explicit understanding that this is not a study of the content's accuracy.

**Table 17***Misinformation comment uncontested by a response*

<b>Content</b>	<b>Example</b>
Unsubstantiated statement of fact	Biden worth only & million? 1% of Hunter's first China 'deal' netted Hunter \$1 B. Biden's take was at least \$100M. It's in the Caymans or Myanmar or more likely Panama with Mark Rich
Supporting response	That's just fine. We need people in charge of the nation's money who can manage their own money. Those involved in the House Banking Scandal (AKA "Rubbergate") have no business managing the nation's finances. Many overdrew with literally hundreds of checks, for hundreds of thousand of dollars. They should have been jailed!

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Diversity of viewpoints, using the approach described in Chapter 6, yielded the highest results for contribution among all metrics. This is likely because differentiation is possible in multiple ways for otherwise similar statements, be it a change in the problem, the cause, the evaluation or the treatment, as discussed in Chapter 6. Simultaneously, the term used for this media, “comment,” inherently suggests that contributors would provide viewpoints.

Each of the ways new views could be constituted were present on each website, often within a single comment section. Evaluation was a common focus of comments, and this was often done with just one word. Problem and cause views were frequently easily identifiable as the commenter specifically said, “the problem is” or “because”; similarly, treatment was usually suggested through the use of a modal such as “should” or “need.” While these statements sometimes included statements of information, as well, most did not, and statements of information often did not include views [see Table 18].

**Table 18***Framing elements presented in example comment sections*

<b>Framing element</b>	<b>SMH example</b>	<b>DM example</b>
Headline	Should Sydney have locked down earlier? It's not that simple	How Australians are REALLY feeling about their lives after 17 months of Covid
Evaluation	Sydney's approach is correct. [...] It is an absolute joke South Australia's prophylactic lockdown	I loved Australia in 2019. Now I hate it. A nation of bed wetting girls. I am forth generation Australian. I am getting a Russian passport. Russia is a free country. Australia is a police state. Things change.
Problem	It seems to me that this virus is such new territory that it's a bit of a guessing game as to what to do when it comes to lockdowns .	The coronavirus overreaction will kill far more people than the virus ever would have
Cause	[...] this a highly infectious strain, and chains of infection can easily be missed, all while contacts are circulating freely in the community. Not to mention the complacency that's taken hold due to eased social distancing and mask wearing restrictions.	In Australia we are plunged into lockdowns after lockdowns over a few cases. How is the economy supposed to survive after that plus what it is doing to peoples mental health. Oh thats right the government is pouring millions into mental - that he is creating.....
Treatment	We need to add a period of home isolation and testing to HQ. BEFORE anyone is allowed out into the community! [...]	Because older people have not carried the can for the virus and lockdowns. [...] Let's get back to normal and start living again. Those who want to hide can do so.

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021).

The challenge for identifying viewpoints, however, was removing redundancy. In highly active discussions with shorter comments, a frequent occurrence at DM and Naver, strings of comments concurred with other commenters and the headline [see Table 19]. This left some highly active discussions with low or no viewpoints being presented despite the number of comments (in one DM comment section, only two viewpoints were identified out of 33



comments, while a Naver section had 0 out of 40). This also resulted in extensive phatic communication (discussed in Chapter 8).

**Table 19**

*Example comment section with non-competing viewpoints*

Content	Example
Headline	Slaver couple block their ears in court as they hear heartbreaking account from elderly housekeeper they held captive for eight years and nearly starved to death - A couple found guilty of holding a woman captive as a slave for eight years will finally be jailed months after being convicted of the callous crime.
Comments	<p>So sad , I wonder how many other cases there are like this in Australia ?</p> <hr/> <p>Disgusting pair, I hope they are locked away for a long time. Then they might realise how that poor woman felt.</p> <hr/> <p>Throw them in prison and make them listen to their victim's testimony 24/7</p> <hr/> <p>There is no excuse for it and both deserve very long prison sentences.</p> <hr/> <p>Jail for. LIFE... BOTH of them. !!!!</p> <hr/> <p>Absolute monsters. They should get at least 20 years! At least!</p> <hr/> <p>Is the defence barrister a relative of these two because their attitude is just as gross.</p> <hr/> <p>Enjoy your porridge!</p> <hr/> <p>Truly disgusting people. Not worthy to live in a developed society.</p>

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Overall, both new information and new viewpoints were relatively common on all sites to varying extents [see Table 20]. In every case, information was much less common than viewpoints and viewpoints were more common than any other form of contribution, including for representation.

**Table 20**

*Amount and rate of viewpoint diversity and new information comments of total comments on each site in each sample*

Type	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
<b>DM</b>							
Information	43	41	44	100	89	75	<b>392</b>
% of total	4.3%	4.8%	5.3%	9.5%	7.6%	7.8%	<b>6.7%</b>
Viewpoints	303	306	278	350	487	464	<b>2188</b>
% of total	30.3%	35.7%	33.6%	33.3%	41.7%	48.5%	<b>37.4%</b>
<b>SMH</b>							
Information	50	44	49	32	31	43	<b>249</b>
% of total	19.6%	12.0%	13.1%	12.0%	11.2%	14.7%	<b>13.6%</b>
Viewpoints	111	181	170	130	156	194	<b>942</b>
% of total	43.5%	49.2%	45.5%	48.7%	56.5%	66.4%	<b>51.4%</b>
<b>Daum</b>							
Information	21	35	18	15	31	42	<b>162</b>
% of total	8.7%	7.9%	5.7%	5.7%	8.9%	7.9%	<b>7.6%</b>
Viewpoints	93	153	62	65	69	130	<b>572</b>
% of total	38.6%	34.6%	19.5%	24.9%	19.8%	24.3%	<b>26.7%</b>
<b>Naver</b>							
Information	43	35	28	34	20	19	<b>179</b>
% of total	9.3%	7.5%	9.6%	8.4%	6.2%	4.5%	<b>7.5%</b>
Viewpoints	139	115	70	98	111	93	<b>626</b>
% of total	30.1%	24.5%	24.0%	24.1%	34.6%	21.9%	<b>26.4%</b>

As shown in Table 20, this description of characteristics of the commenting body offers insights but does not paint a practical picture of how these kinds of comments are contributing to the media pluralism of the media the readers are exposed to for each public affairs topic. If these comments are to impact the distribution of communicative power and contribute to broad diversity, they need to be assessed for how they are situated as part of the discussions within comment sections.

### *Comment Sections Presenting Viewpoints and Diversity*

While comments more often presented both information and viewpoints than representation, the picture was more compelling at the level of comment sections. A key contribution here is the ways that commenting can enhance political independence: commenters are in a position to disrupt the political ties and ownership controls otherwise potentially influencing news content. Section by section, this frequently proved to be the case, with commenters running counter to the framing presented by the news organisation and journalist (even if the contradiction was sometimes as simply stated as “I disagree” or “Lies!”). Even comments stating new information, less than 10% of total comments, were present in most discussions.

There are two ways to view the statements of information in news comments. On the one hand, every comment section that contained comments providing new information added details and context that were previously absent in the comment section or headline. By adding new details or context for consideration, adding depth, or contradicting prior information, this contribution provided an opportunity to augment diversity. This was widespread – only Daum did not feature new information in a majority of their overall comment sections, by a thin margin (49.7%). SMH, DM and Naver had new information presenting through comment sections in 69.2%, 63.2% and 58.2% of cases, respectively. The longer the comment sections were, the more likely they were to present additional information (though SMH’s longer comments provided the most, proportionally, despite generally averaging fewer comments per section). Conversely, the

quantity of new information in individual comment sections, in terms of the number of informative comments, diverged significantly. DM, Naver, and Daum almost exclusively saw a low proportion of information comments in their comment sections, often just one but rarely more than a quarter. SMH saw 10% of their comment sections with a moderate level of comments and most sections with information statements had more than one [see Table 21].

**Table 21**

*Presence and proportion of new information comments in comment sections*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Present	156 (63.2%)	90 (69.2%)	87 (49.7%)	71 (58.2%)
Absent	91 (36.8%)	40 (30.8%)	89 (50.3%)	51 (41.8%)
High	3 (1.2%)	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.1%)	2 (1.6%)
Moderate	8 (3.2%)	13 (10%)	7 (4.0%)	1 (0.8%)
Low	145 (58.7%)	76 (58.5%)	78 (44.1%)	68 (55.7%)

By contrast, most comment sections were flush with viewpoints, as shown in Table 22. DM, which had the most comments and the most comment sections of all data sets, had several days where every comment section provided at least one comment with a new viewpoint on the focal points of the discussion. Across all websites, high viewpoint diversity – over half of comments provided a new viewpoint – was common, from 27.7% of Daum sections to 50% of SMH sections. Almost half (44.5%) of DM comments featured moderate diversity, but it was rare at both Naver and Daum, where comment sections were either highly diverse or limited. Only Naver featured more low diversity sections, but this was only slightly more than the proportion of sections with high diversity (32.8% vs 28.7%). Daum featured more viewpoint absent sections than the others (29.4%), while DM and SMH had almost none (1.3% and 2.3%).

**Table 22***Rates and proportions of viewpoint diversity in comment sections by site*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
High	79 (32%)	65 (50%)	49 (27.7%)	35 (28.7%)
Moderate	110 (44.5%)	56 (43.1%)	29 (16.4%)	26 (21.3%)
Low	55 (22.3%)	6 (4.6%)	43 (24.3%)	40 (32.8%)
Absent	3 (1.2%)	3 (2.3%)	52 (29.4%)	19 (15.6%)

Overall, the results for viewpoint diversity were the broadest for each website, with each website featuring some amount of high, moderate, low, and absent diversity comment sections. Unlike for representation, the conditions for high and no diversity of viewpoint comment sections were present on each website, but the presence of comments strongly correlated to the presence of at least a small number of diverse viewpoints.

Daum demonstrates an instructive case in this regard. A greater portion of their front page featured public affairs news articles, and these public affairs news articles were also more likely to contain at least one comment. This means that Daum users could typically encounter a higher number of public affairs-relevant comment sections with diverse viewpoints than at either SMH or Naver, even if they were alongside a higher number of populated comment sections without diverse viewpoints [see Table 23]. The study found that, while not every open comment section on every article provides new viewpoints, a higher number of open comment sections appeared to correlate to a larger number of comment sections with diverse viewpoints. Further, Daum comment sections with no viewpoints often offered other contributions, with 25.4% of them providing new information and a majority offering some form of representation. Nevertheless, the amount of diversity within Daum's comment sections was consistently lower and many of these additional comment sections had a single comment with a diverse viewpoint,

which was rarer on Naver, SMH, and DM, so the result for that site provides a complicated context that resists a simple assessment.

**Table 23**

*Ratio of comment sections with new viewpoints out of total comment sections with comments*

Site	Week					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Daum	21/25	25/32	16/29	14/25	18/28	27/37
Naver	19/21	20/20	15/20	16/18	13/20	20/23
SMH	18/18	24/25	28/30	16/16	20/20	21/21
DM	44/45	38/38	38/39	42/43	43/43	39/39

Certain topics (as determined by headline focal objects) consistently received a larger number of comments and a higher diversity of viewpoints. Gonçalves (2018) found that topic presented an important factor in news commenting discussions, and these results support that claim. In all data sets, Covid-lockdown, testing and vaccine-related discussions were highly common (with multiple headlines per day every day) and drew many of the largest comment sections, which frequently had a moderate or high diversity of viewpoints – though Daum is a notable exception, as their highest viewpoint diversity sections were not Covid-related, despite Covid-related articles appearing across their data set. The one topic that led to the highest diversity of viewpoints at several points across all data sets was income and wages, which saw large comment sections with the most viewpoint diversity for at least one day on every site. These differences are notable because the topics, even between countries, broadly overlapped, but the resulting diversity of viewpoints on those topics did not. While news organisations were influencing the agenda of the conversations, the commenters determined how viewpoint diverse the comment sections were, and results varied widely [see Table 24].

**Table 24***Focal objects of highest viewpoint diversity comment sections*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Focal objects of highest viewpoint diversity sections</b>
SMH	Lockdowns, Qantas, income disparity, nurse pay, smoking health impacts
DM	Income disparity, immigration, lockdown, US politics, Taiwan, French policy, Cuban riots, Covid testing
Naver	Political scandal, vaccines, Covid, North Korea, wages, Japanese relations, Covid subsidy, crime rates
Daum	Election, income disparity, wages, credit cards, regional work, wages

While these comment section results have implications for news commenting broadly, the range of outcomes can only be viewed as a part of the media ecosystem when seen as a part of the news websites where they reside, which each have lesser and greater prominence in their distinct media ecosystems.

#### *Websites Hosting Viewpoints and Information*

For viewpoint diversity and as a source for new information, commenting offered some consistent contributions on each website, but the sites also diverged in consistent ways.

Regarding the contribution of information, the data suggests that the context which readers gain while reading comment sections below the majority of articles is balanced against the low number of informative comments in those sections [see Table 25]. Fewer comments present less information, but are also potentially missed by readers tuning in at a different time of the day (in active comment sections) or simply reading a smaller number of comments. While the scope of information varies, from in-depth historically grounded analysis to short matter of fact statements, no assessments are in broad use that assess information quality (an extremely fraught enterprise), and so I did not apply such a metric here. Readers in Australia and Korea can turn to the most popular comment-hosting websites and consistently find statements of new

information in comment sections that they would not otherwise have been exposed to, but only to limited extents.

**Table 25**

*Assessment of presence and prevalence of new information and diversity of viewpoints by site*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Information presence rating</b>	<b>Information prevalence rating</b>	<b>Diversity of viewpoint rating</b>
DM	High	Low	Moderate
SMH	High	Low	High
Daum	Moderate	Low	Low
Naver	High	Low	Moderate

Diverse viewpoints suffused the comment sections to varying extents, but all sites had a substantial number of high viewpoint diversity comment sections while few sections provided none. There was, however, a divide in this offering between media ecosystems. Serving Australia, DM and SMH comment sections were highly or moderately diverse in viewpoints – 76.5% of DM and 93.1% of SMH – though DM tended to be more moderate (44%) and SMH tended to be high (50%). Korean site Naver had results across the range from high diversity to absent, but a plurality (54.1%) were moderate or low. By contrast, Daum also featured a range of results, but the largest grouping was between low and absent (53.7%), and absent had the largest proportion of any level (29.4%). As a result, the outcomes for this category were led by SMH, with Daum placing lower [see Table 25].

Taken together, all websites provided more contributions to information and viewpoint diversity to an identifiable extent. The presence of comments generally portended that users would get access and exposure to views and information that differed from what was presented by the news organisation, and each of these organisations is a dominant player in the online news media market, which is increasingly the way citizens in both countries get their news. While these



were the most common contributions identified, they were not the only ways that news commenting was found to offer benefits for media pluralism.

### **Results for Representation of Gender, Region, and Minority Status**

The comments in this study had implications for several of the concerns of representation covered by the Media Pluralism Monitor (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) as well as the scholarship surrounding voice pluralism (Ellis & Goggin, 2015; A. Jakubowicz, 2019; Sainath, 2016): gender, region, minority status, and disability. This is an area that Klimkiewicz (2015, p. 82) ties to cultivating “a culture of tolerance, media pluralism and consequently, consolidation of democracy.” This part of media pluralism has been hard to pursue in practice and is a high risk area (Klimkiewicz, 2021), elevating the importance of news commenting’s discussed potential to draw in new voices (Canter, 2013; Meyer & Speakman, 2016).

However, the way this presented in news commenting was not as straightforward as in the forms of media already covered in the MPM. When a gender or minority group is represented in a televised broadcast or streaming video, for instance, its presence is immediately apparent – viewers can physically see that this person is presenting as a woman or as an ethnic minority; they may even be able to tell if the person has a disability. This transparency and self-disclosure not only mean the journalists’ backgrounds have visible representation, but also add credibility to the content they produce (Johnson & St. John Iii, 2021). Even for print stories such as those above the comments in this study, articles often feature a picture of the author and occasionally a brief biography. Radio personalities have identifiable voices with pitch and tone that audiences can associate with a gender, accents they can associate with a region, and they provide listeners with names and stories that situate the presenter in a particular personal background. While every detail of these media producers’ personal background and the demographics they represent may not be immediately knowable to all audiences at all times, they are, in many ways, highly visible. This visibility plays a role in not only extant representation, but

ongoing representation – as Price and Payne (2019) note of women in media: “You can’t be what you can’t see.”

By contrast, audiences have much more limited options to know whether commenters represent diverse backgrounds. Commenters do not present with any images at all. While most websites allow users to choose usernames (which includes, in DM’s case, self-described region), Naver does not even permit that. Nevertheless, there was extensive representation through these limited channels and that could be identified in several ways.

#### *Representation in Individual Comment Texts*

The first step to identifying this contribution to media pluralism is to be able to see it at the individual comment level; in order to know, for instance, whether comments are as male-dominated as the larger media ecosystem, assessors would first need to identify whether individual commenters were identifiably male, such as through gendered names (as done by Martin (2015)).

While gender self-identification could be seen in several forms, a highly prominent identifier is the use of names in the UIF. Most comment texts lack a form of self-reference outside of the UIF, but the use of gendered given names was extensive [See Table 26]. As DM comments were shorter, each visible comment section contained more usernames and a correspondingly high number of gendered names, though they featured extensively on SMH and Daum, as well. This is an important source of representation as people have been shown to be accustomed to and accurate at identifying gender through given names (Cassidy, Kelly, & Sharoni, 1999), a trend that has mostly continued online in social media (Tang, Ross, Saxena, & Chen, 2011). Even with coders instructed to hermeneutically disregard names a reasonable person would find ambiguous or unisex, this was the most common form of gender identification (note: Naver’s limited UIF did not make this kind of identification possible).

**Table 26***Gendered first names on Daily Mail, SMH, and Daum*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Daily Mail	GrannyCarla, Stella, madmike46
SMH	SteveP, MariaS, Maxwell
Daum	석영, 도현, 지혜♡

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021), The Sydney Morning Herald (2021), and Daum (2021)

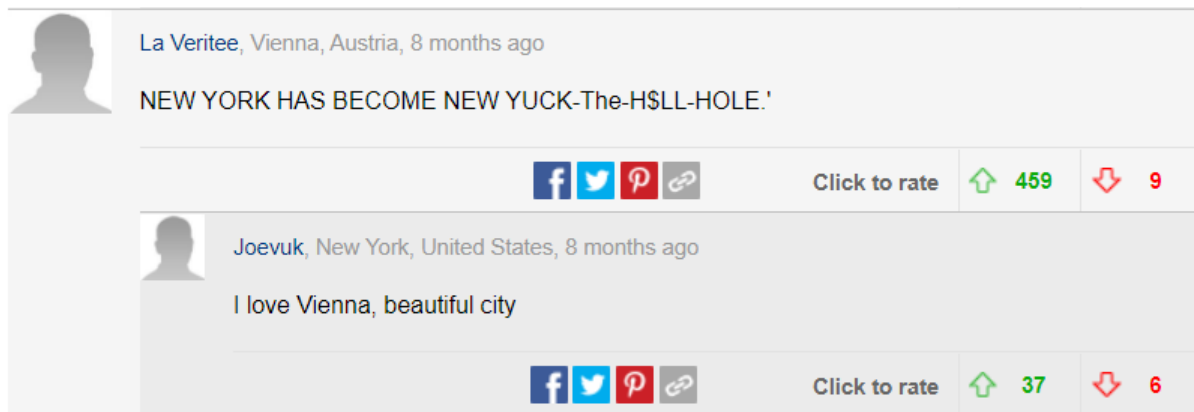
A more suggestive form of gender identification was when users referred to themselves with gendered titles, role descriptions, person nouns, or within the comment body [see Table 27], as these references were less ambiguous as a whole. Titles include the more generic “Mr.” and “Ms.” as well as royal titles like “King.” The role descriptions most often used were parental – specifically those relating to motherhood – but gendered nouns for jobs and positions were not uncommon, particularly, again, as references to royalty. Gendered person nouns provided a simple means of identification, as users would often refer to themselves as “guy,” “lady,” “boy” or “girl” in the UIF. In-comment identification was less common, though this is practical: the topic of the discussion is generally something or someone other than the commenters themselves. Nevertheless, commenters sometimes identify their gender through familial role descriptions, such as “son” or “mom”. Comment bodies were the only form of commenter identification available for Naver comments, though that was also exceedingly limited.

