CHAPTER 3

Instilling Mistrust in Institutions

Gab Example 1

We have Mueller indicting imaginary Russian Trolls, Nancy Pelosi saying the grass should be mowed in AZ along the boarder, as a security measure, incase Mexicans are hiding in it! Put this in a book, no one would publish it they would think you insane.

In the comment above, Russian troll denial frame suggests that Russian trolls are merely figments of Robert Mueller's imagination. The author of this Gab post attempts to persuade readers that US Department of Justice Special Counsel Robert Mueller has indicted "imaginary" Russian trolls. While invalidation of the Mueller investigation underlies this persuasion attempt, the very existence of Russian trolls is questioned through the statement that no book on the topic stands a chance of being published. Such rhetorical attempts exemplify this chapter's main subject: How online comments retaliated against media and government institutions (by challenging their credibility) that scrutinized and covered stories on Russian trolling.

This chapter examines conditions that contextualize inauthentic participation online that leads to chaos. Specifically, it details how media institutions have been facing continuous attacks and those attacks were used to deflect attention from Russian trolling. Such trivialization of Russian trolling, while attacking news media as institutions, has been identified in all analyzed media sources comments, exemplified by attempts to undermine public trust. In addition, attacks in the analyzed comments were addressed against US government agencies such as the FBI, by criticizing for its involve-

ment in Russian trolling investigations. This chapter's goal is to introduce how reputable news media institutions, despite following the best practices to foster democratic debate online, have become targets of attacks to justify Russian trolling or divert attention from it.

To contextualize online news comments, it is critical to point out that print media have transformed in the past years and adapted to digital formats by moving online while retaining their print versions. Scholars have expressed continuous optimism for the role of technology and automation as ways to increase quality of the production of the print press of the future and even the potentials to leverage automation to enhance the quality (Diakopoulos, 2019). Through digitalization, as some scholars such as Usher (2014) noted, news organizations have changed. Similarly, news portals have embraced the emergence of the new values—immediacy, interactivity, and participation—that online platforms offer. News portals reflect such a trend by fostering an increasing engagement of their readership by soliciting comments to news stories. Such comments can be interpreted as a form of readers' participation in the sense making of the news or at least in response to news stories.

Yet with the emergence of inauthentic participation, news comments are paradoxical: On the one hand, they deliver a promise of a deliberative online participation. On the other hand, by the virtue of being open to anyone, they also represent a "weak link" that technologically allows for inauthentic participation to creep into online spaces even if unintentionally. Thus, this chapter discusses how, with the emergence of inauthentic participation, news comment sections can, to a certain degree, challenge the democratic principle underlying online discursive participation and debate and can be exploited by forces beyond democratic ideals. While the option to post comments exemplifies the democratic ideal of free speech (since any user can post), this option can also be exploited to advance agendas that are actually predetermined by specific stakeholders—possibly even foreign governments.

Because comments are written by users instead of professional journalists, news portal comments are less codified than the news stories to which they respond. By no means does this chapter argue for disabling news comments, as they are vital for the public sphere because they represent multiple voices and a potential for multiple points of view—based on ideals of the democratic public sphere. Instead, this chapter exposes challenges journalists today face with contentious phenomena, exemplified here through Russian trolling, and the attacks that have been launched to the news media organizations through the same news comment sections.

News comment exploitation for inauthentic participation has been con-

ceptualized through the lens of dark participation. Frischlich et al. (2018) described dark participation as "comments that transgress norms of politeness or honesty with partially sinister motives" (p. 1). This chapter argues for news comments and especially the attacks on media as institutions playing a critical role in breaches to democracy. When it comes to online participation, newspapers have to constantly adjust in relation to incorporating reader comments. And this balance has not been easy. Some newspapers function as fierce gatekeepers; others observe it more passively, as argued in the recent research on dark participation mentioned earlier; and others are leveraging artificial intelligence and machine-learning techniques to deal with dark participation.

This chapter documents how news media organizations and journalists have received numerous attacks in the commenting sections of the news portals, attacks focused on challenging the credibility and authority of traditional journalism. Specifically, considering the hostility expressed toward mainstream media, as demonstrated by recent research, for example by Ihlebaek and Holter (2021), this chapter starts with some of the contexts based on which online spaces can become preconditioned to unwillingly "hosting" Russian trolling, along with any other online participation. By doing so, this chapter discusses the conditions in which disinformation as chaos can be created in news portals by detailing conditions that have transformed news portals' commenting section into information battlegrounds.

Living in Media

Deuze (2011) has insightfully observed that we are not living with media, but in media. This heightened sense of *being in* media reconfigures our ability to make sense of it. In other words, the more we are enmeshed in media, the more our ability to grasp the complexity of increasing information streams diminishes—even if our confidence in media savviness increases, as demonstrated by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). In their study on the 2016 US presidential election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) revealed that 14% of Americans considered social media their most important source of information. Yet, false stories about presidential candidates were shared 38 million times (30 million favoring Donald Trump and 8 million favoring Hillary Clinton). Remarkably, Americans were exposed at least with one fake news story. These statistics indicate an overconfidence in assessing online sources.

Conditions that have generated the vulnerability of online spaces to Russian trolling had been steadily evolving throughout the past decade. Such

vulnerability is, in part, attributable to the paradoxical situations in which media and information communication technologies had evolved. The first paradox involves the false perception of user empowerment through technology, related to the celebration of "you" phenomenon. Specifically, in 2006, *Time* magazine named "you" Person of the Year where the cover reads: "Yes, you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world" (Grossman, 2006). In short, the message is that "'you' inhabit the center of all media." This message implies that general users, ordinary citizens, and online comment writers (all designated by "you") are positioned to define information and to control it. It is, indeed, a very powerful and potentially self-transformative message for everyone in this information age. The front cover design for the 2006 issue of *Time* reinforces the message's power: The word "you" is centered on a gray area that doubles as a computer screen and a reflective mirror surface. Thus, the subliminal message behind this design is that "you," an ordinary person, has control over technology and information flows.

This message encourages the reassurance that ordinary people define online spaces, be it from the information infrastructure perspective or content—and that all online contributions are actually authentic, even if it is not entirely true. This assumption has been challenged on several grounds ever since the resurgence of automated and coordinated online behaviors through the information warfare and dark participation practices mentioned earlier. While now more than ever, all users can contribute to the content within online spaces, we, the ordinary people (i.e., who *Time* addresses as "you"), are less informed about how networks enable information flows—despite the fact that each of us has acquired a certain degree of familiarity with our own personal networks of information flows.

Moreover, our capacity to store and own our contributions online (in a form of posts or comments or video) is limited, let alone to access to other users' data and network. Some exceptions to owning one's data include some mobile platforms such as WhatsApp, which give users the option to download and store it. Even if there are visionary open data initiatives (for example, by the Open Data Institute ("About the ODI," n.d.), at the current point, this is the exception, not the norm. Otherwise, online data are available (typically in formats that are not conducive to be saved) within the specific platform, owned by the platform, or for purchase.

Similarly, even when we had the technological means to look at other networks, it could be difficult to make sense of them. News portal comments illustrate this challenge—as readers of news portals' comments, we typically look at each individual post at a certain time (e.g., when

we access it) rather than at a series of posts over an extended time. Nor is it easy to access individual user's posts, since typically comments are not designed with such a purpose. Thus, we do not "get to know" these anonymous online writers through their posting over time. Our network experiences can be somewhat different on social media platforms, such as Twitter, where users who follow one another can gradually get to know one another through posts. On many platforms, however, users cannot easily access their own produced data points—let alone gain easy access to networks of data. Exceptions include user comments that are outsourced to third-party platforms such as Disqus that function as social networking sites and user-level posts are available, if a user is set as public. Yet such third-party platforms do not necessarily foster a sense of community for a given news portal or share their data.

Access to data becomes even more critical during times when new actors emerge into media spaces. Frequently, such actors become known for their vested interests. For example, media analyses of the 2016 US presidential election reveal that internet users have scrutinized concerted efforts to circulate information through advertisements or bot activities (Stromer-Galley, 2019). Yet the constant flow of messages—specifically, in social media, complicates the identification of the initial sender of a given message, let alone the rationale for sending it. Moreover, in the current media landscape, knowledge of larger-scale networks and message flows has acquired unprecedented importance. In other words, the use of online spaces through the observation of our own individual network had formerly sufficed. Today, however, the forces behind dark participation reconfigure our expectations about what we need to understand within the online world.

Nearly a decade and a half since the popularization of the "you" phenomenon, its repercussions have emerged through the paradox of dark participation. After all, the phrase itself is paradoxical because it implies that not all types of participation are equal. Furthermore, dark participation entails an orchestration of participation that we are facing in the current media landscape, and this is posited by the following excerpt from Massimo Calabresi's (2017) *Time* magazine story "Inside Russia's Social Media War on America": "Marrying a hundred years of expertise in influence operations to the new world of social media, Russia may finally have gained the ability it long sought but never fully achieved in the Cold War: to alter the course of events in the US by manipulating public opinion. The vast openness and anonymity of social media has cleared a dangerous new route for antidemocratic forces" (para. 4).

Here, Calabresi (2017) mentioned the unprecedented nature of Russian

influence in the US public sphere. He then cited Rand Waltzman, who led a major Pentagon research program enabling the identification of propaganda threats that social media technology posed: "Using these technologies, it is possible to undermine democratic government, and it's becoming easier every day" (Calabresi, 2017, para. 4).