**Table 27***Forms of gender identification in comments*

<b>Gendered descriptions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Titles	Lord Kremnos, The Duke de Sussex, Mr Bob, Ms. Dashwood
Role descriptions	Ezraprincess, dramaqueen, working father here, RottieMom612, Surburbandad, 공주아빠,
Person nouns	U.S. Maleman, That girl, Superchick999, pikeguy, 텐디중년
In comment	Paying to die. Literally the stupidest 'habit' in the human race. Tax them to oblivion. From the son of chainsmoking parents who are still too dumb to realise how much money they waste and how much they stink.

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021), The Sydney Morning Herald (2021), and Daum (2021)

References to region saw more complex results that were more specific to the individual websites. These references played an important role in message content, where region provided context about views and information, as well as reception – commenters used region as an aspect of their inter-textual reference when responding to other commenters [see Figure 8]. These mentions typically placed commenters either in a capital city – particularly Sydney, Melbourne, or Brisbane – or in a vague and unidentifiable region, like “mytown”, complicating their contribution to representation of region. For DM, region placed commenters in locations across the globe, even under Australia-focused articles, again with a focus on metropolitan areas, though regions chosen were often fictitious.

**Figure 8***Reply engages with regional identification*

*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Commenters broadly presented their region in the same way, through the UIF – though this was more common for DM than anywhere else due to their dedicated space for commenter’s location. Conversely, many people interacting with DM comment sections identified as not being within Australia – these comments were excluded from regional representation and minority coding as they explicitly did not represent Australian minority groups. With the presence of that component, not only was region prominently visible in DM comment sections, it was present for the majority of comments in the majority of comment sections. SMH and Daum comments contained this information in the form of the chosen username [see Table 28], but this generally supplanted the potential for other forms of representation.

Table 28

*UIF indicating region*

Source of identification	Examples
SMH username	Rob Gynea Bay, Bomaderry, Life-long learner of Sydney
Daum username	포정해우-부산, 강서구, 서울
DM username	Louie Sydney, Seoul Survivors, Sydneygirlie
DM region UIF	Britozzie, Sydney, Australia, e.r, Melbourne, Australia, privatedancer, Mildura, Australia

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021), The Sydney Morning Herald (2021), and Daum (2021)

As with gender, commenters also revealed their region through the comment body, though the expressions used were more diverse and included elements of inter-textual reference. This presented in self-inclusion through pronouns, with people placing themselves as part of the group affected by the news with *we*, *us*, and *our* and using interactivity with previous texts as an antecedent. Some commenters state their region more directly, as with “I live in Sydney.” This is a way that commenters diverged substantively from the news organisations’ headlines. Commenters indicated belonging to and ownership for the affected regions (this is also visible in the way they choose regions as their usernames) [see Table 29]. Some commenters indicated regions where they were not, through phrasing such as *there* and *your*, but these statements had limited value for identifying the region commenters represent.

**Table 29***Intertextually indicating region in body text*

Content	Example
Headline	Berejiklian says NSW quarantine facility must be federal responsibility - The NSW government also announced plans for another mass vaccination centre to open in mid-July.
Comment body texts indicating region	<p>Only a matter of time and we will be forced to build a purposeful quarantine facility.</p> <hr/> <p>Help from Morrison? Even if covid is beaten which it won't be, there will eventually come another similar or horrific pandemic in the future. We need to be prepared this time. Good luck with that one Gladys 🇺🇸. Aloha...Take care.</p> <hr/> <p>Almost felt sorry for Gladys yesterday, (but I cant due to that pork and developer mates) standing in front of the disaster surprise demolition of peoples home announcement, anothe photo-op stuff u (with no one having thought this no great oppo for the peoples whose homes will be demolished) with ham fist, foot in mouth, PM standing over her saying how he wanted Victoria to open up (still hasnt learnt has he).I mean Gladys is looking weak, with her one seat majority, not able to drive a deal for a quarantine center as Merlino did in a masterful bit of politics, for Melbourne. But her weakness is ours. NSW is so exposed to another superspreader leak.</p>

*Note:* Example text drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021)

Ascertaining minority status through UIF and comment text proved to be much rarer and more fraught. This was also limited to the Australian dataset; only one comment in the entire Korean data set indicated minority status. Usernames were again the most common source, mostly through given names. Some usernames explicitly stated identification as minority or majority. However, these needed to be considered alongside the frequent occurrence of names being nonsensical strings of characters, references to famous and/or fictional characters with ethnic names, or apparent attempts at humour [see Table 30]. This was further problematized by whether a reasonable person would associate the name with a minority background for the commenter's location. In DM data sets, many users were posting from diverse international

locations, and their minority status within their own region is not categorically relevant to a study of the Australian media ecosystem.

**Table 30**

*Minority status identifiable and non-identifiable usernames*

Identification	Examples
Identifiable minority usernames	Chậu Vương Xi Mãng, InezS, wchenchou
Minority/majority status	ProudBlackRepublican, Agaydemocrat, AngloSaxonFella
Character strings	jih33; CnyTHuk; Eiaqulatzio, Europistan, Bhutan
Famous/fictional characters	Karl Pilkington II, DoctorZhivago, dobie300
Humour	Foratetoo Abn, JezzaInFlyoverLand, il gattopardo

*Note:* Example text drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Discussion of minority status within a comment was less complex but exceedingly rare. These instances also drew direct attention to the importance of their minority (or majority) status as part of the text, flagging the potential for a contribution to media pluralism:

Aussies want to travel to all destinations regardless of colour codes(red/green). Like I want to do an African Safari and visit my relatives. And I have taken the 1st jab, well AZ waiting for the borders to reopen. So why should I be stopped considering that Africa is not about to be become a green zone any time soon? (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)

While instances of minority and majority identification were rare, they far exceeded instances of disability representation. No users identified as being “blind, partially sighted, deaf, and hard of hearing,” the forms of disability referenced in the MPM due to their implications for media (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018). These descriptions could be simply stated or inferred in usernames or referred to in body texts, but that did not happen in any sample across the four websites over six weeks. Neither did commenters present other disabilities – no one self-







**Table 34***Rates of comments on SMH with forms of representation by sample*

SMH	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Gender	89	149	146	106	123	166	<b>779</b>
% of total	34.9%	40.5%	39.0%	39.7%	44.6%	56.8%	<b>42.5%</b>
Female	11	18	41	23	33	45	<b>171</b>
% of gender	12.4%	12.1%	28.1%	21.7%	26.8%	27.1%	<b>22.0%</b>
Region	16	23	18	21	33	44	<b>155</b>
% of total	6.3%	6.3%	4.8%	7.9%	12.0%	15.1%	<b>8.5%</b>
Minority	4	5	11	9	3	4	<b>36</b>
% of total	1.6%	1.4%	2.9%	3.4%	1.1%	1.4%	<b>2.0%</b>
Disability	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
% of total	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	<b>0.0%</b>

In every case, the amount of representation was consistent both by category and by site. There are practical considerations as to why these sites diverge – as discussed, DM offers a fuller UIF while Naver provides almost none – but these also coincide with and relate to the media ecosystems that the pairs of websites inhabit, which I discuss further in Chapter 9. However, the comment-level results do not tell the full story; these differences occurred in comment sections, which contained more and less diverse representation depending on the specific discussion.

#### *Comment Sections Presenting and Contextualising Representation*

Investigating collections of comments as a discussion is important on several levels. For one, individual instances of representation are not strongly indicative of a contribution if the comment section is otherwise dominated by a single group. Secondly, there is scope for some comment sections to feature extensive representation while others have none, as the distribution of contributions was not equally proportional across any of these sites. This section focuses on how the different results can be characterised at the comment-section level so that these concerns are accommodated as they relate to each public affairs issue discussion.

The most challenging representation, with the most diverse results, is that for gender. Comment sections sometimes featured only male representation or, rarely, only female representation, and a discussion dominated by one group is not categorically diverse. Adding to this complexity, a focus of measurements such as the MPM is the extent to which the historic male dominance of media is being disrupted so as to feature other voices, particularly those of women. While this investigation sought instances where commenters self-identified as gender non-binary or otherwise not fitting a male/female classification, no commenter in any data set did so. Consequently, this category of representation requires two approaches to framing the results – the presence of gender identification as well as the ratio of that identification.

In terms of amount of representation, a part of that classification is simple and covers a large number of comment sections – they simply had no gender identification at all. This happened even for websites on which gender representation is otherwise relatively high. These are rated as *none* for gender representation. The number of comments in these sections tends to be low – no more than 10 on any Australian site – but Naver sections were generally rated as none regardless of length (as high as 40 comments in one section). A *low* level is identified when less than a quarter of the comments in a section provide some form of identification, sometimes only one, but readers had some way of identifying the genders being represented by commenters. Examples include a comment section on DM with 28 comments but only three gendered, as well as one on Daum with 18 comments but only one gendered. Low representation in comment sections offers a different perspective from simply tallying up the number of gender representative commenters overall: even while a low number of comments overall offer representation, these comment sections relate viewpoints and information that are grounded in the personal background of the commenter, which may differ from the background of the journalists that wrote the article. Though Daum had only 11.8% of comments featuring gender, 67.2% of their comment sections featured at least one instance of this representation. Sections where over a quarter (moderate) and over half (high) of commenters have an identifiable gender

are more common at SMH and DM, where a clear majority of comment sections are moderate or higher [see Table 35].

**Table 35**

*Proportion of gender representation in comment sections by site*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
High	49 (19.8%)	42 (32.3%)	8 (4.5%)	0 (0%)
Moderate	147 (59.5%)	64 (49.2%)	12 (6.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Low	33 (13.4%)	20 (15.4%)	99 (56.3%)	2 (1.6%)
Absent	18 (7.3%)	4 (3.1%)	56 (31.8%)	119 (97.5%)

This data merely provides a context for the more relevant aspect of this contribution, which is the extent to which these comment sections are contributing to diverse representation. In Australia and Korea, that means adding female (or non-binary) voices to offset the historically dominating male representation in media systems. My investigation found comment sections that featured exclusively male voices, male dominance, balanced voices, female dominance, or exclusively female voices. Over half of comment sections where gender representation was present were male dominated or exclusively male. In the majority of cases where a reader was exposed to comments from an identifiably female commenter, that comment was accompanied by a larger or much larger number of identifiably male voices, sometimes with one female voice competing with 10-15 male voices. With few exceptions, female-dominated or exclusively female comment sections were short in length or featured little identifiable gender (five or fewer comments) – only DM had female dominated conversations that reached the 800-word limit. Balanced conversations were generally longer, rarely less than 10 comments and never less than five, but longer conversations were still more likely to be male dominated or exclusively male on all sites.

These comment sections provided two views towards the potential for contribution. On the one hand, comment sections that add female voices that were not present in the original media production have added female voices to public affairs discussions within the media ecosystem and done so in a way that makes those female commenters, to varying extents, visible. A clear majority of Australian comment sections do this, as do approximately a third of Daum comment sections. On the other hand, these commenters do not exist in isolation, and the ratio of male voices to female voices among commenters is skewed, often heavily, towards males in most sections, which reinforces existing imbalances within the larger media systems [see Table 36].

**Table 36**

*Presence and ratio of female representation in comment sections by site*

<b>Representation</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Sections with female commenters	200 (80.1%)	79 (60.8%)	53 (30.1%)	1 (0.8%)
Male dominated or exclusive	127 (51.4%)	103 (79.2%)	76 (43.2%)	3 (2.4%)
Balanced + female dominated	102 (41.3%)	23 (17.7%)	43 (24.4%)	0 (0%)

To an extent, the way region was represented within the comment sections suggested it was part of that media pluralism engine for generating diversity. Particularly with Covid-related comment sections, people from other regions often offered outsider perspectives on regional public health measures (the most common being NSW commenters discussing Victorian restrictions or the reverse). Consequently, some sections on DM and SMH had extensive presence of regional representation. By contrast, many sections on the same sites on the same day had no representation, often when a politician or company was the focus of the article. As a result, on the site with the highest rates of representation, DM, 38.9% of the sections had no regional representation among commenters, but also over a quarter of comment sections had high, with more than half of commenters indicating their region. This number increased

dramatically after the Covid lockdown measures were introduced in late June 2021: 37.2% of DM sections had high regional representation in the 30 June data set, compared to 13.2% just two weeks earlier. That same week on SMH also saw the highest rates of regional representation, but neither Daum nor Naver saw substantive regional representation in those weeks.

Across all data sets, the most common result was no regional representation within the comment section, followed by low (at least one but less than a quarter of commenters – often only one) [see Table 37]. By contrast, DM's UIF led to results across the board, and over half of their comment sections (61.1%) had low, moderate or high regional representation for Australians, despite the fact that the representation for most commenters was not included due to their international location.

**Table 37**

*Presence and proportion of regional representation in comment sections by site*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Present	151 (61.1%)	68 (52.3%)	13 (7.4%)	0 (0%)
Absent	96 (38.9%)	62 (47.7%)	163 (92.6%)	122 (100%)
High	62 (25.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Moderate	23 (9.3%)	6 (4.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Low	66 (26.7%)	62 (47.7%)	13 (7.4%)	0 (0%)

There was an internal consistency with minority representation in comment sections that necessitated a different metric from region and gender. Rather than focusing on the extent to which comment sections were suffused with the views of minority groups (though this would, on balance, be a substantive contribution to extant media diversity), this study focused on whether comment sections featured a minority voice at all. If these commenters are a small number of the overall commenters in the section, then that is proportionally consistent with their prevalence among the general public – but complete absence would not be.

Complete absence of minorities was nevertheless the most common result, however, by a considerable margin. Only SMH saw relatively frequent posting by identifiable minorities, with 19.2% of sections having some presence, sometimes multiple. This does paint a different picture than a simple tally of comments, as just 2% of SMH comments overall offered minority representation. Less than a tenth (7.7%) of DM's larger and more numerous comment sections had any presence (typically one per section, as only 0.4% of DM comments had minority representation). This is partially down to DM's international status – some commenters were of minority groups, but they did not represent Australian minority groups (though even this was rare). A single comment by a single commenter in the entire Korean data set indicated they were part of a minority group, on Daum [see Table 38], but none on Naver did so.

**Table 38**

*Presence of minority representation in comment sections by site*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Present	19 (7.7%)	25 (19.2%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)
Absent	228 (92.3%)	105 (80.8%)	175 (99.4%)	122 (100%)

For disability, there are no results to show – no individual comments self-indicated disability in any way, and so no comment sections included any level of representation of disabled people. This means that disabled people reading these comment sections cannot see evidence that a person in their shared position was making a contribution to these discussions.

#### *Representation Differences Across Websites*

The comment section-level data indicated that a wide range of outcomes were appearing beneath the stories on most of these sites. Crucially, however, the public of each media system was not getting an even sample of this range from their most visited news websites, which deviated from one another substantially.



The macro view of each site's gender representation demonstrates how this distribution of comment section outcomes has the effect of limiting news commenting's contribution to media pluralism [see Table 39]. DM and SMH provided ample opportunities for commenters' gender to be identified, but this identification mostly perpetuated existing gender imbalances (worse for SMH). Naver and Daum had even fewer comment sections with any representation, but the picture remains the same, that identifiably female presences are much less numerous than male presences. None of this is to say that female voices are not being heard – even the usernames quickly identified as male could actually be used by female commenters (and female commenters would have some reason to do so given the history of disproportionate abuse women receive in comment sections (Kwon & Cho, 2017; Meyer & Speakman, 2016)). The visibility was the concern here, for people of all genders to see themselves in these comment sections and to see that some of their concerns were being presented by someone like them. While three websites introduce a number of female voices through comment sections into discussions on public affairs issues that would not be present without, they also introduce a larger number of male voices. As noted in Chapter 9, this lacking representation can be tied to the websites' structures – while they ask for viewpoints and warn against issues of silencing speech, no website had structures or invited input to indicate representation, nor did they highlight content from diverse contributors.

**Table 39***Rating for presence and ratio of gender representation, region rating, minority rating, and disability rating by site*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Gender rating</b>	<b>Gender ratio</b>	<b>Region rating</b>	<b>Minority rating</b>	<b>Disability rating</b>
DM	Moderate	Male Dominated	Moderate	None	None
SMH	Moderate	Highly Male Dominated	Low	Low	None
Daum	Low	Male Dominated	None	None	None
Naver	None	Highly Male Dominated	None	None	None

Other categories saw lower results [see Table 39]. Regional results provided a starker contrast, but one with a clear division by nation. DM, with its mix of high, moderate, and low levels of regional representation marking the majority of its comment sections (61.1%), presents moderate levels of regional representation through its comments as a site. SMH, dominated by low levels or absent, is markedly low. At both Korean sites, less than 10% of comment sections have any commenter identifying their region, so these both fit the rating of none. Similarly, for minority status, only SMH presents consistent representation at any level, but even then, only a fifth of sections provide any insights, meriting only a low rating. DM, Daum, and Naver, with less than 10% of sections containing any representation in this regard, effectively offer none. As no disability representation was found, all sites are rated as none for this indicator. These rates of representation, the visibility of diverse groups, suggests a highly limited contribution, which is discussed and analysed further in Chapter 9.

### **Comments' broad contribution**

As shown in the explorations of diversity of viewpoints and information and of representation above, the collection of results for comments' benefits for media pluralism are mixed, and partially demonstrate a risk rather than a benefit due to the imbalance of male to

female voices perpetuating existing media pluralism risks. By enacting greater (but not complete) editorial independence, the contribution to diverse viewpoints and, to a lesser extent, information was mostly unequivocal. Often, the gist of a comment was explicitly to disagree with the organisation's view, and these contradictions shared the page with the organisation's production. This agonistic quality of most comment sections demonstrated a capacity to disrupt some of the disproportionate communicative power held by these highly dominant media organisations – a central concern for media pluralism that connects to multiple risk factors in the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) and other indicators and concerns for media pluralism (Trappel & Meier, 2022; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). The media organisations were positioned to exert their communicative power over these spaces by consistently setting the agenda and deciding on the topic of discussions – which commenters rarely deviated from – and deciding, on some websites, whether comment sections would be opened at all, but commenters also played decisive roles in whether, what, and how comments would appear.

Increasing the visibility and accessibility of women's participation in public discourse is in keeping with media pluralism goals, and many comment sections introduced female voices where otherwise none would be identifiable. Likewise, commenters' regional identification created a context for comments that the news articles typically lacked – commenters were in a position to provide personal witness to the public affairs issues that was grounded in their proximity and to claim ownership of and belonging in affected communities. However, comments also tended to exacerbate existing representation issues. Minorities were essentially invisible, people with disabilities more so. More male commenters could be seen coming in through the “open gates” than did women or non-binary groups, drawing into sharp question whether the gates are open or simply kept by a different group of men.

News commenting scholarship often focuses on news commenting's argumentative and vitriolic qualities (A. Anderson et al., 2014; Gonçalves, 2018; Rösner et al., 2016), which would indicate an aggressive approach to what Karppinen (2013) might describe as the process of

reconciling disagreements that is central to conceptions of deliberative democracy. While several populated comment sections offered no new viewpoints or information and even more had only a few, a majority of them provided heterogenous, viewpoint diverse content that brought multiple perspectives on the range of frame elements, describing new evaluations, problems, causes, and treatments. Sitting alongside traditional media that so often harkens to liberal pluralism and deliberative democracy (Flew et al., 2017; Karppinen, 2013), media organisation content accompanied by news commenting's divergent views and information from divergent groups can offer not just different frames of understanding and contextualising information but also visibility for the groups providing them – but only where comments are allowed and structurally cultivated.