"Antidemocratic forces" and "undermine democratic government" are keyword clusters that can be singled out from these quotations to emphasize the new role of media institutions and news comments. Antidemocratic processes can take place not only through actual warfare, where military troops are deployed for combat in designated territories, but also through what Simons (2015) called soft influence. In other words, forms of soft influence (the online counterparts of military troops) are subliminal, algorithmic, and fully embedded within the contexts in which they appear. While such contexts can be social media sites, soft influence can also emerge as dark participation in news story comments.

Forms of soft influence are embedded in that they can resemble comments or opinions written by ordinary users. Of course, there is always the possibility that such messages are authored by actual human users, given that they can be further amplified by users for whom they resonate—even if, only partially, and despite their function as the means of spreading conspiracy theories or rumors. Such rumors do not need to be real—in other words, verifiable, through factual debunking. Instead, it suffices if their recipients perceive them as real. Such contested truth illustrated here through the case of interference in the 2016 US presidential election—an issue discussed here within the context of dark participation. To account for dark participation in online news, as argued by Quandt (2018), the following sections conclude with the challenge of post-truth that create uncertainties not only for news comments interpretation but also for the treatment of news organizations.

Exploiting Post-Truth

Delfi.lt Example by Anonymous Users 1

Headline: kremlin trolling.....
Comment: The current Russian propaganda differs from the one that has been used in the soviet times since it has adapted to the principles of the western liberal democracy. For example, Russia registers their own channels in the European Union countries and in them they project their own propagandistic positions as a 'different opinion' and the Western countries

> **see it as some kind of expression of the pluralistic opinions. The problem of the West is that, there is no truth and everyone just merely needs to have their own opinion.**

This Delfi.lt comment answers the question: "How does Kremlin trolling work?" It suggests that there are certain vulnerabilities inherent in the democratic premises of the need to include and foster alternative viewpoints. Such vulnerabilities are exploited by Russian trolling. The primary objective of democratic deliberation is clarification through debate. Thus, as Zelizer (2004) put it eloquently, the goal of journalism is the presentation of problems rather than their solutions. Moreover, through news stories or exchanges with news readers, journalists can clarify issues, shed light on obscure speculations, and provide evidence and interpretation. However, regardless of the sense-making mechanisms that news readers are offered—be it framing or community journalism—all of them are geared toward clarifying issues.

Such striving for clarity has been challenged by the rise of what is called *fake news* over the past several years—a phenomenon that has revived questions concerning truth in the mass media—thus, the concept of truth is yet another condition that challenges news portals. Over the years, best practices in journalism were prescribed to safeguard the truthfulness of information to alert citizens about the most pressing issues. Thus, while journalistic practices have changed over time through adaptation to new communication information ecosystems, commitment to information's truthfulness remains the primary ideal of the journalism profession. Despite such shifts to online platforms, news portals retain their original objectives: holding news reporters and writers to the highest standards of journalistic practice to inform readers about current events. After all, confirmed truthfulness—for example, through verified sources—has become a main cornerstone of democratic deliberation. Consequently, fact-checking has been proposed as a crucial means of combating fake news (e.g., "Factcheck, Factcheck: A project," n.d.). After all, citizens have the right to access accurate information. Furthermore, they have the right to produce their own interpretations of that information.

Today's journalists are also challenged with the threat of democratic subversion through information influence tactics that closely resemble those of propaganda. Because such influence models are based on information subversion in news portal comments, they elude fact-checking to a certain degree. Thus, they are more related to disinformation—a phenomenon that can, in turn, be related to what constitutes truth in the modern and postmodern worlds.

The transparency of journalistic practice has been considered yet

another cornerstone of democratic deliberation (Phillips, 2010). Consequently, journalists have focused on source verification as ways to achieve transparency. Yet the term "post-truth" entered dictionaries in 2015 directly before the US presidential election. Post-truth refers to circumstances where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and to preexisting beliefs (Tsipursky, 2017). For example, Tsipursky (2017) argued that the concept of post-truth was exploited by Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and throughout his first year in office. Trump's communications team caused multiple truths to morph into alternative facts within popular vocabularies. This communicative metamorphosis implies that facts and truths are far from synonymous and that news media facts are particularly susceptible to public skepticism. Such attitudes exemplify subversive postmodernist views of the truth and validate the inclusion of alternative practices, such as Russian trolling, within information ecosystems.

Russian trolling can be part of a broader discussion about who disseminates what types of information. Over the past several years, information sources for trolling have included discussions about fake news detection and resistance. "Fake news" is a label that can be used to degrade all categories of information. In fact, that label can be similarly attached to the misinformation spread by automated bots. Moreover, "fake news" also has become a convenient the coinage used to interrogate the legitimacy of journalistic sources. Thus, the controversy about what constitutes fake news rages on. The arbitrary "fake news" label that depreciates journalistic sources can also discredit other legitimate sources even if they can serve to scrutinize bot-based or trolling behaviors.

However, even in the face of supporting evidence, truth remains contested, as described through the "fake news" accusations. The concepts of post-truth, fake news, and alternative facts are strongly related to the uncertainty about legitimate objects of belief or constructions of reality—or even the possibility that foreign governments use online commenting for agenda advancement, as detailed by Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) in their assessment of post-truth in the Ukrainian conflict coverage. Such uncertainty has also led to the interrogation of the bases of information communication technologies, and their affiliated institutions.

Thus, through the notion of "fake news" news organizations are facing heightened interrogation. In fact, such interrogation has intensified to the point that, in some instances, a pledge of truth has been drafted as an initiative where journalists can use their sources to profess their commitment to

tell the truth ("Protruth Pledge," n.d.). This practice is problematic, since its default premise is that journalists are untruthful. It also implies such pledges of truth are necessary, while exemplifying how postmodernist definitions of truth have been interrogated.

Postmodernist treatment of truth complicates the treatment of all information, including comments in online news portals. Ideally, multiple truths should provide more clarity and certainty. In actuality, however, such multiplicity challenges facts and pushes the boundaries of human understanding. And such post-truth can be exploited for information warfare. The beginnings of the post-truth movement, which permits the coexistence of multiple and subjective individual claims to truth, are identifiable before it even affected the US around the time of the 2016 presidential election.

Yet the concept of post-truth was a discussion item for news organizations prior to that. For instance, in the UK media in 2015, the notion of post-truth had been linked to Russian propaganda techniques, as outlined in an editorial from the 2 March 2015 issue of *The Guardian*: "The idea that there are multiple interpretations of the truth has become the founding philosophy of state disinformation in Putin's Russia" (*The Guardian* Editorial, para. 2)." *The Guardian* describes, however briefly, the interrelation of propaganda techniques and the exploitative, obfuscating aspects of post-truth. Even so, it can still be argued that a lens for interpreting post-truth is merely being offered. In fact, other scholars (e.g., Heinrich & Pleines, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2014; Roudakova, 2017), have identified the concept of post-truth within the extant repertoire of classical propaganda techniques.

There is a list of dangers to media ecosystems presented by post-truth. Post-truth positioned as alternative interpretation of controversial or ideological events serve to instilling cynicism. Cynicism, instilled particularly by the alt-right media, or what Rae (2020) urged us to call hyperpartisan media, has been found to be detrimental to the media institutions and their credibility. And, for example, there is increasing evidence showing that alt-right media sources push boundaries of the post-truth (Rae, 2020).

Dangers and mechanics of post-truth as the discursive cornerstone for justifying authoritarian regimes have been also exposed by scholars like Pomerantsev (2014). Similarly, Roudakova (2017) specified how post-truth originated in an overarching Soviet propaganda model. Thus, by situating it within authoritarian contexts, she advanced her argument that, in the former Soviet Union, even though citizens could have distrusted media content, they still upheld high modernist notions of the truth—in other words, that the truth existed and was determinable, even if media, such as newspapers, were prohibited from exposing it. Consequently, the public learned to

read between the lines of newsprint, knowing that there were always variations of the truth—those that were unavoidably visible in their daily lives.

Roudakova (2017) also argued that authoritarian regimes, such as Vladimir Putin's Russia, manipulated the notion of truth as ways to silence their critics. The rationale behind such attacks can be formulated thus: "If there is more than one version of the truth, then, who is to say your version is better than mine?" Such rhetoric exemplifies the whataboutism discussed earlier. Whataboutism invariably presents alternate explanations, or counterarguments, that generate false equivalencies in response to previously stated claims. In addition to whataboutism, Kalpokas (2019) argued that post-truth is enabled through mediatization and affect.

The debilitating effects of post-truth have been attributed to politics as well. Categorized as post-truth politics, it typically represents American conversative ways to defend established status quo, as argued by Andrejevic (2013). In other words, postmodernism is useful only if it can augment our understanding. Postmodernism has been exploited to create more uncertainty or to craft influence by provoking oppositional thinking. Uncertainty is created by diverting attention from a given issue when multiple truths are invoked through whataboutism, discussed in Chapter 2. Such a rhetorical maneuver can prevent the augmentation of understanding about an issue that was originally the main focus of attention.