In each case, for representation and for diversity of viewpoints and information, these results need to be considered with two crucial factors of their context: commenting's introduction of risks through silencing speech and phatic communication as well as the larger media ecosystem these comments inhabit. I consider these aspects in the following chapters.

## Chapter 8: Assessing the Risks in Comments

The previous chapter described the ways that the comment sections offered a supportive contribution towards media pluralism. However, there are also challenges and problematic content that can not only diminish the potential contributions but outweigh them. In this chapter, I focus on two forms of risk that place potentially detrimental content right next to the articles produced by journalists and media organisations: silencing speech and displacing quantities of phatic communication. The data here provides a picture of problems presenting through news commenting that are not inherent to the way comments are constituted but rather a product of the structures and people that present them, site by site, as well as the media ecosystem they inhabit. The site details and comment section approaches described in Chapter 7 outline this impactful context, but this chapter illustrates how these differing contexts have achieved divergent results for this negative potential.

### Silencing and Marginalising Views

The first category of risk I studied was the capacity of comments to introduce vitriol and “nasty” interactions (A. Anderson et al., 2014; Masullo et al., 2021). Interaction being the key concern here, my investigation was focused on comments that directed aggression at the journalist, news organisation, readers, or other potential commenters. Such speech could have the practical function of limiting the input of these other speakers (Meyer & Speakman, 2016; Van Duyn et al., 2021), which poses a clear danger to comments’ potential to contribute the perspectives, ideas and representation of these silenced groups.

Whether they were successful or compelling was beside the point. These speakers have implicitly engaged in anti-social behaviours that can have the effect of reducing social interaction and participation from the implicated person or group, and they were being given a platform by the comment section hosting them. Their silencing speech, as it presented, would not have been possible if the comment section did not exist. This extended beyond the comment section in

question because these commenters often targeted the news organisation and journalist or sources, which is a frequent issue confronting journalists (Gardiner, 2018).

### *Identifying Silencing Speech in Commenting Texts*

Silencing speech in this research encapsulates a specific risk by the way it infringes on the diversity of contributors as well as freedom of expression, but the way it presented in each case was diverse. While attempts to stifle other commenters or potential commenters were rare, they were also relatively easy to identify. Insults could be subtler, often appearing as matter-of-fact statements with a generalised group as a target, but they were directed at other contributors and potential contributors as well using both a second-person address and a generalised *you* directed at broad groups.

Most stifling speech incorporated an imperative or modal form directly with a stifling verb or verb phrase [see Table 40]. Imperatives included commands such as “Oh do shut up Piers.” and “Get over it.” but variations of “F- Off” were the most frequent (only on DM, where the most stifling speech was present). Among the modal forms, stifling comments often contained “should” or “need to,” but the accompanying noun was not always a direction to be silent, as in “Kevin Rudd should just simply disappear into the sunset and never be heard ever again” (Kevin Rudd was the source of the preceding article). Others denied a person or people the right to communicate. All were explicit in their desire for other communicators to stop talking.

**Table 40***Stifling constructs in sample comments*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Imperative	Crawl back into your little hole. Shut up yank. She's our Queen. Lol..as if the hillbilly Biden's have any decorum.
Modal	You aren't any owner, traditional or otherwise. I own my land and you are nothing to me. You can roll your land claim up and put it where a ferret couldn't find it. Kevin Rudd should just simply disappear into the sunset and never be heard ever again ..... he's yesterday's man ..... well and truly!!!!
Denial of rights	Ignore the troll. Who do you think you are? You didn't invent mail. You didn't even invent writing. You have no right to demand I learn anything about some obsolete culture. I have no interest in you and I won't accept you making demands of me. The arrogance and egotism is astounding.

*Note:* Example text drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021) and Daily Mail Australia (2021)

Stifling speech was sometimes directly accompanying insulting speech, though this was not a constant (“F- Off?” variations, as much as they were incontrovertibly aggressive, often lacked direct denigration of other communicators). Insulting speech, which was far more common, typically lacked an explicit attempt to stifle other contributors. Insults fell into several categories and, while the underlying sentiment varied, they shared a function of marginalising or debasing other speakers. Whether the insults were hurtful or effective is moot – there is no function for the underlying imputation apart from discouraging others from either contributing or listening. It is this function that is the focus, rather than the particulars of its expression. For instance, many commenters concluded replies with “idiot.” There is nothing in their speech indicating that the statement of “idiot” is a matter-of-fact statement striving to provide a description of practical reality. It does not correspond to community guidelines, whereby “idiot” would be a commonplace and collegial form of address.

There were only a few bases for denigration employed by insulting commenters [see Table 41]. The most common was related to competence – that the targeted person or group lacks the capacity to make a valuable contribution. While “idiot” addresses intellectual competence, other users attacked education, gullibility and naivety, physical strength, maturity, mental health, age (young and old), and even continence (a loose proxy for age and intellectual competence). Second to that was ideological affiliation, whereby certain ideologies were posited as anti-social, morally bankrupt, or part of a conspiracy to do harm. This included classic denigrations of “communists” and “socialists” (this was in both Australia and Korea) but also disposition towards public health and safety measures (masks and vaccines but also others), views of public spending and regulation, or simply party identity and broad political orientation. There were also insinuations of corruption, influence, and criminal activity. This was typically tied to sex or money, either that positions are predicated upon sexual and monetary favours or that people are engaged in illegal sexual activity (particularly paedophilia) or drug use. There were frequent assertions of specifically Chinese or Russian influence.

This ties in to the last broad category of demographic: socio-economic, gendered, ethnic or cultural vilification (age fits roughly into this category, as well, but that was typically used as a proxy for competence). Simply being Chinese was posited as debasement, as was being poor. Women were targeted for promiscuity, selfishness, and hypersensitivity. It was insinuated that being alive was a sufficient cause for vilification among some groups, and these groups were often the very groups of concern in media pluralism metrics of social inclusion. Beyond the validity of the statements, the assertions were typically baseless, as well, presenting as an alternative approach to expressing disagreement.



**Table 41***Types of insults found in comments*

Insult	Example
Competence	Check your pediatrics records to see how many times you were dropped on your head.
	Voters sure are dumb.
	Nicki, you are dangerously ignorant. That is simply rubbish. Please get an education and stop spreading nonsense.
Ideology	BRAINWASHED LEFTIES Your President SUCK. Shame to evil Democrats.
	Cue the trolls, the shock jock dependent, the SKY and 2GB followers, the gullible and easily led. It must be infuriating for the anti-science crew to see the transition happening, despite their yelling and gnashing of teeth.
	There's a few filthy commies in the comment section again
Corruption	Wow, are you a paid up member of the CCP?
	Are you on crack? We're talking about Joe Biden here.
	Yes ... the "fight is coming" because Trump has radicalized all of you #TrumperTrash individuals with his lies!!! I can wait to see you all slaughtered in the streets ... what are you waiting for??? Grab your guns and go!!!
Demographic	WHY ARE WE STILL LETTING THESE DIRTY GRUBS INTO OUR COUNTRY FROM A DISEASE RIDDEN PLACE????? [India]
	Guys do stupid things like murder to please crazy females
	Women and spatial awareness loool

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

As can be seen above, four basic structures were used for these insults. Name-calling was especially common for ideological insults, though technically some of the ethnic vilification was name-calling as well, since the author had no way of knowing the communicators' background. Insinuations were often masked as questions, but the questions are rhetorical, incongruent with the conversation and baseless. In the example above – “Are you on crack?” – none of the previous commenters discussed physical and mental health impacts of addiction to a controlled

substance. Imperatives were used to situate other communicators with certain characteristics (“Check your paediatrics [sic] record [...]” is an insinuation that there is cause to believe a communicator has cognitive or intellectual impairment). Finally, matter-of-fact statements were used to create associations between targeted groups and negative portrayals.

In some of these cases, commenters were not targeting other communicators in the comment section or audience directly. However, by making denigrating generalisations about broad demographics, they were implicating large groups of potential communicators – approximately half of the public could be included in statements that attack women, for instance, and they are identifiably present in the commenting population on the site and in the comment section where these generalisations are stated. This devalues their contribution and, according to Meyer and Speakman (2016), makes them disinclined to participate, as well as impacting on the journalists and their sources (Gardiner, 2018). While the commentary sometimes accompanies viewpoints or representation, the contributions were only predicated on their insults and stifling speech of the public and other commenters in one instance: insults and stifling speech on articles written by public figures. Insults and stifling speech directed at public figures were common across samples, but there were no indications that these public figures were interacting with the comment sections studied, as they did not post in the comment section or write the articles, so these were not coded as silencing.

On the whole, the presence of directly stifling speech across the sites was exceedingly rare with one exception, and the differences remained mostly consistent across the samples [see Table 42].

**Table 42***Number and proportion of comments with stifling speech by site and sample*

Site	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
DM	3	4	3	3	3	3	<b>19</b>
% of total	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	<b>0.3%</b>
SMH	0	0	1	0	1	0	<b>2</b>
% of total	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	<b>0.1%</b>
Daum	0	1	0	0	0	2	<b>3</b>
% of total	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	<b>0.1%</b>
Naver	0	1	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
% of total	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	<b>0.0%</b>

Conversely, insulting speech had a more widespread presence, particularly on DM, though it was still rare on the other sites, as shown in Table 43. Multiple days of sample on all of SMH, Daum, and Naver had zero instances of insulting speech within the sampled sections.

**Table 43***Number and proportion of comments with insulting speech by site and sample*

Site	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
DM	59	58	57	36	43	51	<b>304</b>
% of total	5.9%	6.8%	6.9%	3.4%	3.7%	5.3%	<b>5.2%</b>
SMH	3	0	0	1	5	1	<b>10</b>
% of total	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	1.8%	0.3%	<b>0.5%</b>
Daum	0	1	0	1	0	1	<b>3</b>
% of total	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%	<b>0.1%</b>
Naver	1	6	0	0	1	1	<b>9</b>
% of total	0.2%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	<b>0.4%</b>

*The Comment Sections as Sites of Silencing Speech*

As I found for the contributions covered in Chapter 7, the results tell a different story at the level of comment sections. Particularly with insult speech, negative broad generalisations can target a large portion of the audience with just a single comment in a comment section with many other comments. Conversely, even on a day with a relatively high number of these comments, there are cases where all of them occurred in just one comment section.

Even on the most affected site (DM), stifling speech was relatively rare by comment section – some sites went without them entirely for several days of the sample. Further, these comments tended to be targeting individuals, often individual commenters, rather than broad demographics, which implicates a smaller portion of the potential commenters and readers. However, their intention to prevent others from communicating or being heard was also clearer and not incidental; their function was clearly counter to further contribution and discussion. Consequently, stifling by comment section was gauged as being *present* or *absent* rather than

measured by their proportion of the comment sections, which was low in every case. Predictably, DM had the highest portion of comment sections containing stifling speech (5.7%) [see Table 44]. Daum and SMH saw its presence in 1.7% and 1.5% of their comment sections versus Naver's 0.8%, but this was only a difference of 1 comment section overall.

**Table 44**

*Presence of stifling in comment sections by site*

<b>Stifling in sections</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Present	14 (5.7%)	2 (1.5%)	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.8%)
Absent	233 (94.3%)	128 (98.5%)	173 (98.3%)	121 (99.2%)

Stifling speech instances were apparently self-limiting. Not only were they typically engaging the journalists or sources rather than other commenters (as in “Oh do shut up Piers”), but they also generally provided little to discuss. When Yes\_Because responded to noface with “@noface climb back into your rat hole,” that marked the end of the exchange. That the stifling speech was often directed at journalists and sources, however, has relevance to the finding that journalists, sources, and news organisation staff were almost entirely absent across the breadth of sections in the sample. Journalists told Gardiner (2018) that these participatory spaces portended “terrible” interactions and abuse; commenters directing more of the “Shut up.” and “F- off!” comments at the journalists and their sources provides a context for this absence.

By contrast, insult speech was common enough to reach higher than low levels in some sections on some sites, though most sections had none across all sites on most days. This kind of speech was generally restricted to large comment sections with on average shorter comments – only four comment sections containing insults had less than 15 comments across all sites. DM contained by far the most, and a majority of their comment sections contained insulting speech on two days of the sample (52.6% and 51.2%). By contrast, the other Australian site, with its pre-moderating team, saw only 3.8% of their comment sections containing insults overall. While

both Naver and Daum run “safety bots,” Naver saw more insults (4.9% vs 1.7%), but again this appears to correlate to comment counts and lengths; Naver had 19.8 comments per section on average to Daum’s 11.9, with shorter comments with 13.7 words per comment compared to 15. Apart from DM, however, the number of sections with insults were exceedingly small overall [see Table 45].

**Table 45**

*Presence and prevalence of insulting speech in comment sections by site*

<b>Insulting in sections</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
Moderate	4 (1.6%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Low	109 (44.1%)	4 (3.1%)	3 (1.7%)	6 (4.9%)
Absent	134 (54.3%)	125 (96.2%)	173 (98.3%)	116 (95.1%)

By contrast with stifling statements, insulting speech often happened in consecution.

This can be seen in the following exchange:

[Commenter]: “Wait a minute ... I thought all of the idiot liberals were lining up to get the vaccine. Why is their vaccination rate so low?”

[Reply]: “You must be an idiot if you think everyone is Liberal. Why bring Politics into a Health issue. So you dont want to be vaccinated , your right, it has nothing to do with your Political leanings . If you die you die.” (Daily Mail Australia, 2021)

The first insult was a broad demographic insult of an ideological group based on competence.

The second was a directed insult in response, one that mirrors the insult. In these cases, insults

apparently invited additional comments. Exchanges of insult speech were typically representing

widespread conflicting political dispositions, wherein commenters, as those above, ascribe

incompetence to people holding contrasting views. However, they did not broadly elicit

contributions. Most insults received no responses and did not provide diverse or any viewpoints.

No respondents corrected or conflicted with the several statements denigrating women or

minority groups. Overall, the presence of insulting speech in a comment section did not lead to contributions to balance their risks to freedom of expression, but they did occasion an increase in phatic communication or further stifling and insulting speech.

### *Silencing at the Layer of News Sites*

Addressing the significance of this silencing speech is partially a fraught venture – no threshold has been proposed for what is an affecting level of silencing speech of either form. Rösner et al. (2016) found that even a single hostile comment can impact reader perceptions, and these comments contribute to the sense that comment sections can be hostile spaces for potential contributors (Meyer & Speakman, 2016) and journalists (Gardiner, 2018). Simultaneously, for three of the sites studied, the classification for the incidence of this kind of content was relatively straightforward: negligible. On both of Korea's most visited online news sites and on one of Australia's – SMH – the inclusion of comments resulted in a risk classification of *none* for stifling speech and insults. In each case, much less than 10% of comment sections contain language that functions to silence the journalist, sources, or other potential commenters. Similarly, though there is more insult speech, still less than 10% of comment sections on these sites contain language that marginalises, diminishes, or otherwise excludes the value of the journalist, sources or other potential commenters as participants in the discussion. In each case, there are active and visible attempts to reduce and combat this risk that could otherwise be introduced through the inclusion of comment sections.

The challenge is in assessing the level of risk to media pluralism presented by DM. In every day of the sample, DM comment sections contained speech that actively discouraged individuals or groups from voicing their views of public affairs issues. Further, almost half of all sections contained speech that acted to marginalise journalists, sources, or potential commentators, with each of these being targeted at some point and a majority of sections doing so on some days. This means that up to half of DM comment sections introduced some form of discouragement for participation in public discussion that would not be present if these

comment sections were not open. These were not isolated comments, either; a majority of cases (66.7%) saw more than one comment with insulting or stifling speech per implicated comment section.

Taken together, these results suggest that stifling speech is a relatively uncommon occurrence in both Australia's and Korea's most visible comment sections, introducing no appreciable risk to their media pluralism. While this is also mostly true of the presence of insulting speech, there is a clear exception in DM where this speech is relatively common [see Table 46].

**Table 46**

*Level of stifling and insulting speech in comment sections by site*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Stifling</b>	<b>Insult</b>
DM	None	Moderate
SMH	None	None
Daum	None	None
Naver	None	None

This is noteworthy for key reasons outlined in the site descriptions from Chapter 7 – these websites have different structures and operate in different contexts. Of the four, DM applied the lowest apparent level of moderation, frequently noting that some comment sections were unmoderated. It also had no warnings or instructions to avoid silencing speech apart from a link to the guidelines. By contrast, Naver, Daum, and SMH had visible elements (as well as implicit policies and tools) to combat silencing speech and saw commensurately little presence of it. This variability is a key characteristic that I set out to capture, as it indicates the ways that news commenting can present distinctly on the most visible sites in the media ecosystem. It has implications for the contributions of individual sites' news commenting to media pluralism, as the most prominent sites can distinctly pose greater or lesser risks for both the freedom of



expression and rights of access to information as well as social inclusiveness by threatening and excluding diverse contributions and contributors.

### **The Boon and Bane of Phatic Commentary**

Phatic communication's fundamental role in constituting and structuring these online discussions should not be understated. While commenters can present viewpoints and insults, they frequently just presented socially orientated content like "Well said" and jokes, or even just "Hi" alongside feedback and questions. The same research that suggests silencing speech is a concern also indicates that participation is affected by how welcoming the comment sections are as spaces for discussion (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), and phatic communication is the language that enables the community to identify itself and set the rules of communication (Miller, 2008). Nevertheless, the ways that it presents as repetitious, redundant, or otherwise counterproductive content (Sarjanoja et al., 2013) is what made it present as a risk in these comment sections, pushing out viewpoints and ideas that would otherwise be visible.

#### *Identifying Phatic Content in Non-Contributing Comments*

The phatic communication found in these samples did not always preclude perspectives or information. Often, they were simple, short statements of interaction with previous statements or the article that were attached to larger statements providing contributing content. In several cases, explicitly phatic content, such as questions, were indirect expressions of perspective or even information (typically through rhetorical questions) [see Table 47]. Unlike silencing speech, which presented a risk even while offering such contributions, phatic content alongside viewpoints and information actually extends the benefit of the content, as comment readers can partake of the contributions alongside this socially cohesive content, which can provide some of the humour and entertainment that they often seek from these sections (Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). Such comments were not coded as phatic risks and instead contributed to diversity of viewpoints or information.

**Table 47**

*Phatic content with contributions to viewpoints or information that were excluded from phatic communication coding*

<b>Type of phatic content</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Phatic statements with viewpoints and information	Yeah, these are people who saves lives - yeah, that's appalling. Incorrect, the US travel guidance includes vaccines authorised for emergency use by the WHO such as AZ. I know only of a problem with AZ produced in India but unsure whether this has been resolved already.
Questions that contain or infer viewpoints and information	How terrible How long until someone calls for Australia to follow suit immediately despite our pitifully low vaccination rate?

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021) and The Sydney Morning Herald (2021)

Conversely, some content was flagged as a phatic communication risk that could have broader value as feedback or entertainment but was nevertheless focused on the process and context of communication rather than the discussion of public affairs issues. For instance, in many cases, commenters were discussing the journalist or organisation, applying frames and even information to situate it as a part of the conversation. While these commenters were providing perspectives and information, their input was displacing opportunities for perspectives and information on the public affairs issue, a discussion that their comment did not take further. Additionally, this form of phatic communication was sometimes only subtly different from silencing speech, intending to debase the value of the platform or encourage readers to ignore it, even if they were not implicating an individual or group.

Other comments expressed approval of news organisations and journalists, but still lacked a perspective or information for the discussion. Numerous commenters made requests for information, both from journalists and from the commenting community. Unlike the rhetorical examples above, these appeared to be genuine requests for information from the

journalist, source, or commenting community, but they did not contain a perspective or information in themselves, and they generally received no response [see Table 48].