Moreover, endorsement of postmodernist multiplicity of viewpoints can complicate understanding of everyday life facts. Because some aspects of postmodernism are historically rooted, they can provide elements of plausible truth. More specifically, postmodernism can appropriate the ideological premises of various belief systems to produce a confusing theoretical synthesis. Thus, the post-truth paradigm of postmodernism creates challenges for news interpretation. Yet the postmodernist philosophy paradoxically challenges the very assumptions about reality that it contextualizes. In sum, because multiple realities are acceptable in the postmodernist world, postmodernism challenges our understanding of truth.

Comments as Forms of News Deliberations

Having specified that the first of these paradoxes involves the "you" phenomenon and that the second relates to dark participation, and the consequences of post-truth, the third is based on a set of preconditions. When the democratic deliberations are a priority, news portals strive to intentionally implement technological affordances that foster such a democratic debate. Thus, given such objectives, the news portals, selected for this analysis,

among numerous other news organizations worldwide, adhere to a mission that encourages sense making of the news stories by their readers in the commenting section. While news portals share many similar features, there is a certain amount of variation in their approaches to soliciting user participation. Thus, it can be said that all analyzed news portals in this book endorse the same principles of democratic deliberation through their commenting affordances—and whether their respective political leanings tend toward the right or to the left. Such principles include the sociotechnical means that enable and provide online spaces to encourage the discursive involvement of all citizens—spaces where they can freely process and interpret news stories. On the one hand, the challenges of online deliberation limit the control that news portals can exercise over the content of reader comments. On the other hand, they do retain a certain level of sociotechnical control over such content.

The first thing to consider is that news portals take online participation seriously. They create and reinforce rules for participation from the outset and specify what constitutes meaningful user participation. Each of the analyzed online portals here outlined participation values in its guidelines. For instance, the *New York Times* specified these guidelines: "We are interested in articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article. We welcome your advice, your criticism and your unique insights into the issues of the day. To be approved for publication, your comments should be civil and avoid name-calling. Our standards for taste are reflected in the articles we publish in the newspaper and on *The New York Times*; we expect your comments to follow that example. A few things we won't tolerate: personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes), commercial promotion, impersonations, incoherence and SHOUTING" ("New York Times Home, Comments," n.d., para. 1, 2). These guidelines emphasized the focus on "on-topic" comments and their perceived relevance to a given discussion.

As for Delfi.lt, not only were text boxes provided for user commenting, so were guidelines on what constitutes participation. Thus, even if readers do not read the actual fine print for the guidelines in other Delfi.lt spaces, they pop up each time they create a new post in the designated text boxes. The Delfi.lt comment box example includes the following text:

> **Write your opinion. Connect via Delfi.lt, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Yahoo or create an account here.**
> **[Box for a comment] Post your opinion. You agree with the rules. [Post button.]**

As this Delfi.lt comment box illustrates, users see the following invitation: "Write your opinion." To enable them to do that, they are invited to register through social media logins of their choice. These include Delfi itself, Delfi.lt, Facebook, Twitter, Google, or Yahoo, even if most users post comments anonymously. By clicking onto the hyperlink, they can access participation rules. Delfi.lt's discussion system allows for readers to express their opinions regarding any of the news stories. Readers can also add information, share ideas with like-minded readers, or simply disagree with others in a confidential way. However, Delfi.lt displays the IP address of authors ("Delfi.lt Apie," n.d.).

Similarly, *Breitbart* provides a link to their user participation rules within commenting boxes and the following text in the commenting box:

> **Number of comments Breitbart News Network Login**
> **Recommend Tweet Share Sort by Newest/Oldest**
> **Join the discussion [write a comment]**
> **Login with Disqus, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or sign up with Disqus [name]**

The link for *Breitbart*'s terms and conditions leads directly to a new page where user participation rules are outlined in a nine-page document. These include their policies on incivility and bot-based activities (Breitbart, 2020). Specifically, *Breitbart* explicates the legal rights of the commenting:

> You agree not to provide User Content that: Infringes on, misappropriates or otherwise violates the copyright, trademark, patent or other intellectual property right of any person; Is false, misleading, libelous, slanderous, defamatory, obscene, abusive, hateful, or sexually-explicit; Violates a person's right to privacy or publicity; Contains advertising or a solicitation of any kind; Degrades others on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual preference, orientation or identity, disability, or other classification; Contains epithets or other language or material intended to intimidate or to incite violence; Or violates any applicable local, state, national, or international law, or advocates illegal activity (Breitbart Terms of Use, n.d., para. 11).

As for Gab (2020), the site described itself as "Welcome to Gab.com: a social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online. All are welcome" (para. 1). The Gab website also specifies terms and conditions that include the legal aspects of posting. For

instance, Gab stated: "The Company reserves the right to take any action with respect to any User Contribution that we deem necessary or appropriate in our sole discretion" ("Gab. Gab AI INC," n.d., para. 8).

Even if news portals clamp down on user discussions about controversial issues, they provide users with the option to engage with such content through the traditional letters to the editor, as exemplified in the following *New York Times* section that has been closed to commenting: "The comments section is closed. To submit a letter to the editor for publication, write letters@nytimes.com."

As discernible from these four platforms, all users are invited to participate in online discussions within designated parameters. Nevertheless, based on platforms selected for such participation, news portals will determine content engagement levels for users. For instance, news portals can decide to include text-based reactions (e.g., comments, responses). Otherwise, they can favor visual icon-based ones (e.g., a thumbs-up symbol for "likes," thumbs-down for "dislikes," other emoji). Similarly, Delfi.lt includes user IP addresses, in addition to or in lieu of other forms of authentication. Finally, the institutional practices of news portals can determine the extent to which user information they will collect. While some news portals permit anonymous posting, others do not. Moreover, while some include third-party posting (e.g., via social media platforms), others, such as *Breitbart*, outsource commenting to a third-party platform (e.g., Disqus).

Other news portal practices address policies on user comment archiving. While some news portals archive stories for an unlimited time, they can also limit user access to comments (e.g., up to one month on Delfi.lt). Others do not place such limits (e.g., *Breitbart*, *New York Times*). Procedures for reporting message posting times also vary among news portals. For example, while some include the chronological time reference (e.g., 12 April 2018), others use the chronologically reversed time (e.g., 5 minutes ago).

Even if all the discussed portals solicit comments, subsequent sections of this chapter specify the challenges that news portals face with the current participatory readership that can comment and be part of the news deliberation. These address the price of being open and inclusive in the turbulent era of dark participation.

News Portal Comments as Information Warfare Zones

At this point, we might ask, What is trolling within the context of influence, and why is it relevant for analyzing comments? To address this question, it is relevant to contextualize how information circulates. Typically, news

portals host stories and articles written by professional journalists, and these undergo an established editorial process. Because the editor in chief retains the final stamp of approval for all journalistic content, predetermined editorial practices strictly regulate news portal spaces. By contrast, news story comments posted by users are rather uncodified. As specified earlier, because anybody can write and post these comments, they are neither edited for style nor filtered for content (there are exceptions to that, detailed later in the chapter, such as community-based flagging that can lead the content to be removed or AI-based tools that allow to flag comments that do not adhere to the norms detailed by the specific platform).

Not only content of the comments is not a strictly codified practice, but the structure of the comment is also not limited by platforms, either. The structure, such as the length of the post, can vary significantly, in contrast to some platforms that limit posts' length (e.g., Twitter has a limited post length). When it comes to the "genre" expectations of comments, while it is generally expected that comments should be somehow related to the news story or article to which they are allegedly responding, as explicitly urged by the *New York Times* to its commenters, as pointed out earlier, they can, at times, defy such expectations.

There are at least two main paradoxical ways in which news portals can be treated. As noted earlier, the first of these pertains to the deliberative premises underlying user comments. One such premise relates to the ideal of democratic deliberation that is based on Habermas's (2010) equation of online spaces with public spheres where discussions can be fostered. Habermas (2010) posited the need for a public sphere for interpreting news. More recently, this concept of a public sphere has been expanded to include online spaces. Specifically, designated comment fields within news portals encourage users to express their opinions about social or political issues. Thus, they are also invited to participate in the complex processes of news story interpretation through a mutual exchange of comments.

The democratic premises underlying such comments are central to this overall discursive process that enables users with varying perspectives to convene online. Ideally, the convergence of ideas encourages them to achieve clarity about issues. This clarity is expected to be achieved through the sharing of ideas (even if contrasting ones) and discussion. Thus, the ideal of democratic deliberation is based upon the convergence of ideas, as well as the shared sense of online community among users. And the precondition for the success of such deliberation is the receptiveness to alternate viewpoints or to unique counterarguments (Degli Carpini et al., 2004).

For decades, mass media, such as newspapers and TV, was treated as the

sole bastion of legitimate truth. Since the primary function of these mass media forms was informative, newspaper readers and TV news viewers alike, are stimulated to ponder what they had read or viewed to make sense of the world's ongoing events. In fact, journalists themselves contribute to that sense-making process. Journalistic practices include content coverage that enables news readers and viewers to receive synthesized information. In election coverage, for instance, frames have been solidified over time, and they become familiar and reintroduced in each new election cycle. Thus, framing has been a preferred sense-making mechanism when delivering information to media audiences.

Blumler and Gurevitch (2002) illustrated how mass media plays a critical role in sustaining democratic expectations by listing eight ways in which media enables democratic deliberation that are geared to provide clarity: "Reports of developments that impinge the welfare of citizens; Meaningful agenda setting, identifying key issues of the day, including forces that have formed and may resolve them; Platforms for advocacy by politicians and interest groups; Dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between power holders; Mechanisms for holding officials accountable; Incentives for citizens to learn choose and become involved; A principled resistance to the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence, integrity, and ability to serve the audience; A sense of respect for the audience members" (pp. 25–26).

While the objective of this list is to highlight main ideas, the authors also discussed journalism and its various aspects to address the responsibilities of news media. These included contribution toward the collective efforts to sustain democracy. News organizations are invested in this particular responsibility because they use a mass medium to distribute information. In fact, news has evolved within democratic contexts to fulfill the public craving for information and to clarify for citizens their civil rights and voting choices. Thus, news serves a role of a purveyor of information. Moreover, news is a crucial journalistic practice that encourages analyses of available information to enable democratic deliberation.

However, what happens when specific interpretative frames are perpetuated through user-generated content, such as news comments written by the general public? News portals face vulnerabilities through online comments. One of these, as mentioned earlier, is the possibility that attempts to realize the democratic deliberation ideal could backfire. Specifically, indiscriminate news story comment solicitations render news portals vulnerable targets for the agents of dark participation. In other words, in instances where user participation is accessible to anyone, online spaces can become targets for

subversive agents that intend to exercise influence. These can be automated bots created by foreign governments. Thus, authentic user participation can be infiltrated by orchestrated disinformation campaigns that push specific agendas. In such instances, messages that contain specific inauthentic affective narratives can be distributed from a centralized apparatus and be mistaken for authentic user comments. Upon entering news portals, they are read and eventually redistributed—initiating the cycle of viral proliferation by authentic writers and readers of news stories.

This entire scenario involving news portals is further complicated by the fact that we live in postmodern times when truth is no longer an agreed-upon construct. Thus, the practice of questioning publicized truths has become a discursive trend where news outlets are concerned. For example, high-ranking government officials, such as former US president Donald Trump, have charged news organizations with manufacturing "fake news" ("BBC, How President," 2018). This denigration of news as "fake" signifies diminished public trust in media organizations as credible institutions that are invested with discursive authority. Thus, disinformation can further exploit this mistrust to circulate rumors as legitimate alternative truths.

Consequently, there is a philosophical clash rooted in the inquiry of what constitutes "truth." As mentioned earlier, truth can be positioned within the modernism-postmodernism polarity. These two contrasting philosophies can be invoked to explain the complexities involved in defining "truth" and generating a consensus for the term. Specifically, Habermasian deliberation is based on the premises of logic and consensus building. Because such premises are geared toward common understanding, they exemplify aspects of modernist philosophy. In short, the Habermasian deliberation ideal can be rearticulated as "the convergence of ideas." The ideal of the participation in news commenting striving to bring multiple points of view can be subverted by non-genuine participation. Postmodernist approach, that invites multiple interpretations, and should enforce the idea of multiple voices online, paradoxically creates conditions for the subversion of truth. In other words, postmodernist philosophy is based on the idea that multiple outcomes and explanations are plausible. Thus, it rejects the assumption that there can be single and unified or binary and dualized outcomes and explanations. Divergence of ideas, then, becomes the outcome of postmodernist reasoning—the opposite of the convergence ideal underlying modernist philosophy. Thus, by adopting the premises of postmodernism that allow for greater complexity and encourage multiple interpretations of "the truth," news story commenting sections can be exploited to seed confusion rather than optimized for providing clarity. As argued earlier, such maneuvers cre-

ate chaos online. Thus, the goal of next section is the discussion of aspects of these deliberative premises within the context of online news commenting.

Contexts That Situate Online Public Deliberation

I list several reasons that explain how and why news portal comments can be double-edged swords for deliberative democracy outlined so far: since they foster online deliberation but also can become ideological battlefields of influence, as seen in the Russia trolling phenomenon, with its masked and unmasked actors. I start with the underlying premise of this book that news portals' comments matter and deserve to be treated seriously, even if, at times, they are treated as "in the margins" or secondary to the news story itself. Yet I also argue that news portal comments can be vehicles for online influence through both Web 2.0 technology and communicative practices, where the diversity of viewpoints in news portal content can be subverted and vulnerable to manipulation.

2016 report on reader engagement with news comments, conducted in the US shows that 55% of Americans left a comment online, and 77% have read comments at some point (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Thus, I start here by saying that online news comments matter. Journalism scholars have emphasized the promise of news comments not only to reflect diversity points of view provided to the story (e.g., Baden & Springer, 2014) but also to serve as a litmus test for the story's credibility (Naab et al., 2020). As journalism is under attacks, news portal comments are essential in mediating this role. Even if news comments typically do not provide praise for the coverage, it has been found that equally the tone of the comments can hurt the content of the news story by diminishing its credibility, as argued by Naab (2020).

Similarly, news portals comments as a type of online user-generated content can be viewed as secondary to the news stories, but with the potential of influence, or small things that matter, argued by Beyer et al. (2009). Barnes (2018) emphasized the interactional exchange value of the comments by stating that they remain the primary discursive modes through which "we engage with and react to each other in the online space" (p. 3). Her description is specifically applicable to news story comments. Reagle (2015) contended that while comments are a phenomenon at the margins of social media discourses, they are part of today's media ecosystem. Because such comments comprise only one aspect of an online media ecosystem, they are part of an online media ecosystem (e.g., news portal readership). Thus, they

go beyond a formal definition of comments, provided by Reagle (2015), as being reactive, asynchronous, and short.

Comments are also subjective, opinion based, and capable of expressing individual emotions—and those emotions can be constructed and manipulated. While scholars like Mansbridge (1999) have observed that online news portals represent "everyday political talk," news portals can be vehicles for online influence. Also recognized as deliberative spaces, or as forums for interpersonal communication, they can provide arenas for mutual influence among news readers. At the same time, social media has become popular due to its convenience, which derives from accessibility and anonymity. Social media is, in fact, designed to encourage interpersonal exchanges and open up spaces for influence. Due to its network-based structure, it was initially perceived as a mode of self-presentation and resource sharing in community-like spaces. Consequently, online spaces now provide a new terrain for achieving this goal.

More recently, however, mass media, including news portals, have also started to incorporate social media to reach out to online content readers. Also, news portals provide a new space for deliberation—for sharing and exchanging ideas. Furthermore, with the rise of social media—based on two-way communication technologies (otherwise known as Web 2.0)—news story readers have been provided with new sense-making mechanisms, such as comments or third-party provider interactive platforms (e.g., Disqus). Such provision is partially because news portals and other media have moved online and started to include comments. By moving online, news portals have been required to adapt to new rules stipulating online interaction norms. Such adaptations include, as mentioned earlier, the task of determining which comments are to be included and to what extent.

Thus, while news cycles change rapidly online, readers enjoy the option of discussing news topics in greater detail. The drawback of this option, however, is that diverse viewpoints can be subverted by bots and other automated actors that are launched to infiltrate online commenting platforms. Such automated infiltration, in turn, promotes orchestrated opinion-shaping mechanisms (see more in Woolley & Howard, 2018). Engaged communities are critical for today's healthy journalism, as argued by some of the leading scholars in the field, such as Wenzel (2020). However, what happens when online communities are utilized to manipulate affect? Affect has been found to weaponize online spaces by focusing on discourses of fear and anger noted as hostile "emotional regimes" present in online comments (Ihlebaek & Holter, 2021).

News organizations need to stay in constant vigilance about the online

spaces they provide for participation. Currently, they have to not only ensure values such as inclusion and diverse of points of view and civility but also handle foreign interference and manipulation. The idea of online comments as permeable spaces for subversion derives from the interrogated democratic ideals behind news commenting. Although news readers today perceive comments as crucial modes of information access, debates continue concerning the management of two-way interaction streams in mass media and the overall value of user-generated content as treated by mass media (see, e.g., Zelenkauskaite, 2017).

In addition, another dilemma concerns the navigation between democratic premises to promote diverse points of view while incorporating news reader comments, given that the diverse points of view have been considered a gold standard for fostering the sense of the public sphere (Baden & Springer, 2017). Such comments preceded the internet—specifically, when they were published as letters to the editor. Publication of such letters to the editor predated the web, long before the emergence of online news, and those letters were selected for publication by the newspapers. It is not surprising that the democratic ethos of the inclusion of various opinions make scholars like Hart (2018) treat letters to the editor as representing civic hope, even if is driven by affect.

In fact, the ideal functions of online spaces for democratic processes have been outlined according to various perspectives. While one such perspective compares the web to a mirror, Bailard (2014) has a two-fold perspective about online spaces: that the internet provides users with a greater amount of information than would otherwise be accessible through traditional media. And, compared to traditional media, the internet provides users with more diverse types of information, and a wider range of perspectives for evaluating that information. Thus, the internet, based on these views, enables the inclusion of more voices at any one time and in response to a specific news story.

Yet online spaces, including news portals, are viewable as extensions of traditional mass media—ones that are endowed with specific medium-driven advantages. Thus, the rise of social media and the interconnected web provides new opportunities for news portals to achieve the goal of fostering diverse viewpoints in democratic contexts. Scholars have, in fact, applauded social networking sites for civic engagement, thus encouraging hopes that such idealistic treatment of online spaces would enable the achievement of democracy's deliberative goals (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). Yet it is evident that within the current media landscape, online spaces can rapidly degenerate from forums intended for deliberation to those that are actually nondeliberative and divisive (Boutyline & Willer, 2017). Thus, in many

instances, online spaces have been reduced to political echo chambers (Garrett, 2009) or mere propagators of information—a situation that reifies the comparison of the web to a mirror or the physical world divided into cliques of opinions.