**Table 48**

*Phatic feedback with no contribution to viewpoints or information for the public affairs discussion*

Types of phatic feedback	Examples
Commenting on article/journalist/news organisation	‘So you deleted my very succinct comment DM. Not surprised.’
	‘Very good to read a measured, scientific opinion on this particular issue. A front-page print version would be a great thing for reporting balance.’
	Spelling error in the headline DM
Request for further information	Why? / 왜?
	So can people swap vaccines after their first jab in Australia? Can people have 2x AZ then request Pfizer if they age qualify?
	JEEP JOCKEY Have they retested it ?

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021), Daily Mail Australia (2021), Daum (2021), and Naver News (2021).

The most common form of phatic communication, however, was to provide a personal reaction to the news or other commenters. Despite comments’ aforementioned reputation for vitriolic speech (Gardiner, 2018; Ksiazek, 2015), the most common of these were expressions of agreement or shared distaste, responses that could dominate comment sections on some topics and demonstrate the role of phatic communication for aligning/disaligning contributors to participatory media with groups and ideologies (Sarjanoja et al., 2013). An expression of disagreement has the potential to provide an alternate perspective, particularly if it is disagreeing with the article: on the page where the article has framed an issue with a particular context and sensibility, a commenter has said that a different perspective is more compelling. However, in many cases this disagreement was not elaborated upon and was presented after others had already expressed disagreement, thereby becoming further redundant and repetitious content

that pushed competing perspectives and information out of view. These inter-textual personal reactions also occurred alongside other comments or expressed a general sense of the comment section rather than the public affairs issue [see Table 49].

**Table 49**

*Phatic comments providing inter-textual personal reactions to prior content with redundant or no viewpoints*

<b>Reaction reference</b>	<b>Antecedent content</b>	<b>Reaction comments</b>
Article headline	Indigenous woman urges Aussies to make a simple change to the way they send mail to educate the country about Aboriginal history - Sydney business owner Amelia Rose, is calling on Australia Post customers to make a radical change in the way we send packages, so it's more inclusive to First Nation's peoples.	<b>Really?.....don't think so</b> <b>Enough already - Go away!</b> <b>Not a chance</b>
Prior comment	I would plough the babes in pic 1	<b>Would definitely be smashing their like buttons.</b>
Comment section	[all preceding comments]	<b>13% comments were all over the place</b>

*Note:* Example texts drawn from Daily Mail Australia (2021)

In addition, a large cohort of commenters focused on attempting or responding to humour. Typically, the humour revolved around exaggeration, as in “He is still planning a plan about planning to plan a future plan,” though there were also cases of stereotyping – “Girls, methinks street corners, dive bars and strip joints are in your future.” That the majority of these attempts did not receive a response was not apparently a concern, as the authors often laughed at their own contribution: “lol, trump wears a diaper.” In some cases, the community responded with “lol” or “ㄟ ㄟ ㄟ” (onomatopoeia for laughing). This humour or these reactions were only marked as phatic communication risks if they did not accompany new viewpoints or information.

Finally, comments that were reactions or interactions with other commenters, the journalist, sources, or the news organisations that repeated prior framing and information were also marked as phatic. This was common on articles relating to vaccines, where users would repeat concerns about the lack of vaccines or a dislike of lockdowns and masks that had already been mentioned in the comment section or headline. However, these were only counted as phatic if they contained some element of phatic communication, as well, as in “This is an excellent idea, and every state should be doing this”, where the commenter was explicitly addressing previous communication and communicators. This repetition and redundancy generally occurred in longer comment sections and was highest in sections with the highest number of comments.

While phatic communication is not a direct risk for media pluralism in the way that silencing speech is, it was also far more prevalent on all sites [see Table 50]. In the majority of samples across the sites, this phatic communication had greater prevalence than any other metric apart from viewpoints and gender. This indicates that the phatic back-and-forth commentary among commenters and between commenters and the journalists/sources had an impact on what users could see. Further, the range of results (between 7.4% and 23.8%, depending on the site) demonstrated that this impact was variable from site to site and day to day. Crucially, however, this phatic speech occurred at different concentrations from section to section.

**Table 50***Number and proportion of phatic comments by site and sample*

Site	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
DM	408	264	167	217	202	134	<b>1392</b>
% of total	40.8%	30.8%	20.2%	20.7%	17.3%	14.0%	<b>23.8%</b>
SMH	56	77	90	46	51	76	<b>396</b>
% of total	22.0%	20.9%	24.1%	17.2%	18.5%	26.0%	<b>21.6%</b>
Daum	46	43	26	21	20	41	<b>197</b>
% of total	19.1%	9.7%	8.2%	8.0%	5.7%	7.7%	<b>9.2%</b>
Naver	35	48	19	27	21	25	<b>175</b>
% of total	7.6%	10.2%	6.5%	6.7%	6.5%	5.9%	<b>7.4%</b>

*Phatic Comment Impacts on Comment Sections*

As with other metrics, the presence of phatic communication was substantially higher from section to section than from comment to comment, but, in this case, the section-by-section results took on the most importance. As shown above, phatic communication often has its own value, so the simple fact of its presence is not indicative of a risk. The key issue with it, rather, is displacement: whether the prevalence of phatic communication has displaced opportunities for new viewpoints, additional information, or new diverse voices. Without this, phatic communication has room to be a welcome addition. I consequently considered the data for phatic communication from two angles. One was to identify how prevalent it was in general – whether it was appearing at higher and lower levels from one section to another. The second was to identify if, through the length of the comment section or, in Daum’s case, due to the formatting and algorithm, it could potentially have been displacing contributions within the comment section.

This was particularly a concern because phatic comments frequently coincided, with sometimes long stretches of phatic comments appearing consecutively [see Figure 9]. This could see as many as 30 phatic comments interrupted by only two viewpoints and no information in a single comment section, with up to seven phatic comments in a single section being from the same commenter. As can be seen below, phatic comments often led to other phatic contents – particularly in the case of jokes and insulting speech. For these stretches, not only were there no competing viewpoints or new information, but readers had to read through sometimes long stretches of phatic interaction to reach what viewpoints and information were presented.

Figure 9

*Consecutive phatic comments in a DM comment section*



*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Daily Mail Australia (2021).

Phatic communication was present in the majority of comment sections on every site, regardless of whether they used filters, sorting algorithms, pre-moderation, or post-moderation. While low was the most common rating, there was generally more than one comment even in these sections. DM had more high and moderate concentrations of phatic communication, which corresponded with their higher number of phatic comments overall, but every site had a number of both high and moderate results [see Table 51]. High phatic content sections were not



generally long or full – they were labelled as high because over 50% of the comments were phatic. While some sections had many more phatic comments that made a smaller proportion of the section, the smaller high-phatic-content sections were problematic because most of the comment section on the article was taken up by comments that did not make contributions. Moderate comment sections, by contrast, were more common and generally longer, as highly active comment sections tended to see more repetition and redundancy as the comment thread grew.

**Table 51**

*Proportion of phatic comments in sections by site*

<b>Proportion</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SMH</b>	<b>Daum</b>	<b>Naver</b>
High	17 (6.9%)	7 (5.4%)	10 (5.7%)	4 (3.3%)
Moderate	56 (22.7%)	30 (23.1%)	7 (4.0%)	7 (5.7%)
Low	127 (51.4%)	67 (51.5%)	73 (41.5%)	60 (49.2%)
Absent	47 (19%)	26 (20%)	84 (47.7%)	49 (40.2%)

More important is the rate at which these comments displaced contributions, however, and that data was less consistent across the samples. While phatic communication was widespread, it often had limited impact on the accessibility of contributions. This is particularly true of smaller comment sections where there are comparatively fewer comments to see, less than the 800 words of comments I used as the guideline for data collection. In cases where audiences read as much of comments as they had the preceding article, they would have been able to see the range of perspectives and information as well as the phatic communication with its own potential benefits. In some limited cases, comment sections that exceeded the 800 limit had no phatic communication, as well, for which no displacement was possible. These scenarios lacked some of the risk posed by high levels of phatic communication.

Phatic displacement was common across the data set, but there was a great deal of variability across the sites and dates [see Table 52]. While phatic communication was non-displacing overall on Naver and Daum, both sites had days where phatic communication was highly displacing and posed a risk in over a third of the comment sections on the site, as well as other days where it was present in only approximately 10% of sections. By contrast, DM was highly consistent in that phatic communication consistently competed for space with other comments in their frequently extensive comment sections. Phatic commentary was highly displacing overall (56.3%) and there was only one day in the sample when phatic displacement did not occur in the majority of comment sections on the site. SMH was the most mixed. It saw displacement in 50% of comment sections, but the individual days tell a more complex story.

The Australian dataset presented a distinct phenomenon in this regard – phatic communication occurred heavily in lockdown-related comment sections, which also tended to have the largest number of comments (Korea did not experience a lockdown during the time of data collection). Prior to the lockdown at the end of June, phatic communication occurred and displaced at lower rates, but then rose progressively as the lockdown wore on for both SMH and DM. A crucial note here is SMH's pre-moderation system: SMH's high numbers of phatic comments on these days and in these sections were directly approved by its moderation teams. Similarly of note is that DM also had highly phatic comment sections dedicated to Australia's growing case numbers even though they sit on the front page alongside numerous international news articles about countries that were not facing a change in their public health response. By contrast, the relatively high displacement characterising early Daum and Naver samples related to a range of issues (with a focus on Covid and politics), but many of these instances of displacement involved limited displacement (as little as a single comment) and neither exceeded the displacement of DM or SMH in the respective sample.

**Table 52***Phatic displacement in comment sections by site and sample*

Site	Week						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
DM	20	20	22	24	29	24	<b>139</b>
% of total	44.4%	52.6%	56.4%	55.8%	67.4%	61.5%	<b>56.3%</b>
SMH	8	10	13	9	12	13	<b>65</b>
% of total	44.4%	40.0%	43.3%	56.3%	60.0%	61.9%	<b>50.0%</b>
Daum	11	8	5	5	3	9	<b>41</b>
% of total	44.0%	25.0%	17.2%	20.0%	10.7%	24.3%	<b>23.3%</b>
Naver	7	7	3	3	2	5	<b>27</b>
% of total	33.3%	35.0%	15.0%	16.7%	10.0%	21.7%	<b>22.1%</b>

*Phatic Communication and Displacement Across the News Sites*

The results overall for each site provided a sense that these constitutive comments that contribute to the formation of commenting communities and provide feedback to news organisations do compete for space with the potential comments that provide other contributions to media pluralism and to discussions on public affairs issues. However, each site saw this happening at different rates and in different ways. This resulted in distinct levels of risk from phatic communication in comments in each of the Australian and Korean media ecosystems. Most importantly, the divergent results indicated that phatic communication is not an inevitable or intrinsic challenge for comments' contributions to media pluralism; rather, the contexts and structures surrounding these comment sections impacts the presence of the risk.

This was most apparent in Australia's chronologically sorted comments. Without sorting for popularity, highlighting certain comments, or algorithmically filtering others, non-contributing phatic communication often competed for space with diverse viewpoints and

information. Nevertheless, SMH saw substantially less of this risk than did DM. Both sites had a moderate amount of phatic communication, with phatic commentary on 80% or more of comment sections, over a third of which was moderate or higher. Conversely, DM had a high amount of displacement overall and on all but one day of the data set. SMH, by contrast, had a moderate amount of displacement overall [see Table 53].

Korean sites Naver and Daum had lower results for both of these, but their results were not identical. On both sites, phatic communication was present in a majority of comment sections, more so for Naver (59.8% vs 52.3%), though the levels were rarely above low in either case. However, Daum's algorithm chooses sets of comments to display on highly active comment sections, and a higher percentage of their comment sections were affected by phatic displacement despite the comments being less common overall. This means the algorithm was selecting phatic comments instead of other potential contributions. Still, phatic displacement was ultimately low on both sites [see Table 53].

**Table 53**

*Rating for phatic communication and displacement by site*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Proportion phatic</b>	<b>Phatic displacement</b>
DM	Moderate	High
SMH	Moderate	Moderate
Daum	Low	Low
Naver	Low	Low

### **New Channels With New Risks**

The risks I presented in this chapter are given particular attention because they are so specifically attached to the addition of comments. While traditional media has long had gatekeeping structures (Bruns, 2003; Singer et al., 2011) that select some voices over others (Masini et al., 2018), the risks described in this chapter outline the structure of new kinds of gates

that are intrinsic to features of web 2.0 in general and comments in particular. Bruns (2012) emphasises the ways that participatory media increases the breadth of people who have a platform to speak, but comment sections crowded with phatic discussions (Lomborg, 2012; Miller, 2008; Sarjanoja et al., 2013) or dominated by vitriolic (Masullo et al., 2021) or even threatening (Chua, 2009; Gardiner, 2018) comments had implications for who can participate and whether their viewpoints and information will be heard.

The strong divergence in results for silencing speech indicate that *risk factor* has an application here. Through their contexts and systems, some sites are able to marginalise and limit silencing speech much more effectively than others. This shows that silencing speech is not an integral part of commenting itself, confirming findings by Huang (2016) that news organisations have found ways to effectively mitigate its potential. These silencing comments have a much more visible presence in one media ecosystem, but they do not appear to accompany a greater diversity of viewpoints or information, so an assessment of their presence can provide an understanding of the distinct news commenting appearing most visibly in an individual media ecosystem as a result of the context provided by its most prominent websites.

By contrast, phatic communication did appear to be more intrinsic to the presence of comments – within limits. Phatic communication carries its own value and clearly plays a role in the formation and development of comment sections given its more ubiquitous presence, as is the case in other participatory spaces (Miller, 2008; Sarjanoja et al., 2013). Further, many forms of phatic communication accompanied other valuable contributions to information and viewpoints. However, the ubiquitous presence identified in this chapter was specifically for those comments that did not provide these other contributions, with an emphasis on these comments' capacity to displace valuable content.

The next chapter draws these results together to consider whether the news commenting offered in these media ecosystems ultimately proves a contribution to media pluralism on balance. I then align this contribution to the respective media ecosystems as covered in Chapter

4 to consider whether these sites include news commenting to the benefit or detriment of their media ecosystems, or if news commenting simply exacerbates existing trends.

## Chapter 9: Contribution and Risk in the Ecosystem

The final concern of this project is to connect the results and the complex concepts of media pluralism, news commenting, and media ecosystems. In this chapter, I use the data shown in Chapters 7 and 8 to highlight the ways that these interactive features provide, and fail to provide, contributions to media pluralism as well as to weigh those against the risks that commenting uniquely poses.

I spread this analysis across three parts. The first revisits the concepts of media pluralism and news commenting in the media ecosystem explored in Chapters 2 and 3 to tie the concepts to the results. I then show how the differences in the contributions are situated in the distinct media ecosystems of Korea and Australia. This goes beyond outlining theoretical benefits to appraise whether comments provide a complement, detriment, or continuation of the media ecosystems they inhabit (as outlined in Chapter 4). Finally, I discuss how the results can answer the research questions guiding the project.

### **Balancing Limited Contributions With Minimal Risks**

While the results were always going to be relevant to the news commenting concepts discussed in Chapter 2, the ties to media pluralism and media ecosystems analysis are more nuanced and complex. Not all media pluralism indicators discussed by Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) or used in the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) were directly relevant to the results, and the comments themselves demonstrated that their role in the media ecosystem was diverse and contested. Juxtaposing the literature with the results both illustrates and problematises the concepts that provided the foundation and approach to this research.

### *Seeing News Commenting as Distinct and Meaningful Content*

A key distinction between this research and the wide range of news commenting literature is the ways that it eschewed many of the conceptual frameworks guiding past studies in lieu of a conceptualisation of these comments as another part of the media environment surrounding the public as they engage with an increasingly mediatised society. In Chapter 2, I

surveyed the literature describing news commenting for its associations with journalism (Domingo, 2008; Koskie, 2018; Wolfgang, 2021), discussion and the public sphere (Kangaspunta, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2011; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), public views (Callaghan et al., 2021) and the conditions of media production (Gardiner, 2018; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Meltzer, 2015). This investigation, however, placed the focus on a specific understanding, in line with Morrison (2017) and Baden and Springer (2014): that news commenting presents impactful content to the public that is a part of their media ecosystem. While not inseparable from the journalistic production they accompany, these comments provided their own narratives, interpretations, and evidence to readers. My study strove to accommodate that commenters and comment readers have often not viewed the accompanying journalistic production in full or at all (Grut, 2017; Stroud et al., 2016), elevating the importance of commenting texts as a vehicle for information, viewpoints, and representation – as well as new risks [see Table 54 and Table 55].

**Table 54**

*Summary of contributions*

<b>Site</b>	<b>IPs</b>	<b>IPv</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>GR</b>
DM	High	Low	Mod	Mod	Mod	None	None	MD
SMH	High	Low	High	Mod	Low	Low	None	HMD
Daum	Mod	Low	Low	Low	None	None	None	MD
Naver	High	Low	Mod	None	None	None	None	HMD

*Note:* IPs = Information Presence, IPv = Information Prevalence, V = diversity of Viewpoints,

G = Gender, R = Region, M = Minority, D = Disability; GR = Gender Ratio, HMD = Highly

Male Dominated, MD = Male Dominated



**Table 55***Summary of risks*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Stifling</b>	<b>Insult</b>	<b>Phatic</b>	<b>Phatic Displacement</b>
DM	None	Moderate	Moderate	High
SMH	None	None	Moderate	Moderate
Daum	None	None	Low	Low
Naver	None	None	Low	Low

Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrated that these texts present various contributions and risks that do not hinge on comments acting as a public sphere or as journalism. Indeed, from site to site, readers of each comment section were highly likely to find a distinct interpretation of a public affairs issue: at lowest (Daum), nearly three quarters (70.6%) of articles offered at least one distinct framing of each topic, but this number was 97.8% at highest (SMH). There were less “checkable facts” (Merpert et al., 2018) that could entail “evidence” for Morrison (2017), but these were nevertheless widespread, and only one site saw such information appearing in less than a majority (49.7%) of comment sections. As seen by Graham and Wright (2015), the presence of this content could be visible and rich. Through their comments, commenters were able to provide both instructive information and community-orientated interpretations of news that impacts on readers:

My GP is totally booked and can't move any Astra Zeneca forward unless there is a cancellation. This is probably the case everywhere. This type of messaging puts a lot of fear and frustration in the community. We've done the right thing and had our first shot, now we feel more vulnerable because we can't bring the second forward. I'm speaking for the over 70 age group. (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021)

The above comment presents text on a public affairs issue with broad impact – the process of vaccination against a deadly pandemic. The text contains a viewpoint, with a treatment frame of

the AZ vaccine that is a clear reference to Baden and Springer's viewpoint (2017), with the framing firmly grounded in the characteristics of the commenter's lived experience. It contains information, providing a personal account with ostensibly checkable facts. People reading this content will have been exposed to content that can impact the way they interact with their society, potentially impacting the way they view and access the vaccine. Whether or not this content is of sufficient quality (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014) or is influenced by adjacent media (Baden & Springer, 2014; Morrison, 2017), the readership has been exposed to these messages through this medium. The message is also not dependent on whether it is part of a conversation – indeed, the discussion happening in this space does less to deliberate, in line with the study conducted by Ruiz et al. (2011), than to add additional viewpoints and information that inform the way readers can see, react to, and interact with their society.

Unfortunately, this was also apparent with the risks I assessed – particularly with the insults of silencing speech. This is well exemplified in a comment from DM (2021): “He can't help you boys, he's letting all the wet-backs [US pejorative term for migrants that crossed the southern border] in with Tuberculous, but thanks for your help anyway.” Here again, there is a viewpoint – that the US president is focused on permitting immigration on the southern border (which permission is apparently a high-effort activity) as a cause for why the US cannot resettle Afghan refugees. There is also, variously, information not contained in the headline – that immigrants arriving on the southern border have tuberculosis, for instance. This is an internationally accessible website where immigrants could be expected to participate, and this commenter has told the commenting forum that such immigrants are diseased and debased them based on their background, using a term leveraged at groups with historic ties to Central and South America. This suggestion is not posited in the comment as a question or conjecture – it is stated as a checkable fact. This fact could easily be checked and found to be misinformation, but the public's capacity and willingness to identify and check misinformation has not been able to keep up with evolving online media (David Lazer et al., 2017). These assertions can not only put

off and marginalise contributions for these people (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), but also do reputational damage for the group (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019). Uniquely (Miloni et al., 2012), the comment even challenged the news organisation's agenda setting through the article, which in no way mentioned any of these assertions. While such content was mostly absent from SMH, Daum, and Naver, it was present in nearly half of DM comment sections (45.7%).

Seeing comments as comment sections rather than aggregate or individual comments also had important implications for the results. Comments containing information proved exceedingly rare on every site on the whole, but people reading comments under news articles were still more likely to get new information on the topic or to be introduced to new topics entirely. Silencing comments were rarer than information among individual comments, even on DM (5.2%), but that site's readers were exposed to silencing speech nearly half the time they opened a comment section – and Rösner et al. (2016) found that such hostility had notable impacts on readers regardless of how much was present.

The positive and negative potential of the content was highlighted by the study's approach to comments as significant texts in their own right through its qualitative content analysis research design. Ruiz et al. (2011) ascribed comment sections such characteristics as homogenous communities and communities of debate, but I found additional lenses by which these collective, collaborative productions can be assessed, showing how news commenting can present distinct characteristics at micro and macro layers. Placing an emphasis on topics (Graham & Wright, 2015; Miloni et al., 2012) or adjacent production (Ksiazek, 2018; Morrison, 2017) obscures comments' capacity to have an impact on their own – the silencing speech above was not merely reframing the Afghan refugees of the article but initiating its own framing of an entirely different group. While it is not possible to entirely divorce news commenting from the above-the-line production, which provided the gateway to comments on all of these sites, news commenting can present a text that is substantially distinct with its own potential impacts.

Further, privileging mass media narratives as the source for commenters' content (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012) contextualises comments as a product of mediatisation but does not do the same for the accompanying journalistic production, which itself could be influenced by broader media agenda setting (Protess & McCombs, 2016) and journalistic field influences (Willig, 2016). Such prioritisation of journalistic narratives over commenters' views and information adheres to the gatekeeping or *gatwatching* view of journalism (Bruns, 2003), which positions journalists and media organisations as the legitimate arbiters of a social reality that is equally experienced by the journalists, the public, and the commenters. However, as demonstrated, commenters will often provide eyewitness and lived experiences of that reality (Morrison, 2017) while journalistic production frequently leverages elite sources instead (Núñez-Mussa et al., 2022).

In line with media literacy concerns of assessing credibility and recognising fake news (Nettlefold, 2018), there is good reason to invest more value in the products of professional journalism, but news commenting presents important media to study partly because the public's media literacy has struggled to keep up with developments in online media. Consequently, news commenting texts provide important information about the media ecosystem the public is exposed to.

#### *Comments in the Evolving Media Ecosystem*

The media ecosystem also provided an important and intervening factor for news commenting in this study. Much of this context was described in Chapter 4, but aspects of news commenting revealed in the content analysis speak to a highly entangled media environment. In line with Hitchens (2011) and Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018), this suggested a more complex and interconnected media system whose internal boundaries were more blurred than in the past.

With convergence and cross-ownership, there were already blurred lines between broadcast, print, and online media (Hitchens, 2011; H. S. Kim, 2018), and content often crosses these lines directly (Paterson & Domingo, 2011). Extensive research elaborates how the media

operate as and within an ecosystem (Jones & Pusey, 2010; Rhee et al., 2011), but relating news commenting to that context proves a more challenging task. Moe et al. (2021) and Napoli (2011) suggest such a portrayal would require knowing what the public is consuming, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) also assert plays a role in comparing media systems, but only limited information is available on the habits of people participating in comment sections (Stroud et al., 2016). The framework for comparing media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) maps the media to a framework for comparison with other systems rather than investigating any individual component of the media, but they do place a clear importance the history of some media types, such as print media. However, A. Chadwick (2017) suggests such a framework may no longer be sufficiently precise because it does not situate the media system in relation to the wider and growing variety of media now available – though news commenting is a more specific form of media than his analysis discusses.

For this study, the broad media ecosystemic characteristic that arose in the course of the content analysis relates to the issue of interconnectivity, which is central to media ecology frameworks (Cali, 2017) and media ecosystems (Hitchens, 2011; Naughton, 2006). Leveraging website analysis (Brügger, 2010), I found news commenting to be highly adjacent to other forms and types of media hosted on not only other sites but also different sorts of platforms in addition to its adjacency to the news article content. This means that users looking at comments are linked directly to social media platforms and streaming video services where the coverage and discussion of these issues can receive further attention and further discussion. Though my research focuses on discrete components, what Gálik and Vogl (2015) might call media types and genres, the news articles, Twitter posts, and other online media are only one click away from each other and maintain a visual presence across sites.








A review of the DM transition to commenting (2022) [see Figure 10] illustrates this issue in practice. In the intervening space between the article and the comments, users find not just a link but also a branded icon for Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Flipboard, and Facebook

Messenger, as well as functional buttons to change the content into e-mail and enable other forms of sharing, though the “Add Comment” button has the largest presence. One click moves the conversation and the user to a different platform with different characteristics, a different audience, and a different format – a low bar when users would already have clicked at least once and likely scrolled down the page to reach the comment section in the first place. This does not prevent access to comments; indeed, given that passive user reading habits focus on endless scrolling (I. Anderson & Wood, 2021), there would be an inclination towards sliding down to the content rolling out below, which is borne out by the longer site times for pages containing comments (Stroud et al., 2020). However, this interconnectivity raises an issue for identifying appropriate units of analysis for studying any online media – can a Twitter reading audience (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018) be feasibly separated from news commenting readership (Springer et al., 2015)? Alternately, can assumptions be made about whether news commenting readers have been exposed to widespread media coverage of an issue when interconnected links and adjacent content allow for news avoidance behaviours (Jean Tsang, 2019)? The website analysis in Chapter 7 suggests such approaches to online media might require a broader and more challenging purview.









Figure 10

DM Comment transition (2021)

**Share or comment on this article: Women who 'settled' for partners who weren't 'the one' reveal what it's REALLY like**








Share
Add comment

**MOST WATCHED NEWS VIDEOS** Embed this

 <b>Putin's robot army goes into action amid fears of</b>	 <b>Weinstein uses 'health problems' to battle</b>	 <b>Black Cabs line up at Buckingham Place in</b>	 <b>Joanna Lumley pays tribute to 'kind, funny'</b>
 <b>John Major says the Queen must be given</b>	 <b>Boris Johnson sports new haircut after</b>	 <b>Flowers swiftly removed from outside</b>	 <b>Lindsay Hoyle: Prince Philip was the 'father of'</b>

**Comments 75** Share what you think Add your comment

Newest
Oldest
Best rated
Worst rated
View all

*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Daily Mail Australia (2022).

The comments indicate that this blurring extends beyond online media. In their phatic content, commenters cross boundaries as well. When providing sources and criticism, they draw on sources from across the range of media, citing newspapers, radio, and television, and they bring this range of content into their online discussion. Even if, as Baden and Springer (2014) contend, commenters are drawing from mass media narratives, they are doing so in a manner that brings the content from these diverse media types into a single discussion. Even the way they view the website was contested, as they variously referred to it as a “newspaper” or referred

to its streaming video as “television” – a reasonable conception given the extent to which traditional media organisations have come to dominate in online spaces (Newman et al., 2021).

Potentially more important, however, is the way commenters’ phatic feedback to the journalists and organisations has offline implications. The phatic content reviewed in Chapter 8 showed a variety of ways that the commenters provided this feedback, offering thanks and criticism as well as provocations and suggestions for further news. Hanusch and Tandoc (2019) and my own previous research (Koskie, 2018) found that journalists take on such feedback to varying extents. The analysis by Meltzer (2015) indicated that there was some consideration among journalistic staff that listening and attending to such input was a part of the profession. Where this becomes a complication for the media ecosystem is that this feedback’s influence extends offline. Online newsrooms were once separate from their traditional counterparts (Paterson & Domingo, 2008), but this is no longer the case (Koskie, 2018). Journalists that reflect this phatic discussion on their production will impact content that appears simultaneously on the website and offline. This interpersonal interaction through phatic content concerned much more than such direct feedback on the journalism, but phatic content was also the second most common category of content (after viewpoints) identified on all sites.

The characteristics of news commenting presented differently in and as part of the distinct media ecosystems of Korea and Australia, which indicates that the media ecosystem view that Hitchens (2011) recommends is both more relevant and more complex than ever before. While news commenting has blurred lines with its adjacent and connected media content, it also has the potential to be a more entrenched and influential aspect of the broader media ecosystem (even if the amount of that influence is debatable (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Wolfgang, 2019)).

### **Media Pluralism in the Comment Sections**

The core concern I have sought to address through this study is the ways that news commenting can have implications for media pluralism. Chapter 3 set out in detail how various



views of media pluralism (Karppinen, 2013; Valcke et al., 2010; Youn & Lee, 2015) are ultimately orientated towards a central concern, that of a media ecosystem's capacity to augment the functioning of a complex and diverse society through relevant and representative media content, in which news commenting can play a role. Identifying the implications requires contextualising the results in the unique characteristics of Korea's and Australia's media systems as below, but broader insights emerged that impact the way news commenting can be understood and assessed for the extent of its contributions to media pluralism.

While recent studies have investigated the prevalence of pluralism concerns such as ownership concentration (Trappel & Meier, 2022) and access to diverse content (Vermeulen, 2022), Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al. (2018) gave a more consolidated and sweeping view of the range of indicators used in the MPM [see Figure 11], and this provided a useful starting point for analysing the results. Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al. (2015) use the different categories of legal indicators, economic indicators, and socio-demographic indicators and the content of the comment sections can be tied to these indicators as well. However, the assessment framework of the MPM provided key guidance to how this study was structured so it has more relevance for analysing the outcome. While Karppinen (2018) problematises some of these concepts and emphasises that there is a more central concern surrounding the role of journalism, using the MPM as a template brings a diversity of lenses on how media pluralism might be achieved.

Figure 11

*The MPM indicators for media pluralism risks that were used to inform the coding and analysis for this study*

Basic Protection	Market Plurality	Political Independence	Social Inclusiveness
Protection of freedom of expression	Transparency of media ownership	Political independence of media	Access to media for minorities
Protection of right to information	Media ownership concentration (horizontal)	Editorial autonomy	Access to media for local/regional communities and for community media
Journalistic profession, standards and protection	Cross-media concentration of ownership and competition enforcement	Media and democratic electoral process	Access to media for people with disabilities
Independence and effectiveness of the media authority	Commercial & owner influence over editorial content	State regulation of resources and support for the media sector	Access to media for women
Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet	Media viability	Independence of PSM governance and funding	Media literacy

*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al. (2018).

In chapters 7 and 8, I did not seek to provide insight into the majority of these indicators – though they do touch on each of the areas. Further, the MPM focuses on risk, but this research also focuses on the ways media can “enable access” and offer a “tool to achieve” media pluralism goals (Vermeulen, 2022). Consequently, I focused on both the opportunities and threats afforded by news commenting, considering it with a view to positive and negative implications.

#### *Implications for Freedom of Expression and Right to Information*

Of the indicators, *protection of freedom of expression* and *protection of right to information* saw the most impact. Each of these was impacted in both of the ways considered by the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018): the comment sections provided additional freedoms to express views and offered access to a variety of viewpoints and information. Further, there was a tendency for them to do so in a way that exhibited characteristics of agonistic radical pluralism (Karppinen, 2013, p. 41) and dialogic debate (Sunstein, 2018) that gave communicative power to

diverse viewpoints and perspectives which was distributed and mediated through time of posting or recommendation rather than through differences in personal power. This was particularly evident in those high viewpoint diversity sections discussed in Chapter 7 where topics such as lockdowns, vaccines, and wages saw users give their unique personal experiences evincing distinct and competing values. As can be seen in the sample in Table 56, commenters' distinct interpretations went beyond addressing blame and treatment to reframe the positions of citizens in regard to their government and public affairs issues, a potential of comments covered previously by Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019). These viewpoints were not simply hostile antagonistic interactions but often an example of the agonistic interactions identified by Mouffe (2000), reconsidering power and drawing on divergent values. This potential was seen not only in the diverse viewpoints and information of Chapter 7 but also the phatic content of Chapter 8.

**Table 56**

*A comment section demonstrating a diversity of agonistic views. Each commenter placed priorities on different objects and frames.*

Source	Content
Headline	Three mystery cases from hotel party cast doubt on end to Sydney lockdown - A party held in a Waterloo hotel room as Sydney went into lockdown has threatened to jeopardise the city's reopening on Friday, after three young attendees tested positive.
I believe whatever my party's policy says.	To those with faith in people's common sense, I say this is why we need government. This makes me almost wish, if we take hoon's cars away, that we could confiscate property of people who do this sort of thing.
ksstonham	The root cause of the continuing illnesses and bad behaviour during this pandemic is the near total lack of vaccine supply. This lack of vaccine supply is NOT a NSW or state issue! Responsibility for the perilously inept vaccine supply process rests with the federal government !
Fartsalot	We all have to be accountable for our own actions. This party was unacceptable regardless of individuals vaccination status.
Mark Anthony	That's true but it is the NSW State Government's issue to ensure all aged care and health care workers have been vaccinated against COVID-19. It is also the State's responsibility to ensure people employed in the travel industry and airports are vaccinated, regularly get tested and follow the law by social distancing and wearing face masks, and clearly this hasn't happened. We have been let down by the Berejiklian Government!
Epictetus	And what of the responsibilities of a hotel, allowing such a party to unfold without interjecting or contacting police. I thought businesses had certain responsibilities in terms of complying with health directives and keeping people safe.

*Note:* Example texts drawn from The Sydney Morning Herald (2021).

Using their concentration of communicative power, news organisations can set the frame of how a public affairs issue is shown to the public (Robert M Entman, 2007). However, right on the pages of the articles, sometimes directly next to the headline (for SMH live feeds), these users wrote “I disagree” or other contradictions and competing views, and that statement passed through the organisations' filtering algorithms, sorting, or direct editorial oversight to be published and visible on every site in most of the cases where comments were present. Editorial

control and influence are visibly present in every case – each organisation is explicit that it reserves the right to reject or remove individual comments entirely at their discretion – but this potential influence did not prevent the alternative viewpoints. On the numerous articles where no comments were allowed (SMH and DM) or where no comments were posted (an occasional occurrence on every site), these competing viewpoints did not appear. The extent to which this was present, in as many as 98% of comment sections (SMH) for viewpoints and 69.2% (SMH) for information, positions news commenting as a tool for surfacing this kind of content.

Conversely, this is also where the MPM's risk-based framework (Valcke, 2011) becomes especially salient: no additional viewpoints or information were available on the several prominent websites that did not host articles, nor under the numerous articles which did not have open comment sections, nor the open comment sections where no comments were present. This suggests that there is a risk for freedom of expression and right to information, as well as for access to this expression and information, that can arise if a media ecosystem's dominant media organisations refuse to host comments on articles or their entire site. This risk could further extend to whether their community and moderation practices are not eliciting and facilitating contributions, which organisations can have a demonstrable impact on with their decisions (Baek et al., 2020; Huang, 2016).

This risk was in addition to the risks of silencing speech and phatic communication that the research initially sought to investigate, which also impacted on these indicators. Silencing speech in particular is both an especially notorious part of comment sections (Chen & Pain, 2017; Wolfgang, 2021) and one with established impacts (Masullo et al., 2021; Rösner et al., 2016). Its ramifications for freedom of expression are demonstrable – they can and, as shown in examples, intend to silence other speakers and prevent them from expressing their views. However, their impacts also implicate risks for the right of access to information, as information was typically offered alongside viewpoints and both require participants to contribute them. Every site featured insults directed towards these potential contributors, including the journalists

and their sources, though only DM featured them with any regularity, and these insults ranged from the milder comment on Daum labelling someone “무식한 인간아” (Daum, 2021)

(ignorant person) to more detailed debasements such as DM’s commenter stating, “India has the highest number of slaves globally - between 14 and 18 million. It is the culture and they try to bring them to Western countries like on this occasion. Not to mention all the sweatshops in the UK. No scruples” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). These statements may provide a viewpoint and even information, but their potential and even apparent intention to exclude and diminish the contributions of groups ties firmly to these media pluralism indicators, particularly given the extent to which the varying rates demonstrate that such content can be abated.

The relationship of phatic content to these indicators is much more complex. By cultivating a sense of community (Hopp et al., 2018; Sarjanoja et al., 2013), phatic communication can actually encourage expression and contributions of information. Indeed, this was found to be relatively common – there were frequent expressions of “thanks”, frequent requests for more information, even such everyday social niceties as “hi John”, and this has potential to open the gates for freedom of expression. Where the risk is present, and demonstrable, is in the area of access to diverse views and information (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015). Chapter 8 found that phatic displacement was widespread, a consistent presence across sites – though some sites featured far more than others. This meant that up to a majority of comment sections (DM) were surfacing phatic content over the inclusion of further contributions to viewpoints and information, and the non-contributing phatic commentary could at times constitute more than half of some comment sections on all sites. It is essential to note, however, that this potential risk is less significant than the previous two. Both closing comment sections and marginalising potential commenters intervene at a higher level than does phatic displacement, as with these two risks, there is less expression and information for phatic

communication to displace. Phatic communication does not prevent others from speaking, but rather obscures their speech, though it does this obscuring at relatively high rates.

### *Implications for Journalistic Profession and Standards*

In the basic protection area, the results also had implications for the indicator of journalistic profession and standards (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018, p. 19). Through the Chapter 8 results pertaining to silencing speech and phatic communication, commenters can aid and denigrate professional standards but also threaten and attack journalists and the organisation.

The more common of these, phatic communication about journalistic content, frequently presented an opportunity rather than a risk, despite the potential problems with extensive phatic content. Phatic commentary spoke directly to journalists, news organisations, sources, other commenters, or even just named actors within the article, generally offering support and appreciation. For example, one commenter wrote, “Thank you Alexandra for proving readers with the facts and what Gladys actually did say and mean when she made her comments on this matter. Your commitment to factual and balanced reporting is noted and commendable” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). Similarly, a Korean comment thanked government actors for speaking out, (“말 꺼낸김에 국정감사하면 되겠네요~~~” (Naver News, 2021)). Some criticism was grounded in a constructive approach intending to improve the article, such as in “Unfortunately the map published here contains some errors. For example the Mobil station/7 Eleven on Raleigh Rd is actually incorrectly listed as Chemist Warehouse Southbank, 10 kms away” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). These comments provide benefits for the “enabling environment” or contribution to professional standards identified by the MPM, reconciling with the potential for comments to provide useful contributions to journalistic production (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Meltzer, 2015).

However, comments were often not particularly constructive contributions to journalistic professionalism. This was a frequent problem with the prevalent silencing speech on DM, which

ranged from “Oh do shut up Piers” (in reference to Piers Morgan, a frequent columnist on the site) to:

I read these headlines and can't help but laugh. Trump is still inside these far left writers heads! I guess they think they are accomplishing something by trying associate his name with every story of a "bad person". In reality they just come off as pathetic nobodies.

(Daily Mail Australia, 2021)

Where stifling speech was present (rarely), it was often directed at journalists and their sources rather than other commenters and occurred across sites. The results demonstrated the characteristics of the “terrible” environment Gardiner (2018) described for female and minority journalists. Consequently, the silencing speech moderating approaches employed by these organisations (to very different extents) are also a part of creating that “enabling environment” mentioned as a concern in the MPM (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018), and the journalists at DM, SMH, Naver, and Daum are engaging in their production in distinct conditions as a result. By contrast, phatic communication did not prove a risk to this indicator – indeed, it mostly provided a benefit.