Within the context of online comment subversion, the forces of influence are far more important than the homogenization of opinions through user interactions (or lack thereof) involving diverse viewpoints. Some of it has been further attributed to a technologically-driven arguments such as filter bubbles. For filter bubbles to occur, the algorithms further take agency of online content distribution, thus shifting the power from an individual to technology. Instead, these technology-mediated algorithms create filter bubbles, even if filter bubbles can be viewed as rather reductionist, as argued by scholars like Bruns (2019).

Yet if it is not about the algorithmic agency, the question that remains unanswered is this: How can dark participation be exploited? How can the vulnerabilities to such participation in online news be exposed? More specifically, how is dark participation exploited for political polarization? And, how are online spaces exploited by foreign governments that attempt to sway public opinion? While governments might vociferously deny charges of interference, they can provoke suspicion through the traces they leave behind in online spaces—regardless of the verifiability of such charges. Moreover, while it is crucial to acknowledge the bases of interference, it is equally important to consider the formative role of public perception about it. Such perception can evolve through online news portal comments and shapes the realities within user mindscapes.

To conclude, while online news comments are important for public deliberation, they are not immune to manipulation and dark participation. While online news portals can function as hidden spaces, since they are not always immediately displayed for the reader, they are locally grounded and constantly updated, together with the news cycles that they are part of. Thus, due to such fluctuations, influence in news portals can be hidden in continuous streams of fluctuating user-generated content.

Discrediting Media as an Institution

Gab Example 2

We wouldn't have to rely so much on RT streams if Western media bothered to turn up and provide reporting on the ground. PS there's a shit loads of periscopes from protesters to watch if you're scared of nasty Russian trolls.

This comment celebrates *Russia Today* as a news source over the "Western" media. By doing so, it legitimizes *Russia Today* (RT), a state-sponsored Russian news source, at the same time that it degrades Western media and compares protesters with Russian trolls, thus creating false equivalencies. While news portal comment spaces offer platforms for all user voices, paradoxically, when Russian trolling is uncovered, the same platforms that give voices to their readers have been attacked. Specifically, arguments that are geared to discredit media institutions have been identified across analyzed news portals. Such arguments shift blame from Russian trolls to the media institutions that authorize coverage of the phenomenon.

The following comments exemplify the exploitation of the post-truth era to attack news media institutions. Such attacks that have been identified across analyzed news story comments accuse media institutions of circulating fake news.

Breitbart Story 7, Example 1

NY Times is Fake News.

Another comment elaborated on the attacks on mainstream media as follows:

Breitbart Story 9, Example 1

So true, the mainstream media, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, *The New York Times,* WAPO and their websites post fake, phony, lies everyday through their spoken words and web articles and then allow the Soros paid trolls to comment on said articles.....and it has been ongoing for years.....WHERE IS THE INDICTMENT? The Mueller Special counsel in nothing more than a witch hunt smoke screen to deflect attention away from criminals Hillary and Obama and their nefarious activities of the past 5 years.

Thus, the *Breitbart* user attacks primarily left-leaning media. Yet other users imply that such attacks can provoke discord, and destabilize democracy.

Breitbart Story 9, Example 2

Where do Media Matter trolls fall into all of this? They also tried to sow discord.

Even so, other news readers criticized journalists for failing to cover issues adequately.

Similarly, another user insinuated that it was not Russian trolls, but news organizations should be indicted, thus, attacking news media sources:

Breitbart Story 8, Example 2

Using this line of 'reasoning', WHERE ARE THE INDICTMENTS/ CRIMINAL CHARGES against CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, The New York Times, The Washington Post, et. al?

Other users insisted that the existence of Russian trolling is a lesser concern than its inadequate coverage by the *New York Times*.

New York Times Story 5, Example 1

[redacted]
America September 20, 2018
Reading this piece, and the Times over the past two years, I wonder if it will ever be able to recover from this debacle. Reporting like this is so extraordinarily myopic and gullible, trying so hard to exaggerate Russian trolling efforts, trying even harder to whitewash federal and Democrat wrongdoing. How can you do a piece on election malfeasance and not mention Steele one time? Strzok only mentioned once, in reference to being a target of Sean Hannity rather than multiple federal investigations. My only question at this point is whether they're really this gullible, or they're actually complicit to some extent.

Other readers criticize the commercialization of news.

New York Times Story 6, Example 1

London
Nov. 13
@[redacted]Spot on! I guess when US news is corporate controlled partisan entertainment, the ratings are in the fake news and results of it are the dividend - control.

And, yet, other readers in their comments blame institutions by implying that the *New York Times* is a propaganda machine rather than addressing the issue of Russian trolls.

New York Times Story 6, Example 2

[redacted]
Nov. 13
Of course *The New York Times* played a significant part in this campaign, willfully or not who knows. One could argue that *The New York Times* is still playing a part in this disinformation campaign along with most of the US media.

While the right-leaning media could be partially responsible for social tensions in the US, some *New York Times* users invoke it to justify Russian trolls existence:

New York Times Story 7, Example 1

[redacted]
Feb. 21, 2018
Relentless repitition of "Hillary is a corrupt liar," with no details except lies could most certainly have turned the election. On a national TV focus group, a woman showed she actually believed the Planet Ping Pong libel. To be 'sure' Russian trolling did not turn the election is to be in deep denial of the effectiveness of propaganda, underpinned by decades of right-wing hate radio, TV, and websites.

Other users assert the need to restore journalistic integrity in news reporting and to hold media institutions to higher standards of responsibility.

New York Times Story 6, Example 3

[redacted] **Montreal, CanadaNov. 13**
Excellent series. Bravo.
When can we expect a series on how mainstream media has become a propaganda tool of past and present administrations? The build-up to the Iraq War is a fine example of what I mean. How about a few honest accounts of the trials and tribulations of Palestinians? Ask any American today, why exactly Iran is an enemy of the US and you're sure to find a lot of blank faces and a litany of the usual anti-islamic clap trap as a rationale. When will journalists delve deeper into this propaganda? And I don't mean op-ed contributors that are influenced by a need to safeguard Israel.
Many readers here will poo-poo Fox 'News'—justifiably so—as propaganda tools of the Republican Party. Are there not similar arguments to be made

about the Times or NBC? We need a return of newspapers and TV news as disseminators of information rather than entertainment & profit generating enterprises. Whatever happened to media companies making money from 75% of their divisions and agreeing to break even with the News media in order to stay unbiased? Doing so was once seen as a necessary component of the American democracy.
My point - which might be awkwardly advanced - is that we need a return of quality investigative journalism. We need less 'opinion' pieces, particularly on TV. We need a few trusted media sources that will refuse to be adherents of one political side or the other.

Yet another user criticizes right-leaning media (e.g., Fox News) as responsible for social problems in the US:

New York Times Story 7, Example 2

[redacted] **Feb. 21, 2018**
The blow did not come from Russian trolls. The blow came from 25 years of Rush Limbaugh and Fox News. I have neighbors who still believe the Clintons had Vince Foster murdered.

While the comment specifies actual entities, such as Fox News, in the scapegoating process, the first statement, "The blow did not come from Russian trolls," is particularly noteworthy. The statement primes the reader to trivialize and thus dismiss the Russian trolling issue. As seen in the comments presented earlier, the rhetoric of such critiques where Russian trolling is concerned has been successfully deployed as a divisive crack in society.

News portal users in their comments have proposed various explanations for the reasons that allow for Russian trolling to perpetuate even if some users have been appalled by the inability of "special services" (e.g., Lithuanian "secret intelligence" services) to eliminate Russian trolls from news portals. One such theory presented on Delfi.lt concerns the evils of commercialism, discussed earlier as neoliberal critiques of media institutions, by exploiting neoliberal critiques, such as the one by Cushion (2012). Thus, it has been claimed that the news media has a vested interest in "feeding the [Russian] trolls" to increase interest and thus profit:

Delfi.lt Example by Anonymous Users 2

Headline: It is a pity
Comment: But these vatniks are protected by the news portals. The money is

the most important. Without vatniks there would be fewer views, comments, less money to the authors of the stories.

Furthermore, this comment claims that Russian trolls are protected by news portals. "Vatnik" as a term, in Lithuanian news portals used as "Vatnikas", has emerged as a neologism from Russian, typically used derogatorily, to define patriotic Russian rednecks ("Wikipedia, Vatnik," n.d.), here used as a synonym to Russian trolls. This user emphasizes the sensationalist nature of Russian trolling that has been exploited by news organizations. Consequently, the argument proposed by this user is that the news portals would have a financial incentive to continue that exploitation.

Media's profit-seeking accusations are implied through reference to the (euro) "cents," the Lithuanian currency where media is gaining profit:

Delfi.lt Example by Anonymous Users 3

Headline: And in Lithuania trolls continue to bark
Comment: When they want and how much they want. Media has no sense of pride. Just wet cloth. Delfi is not able to start registered commenting. All of it is in the name of cents. It was only 15 minutes [Author's note: reference to another news portal in Lithuania] who managed this well because they are owned by Estonians who have taken care of trolls-land

This writer speculates that the media profits from trolling—that such profitability is the only obstacle for "taking care of trolls." Thus, user registration is proposed to redress that obstacle. The word "cents" introduces an oppositional tone to the comment, since it is readable as an allusion to "ruble troll," where "ruble" refers to "selling out" by the "Russian trolls paid by Kremlin." And the case of "cents"—reference to the payments made in euro cents, the currency in Lithuania—refers to the gains from the clicks and views in the news portals' readership advertising revenue.

The following Delfi.lt comment suggests that the media is populated by trolls with various agendas but news portals profit from them:

Delfi.lt Example by Anonymous Users 4

Headline: asw
Comment: When DELFI is going to start isolating kremlin trolls, who are telling lies and us fairy tales and similar?
Response Headline: Never

Response Comment: Because news portals gain from vatniks who increase activity and gain . . .
Response Headline: Let them tell fairy tales
Response Comment: One has to be a truly gullible to believe those fairy tales.

The user with the response headline "Never" responds to critiques of news portals that do not take action against Kremlin trolls. Additionally, "Never" invokes the impression of disillusionment by stating that trolls merely provide a convenient and profitable frame for news portals. Thus, the information warfare aspect of trolling is dismissed.

"Never" repeats this entire argument that "Russian trolls are part of the profit" within the same thread:

Delfi.lt Example by Anonymous Users 5

Headline: Never
Comment: Because vatniks help to earn money

This comment is repeated for argument reinforcement, thus, exemplifying an interesting instance of counterargument construction. The comment presents a partial truth through the claim that news portals are commercial, and that user views and clicks are essential for their business model. Thus, the argument is craftily incorporated and adapted in reference to information warfare, and within the ideological contexts that polarize pro-Russia perspectives and Lithuanian sovereignty ideals.

Deniers have argued that Russian trolling is a media invention. The following comment exemplifies such arguments that are seemingly influenced by conspiracy theories that speculate that Russian trolls are invented by opposition:

Delfi.lt Example by Registered Users 1

Headline: Andrius[redacted]
Comment: Romualdas, what do you expect from them? Some time ago the government has invented these trolls so that they can justify lay people's questions. Later this story has been just escalated. Delfi has even written an article about this: https://www.Delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/premjeras-vienijo-desiniuosius-prie-pietu-stalo.d?id=6902

This user posits that "trolls are invented" by the "political opposition"—at the time the government was a Christian-Democratic majority. Thus, the comment indirectly criticizes Christian-Democrats for inventing trolls and attacks news portals for covering it. It was subsequently removed from Delfi.lt after provoking 25 "dislikes," 10 "likes," and 8 "crying" emoji.

Other users sarcastically downplayed the threat of Russia by mockingly using the word "horrifying" when describing Russia.

Delfi.lt Example by Registered Users 2

Headline: True Lithuanian
Comment: Russia is so horrifying, soon this cornered monster is going to start to blow the world.

Examples that accuse news organizations regarding monetization-driven agendas and the profitability exploit the narrative from the beginning of the 1990s since news organizations have faced critiques of commercialism, launched against them. Such charges provoked the interrogation of journalism's professed democratic values—a process that is specific to the internal media ecosystem of Western democracies and to the United States, in particular, such neoliberal media critique of its commercial profitability, that has been found to be exploited in the comments to justify Russian trolling, as seen in the examples above, originally was led by the journalism commentator Stephen Cushion (2012). He critically questioned the values of mass media that originated in the continuous media deregulation efforts of the 1980s and 1990s.

Such a neoliberal critique of mass media has been further elaborated by Fenton (2010), who argued that the political economy of the news compromises the quality of information. Democratic intent remains at the core of journalism, even if Fenton (2010) argued that such efforts were fueled by the best intentions of the liberal market—that is, incentives to provide more options for information sources that could be made available through decentralized broadcasting. Critiques of the neoliberal model of media derive from the media's conflicting needs: retaining profitability while informing citizens. More specifically, Cushion (2012) warned against unilateral treatments of neoliberal critiques of the media. Such critiques, they argued, merely aspire to profitability.

While contested as an argument, the neoliberal tendencies found in the news organizations have reappeared in the news portals comments as examples of crack in the society or as the media's vulnerability—in other words, its commercial aspect, and overall profitability being the source of attack on

the media to delegitimize it while justifying Russian trolling, as exemplified in the comments above.

Attack on Government Institutions

Attacks on institutions besides media, such as the FBI, were criticized for their role in Russian trolling investigations in the analyzed US media comments. The rationale behind such criticism was that Russian trolling is unworthy of investigation, or such unworthy investigations are also too costly. Some users questioned public trust in institutions through expressions, such as "Too much money spent" and "They only find trolls." Thus, their arguments exemplified the rhetorical strategy of delegitimization.

For instance, while focusing on delegitimizing Mueller's investigation on Russian trolling interference in the 2016 US presidential election, this *Breitbart* user generates false equivalency (i.e., between the investigation and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign).

Breitbart Story 6, Example 1

So Mueller has spent tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to tell the American people that 13 Russian trolls tried to sway an election toward Trump and Sanders by buying ads on Facebook and Twitter. Hillary spent close to one billion dollars on her campaign but a Facebook ad swung Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania? Yeah, ok

Other users employed the Russian trolling denial frame by attacking institutions (e.g., FBI). In such instances, the underlying claim is that Russian trolling investigations are unworthy public expenditures. While this frequently reiterated argument trivializes Russian trolling, others downplay the seriousness of social media.

Breitbart Story 9, Example 3

This is actually quite embarrassing to find out that they are indicting some trolls on the internet. What has the FBI become? A laughing stock of goof balls.

This comment exemplifies the most frequently repeated argument: "Russian trolling investigations are a waste of taxpayer money."

Breitbart Story 6, Example 2

*** The FBI did not have the time or resources to investigate future Mass Murderer. * The FBI used $15,000,000 to determine that Russian trolls posted messages on internet. Something is wrong America!**

Another *Breitbart* user resorts to mockery in the following comment.

Breitbart Story 6, Example 3

new t-shirt: Millions of dollars, dozens of lawyers and all we got were these trolls

This comment exemplifies the whataboutist focus shift from Russian trolling to other (purportedly) greater crimes.

Breitbart Story 9, Example 4

So glad the FBI is on this like white on rice. No point in wasting time investigating kids who promise to shoot up schools when you can get into something really important like this. Because there were millions of Hillary voters out there who switched their votes to Trump because of these two Russkies and their trolling. Yesssirree Bob!

The same rhetorical maneuver is identifiable in the following comment. The user resorts to deflection by implying that Russian trolls are unworthy of investigation, and that the actual offenders remain at large.

Breitbart Story 15, Example 1

So they indict 13 FAKE Russian trolls while the REAL criminals remain in the FBI.

Yet another user mentions an unsolved crime to lessen the seriousness of Russian trolling.

Breitbart Story 15, Example 2

so two days after the FBI got 17 innocent children killed in Florida, the FBI has "indictments" against russian trolls? the timing is suspect and NO this doesn't make up for dropping the ball on Cruz . . .

Others insinuated that because Russian trolls are merely a subgroup within the larger category of internet trolls, they do not merit serious investigation.

Breitbart Story 15, Example 3

lol,, how many million squandered on internet trolls,, and who pays any attention to them,, we find the trolls here on BB for free

The following rhetorical question is a strategy for making a similar claim.

Breitbart Story 15, Example 4

13 internet trolls cost 10 million dollars to investigate?

Yet others use a more direct line of attack through offensive language to devalue Russian trolling investigations.

Breitbart Story 15, Example 5

Another Wasted Dollar by another Wasted Bureaucrat. How much did this whole investigation cost finding out that there was Russian Trolls on Facebook. GEE - Take it from me. YOUR FIRED A$$HOLE!

Russian trolling deniers were also found to delegitimize Special Counsel's work by alluding that it is politically biased:

Gab Example 3

This Judge is an ass. I agree with the attorney who quoted Animal House: #Mueller's probe humor, now, should we?

Another Gab user shifts attention from Russian trolls to the "enemies within" and drug trafficking by packaging the following comments by alluding to "What About Narcotrafficking?":

Gab Example 4

Good Morning Patriots! Yesterday US Border Patrol seized 254 pounds (114 kilos) of Fentanyl. Think about that for a minute. That's enough to kill 57 million people and it cane in thru a legal point of entry. WOW! Can you imagine how much has come in ILLEGALLY? BUILD THE DAMN WALL!

Forget about Russia and China. We need to be worried about the ENEMY WITHIN ie . . . Pelosi, Schumer, Harris etc . . .

Discussion

Some *New York Times* users have summarized the existence of Russian trolls by paraphrasing the main ideas of the *Operation InfeKtion* video series.

New York Times Story 6, Example 1

[redacted]
Switzerland Nov. 13
This "Operation InfeKtion" is part of Russia's long mastered art of "dezinformatsiya", a term coined by Joseph Stalin, whose loan translation in English is "disinformation". It derived from the title of a KGB propaganda department. When the Soviet Union realised that it couldn't beat the West economically and militarily, it sought to weaken it by sowing divisions within a country or pitting countries against each other. The KGB created the fake news story in 1984 that AIDS was a US biological weapon to target Blacks and gays. Ironically Russia stands on the brink of an unprecedented HIV crisis in recent years.
Today, Putin resorts to the same KGB playbook and goes to great lengths to undermine the West. When the EU is weak and the US is embroiled in chaos caused by Trump, a resurgent Russia is seeking to regain its global clout. He has succeeded where his predecessors had failed—"We Will Take America Without Firing a Shot. We Do Not Have to Invade the US. We Will Destroy You From Within." Nikita Khrushchev. Thanks to the Internet Putin helped Trump win, installing a stooge that obeys the seven commendments of fake news—look for cracks and deepen them; create a big, bold lie; wrap it around a kernel of truth; conceal your hand; mobilise useful idiots; deny everything; and play the long game, i.e. to destroy the country.