#### *Implications for Market Plurality and Political Independence*

In the area of market plurality (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018), the results of Chapter 7 demonstrated a nuanced and telling contribution against the concentration of media ownership and the potential for commercial and owner influence over editorial content. According to Trappel and Meier (2022), there are a few key and interconnected problems with concentrated media ownership, but two were especially relevant here: the orientation of media ownership towards economic objectives and the influence this has over editorial autonomy and independence (p.150). Looking over these comment sections, there was nothing to indicate that the news organisation incentivised comments in any way – there were no listed rewards, no commenters were apparently paid staff members, and registration systems were open (though they were partially mediated by subscription requirements on SMH beyond free article limits).



Springer et al. (2015) found that commenters get their own gratifications for participating, from entertainment and social interaction to viewpoints and information, and comments here suggested this remains the case (commenters laughed at other comments, expressed appreciation for viewpoints and information, and offered social support in phatic commentary).

Consequently, the contributions of these comments existed at least partially outside of that influence of concentrated ownership. The results in Chapter 7 demonstrated that these commenters would consistently disagree with the framing and priorities of the news organisation's own production, providing their own distinct viewpoints and a smaller but consistent amount of new information. As in Milioni et al. (2012), they rarely set their own agenda and were typically discussing the topic set by the news organisation, demonstrating that at least that powerful agenda setting capacity of the news organisation remained intact (Protest & McCombs, 2016). However, the combination of factors whereby commenters are somewhat apart from that influence and that they bolstered diversity sets the stage for a contribution to these indicators of media pluralism. News commenting can provide a partial counterbalance to the deleterious influence of the concentration of communicative power posed by media ownership and its structures and the results demonstrated that commenters' independence portended the inclusion of new viewpoints and information.

The black box for this issue is that media organisations have demonstrable impacts on comments. Domingo (2014) discussed a range of ways that news organisations can influence their comments and Huang (2016) found that these can not only be effective but can be key to making news commenting a contribution to sustainable journalism. Each of these sites publicly displayed a range of ways that they managed and shaped their comment sections, ranging from the extensive and manual approaches of SMH to the algorithmic-filtering-reliant Korean sites. While SMH featured the highest rates of diverse viewpoints and information for their open comment sections despite their moderation practices, there was a clear potential for the news

organisation's moderators to influence the result. This is compounded by findings from Meyer and Speakman (2016) that heavy-handed moderation can put off potential commenters.

In my study, the organisation that featured the least apparent moderation was DM, and its comments, 5,844 in total, were nearly equal in number to all three other sites combined, pulled from comment sections that frequently contained several thousand comments each. Its comparably larger data set demonstrated consistently high diversity of viewpoints and information (as well as the highest rates of both silencing speech and phatic displacement), and comments' extensive presence offered the news organisation more opportunities for the increased onsite time that news commenting can elicit (Stroud et al., 2020). Consequently, the moderation done by these highly prominent media organisations variously appeared to influence the results – though the most notable of the effects I uncovered was a reduction in the prevalence of risk. Nevertheless, the results of Chapter 7 overall suggested a contribution for these market plurality indicators.

A range of other indicators were implicated through the results, where there were potential contributions and additional risks, but the effects and influence were indirect. As above, the indicators of *editorial autonomy* and *political independence* (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018) relate to news commenting because commenters are further removed from the reach of commercial influences or political actors, but the risk remains because of the influence the news organisations can potentially exert over their comment sections. Larger structural implications, including policies against defamation and the independence of and support for public service media, were not visible within the results of the content analysis apart from commenters discussing them as topics. This is not to say these indicators were unimportant for the results – Australia's public service media hosted no comments where Korea's did, providing a clear example of how such structures are important context for the results. Rather, such factors are tied to the ecosystemic view of the media, as the indicators intervene with each other at macro and micro as well as external and internal levels (Klimkiewicz, 2015).

*Implications for Social Inclusiveness*

News commenting's open gates and visible authors demonstrated the potential to contribute to the final area in the MPM's framework, that of social inclusiveness (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018), in visible and predictable ways, but this potential was typically unrealised. In the most recent MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), the risk indicators of access to media for minorities, regions, and women were rated as moderate or high for most countries, but comments may not be substantially ameliorating this concern. While the ratings in the MPM were derived from the structures surrounding media rather than through the content itself, this risk was visible in the contents analysed for this study as well as the broader media ecosystems of Korea and Australia. For each of the indicators for minorities (including disability), local and regional groups, and women's access to media, there were distinct results that varied by site and ecosystem – but in no case did news commenting offer a demonstrable and high level of benefit.

*Demonstrable* is a key term here and an issue that is endemic to comment sections which problematises their contribution to the media system, as the problem was the lack of visibility. Martin (2015) illustrated the ways that names can be a useful metric for identifying representation for women, and people identify personal characteristics through names (Barron et al., 2011; Cassidy et al., 1999; W. Liu & Ruths, 2013). Further, commenters did identify, through the body of the comments and the UIF, these and other aspects of their background, including their region. However, in every case, such users were in the minority. Chapter 7 found that most commenters, most of the time did not evince any representation relevant to any indicator. There are good reasons why this might be the case – particularly women (Gardiner, 2018; Van Duyn et al., 2021) but also minorities (Meyer & Speakman, 2016) can experience aggression in comment sections when they are visible, even as their content can be assessed as more credible (Bhandari et al., 2021).

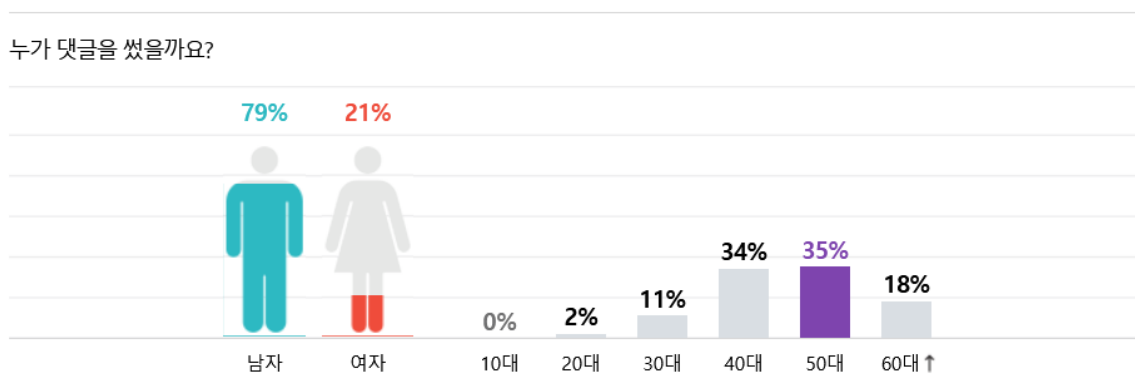
This is not to say that news commenting did not provide a contribution. A female voice was found to be contributing to up to 80.1% of public affairs comment sections (DM), and

people frequently provided clues or direct reference to their region through the UIF and text on every site but Naver. There were also rare references to minority backgrounds. The issue was that the contributions were inconsistent, not easily perceived, or even counter-indicative.

The challenge in identifying the contribution here relates to one of definition: what constitutes representation? How can the presence of “voice” mentioned in the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021) be quantified or qualified? This connects to concerns from Karppinen (2015) about how such diversity can be conceptualised as well as from Gibbons (2015) about what thresholds constitute sufficiency. The results here enabled me to turn these questions on their head, however. While Rachel9988 of Perth saying “He tried burning people to death = such a nice boy” on DM (2021) may not be sufficient to provide a voice to all women or Perth citizens for the topic of racism in law enforcement, her presence in that comment section stands in contrast to 5 out of 6 days of the Naver (2021) sample when not a single female voice was identifiable through usernames such as rbeh\*\*\*\* or xdeu\*\*\*\* or body content. The statement by Price and Payne (2019) that “You can’t be what you can’t see” is reinforced by the faceless commenters in Naver, whose onsite metrics for each comment section [see Figure 12] typically featured an overwhelming ratio of male commenters. Bhandari et al. (2021) found that female voices in news commenting were received differently and perceived differently, and Kangaspunta (2020) demonstrated that comment sections featured a public sphere of deliberation on local and regional communities by their members. Consequently, news commenting did demonstrate a benefit for these areas, and implied a risk where such identifiable representation was absent (particularly relevant to minorities and disabled groups, who saw almost no representation).

Figure 12

*Who wrote comments? demographic section on a Naver comment section showing gender and age category by decade*



*Note:* Image reproduced under the educational license from Naver News (2021).

As with the metrics of the MPM (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021), the structures behind representation are especially noteworthy here. With diversity of viewpoints and information and silencing speech, I was searching for something that the websites specifically or indirectly encouraged and discouraged. This included through posting guidelines or within the commenting process itself. By contrast, no websites sought representation outside of region. No website sought a balance of female voices or the inclusion of minority voices. The one exception to this was region on DM – they included a space for region, and as a result saw the highest rate of regional representation. Consequently, assessments need to extend the content analysis, as in this case, using a qualitative framework that identifies those policies and structures that foster and forfend a plurality of voices.

The silencing speech results of Chapter 8 provide one such structure. Particularly on the DM, women, regional groups, and minorities were a common target of insult speech and sometimes stifling speech as well. While hostility and incivility have a history of association with comments (Gardiner, 2018; Ksiazek, 2015; Rösner et al., 2016), these comments identified specific demographics for vilification and exclusion. By contrast, such insults did not have a wide presence on Naver, Daum, or SMH, where insults typically focused on issues of age, education, political and issue alignment, or social status. This suggests that not only the comments

themselves but also the news organisations' policies and moderation are a risk factor for the MPM areas of social inclusion.

Overall, news commenting interfaced with every area of media pluralism considered by Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al. (2018). This is not to contend that news commenting presents a reflection of the ecosystem's pluralism or even plays a large and incontrovertible role, but the potential for impact was visible and multi-faceted, with opportunities and threats across the range of indicators. Similarly, it is not a massive, indivisible body of content; rather, each rendition of news commenting on each website in each media ecosystem can provide different results. This is illustrated in the comparison of news commenting within the media ecosystems of Australia and Korea.

### **Situating Results in National Media Ecosystems**

Chapter 4 demonstrated that Australia and Korea share key attributes and a similar positioning on the Hallin and Mancini (2004) media systems alignment – though for different reasons. Simultaneously, the two systems diverge in ways that connect directly with the presence and influence of news commenting. My intention in this section is not to draw causative conclusions as to how the media systems affect comments or to suggest that news commenting has significant impacts on the operation of the larger media systems, but rather to address news commenting as a piece of the media systems that complements or detracts from the media pluralism of each nation. In each case, the systems surrounding news commenting had implications for the content, contributions, and risks of news commenting.

In Australia, this took the form of the largest, most dominant news websites (Mediaweek, 2021a), each owned by legacy media organisations, not providing access to a platform that consistently presented competing viewpoints and information. While there are certainly issues surrounding the costs and challenges of moderation (Huang, 2016), it is conspicuous that these are more of a barrier to the most visited media websites with the largest reach (Mediaweek, 2021b), such as news.com.au, than they are to the smaller media outlets such as *The Daily*

*Telegraph*, which is a subsidiary of the same news organisation. This reinforces the findings of Hatcher and Currin-Percival (2016) that groups with larger concentrations of communicative power are more resistant to measures that would dilute that concentration. Notably, while the top websites in Australia's rankings, ABC News and news.com.au, excluded comments, four of five of their biggest competitors included them; however, the two most visited websites received more than double the traffic of their top competitors (Mediaweek, 2021b). Instead of comments offering an antidote to concentrated ownership's influence over online news media, the dominance of a small number of organisations was limiting the presence of potentially valuable news commenting. By contrast, in Korea, where the concentration of ownership in the overall media system is lower, the most prominent websites are highly permissive of news commenting, despite their high level of dominance of online media (Dwyer & Hutchinson, 2019).

Australia's top websites not including comments does not appear to have significantly mitigated risks. On SMH, silencing speech was almost entirely absent. DM's comment sections introduced this kind of speech frequently, but the prevalence of the risk was nevertheless outpaced by its contributions of diverse viewpoints, despite DM applying minimal or no comment moderation in most cases. While nearly every section presented new viewpoints and most presented information, less than half had any quantity of silencing speech. While phatic displacement was clearly present in both cases, more so in Australia than in Korea, this risk is negligible compared to the displacement of excluding comments entirely. SMH is further implicated in this regard as their dedicated app does not show or link to comments in any way for most articles and the majority of their public affairs stories do not feature comments. The lack of access to commenting on sites and articles appears to present a greater risk than the silencing and phatic displacement investigated as a part of this study.

In Korea, a variety of structures and decisions led to an outcome of news commenting contributing more of what was already present while keeping restricted what was already hidden from view. There are good reasons to protect the identity of commenters, particularly in a

country with alarmingly high rates of cyber bullying and suicide (Baek et al., 2022), but this happens to coincide with creating a news commenting environment that appears to lack female, regional, minority and/or disabled voices within a larger media ecosystem that lacks female, regional, minority and/or disabled voices. Naver attempts to overcome this with broad demographic data on commenters, but this is of limited value; the mystery is not whether women exist (nor whether they are generally outnumbered in comment sections), but rather their distinct viewpoints and unique contributions of information. Further, Australian research on inclusiveness in media systems (Ewart & Beard, 2017; Price & Payne, 2019) finds that a lack of representation disenfranchises these groups from participating in media and leaves them feeling underserved, which ties to the spiral of silence described by Meyer and Speakman (2016). Korea's (and to a significant extent, Australia's) news commenting as it currently is structured does not provide a remedy to that.

Of note here is that the news commenting in each system is neither arbitrary nor fated; there are structures around the news commenting in each case that have predictable impacts on the results. Both the capacity of comments to contribute viewpoints and information (Baden & Springer, 2014; Graham & Wright, 2015; Milioni et al., 2012) and the approaches that raise these contributions while minimising risks (Bakker, 2014; Domingo, 2014; Morrison, 2017) have been thoroughly investigated and demonstrated, but it is decisions and tendencies within the media system that effect this outcome in practice. Such structures included the relatively strict, manual pre-moderation at SMH, Naver's tightly constrained UIF (which contrasted absolutely from the expansive UIF of DM), DM's highly permissive post-moderation, and Daum's success in cultivating the highest prevalence of comments beneath public affairs articles. These are described among the many approaches to hosting comments by Domingo (2014) and the heterogeneity of approaches can yield a wide variety of news commenting (Ruiz et al., 2011).

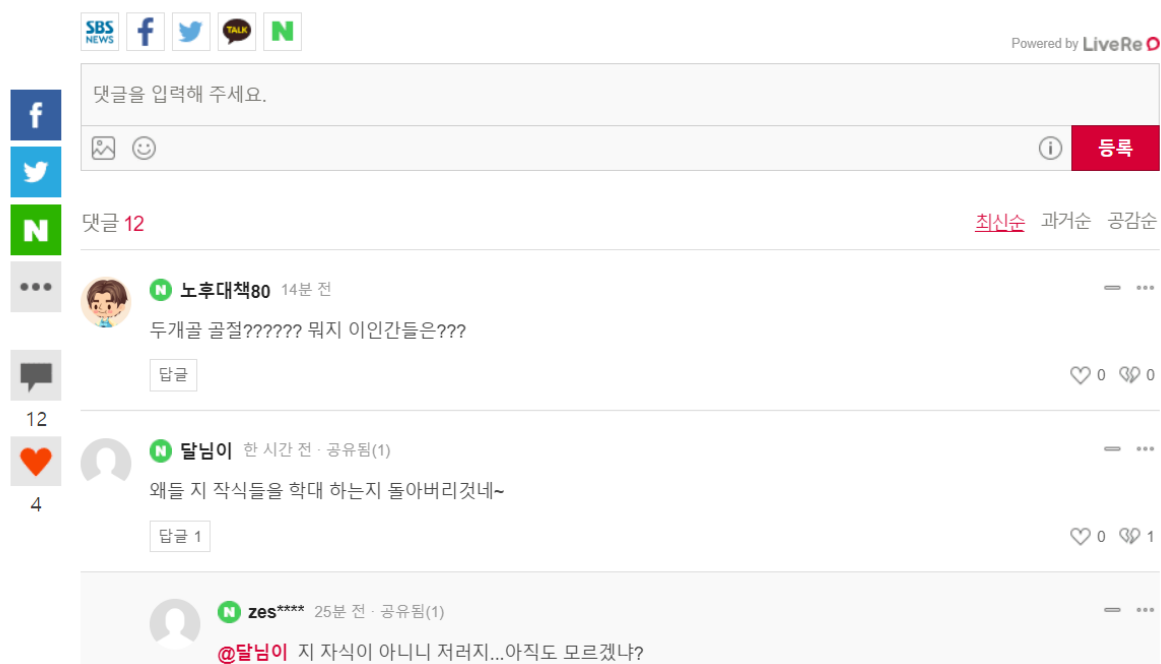
The intervening concern, however, is exposure diversity – a small range of sites have such an outsized influence that it is their decisions that frame what news commenting has to



offer in each case. While Korea has a robust body of literature for news commenting (Baek et al., 2022; C. W. Kim et al., 2019; Kwon & Cho, 2017; S. Y. Lee & Ryu, 2019; Yoon, 2019), its massively dominating online news aggregators offer mostly similar approaches leading to mostly similar results (with the notable but still marginal difference in representation). Australia's websites offered highly different approaches, achieving highly different results – for the fifth and sixth ranked websites. The top four sites had entirely homogenous approaches to news commenting on public affairs articles: they offered none. Further down the ranking in each system, there are more diverse inclusions of news commenting. In Figure 13 and Figure 14, there are a variety of new approaches and distinct features with direct implications on the above findings, with *SBS Korea* offering additional options for self-identification and *Herald Sun* in Australia encouraging diversity and civil discussion in their commenting feature. However, they each have far less exposure, less than a third of top sites (Newman et al., 2021).

### Figure 13

*News commenting and transition for SBS News [Korea], which features distinct features such as image avatars, self-selected usernames and additional sharing links*



*Note:* Image reproduced under the educational license from SBS News [Korea] (2022)

**Figure 14**

*News commenting and transition for Herald Sun, which features distinct guidance for commenters and alternatives for self-identification – as well as implicit denigration of minorities*

The image shows a screenshot of a news website's commenting section. At the top, there are two tabs: 'Comments' (active) and 'My profile'. Below the tabs is a grey box titled 'Commenting Guidelines' containing text about moderation and links to 'FAQs' and 'Commenting Guidelines'. Below this is a text input area with a 'Post a comment' placeholder and a character count of '2000 characters remaining'. A pink 'POST COMMENT' button is located to the right of the input area. Below the input area, there is a section for 'All Comments' with a count of '145' and a 'Viewing Options' dropdown. The first comment is by 'Lachlan' from '7 minutes ago' and reads: 'Don't be naive Andrew. They know that diversity weaken us; that's exactly what they want. They want to bring down western society; white people are being white-anted by their own.' Below the comment are icons for '1' like and a 'Reply' button.

*Note:* Image reproduced under educational license from Herald Sun (2020a)

Conducting this research as a cross-national study reveals how using a media ecosystemic lens that accommodates exposure diversity reframes each nation's news commenting and its implications. The nation-as-context approach (Livingstone, 2003) adds nuance to conceptualisations and implications of news commenting that would be lacking in a single-nation study, which would potentially mischaracterise comments' specific contributions.

## A Response to the Fundamental Questions

I conclude this chapter by drawing this information together in answer to the research question and sub-questions that guided the project. The study was initiated on a grounded hypothesis, that news commenting on Australia's and Korea's most visible online news sites was presenting contributions and risks for media pluralism within these media ecosystems that could be assessed and understood for their relative impact. It was this goal that drove the development of the research questions. The cross-national content analytical methods of the project provided some answers to these questions.