This comment outlines the essence of disinformation practices in online news comments. Thus, we might ask: What are enabling conditions for the subversion of online spaces? This chapter covered broader frameworks that render online news portal commenting analogous to information warfare to contextualize how information warfare is relevant today and the complexities and forces of the news commenting system. The conditions that enable Russian trolling to become embedded within news story comments can be

considered in relation to the post-truth era (briefly discussed earlier), subverted news culture, the rise of hate speech and the culture that promotes it, and technological affordances.

This chapter documented a paradoxical subversion of media logics to attack news media and government institutions to justify Russian trolling that takes place through commenting, which is supposed to be a space for democratic deliberation. Commenting is not a new discursive practice where information deliberation is concerned. Together with journalists, who provide information through stories to news readers and viewers, user commenters have contributed significantly to the information sense-making process. Such a sense-making process is typically considered a two-step flow, which Katz (1957) proposed as ways to conceptualize influence through mass media, where the content presented is reinterpreted and reconceptualized by citizen-viewers. Even if the two-step flow of communication is a form of an interpersonal influence, typically conceptualized through face-to-face networks, nowadays it can function similarly online, as since the emergence of comments in mass media, comments have functioned, to some degree, as forms of interpersonal influence through information.

Furthermore, the emergence of commenting options has encouraged news readers and citizens in general to engage with news content and participate in online debates. Yet these very same sense-making possibilities can convert commenting spaces into information battlefields, where automated online groups—even foreign governments—can unleash bots to carry out behaviors that influence public opinion. The structural properties of news portals alone can provide some insights into the specific contexts in which information warfare could take place.

Cited comment examples illustrate that while news portals maintain control over story content, they cannot completely manage user participation patterns or the content flow of news story comments. News portals have, in fact, become notorious spaces for contentious user interactions, otherwise known as "uncivil" discourses. Recent empirical accounts of leading US news organizations on Facebook reconfirm this discursive trend (see Su et al., 2018). Moreover, scholars (e.g., Herbst, 2010; Papacharissi, 2004) argue that civility is a fundamental principle of democratic deliberation and an important marker of a developed democratic society, even if this ideal does not appear to have been realized on social media. Thus, the forces that can provoke online incivility are treated as indisputable facts. The discursive trend of online incivility is far from new, as evidenced by news forums, the predecessors of online news comments. Yet it has been proved that online spaces can be used to exercise influence through content boosting, automa-

tion, and propagation. And thus the current media landscape is entrenched with various influence forces, of which incivility is only one facet.

The Russian troll denial frame was documented in this chapter through doubts about journalistic quality and integrity. In addition to such media blame frames, doubting or questioning frames were also identified in user comments. Particularly noticeable in *New York Times* user comments, such frames provide subtler rhetorical maneuvers than Russian trolling denial on its own (e.g., in Gab). In fact, the doubting frame has been used as a postmodernist doubt-seeding rhetorical tactic that ultimately generates greater confusion rather than clarity. Furthermore, clarity is obscured through absolutist claims that question premises or the supporting evidence behind them. Examples of such claims, introduced in Chapter 2, are "We will never know if trolls actually exist," "There is no way to know if they exist," "Trolling cannot exist, if it cannot be seen, or measured," and "If we cannot know how trolls influenced voters, or the exact number of influenced voters, then, we cannot know if trolls exist."

These claims exemplify targeting appeals to logic. They are, in fact, evidence-based rhetorical approaches that derive from the Western philosophical paradigms that are based on evidence and logical deduction. Such approaches are used to address general readers of news story comments who are also ordinary citizens and voters—to present them with puzzles that have no solutions. Such puzzles are like riddles that are seeded in our minds—especially when they are unsolved or unsolvable. While they do not provide certainty, they fall outside the discursive parameters of democratic processes. They also provoke distrust in established systems—in evidence providers that include the intelligence and scientific communities. Consequently, ordinary citizens can no longer rely on institutions to provide them with trustworthy answers.

This chapter also introduced challenges over overestimated empowerment that user-generated content brings. Ten years after the "you" phenomenon was presented by *Time* magazine, the European Union countries and the United States of America have been subjected to orchestrated information manipulation campaigns (e.g., Ferrara, 2017), including one that questioned the legitimacy of the 2016 US presidential election. Thus, control seems to have transferred from ordinary internet users to orchestrating regimes in online spaces.

The signifier "you" that promised user empowerment has been also appropriated for information warfare in at least two ways. The first of these involves the exploitation of the assumption that all internet users are authentic. In other words, democratic principles ensure the equal treatment of all users; they are equally entitled to their own opinions and equally encouraged

to post them online. Such democratic equality of user treatment is based upon the misguided assumption that all users are actually authentic. Thus, this assumption can be exploited to circulate information through automated and manual means. Twitter bots exemplify such online agents. Bots are *not* the ordinary users that the "you" movement addresses—authentic human users who facilitate information propagation across online networks.

The second form of "you" exploitation for information warfare involves the assumption that all internet users are infallible—that they are ordinary people who can make sense of new information spaces. The 2006 *Time* magazine cover design does not betray the slightest doubt that the same user ("you") could also be susceptible to false information. After all, when the issue was published, online spaces seemed invulnerable to orchestrated dystopia.

Moreover, the "you" construct (i.e., "you, the online contributor") is based upon the "user-as-consumer" business model rather than the "user-as-critical-thinker" cultural ideal. The problem of the construction part relates to what the issue with how the current social media ecosystems work and how people use them (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Thus, because "you" has yet to appeal to users-as-critical-thinkers, today's users remain vulnerable to online influence. Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2011) made similar observations while discussing the digital divide. More specifically, they claimed that users require access not only to technologies but also to the information technology skills that would enable them to make sense of online spaces. Consequently, the construct of "you" as "you, the media consumer" creates new conditions for the efficacy of Russian trolling.

Information influence does not occur only through predetermined media ecosystems—the medium and the form—but especially so through content, i.e., messaging frames. There is extensive evidence that messages not only shape perceptions but also stimulate actions in response to them, as argued by Aliaksandrau (2014). Thus, where actionability is concerned, messages exceed mere words. While it can be neutrally stated that trolling is an online discursive practice, far less innocuous are efforts to misinterpret it as a mere word-production process that is dissociated from actual consequences (e.g., information warfare). If we were to acknowledge information warfare as no mere variation of contentious online debate, then Russian trolling is comparable to an online masquerade in which the masks that Russian trolls adopt are integral aspects of information warfare. The following excerpt from by Aliaksandrau (2014) interrelates the two forms of warfare as follows: "Information wars used to be a necessary component that accompanied "real" wars, the ones with shootings, bombings, explosions and killing. Today it is

the opposite—shootings and bombings now accompany information wars. The more you lie, the less you need to shoot. And if you are very good at propaganda, you don't need to shoot at all to win a war" (p. 56).

Thus, while the exposure of Russian trolling seems to depend on successful efforts to combat propaganda, information warfare involves continuous efforts to sustain attack and defend narratives that obfuscate clarity. The combatants involved continuously manufacture oppositional narratives: One side circulates such narratives while the other continuously attempts to expose them as fabricated.

The challenges that accompany the "you" phenomenon are complicated by an additional caveat on the ideal conditions in which Russian trolling narratives can circulate. That caveat concerns a philosophical understanding of *knowing*. The act of knowing is inextricably related to the state of "not knowing." In other words, if we adopt a philosophical perspective, we can ask, How do we know that we know? Two basic premises are involved when we address this question: The first is the modernist assumption that considers that a given phenomenon produces a single, definite outcome; the second is the postmodernist position that challenges the existence of a single truth by positing the availability of multiple modes of understanding. As argued earlier, the postmodern era conveniently coincides with the emergence of new communication technologies. Thus, it can be argued that the convergence of postmodernism with such technologies can generate dangerous outcomes. Such is the post-truth era in the information age.

Vulnerabilities associated with the "you" phenomenon spill over to news portals' comments. News portal comment sections are intended to represent a wide range of opinions that can influence decision-making processes and determine truth and nontruth, reality and unreality. The decision-making thus can lead to action, or at least opinions enable *the channeling of action*. Choukas (1965) described the transition from opinion to action accordingly: "[Opinions] are compounds containing both intellectual and emotional elements with the ratio of each varying according to the amount of knowledge or the degree of feeling the individual put into them in the process of formulating them. They are different from the objective demonstrations of a scientist, or the dogmatic assertions of a theologian, for they cannot be supported rationally as the former and are more plastic than the latter. They vary in duration and strength. . . . Some of them have more depth than others, and hence, a greater resistance to change" (p. 174).

To conclude, news comments are particularly relevant for analyzing the potentially contentious forces of social influence. Such analysis is particularly urgent because the threat of Russian government interference in the

public opinion formation process has reemerged recently. The interference threat concerns not only the 2016 US presidential election but also the Russian government's alleged payment of employees to comment on foreign media sites about a particular 2015 news story that exposed the operations of Russian troll farms (Chen, 2015).