### *RQ: To What Extent Do Comments on Online News Articles Contribute to Media Pluralism?*

As stated, the term *contribute* here is meant to take a neutral tone that balances the amount that news commenting cultivates media pluralism against its potential risks. Reviewing the results from the six data sets on four sites in two countries suggests that news commenting adds media diversity directly into the media system alongside the most widely viewed content of the largest legacy media organisations. Where news commenting was present, this injection of diverse views was consistent. By contrast, the risks were typically highly constrained. However, in each media system, these contributions were constituted and contextualised in a way that limited the extent of this impact, so answering this question requires revisiting the sub-questions individually.

### *SQ1: In What Ways Do Visible News Comments Contribute to Media Pluralism?*

In Chapter 3, I discussed several ways that news commenting fundamentally contributes to media pluralism even before considering the content that audiences are exposed to. Gálik and Vogl (2015) suggested that news commenting added to the pluralism of media types, opening the door to further diversity. Simultaneously, carefully managed comments have been found to add to news organisations' sustainability, adding valuable audience engagement metrics as well as subscriptions (Huang, 2016). While their editorial independence is tenuously tied to organisational moderation practices, this potential is mitigated in that this benefit of sustainability

is tied to higher levels of engagement, which works actively against strict editorial control (Løvlie et al., 2017; Wolfgang, 2018).

The investigation confirms that other contributions are prevalent, as well, offering clear examples of ways that news commenting can cultivate media pluralism. While the most definitive example proved to be in the area of diversity of viewpoints, which was in line with past news commenting research (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019), new information and representation were also widely present – particularly when investigating at the level of comment sections instead of on a comment-by-comment basis. Overall, however, these contributions were relatively minor and often absent entirely. Crucially, the variance in these factors appeared to be tied to predictable factors within the structures behind commenting, offering a path to engender more of this contribution. Similarly, even the presence of diverse viewpoints saw structural barriers in that the most prominent websites in Australia did not feature news commenting in any way.

*SQ2: In What Ways Do Visible News Comments Present a Risk to Media Pluralism?*

Beyond these structural impediments to contributions, there were also risks presented through news commenting that were distinct to and introduced through the medium – though they were broadly mitigated. Risks that had been discussed in past literature, such as silencing speech (Meyer & Speakman, 2016) and an abundance of non-contributing phatic communication (Miller, 2008), did appear in the data for Korea and Australia, but new concerns were identified as well.

For the two issues of vitriolic and low value commentary, broadly discussed by news organisations that would host comments (Huang, 2016; Meltzer, 2015), the risks had limited visibility or potential impact. DM made clear that silencing speech *can* appear at high frequency, but the other three sites each demonstrated that it could be almost entirely prevented through multiple means. Phatic communication was widespread, but often not displacing when accounting for readers reading beyond a few comments, which was typical according to surveys

done by Stroud et al. (2016). Many comment sections only had a few comments and there was no invisible queue of comments to displace, so phatic communication's mix of benefits and redundancies did not hinder contributions – which, as stated above, were present in almost every comment section.

Conversely, I discovered other potential risks. One of these was that, even while female voices were often introduced, comment sections typically skewed heavily towards identifiably male participants. In this way, comments have a risk of exacerbating male-dominated media systems even while they introduce a small number of new female voices. Conversely, given that contributions were found and widespread, news organisations also demonstrated a risk by shutting these comment sections down completely on the most popular sites or on a range of articles. In both of these cases, the risks are that comments (or their absence) correspond with and exacerbate larger media pluralism concerns within the media ecosystem. Unlike for the more commonly cited problems with news commenting, both of these risks had a visible presence and impact.

*SQ3: How Do the Differences Between These Distinct Media Ecosystems Affect the Value of Their News Commenting's Contributions?*

Both the contributions and the risks were across all sites in both countries, but not equally, which has significant ramifications for news commenting's relative contribution to the media pluralism of each media ecosystem. In each case, news commenting tended to correspond to the system's relative strengths and was limited in its capacity for shoring up media pluralism deficits. In Korea, this meant already marginalised representation was further marginalised in the comment sections – to the point of being nearly completely absent on the country's most visited website. Australia saw news commenting's manifest contribution to diverse viewpoints and information as well as its limited presence of representation excluded from its top sites. This was in a media ecosystem with an extraordinary concentration of communicative power, dominantly held by the organisations that run these sites.

Simultaneously, news commenting also demonstrated a mostly straightforward contribution in both cases. Korea's media diversity is relatively robust (in comparison to Australia's) precisely because its public is exposed to a variety of news sources in each medium, and the diversity of viewpoints in their comment sections are both evidence and reinforcement of this characteristic. This contribution was accompanied by little commensurate risk beyond the lack of representation that was already a concern in the larger media ecosystem. In Australia, where news commenting did present, it offered high levels of contribution to precisely the areas of challenge for the media ecosystem, distributing communicative power. Each of the websites demonstrated ways that representation can be effected, both through long, in-depth commentary and expanded UIF. While DM displayed higher levels of risk for silencing speech, this increased risk was not intrinsically tied to its contributions, instead tying clearly to organisational approaches to moderation. On the whole, the challenge of news commenting for media pluralism in Australia was in its absence rather than its contents and constitution.

Situating news commenting in each media ecosystem reveals that news commenting is not simply added on as a complement to existing media. Its presence correlates to the larger whole, from which it inherited characteristics. However, investigating these systems comparatively demonstrates ways that this complement can be developed to provide further contributions.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

My goal in this work has been to investigate and demonstrate the implications for media pluralism of news commenting as a simultaneously widespread and marginalised feature of our current media environment. I also strove to further develop the scholarship exploring news commenting as a given and accepted aspect on much of online news media (Huang, 2016; Ribeiro, 2020), an aspect with diverse presentation (Baden & Springer, 2014; Ksiazek, 2018; Milioni et al., 2012) that is the product of a wide range of systems, management, and contexts (Domingo, 2014; Jiyoung Han et al., 2022; Wolfgang, 2021). Media pluralism theories and studies (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021; Trappel & Meier, 2022; Vermeulen, 2022) highlight crucial aspects of media systems that can affect their capacity to benefit or hinder societal functions, and the news commenting I studied suggested both positive and negative potential in this regard. I looked at this content in situ in the two distinct media ecosystems of Korea and Australia by comparing their media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) to provide a view of the nations as contexts (Livingstone, 2003) that may attenuate news commenting's characteristics as simultaneously separate from and connected to their environment. This also offered a sense of how broad is the scope of comments' potential contribution and risk as well as how they complement or reiterate the larger media ecosystem, in line with media ecology frameworks (Cali, 2017; Naughton, 2006).

Chapters 7 and 8 put the spotlight on the content of these comment sections for how they presented ideas and represented the public, but also for how they are potentially affected by and act as influential structures. Chapter 9 examined these results in relation to the research questions and the concepts of news commenting, media pluralism, and media ecosystems. Here, I extend these findings to consider how this research contributes to the broader scholarship and what paths it offers for future research.

### **Contributing to the Body of Literature for News Commenting and Media Pluralism**

The answers to these research questions demonstrate how the content presenting in comment sections reinforces and problematizes existing research on news commenting, media

innovations, organisational dispositions to participatory media, and the applicability of content analysis approaches to this media. Additionally, the findings demonstrate the value of cross-national comparative work in revealing the impact of different contexts and conditions on this content. In each case, these insights relate to important past and present research.

*Deconstructing the Consensus Identity of News Commenting*

Continuing from the earlier work of Goodman (2013) and Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011), my findings confirmed that news commenting does not present a single face, but is rather a channel for diverse content that takes different forms in much the same way newspapers and news websites can deliver a variety of content through their journalistic production. Despite being restricted to generally small print texts with no opportunities to diversify the format beyond emoticons, commenters presented a wide range of variation with a strong tendency to differentiate their content from the extant journalistic production. With individual comments, content ranged from nothing but a single punctuation mark to extensive explanations and expressions that rivalled the articles in length, with the value of the comments commensurately divergent. However, when taken as comment sections, as collections of comments of which readers were unlikely to read only one (Stroud et al., 2016), different sections and sites were able to present consistent and distinct results. Each site provided collectively unique selections of comment section characteristics.

This problematises organisational views of comments as “fetid swamps” (Wolfgang, 2018) or “beneficial yet crappy” (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014), as it raises the potential that organisational decisions and contexts, rather than the intrinsic qualities of news commenting, led to that result. While my investigation was into the qualities of the extant comments rather than the role the organisations themselves played in shaping the qualities of their comment sections, there were clear demarcations in the data between the sites. The news websites at a minimum provide for the existence of the comments or elect to exclude them entirely, and news organisations appear to have some understanding that their influence over them extends beyond



that (Meltzer, 2015). The differences in outcome between, for instance, DM and SMH comment sections reinforces assertions by Huang (2016) and Domingo (2014) that frustrated news organisations may be cultivating the news commenting that they lament.

The effects of organisational decisions proved more nuanced than turning comments on or off, however. Design decisions suggested they had a strong impact on what kinds of content would appear in their comment sections. News organisations, while uneasy about their challenges (Wolfgang, 2018), see news commenting as a space to get new views into the conversation (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014) or to improve their own production (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Meltzer, 2015) – but they rarely ask commenters to produce the kind of content they would like to see. My study found that there was a visible link between what the sites asked for or allowed and what resulted. DM asked for users to identify their region, and most users obliged. SMH asked for viewpoints and saw the strongest results in that area. Each of SMH, Daum, and Naver variously forbade vitriolic silencing speech, and received almost no silencing speech. While each website had the means to directly remove or prevent content they did not want to see, they were not in a position to create the content themselves. Nevertheless, they can cultivate comments with the characteristics they seek, be it diverse views, eyewitness accounts, new voices, or just entertainment value, through communication and the ways that they design their commenting systems.

Regardless of their structures, however, the sites' news commenting expanded on the diversity of viewpoints and information consistently, with relevance to the findings of studies by Milioni et al. (2012) and Baden and Springer (2014). In some ways, this study confirmed their initial findings that comment sections offer diverse views but contribute less to information or new agendas. The key point of difference however is in assessing the position of these contributions within their media ecosystem. Where Baden and Springer (2014) find that comments introduce new frame elements from those presented in the article, this research shows that there is a pivotal significance in identifying what these commenters are deviating from. In

this case, they were not simply offering alternative views – they were using a visible public forum to disagree with the framing espoused by the news organisations that dominate their media ecosystems in almost every section where comments were present. On the one hand, this supports the position of Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) that comment sections are “counterpublic spaces,” but the comments here went beyond that. They were not just antagonistic but rather a collection of varied views from people in different positions of power, providing a version of the agonism that Karppinen (2013) referred to as radical pluralism. Key to seeing this contribution was incorporating viewpoint analysis; commenters were not merely presenting different frames but rather coming from different perspectives – and lesser positions of power.

Similarly, while comments were found to individually contain new information as rarely as did those in the study by Milioni et al. (2012), a crucial question was raised in how much is required to constitute an important contribution. Most comments may only contain viewpoints and opinions, but, as with Graham and Wright (2015), those comments that did contain information could frequently offer in-depth contexts through personal experience or professional knowledge, and adding information to a discussion of a public affairs issue was a consistent result where comments were open and commenters contributed. However, this only became apparent when seeing *comment sections* instead of focusing on individual or aggregate comments.

Through their presence, diverse viewpoints and information, representation of commenters, silencing speech, and their community- or conversation-orientated phatic communication, the news commenting I explored had implications for a wide range of media pluralism indicators. Chapter 9 demonstrated ways that their content was especially important for the MPM area of basic protections (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018). Open comment sections appeared to provide the public with the freedom to express views not presented by the news organisation and to grant access to information (however factual) that would otherwise be absent. This extended to other areas, as well, with news commenting having ramifications for

market plurality and political independence, suggesting a potential to counterbalance some of the deleterious effects of concentration of media ownership or political interference. Conversely, despite their apparent relevance to the *open gates* of commenting (Singer et al., 2011), the area of social inclusiveness saw much more mixed results – though the results also provided several means by which this could be improved, as discussed above.

This study opened the door to new paths of investigation in understanding and contextualising the potential of news commenting as a component of the media ecosystem. In particular, the data demonstrates crucial areas where this form of participatory media is lacking – particularly regarding representation – and could potentially do more. More importantly, it draws attention to the role of news commenting as an addition to and part of a larger whole media ecosystem, where its distinct contributions can offer greater and less potential.

#### *Media Innovations Extending Media Legacies*

When Pavlik (1999) discussed the future of journalism, well before the participatory forms of web 2.0 became widespread, it was not to regard some utopian future society but rather to show that portentous change was easy to envision in light of innovations brought on through online digital media transition. This was soon to be confounded by the social forces that contextualised the development, however, and newsrooms found they had additional roles rather than less, acting as gatekeepers and curators of this new participatory content (Bruns, 2012; Singer et al., 2011) – with some reluctance (Domingo, 2008; Loke, 2012). There was precedent to this; Boczkowski (2004) noted that technological innovations in media had a history of being shaped not just by their affordances and capabilities but also by the people that receive and employ these innovations, through a mutual shaping of technology.

My results add credence to this model in the way that the innovation of news commenting has developed as a part of the news environment online. It is not a revelation that innovations can bring change – indeed, the increasing transition to digital online media has brought about purported crises in journalism (Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013; Fray,

2018; Powers et al., 2015) alongside a change in the work and challenges to sustainability (Almgren, 2017; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Krebs & Lischka, 2019). However, as Flew and Waisbord (2015) point out, many trends of old media have persisted, or even expanded, in this evolving media environment. While many smaller and regional publishers have struggled or gone under (Fray, 2018), massive traditional media players have gained influence, further consolidating already highly concentrated media ownership (Dwyer et al., 2021; Tiffen, 2015; Trappel & Meier, 2022). Innovations have brought change but have also exacerbated longstanding issues.

In multiple ways, this was visible in the data collected for this study. In Australia, the media environment behind the data set meant that every website with extensive readership was an online version of a legacy media organisation. Even the popular international online news sources made more accessible by expanding internet access, including DM but also *The Guardian*, were initially traditional news organisations in another country. In Korea, the top sites for news were new online-only providers, but with a catch: the news their aggregators display derives mostly from legacy media providers. As with Australia, smaller and regional providers have a limited presence and visibility. This is in addition to the already stated issue of news commenting being in an inherently subordinate role to the media sites' own journalistic production.

The Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2018) noted that previous assessments of the internet's potential to support journalism and media diversity may have been overstated and optimistic, and this data provided some further evidence that the online media environment has ultimately served to exacerbate rather than ameliorate media concerns. Recent submissions to the The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee (2021) indicated the variety of impacts this has had on the media available to the Australian public, with organisations such as Sky News, owned by the same organisation that dominates Australia's print media (News Corp) simply repackaging its broadcast content for their YouTube channel and regional newspapers being bought up and shut down in favour of online news distribution that focuses on metropolitan news. This draws further into question

early assumptions about the technologically deterministic beliefs of what these innovations portend.

Conversely, my results suggest that the problems facing media ecosystem are not entirely incidental to adapting to innovations. News commenting had implicit benefits in each country and presented mostly limited problems – they were an identifiably worthwhile addition. Where news commenting failed to provide substantive benefits or demonstrated risks, these outcomes could often be tied back to decisions made by organisations in each media ecosystem. The differences in results between Korea and Australia show, conversely, that news commenting can be opened everywhere for contributions of diverse views, that users will provide representation where given the opportunity, and that news commenting’s particular risks can be successfully contained. Consequently, governments, media organisations, and users need to consider news commenting as a versatile tool and decide what outcomes they would like to see. Even the simple step of communicating desirable outcomes had an apparent effect, but this was only one of the structures that I found impacting the results.

#### *The Impact of Structures on Participatory Media*

A striking finding in the data is that, despite this not being a categorically quantitative approach, there was a high level of consistency in the data by site. This highlighted the relevance of practical design elements to the contributions and risks of comment sections. While Meltzer (2015) and my own past research (Koskie, 2018) found that editors, journalists, and staff engage with commenting in a way that reflects their professional views and practices, the data here demonstrated that the shaping effect of site and commenting structures also has a potentially powerful impact on what and how comments appear.

These structures took several forms, as shown in the previous chapters. Perhaps the most visible was the pre-moderation and post-moderation approaches of SMH and DM, whereby DM’s rendered highly visible the risks of silencing speech. Conversely, Daum and Naver stated a heavy reliance on algorithmic filtering, resulting in the lowest levels of risks *and*

contributions. However, apparently minor structural differences were potentially more impactful, such as when small changes in the UIF led to starkly different levels of visible representation – Naver’s structures excluded this representation entirely. Sorting algorithms helped Naver and Daum feature less phatic communication in their most visible comments, but this also substantially reduced the prevalence of the divergent comments that contribute to diverse viewpoints and ideas.

What makes these structures an important focus is exposure diversity. Despite facing challenges in incorporating the emerging importance of participatory media, the MPM remains a valuable tool because it covers a range of that media that gets the most exposure (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). As found by the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2021), people do not broadly partake of the internet’s vast diversity, as many passively consume the most prominent websites. This is similarly a crucial concern for comments – Stroud et al. (2016) found that even active comment readers have a limit to their appetite for comments. Understanding that there is a limit to comment reading enables a more nuanced assessment of what these comments offer and draws additional attention to concerns around moderation styles, algorithmic sorting and phatic communication. What my study demonstrates is that the size of the sample impacts the potential for contribution and risk as shaped by these structures.

Simultaneously, this data suggests that organisations can leverage these impacts to achieve a wider range of goals than the considerations of raising interactivity analytics or avoiding vitriol that news organisations voiced to Huang (2016). Where news organisations have claimed to feel responsible for providing a forum for public debate and representing public views (Meltzer, 2015), tweaking the structures surrounding their commenting offers opportunities to foment these contributions in a predictable way. Each of these sites demonstrate this capacity: Naver and Daum are direct in their admonishment of vitriol and use of filters and see less vitriol; SMH explicitly describes the kinds of comments they want and do not want to see and their results reflect this; and DM provides additional capacity for representation and gets more

representation. This reinforces that the “swamp” of comments (Wolfgang, 2018) are often not *unmanageable* but rather *unmanaged*.

Each of the websites used in this study provide highly visible examples of how approaches can be augmented to achieve better results. Expanding the UIF to allow users to volunteer more about their background has few apparent drawbacks, but identifying users region (Kangaspunta, 2020), gender (Bhandari et al., 2021; Van Duyn et al., 2021), or other aspects of their background allows society’s diverse groups to have crucial visible representation (A. Jakubowicz, 2019). While this visibility can open such users to aggression (Gardiner, 2018; Ksiazek, 2018; Rösner et al., 2016), three of the four sites in this study were able to combat such silencing speech almost entirely using various forms of manual and algorithmic moderation alongside well-communicated guidelines. DM further demonstrates how news organisations can make the presence of comments highly visible and thereby invite vastly more contributions while Daum was able to achieve contributions on a larger portion of their public affairs articles. Coupling efforts to cultivate valuable, diverse and representative comments with effective moderation and higher visibility would lead these and other sites to feature news commenting that consistently and usefully contributes to the media ecosystem. At the same time, the news organisations would benefit from increased on-site time (Stroud et al., 2020), higher subscription rates and engagement (Huang, 2016), and reinforcement of journalistic values around hosting the public debate (Meltzer, 2015; Wolfgang, 2021). Such an inclusion and cultivation of comments also mediates the effects of increasing concentration of ownership – these sites would be granting wider reach to a greater diversity of media content.

#### *The Extensibility of Past Coding Approaches*

My research would not be possible without the foundations laid out not only by the MPM but also by previous news commenting researchers such as Milioni et al. (2012), Baden and Springer (2014), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019). In each of these cases, including in parallel

studies such as Ruiz et al. (2011), researchers indicated a need to establish new methods for tackling this new content that accommodates its unique nature.

What my research has demonstrated is that this fundamental coding work, establishing guidelines for news commenting content analysis that reconciles its specific characteristics with conceptual frameworks, can be employed to investigate a range of media concerns within these participatory spaces. I have brought in frameworks that were largely dissimilar to these previous studies by incorporating media pluralism, media ecosystems, and representation, as well as the distinctions raised by the divergent commenting and context of Korea and Australia. Yet, the coding approaches were able to yield impactful data, which suggests that this body of coding literature has achieved a level of generalisability that can help consolidate news commenting literature into more grounded insights.

Further, by focusing on transparency for its methodology, this research project has endeavoured to consolidate these related but diverse approaches into a set of reproducible practices and methods for extracting data from news commenting. The goal here was not to define the ultimate guide to best practices for participatory media coding, but rather to provide tools as provocations for further refinement. The data provides an example of outputs and how they can be used to test other relevant concepts and theories, further building on this growing body of participatory content coding and analysis. While a high level of methodological transparency can open the door to criticism (Snelson, 2016), such methodological provocations are a good problem to have as they offer a means of refining this media studies approach into a more precise tool of investigation. I recommend all such content analysis and media ecosystemic research endeavour to provide those specific details of their process (and obstacles) so as to pave the way for future research that can tackle media concerns more effectively.



*The Critical Importance of Cross-National Comparative Research*

Finally, this research provides benefits through its use of two unique but compelling media ecosystems in Australia and Korea and through the insights yielded by comparing them. Each of these contributions is beneficial in its own right.

Exploring the media ecosystems of Korea and Australia reinforces the assertion by Hitchens (2011) on the importance of considering each part of the media in the context of the whole environment. Where Ruiz et al. (2011) demonstrated that news commenting systems in four different countries had divergent content, the results were not situated in an assessment of each country's larger context, which partially separates the results from their potential impact. In this study, I established the surroundings of the comments as a part of the fundamental study design. As a result, the study was able to make an assessment of news commenting that connected to the specific environment of each country, problematising otherwise straightforward results. Additionally, it drew attention to two prominent countries whose media otherwise receives limited attention compared to the US and Europe (Jones & Pusey, 2008; Rhee et al., 2011), which each present unique levels of ownership concentration, political independence, infrastructure, and governance. This reinforced the importance of what Livingstone (2003) labelled studying nations as contexts, as each system impacted its news commenting in ways that were both separate from and integral to the characteristics of this relatively new medium.

The study's comparison provides its own contribution. The contrasting presentation and content of news commenting in these two countries offer opportunities for development and highlight distinct concerns. However, there is limited media in Australia analogous to Naver and Daum to provide these insights within that media ecosystem. Similarly, Korea's most prominent media does not engage in the level of manual curation and moderation of SMH nor the emphasis on cultivating comments as seen at DM. Juxtaposing these systems yielded insights for both about the impact of their media systems and their media organisations on news commenting. Livingstone (2003) notes that comparing national media systems presents deeply contextualised

and wide-reaching differences that can make generalisable findings fraught and difficult to achieve. She also proposes, however, that such a concern overlooks that a single nation study does not forego these challenges, but rather overlooks them, and a single nation study omits impacts of national media systems on the research object that a multi-national approach would otherwise reveal. My study provided extensive support for both of these views.

Whether single nation studies or multinational approaches, my research shows that examinations of media need to consider nations as contexts for the content being studied and the results achieved. Dwyer et al. (2018) and Ackland et al. (2019) demonstrate that even international online media such as Netflix and Twitter sees different impacts and different views in distinct national environments, while Flew and Waisbord (2015) show that national media retains a prominent role. Researchers need to make a space within their research that connects their findings to the national media system that could be playing a crucial role in their findings.

### **Exploring Paths for Further Research**

One of my central goals in conducting this qualitative research design was to explore methods for drawing this as well as other forms of participatory media into our understanding and evaluation of media systems. The ways countries assess their media systems impact the ways that they formulate their media policies, be it for regulation or support. Lacking a full perspective of the range of media the public consumes or the manifest potential of media innovations and developments can lead to policy failures, as discussed in the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2018). This invites a new set of challenges, however, as the media producers of news commenting are decentralised, widespread, and hard to contact (Barnes, 2018b), necessitating that such assessments turn to the content as it sits on the websites that the public most often see. The lack of transparency into the producers of participatory content is endemic to social media, as noted by Craig and Cunningham (2019, p. 61) in their study of user generated entertainment media. They further note that platforms' decisions and algorithms compound this challenge by changing which producers and content are highlighted,

an effect that extends to news commenting, according to Giannopoulos et al. (2015) and Suh et al. (2018). This effect was also visible in this study.

News commenting presents a specific case for this because of the ways it is positioned within other media and yet is produced almost entirely by outsiders. While social media broadly serves many social functions beyond news reading (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019), news commenting intersects with media pluralism in unique and layered ways, allowing for freedom of expression and access to information while simultaneously contributing to sustainability and representation in ways that other social media platforms do not. It is my hope that this exploration opens the door to new avenues of research that can enhance such assessments still further. These avenues could lead to a number of promising initiatives.

#### *Refining Metrics for Incorporating Participatory Media Into Media Ecosystem Assessments*

Perhaps the most suggestive path is that of extending the reach of this assessment onto other social media platforms – though this comes with a specific set of risks and challenges. Analytics through websites serving YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and more are growing in number and fidelity, enabling researchers to connect particular forms of social media consumption to respective media ecosystems. How this research contributes to that goal is by providing categories of consideration that tie both to media pluralism concerns and to the predictable content that has been found to typically occupy these participatory spaces. Broad categorisations of participatory media as a “fetid swamp” (Wolfgang, 2018) or a low value “playground” for participant users (Huang, 2016) obscure that individual comments and comment sections can propose specific forms of content whose value can be tied to important functions. A growing body of research already ties some forms of social media content to journalistic functions (Fisher, Culloty, Lee, & Park, 2019; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019; Wolfgang, 2019). Tying more specific metrics to the content coming through these channels to reach and exposure can allow researchers to describe the impact of other prevalent forms of social media on the system as well as to create a more holistic view.

The challenge, however, relates to issues of scope and function. News commenting presents a very specific value proposition as these popular discussions can be focused on public affairs issues either through the presence of the article (Santana, 2016) or moderation (Domingo, 2011). Further, news commenters are not broadcasting their views to select peer groups or navigating algorithms for broad general interest or invisibility (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018). While social media users do share news, it is often intentionally redundant or reproduced specifically because it serves a social goal rather than a journalistic one: users are aligning themselves with certain groups and ideas to place themselves within a community and construct some sense of identity (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Lomborg, 2012; Miller, 2008). Phatic communication appeared in the comment sections in this research, but participants had less latitude to focus conversations on constructing themselves and communicating with selected peers. As well, moderation and filtering appeared to work against this phatic interaction. Finally, the gates of news commenting are far more open than the gates of other forms of social media; social media producers with the most friends and the skills to navigate the algorithm have the most prevalent voice (Auxier & Vitak, 2019). News commenters do not have followers and individual users have much greater potential reach, which is not restricted by their personal following.

Nevertheless, there are potential workarounds for these differences between news commenting and other participatory media that could enable such an assessment – with crucial caveats. Scholars are already focusing their efforts on the popular social media content from the largest news organisations (Christensen, 2018; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011), and the comments on these posts in some ways mirror the qualities of news commenting, providing a simple method for expanding onto these platforms as well as opening the way for cross-platform comparative studies. While social media extends well past these news organisations, combining analytics with coding for public affairs news content can allow these emerging producers to be included as well. The scope of inclusion would be conducted in much the same way as this study's, with a focus on a set number of producers with the broadest reach (the vast majority of

social media content producers have nearly no exposure, with limited or no audience (Allmer, 2015)). When an adequate sample size has been achieved, coding such as that used in this study – an extension of those used by Baden and Springer (2014), Milioni et al. (2012), and Pinto-Coelho et al. (2019) – can be applied directly to the comments in a similar fashion. This approach also applies to the broad scope of functions within social media, as it excludes other content for non-news purposes, such as community interaction.

The caveat is that users frequently share articles that can go on to start new comment threads – indeed, sharing is a key way the content gets exposure (Dwyer & Martin, 2017). Further, users can discuss the news in their own feeds without sharing or commenting on these organisations’ or influential users’ posts. In the same vein, unlike for news commenting, there is limited data on how much time readers spend on comments specifically for these news items, something Stroud et al. (2016) has enabled for news commenting. Lacking the concentrated viewership of sites like Korea’s Naver and Australia’s ABC, negotiating a meaningful scope to present a broad view that relates to the media ecosystem could present a challenging barrier to this kind of research which is compounded by exposure diversity concerns. Still, given that these news organisations have cross-platform and cross-media reach, a picture could be developed that provides insights into at least these major figures.

#### *Grounding Results in Audience Perceptions*

A missing plank in this and other social media research is having a clear sense of what exposure means when the public looks at social media. While Webster (2009) makes clear that gauging exposure is a crucial component for our understanding of media systems, surveys done by Stroud et al. (2016) show that what goes into this exposure is not uniform from reader to reader. Beyond the depth of reading for individual readers, there is also the issue of breadth, as different users consume a wider or narrower range of media (Newman et al., 2020). This becomes more complex with the interactivity of various forms of social media – users differently

engage with opportunities to interact with (Dwyer & Martin, 2017) and produce (Springer et al., 2015) this content.

Ethnographic or other high-depth research into practical reading habits is required to contextualise results and to find the most appropriate scope for research. Surveys provide powerful instruments for understanding how users see their own activity, but research on third person effect indicates that users can face challenges when gauging their own exposure and its impacts (Chen & Ng, 2016). Ofcom (2018) conducted such a study with a small group of participants (22) using a variety of recording processes and screen capturing and found user media habits deviate significantly from self-reporting. Beyond providing clear challenges to survey-based approaches, their technique uncovered new objects of research that may provide more accurate measurements of exposure.

While such research demands high levels of resources and participant interaction, it would pay dividends for scholars, comment-hosting organisations, and media policy experts. Seeing participants engage with news reading in practice, through one means or another, would provide an estimate of not only how much time is spent looking at comments but also how it compares to time spent reading the articles or other forms of relevant content. Engaging with readers in post-exposure interviews or quizzes can demonstrate levels of retention and influence. Springer et al. (2015) engaged with readers and writers of comments to identify what makes them initiate, but new research could help explore what readers leave with. It is this exposure and influence that is central to my research: the potential contributions hinge on the public being exposed to them in a significant and impactful way. There would be broad value for all stakeholders to have a more grounded and practical knowledge of that reception.

#### *The Missing Link of Representation in Participatory Content*

While diversity of viewpoints and information had a striking presence in the results – with implications for key media pluralism metrics – past research (Baden & Springer, 2014; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2019) had indicated this potential if not its variability by

site and system. A more distinct finding was both the extent to which commenters could contextualise their contributions in their personal background and that this background could play a visible role in how the messages were received. A common message in several comment sections (particularly those relating to public health measures) was that the news affected them because of who they were and what their situation was. This is a fundamental premise of value behind the social inclusiveness factors for media pluralism (Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015), but news commenting provided a particularly intimate vehicle for this representation. Where this was present, such as the commenter pointing out his inability to visit family in Africa because no African nations were listed for opening to travel, the viewpoint introduced was new for several framing elements, there was new information, and a new group was visible. While comparatively rare, these personal accounts provided striking examples. Consequently, representation plays a crucial role in how comments can finish the “unfinished” story (Morrison, 2017).

Given the importance of community in how and whether groups participate in commenting (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), future research can explore ways that these groups can be made more visible, attaching their ideas to their contexts. DM provides an example of a way that users can provide some of this identification at their leisure, optionally, and almost every user contributed some kind of information in this space. Conversely, Naver entirely disassociates messages from the characteristics of the speakers, and almost no identification is possible. Experiments could be conducted whereby certain important areas of representation can similarly be offered as part of the UIF to determine whether users would elect to display this information and how that would impact the comment section. Further, algorithmic and manual approaches can be trialled to elevate this representation to the most visible part of comment sections. Such approaches could attempt to address lack of representation broadly or specifically, elevating issues of gender, for instance.

This potential could not be and should not be left to scholars and academics, however – it has practical implications for news organisations and government policy, as well. While such representation is an important part of media pluralism (Klimkiewicz, 2015), Hitchens (2015) notes that it is largely issues of ownership concentration that are the focus in Australia, providing a key context for the low rates of representation in Australian comments. News organisations, guided by scholarship and government policy goals, are best disposed to finding ways to cultivate the visibility of diverse groups in their comment section. This could take the form of algorithmic “nudging”, as recommended by Vermeulen (2022), which could also be applied in public service media (Helberger & Burri, 2015; Sørensen & Hutchinson, 2018). While news organisations may be uncertain about infringing on users’ freedom of expression (Hwang & Jeong, 2018; Koskie, 2018; Meltzer, 2015), such trepidation is apparently not a barrier to shutting off comments entirely. Public service media and commercial media organisations could play an instrumental role in assessing structures, communication, moderating, and policies that cultivate broadly valuable comment sections with cost effective approaches.

Such an effort could have implications for both representation and sustainability. Ewart and Beard (2017) found that minorities feel excluded and disenfranchised from unrepresentative media, and Roy Morgan (2018b) found people visit social media communities to find relatable and inclusive media. Experimenting with ways to increase this representation could consequently increase access to news for these communities, increase the visibility of marginalised groups’ concerns, and increase the audience for these news organisations.

### **On the Limitations of Scope and Streamlining Assessments**

These potential further explorations of news commenting are important because this study faced a number of limitations that prevented it from tackling these wider concerns. Contextualising the results within these constraints adds necessary nuance to the information as well as providing opportunities for future development.



Resource limits were a guiding force for this research on two levels: this project had finite funding and support so identifying cost-effective solutions for assessment was a core goal. In the first regard, by working to keep the project within an accessible budget, I strove to reduce potential costs in a variety of areas. One impact of this was to reduce the requirements for Korea-based coders and transcribers, consequently reducing the extent of their treatment of the Korean data. It also had an impact on the ultimate method – original plans had included employing the services of expert ICT staff that could craft data sampling techniques for each of websites and days of sample, but this was truncated to initial advice leading to self-developed data collection regimes that employed a mix of app-based and manual approaches. While this incurred its own costs, in the form of app subscription services, self-study programmes, and extensive programming and development timeframes, it provided a far more cost-effective solution. Further, it allowed me to trial a variety of approaches, with this iterative process adding to the efficacy of the developed tools for assessment.

While these resource limitations had a decisive effect on the study's development, other concerns led me to focus on news commenting, even as extensive scholarship focused on social media more broadly. A vital concern was the ethical situation surrounding the study of social media content, and its implications for identification and privacy of social media contributors that can be considered not to have consented to public viewing in the way that other news media has historically been studied. Ethical treatment of social media research straddles a line between text research and human research (Samuel et al., 2018), leading to evolving guidelines for appropriate methods of research. Much of this hinges on consent and identification: it is unclear the extent to which users consent to their material being publicly visible and, perhaps more importantly, the extent to which they recognise themselves as being publicly visible.

These concerns are categorically mitigated for news commenting, as users are intended not to be identifiable and their statements are on an explicitly public-facing webpage, not connected to users' personal platform-hosted micro-blogs and profiles. Further, social media

platform content more generally is frequently focused specifically on users self-identifying and connecting with personal and virtual communities (Sarjanoja et al., 2013), where the results here indicate that news commenting focuses on elaboration and development of public affairs discussions as designated by news media websites, which news commenters rarely deviate from (Baden & Springer, 2014). Expanding such research onto social media platforms more generally would not have these safeguards for consent and privacy, and would require greater care and significantly more governance (Callaghan et al., 2021).

In ways, these constraints presented difficult challenges that impacted the results, but they were not merely problems to be solved. Their influence also led the methods towards specific approaches that played a role in the form and value of the results. The limitations guided me towards an exploratory and qualitative design that offered opportunities for insights that a larger, more quantitatively orientated study could not have yielded. In this way, they operated more as a road than a wall.

### **Towards an Expanded Understanding of the Modern Media Ecosystem**

This research into the intersection between news commenting, media pluralism, and media ecosystems has had, at its core, a central goal: to better inform our evaluation of and decision-making for our media ecosystem. Doing this requires adapting our assessments to include the wider variety of sources being utilised by the increasingly online public. This presents a challenge for current media pluralism approaches. Media pluralism's already expansive scope (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, et al., 2018; Valcke, Picard, Dal Zotto, et al., 2015) struggles to include the wide range of highly dynamic online media that can stretch existing frameworks and pose challenges for their applicability (Dwyer, 2019).

My study elaborated and tested such an assessment while providing insights into a relatively new form of media presenting in the Australian and Korean media ecosystems. By exploring a variety of approaches and concerns for how to capture this data, I was able to uncover key obstacles and experiment with ways to overcome them. From this, I was able to

present empirically grounded information from a data set that was simultaneously relevant and contained in size. The ultimate result was a study that yielded impactful qualitative data which showed a high level of consistency across the most visible examples in the media systems, with each system being treated by an individual or small team. This content analysis demonstrated a cost-effective way to introduce this new metric, one that offers multiple opportunities for further refinement and efficacy as needed.

My study also demonstrated that the Korean and Australian media ecosystems exhibit extraordinary value as subjects of media systems and media pluralism research, particularly in light of their distinct online and offline media environments. With both fitting the description of “polarised pluralist” media systems in the models of Hallin and Mancini (2004) (Jones & Pusey, 2010; Rhee et al., 2011), the focus could be placed on their points of divergence and tying these differences to the distinct data presented from each country’s most visible news comments. This paid dividends on both sides of the research, with news commenting highlighting aspects of each system while simultaneously demonstrating the ways news commenting correlates to this larger media system rather than presenting a contrasting addition or disruptive innovation.

My findings support the value of cross-national comparisons as crucial for understanding news commenting’s potential effects, a core goal of the Media Pluralism Project behind this work. Through the lens of media ecology (Cali, 2017), it becomes apparent that the media ecosystem can contextualise and affect news commenting in key ways. Without the similar and divergent backgrounds of Korea and Australia, not only would it be challenging to identify how much of news commenting is endemic to the medium rather than the environment, but the study would also have missed insights into ways that news commenting is embodying the extant media ecosystem rather than simply adding to or disrupting it. These findings reinforce the value of nation-as-context comparative studies (Livingstone, 2003, p. 484) “to test the hypothesised universality of a particular phenomenon,” as the characteristics of the medium and its content were inextricably tied to the media ecosystem. This was a fundamental premise behind the Media

Pluralism Project (Wilding et al., 2022 (forthcoming)), which highlights the diverse ways the globe is encountering and integrating media innovations.

In each of the Korean and Australian media systems, I found consistent examples of news commenting contributions that were relevant to media pluralism, inviting diverse viewpoints and new information while presenting limited risks. Simultaneously, the divergent results show that news commenting is not a monolithic form of content, but rather a platform whose contents are shaped by the structures around it and the stakeholders interacting with it – which also appeared to limit its relative contribution. In Australia, news comments were absent from the prominent websites with the highest readership despite the highly diverse content they offered on less visible sites. By contrast, Korea's more accessible and visible comment sections featured a dearth of representation of gender, regions, or minority groups, continuing or potentially exacerbating existing trends. Nevertheless, each site I studied displayed contributions from news commenting wherever they were allowed, alongside opportunities for further development regarding other media pluralism concerns.

An overriding finding that became apparent throughout the project is how salient and important media pluralism concerns were as a consideration for newer forms of media and the role that news commenting could play in assessments of media ecosystems. Engaging in this exploratory qualitative content analysis of the research object within contrasting media ecosystems revealed not only that news commenting can be assessed in a relevant scope but also that this content has a nuanced presentation of unique contributions and risks. With each media ecosystem having different media pluralism concerns, the study was able to show that news commenting offers relative, rather than absolute, benefits and risks depending on the environment. The expansive scope of the research offers several paths towards enhancing the scholarship for both media pluralism and news commenting. These comments below the line on news stories can provide a window into how participatory media acts as a growing part of our media system.

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