Summary

This chapter discussed how news organizations had employed a range of solutions to address the dilemma of fulfilling deliberative expectations of online public sphere and challenges of dark participation—one that involved striking a balance between the inclusion of more voices and the policing of online incivility. The need for this balance was urgent even before the Russian trolling phenomenon emerged as a major cybersecurity issue. Since Russian trolling, human moderation of online spaces has become even more crucial. Yet such moderation has more complexity associated with it—it is beyond uncivil content moderation, but it is about detection of an orchestrate affect creation. Such detection work for news organizations can be extremely time consuming and costly, especially if performed manually.

Solutions

News organizations have been challenged by dark participation and incivility, such as the interplay between generally rude comments and those that are specifically geared toward foreign influence—whether the medium for such influence is Russian trolling or web brigades.

Dark participation and chaos in news portal comments further complicate the future of online spaces for public deliberation. Moreover, it is crucial to learn how to correctly identify the various types of online content—specifically, to distinguish between orchestrated cyberattacks; innocuous opinions of concerned users, and the amplifications of both. What are some solutions to Russian trolling in news portals? There are several considerations on this front. Diakopoulos (2019), through his optimism about a technological turn in journalism, has proposed that newsbots could amplify engagement of the audiences. However, I view the potential of implementing newsbots as tools to warn moderators about

threats. For example, newsbots can flag repetitive content that circulates across media platforms. Flagged content can go beyond the items that fall under misinformation. Flagging can be designed to include newly emergent affect-instilled comments to stir discord and sway opinions as described in this book.

Another solution is authentication, proposed to discourage the anonymous commenting that could enable trolling. Authentication is particularly debated, given that in many contexts, anonymity is the driving force that fuels democratic debate. Additionally, source verification has been encouraged as the primary means of identifying fake news and other forms of post-truth that some online spaces have already implemented. Some of these initiatives are inherent in the social media platforms' design. Facebook encourages people to register with their real names. Similarly, Twitter has the function of verified accounts, marking those with a blue badge, even if this function is restricted to accounts that can be defined for the public interest ("Twitter Help Center," n.d.). For the news portals, however, user verification for enabling commenting for stories can be somewhat problematic, and news portals constantly face the following dilemma: On the one hand, news portals strive to uphold their gold standard by inclusion of diverse viewpoint. On the other hand, they also are limiting users to only those who are willing to accept the terms of registration to post comments. Such limitations complicate efforts geared toward viewpoint diversification on the part of news portals.

To mitigate the dilemma of inclusion and restriction of user participation, news portals have already taken various steps. Many news portals allow anonymous participation without registration. Yet, for example, in 2021, Delfi.lt announced it would move into registered-only posting. For that, it will provide a range of registration options, primarily outsourcing authentication to the third-party platforms—from social networking sites to email verification. Such verification, though, does not guarantee true authentication of a person. Rather, it might prevent impulse-based affective commenting. In addition, news portals have produced news stories and videos to contribute toward efforts to promote media literacy initiatives that expose techniques of dark participation to readers. For example, they have been involved in the promotion of large-scale educational programs that specifically discuss issues of online propaganda.

News story series have also been released to publicize definitions of online propaganda and to explain how to recognize and manage bots and

ideological trolls. Some sources that encourage online media literacy by specifying trolling characteristics are "How to Recognize and Neutralize the Propaganda-Spreading 'Trolls' and 'Bots' That Are Occupying the Internet," by Janckus (2018, Delfi.en), and the video story, "How to Spot a Russian Troll," by Aneja and Ifraimova (2018, Time.com). Aneja and Ifraimova (2018) also address the dangers of delegitimizing grassroots activism in the face of foreign interference. Similarly, NBC featured a video story, "Inside a Russian Troll Factory" (NBC News, 2018), that exposed the workings of the propaganda machine while addressing how propaganda had influenced the 2016 US presidential election.

Yet another online media literacy initiative that specifies propaganda techniques is *Operation InfeKtion: Russian Disinformation: From Cold War to Kanye*, a video series comprising three 16-minute segments that the *New York Times* released on 12 November 2018. Other initiatives include an online game, Get Bad News (Delfi.lt, 2020), designed and then promoted through the news portal Delfi.lt to understand the tactics of online manipulation by positioning the user in a player role who needs to make decisions about the content that can foster manipulation. There were nine stories about the disinformation game on Delfi.lt released in 2020 alone.

While these initiatives are commendable, they are primarily geared toward left-leaning audiences, and such initiatives have not been covered on *Breitbart*. Searches on *Breitbart* with the keywords such as "foreign influence" result in stories that cover attacks on George Soros's fact-checking initiative (Hale, 2017). In other words, right-leaning users are not exposed to these educational sources about cases of misinformation and disinformation, especially if those cases are framed as blaming the left. As this study has shown, the right-leaning media in the US neither encourages nor provides access to such sources. Thus, it is unlikely that right-leaning publics have access to gain familiarity with them. For instance, since Russian trolling coverage was relatively infrequent on right-leaning spaces like *Breitbart*, the scarcity of educational material about online influence tactics in such spaces is to be expected.

Comment management by news organization staff is yet another initiative to handle internet trolling. Like the charge of news commercialization, other forms of news contestation are viewable through the user-generated content that interrogates democratic values. Although such user-generated content is crucial for democratic deliberation, today's destabilization of democracy, due to the vulnerability of news portal comments, requires a reassessment of news organizations—how they can inform news readers and still encourage comments that fulfill the democratic premises of debate. News organizations tried different approaches throughout the past decade: By following democratic ideals of participation, they enabled user commenting. Then, some of

them disabled commenting, and others have left commenting sections open only for a portion of the stories. For example, the *New York Times* decided to address the problem of online comment management by enabling user commenting for just 10 percent of all stories. The *New York Times*' decision was made in 2016 due to the lack of a long-term cost and sustainability of human moderation of user commenting (Spayd, 2016). National Public Radio (NPR) illustrates this shift in perspectives regarding the potentials of commenting to impact communities that started with the optimism and led to the subsequent closure of commenting sections for some stories, transpiring through statement in 2008: "We are providing a forum for infinite conversations on NPR.org. Our hopes are high. We hope the conversations will be smart and generous of spirit. We hope the adventure is exciting, fun, helpful and informative. This is important for the NPR community" (NPR Editorial, NPR Launches, 2008, para. 1).

In 2016, however, NPR announced it would shut down the comment sections for stories. The announcement was made in response to user complaints, as in the following example: "A user named Mary, from Raleigh, N.C., wrote to implore: "Remove the comments section from your articles. The rude, hateful, racist, judgmental comments far outweigh those who may want to engage in some intelligent sideline conversation about the actual subject of the article. I am appalled at the amount of 'free hate' that is found on a website that represents honest and unbiased reporting such as NPR. What are you really gaining from all of these rabid comments other than proof that a sad slice of humanity that preys on the weak while spreading their hate?" (Jensen, 2016, para. 11).

Consequently, rather than completely discontinuing news story comment solicitation, NPR has outsourced it to third parties such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). NPR is not the only news organization that shifted the responsibility of user comment management to third-party providers. News organizations have, in fact, had to adopt creative solutions to the challenges that accompany such management—such as by soliciting diverse user commenter voices and addressing the problem of comment civility.

The *New York Times* increased its staff for comment moderation, notwithstanding the exorbitant costs implementing such practices. The company was able to manage budgets allocated for such online human tasks, however, by enabling commenting for just 10% of stories in 2016, to allow for thorough moderation. Then, in 2017, the company announced a sharp increase in plans to open up more stories for commenting and to use automated tools, such as the machine-learning system Moderator (Etim, 2017; Salganik & Lee, 2020). The system was designed to gauge why comments would be rejected (e.g., inflammatory, insubstantial). Additionally, the *New*

York Times partnered with Google for artificial intelligence initiatives to automate comment scanning ("Google News Initiative," n.d.). Thus, by 2018, the *New York Times* managed to triple the number of news stories open for commenting from the mere 10% in 2016.

Similarly, there are specific circumstances, where news portals temporarily deactivated comments. One such case was of deactivation of commenting on all news portals in Lithuania on February 24, 2022, was announced as follows: "When Russia started the invasion to Ukraine, Lithuanian news portals have deactivated news commenting sections with the goal to stop potentials for disinformation spread" (BNS, 2022, para. 1). User comments have been similarly deactivated on the news portals' social media platforms.

Although user comments are undoubtedly valuable for news organizations, they continue to present multiple challenges. These include the determination of practices for meaningful comment negotiation. Thus, while comment incivility had been one of the first challenges, it has been succeeded by the more recent problems of dark participation and automated participation, such as bots, as mentioned earlier. While one solution to such challenges has been the outsourcing of comments to third-party providers, the practice has led to the relinquishment of the responsibility for exercising control over content. However, news organizations, such as the *New York Times*, have elected to forgo this measure. Thus, despite various challenges, for example, the *New York Times* has retained its authority to moderate user comments.

When tackling Russian trolling in news portals, the problem needs to be contextualized within broader comment moderation practices and the specificity of user-generated content management. While Russian trolling is an issue that goes beyond mere incivility, news portals can engage in similar practices to manage them as they did to foster online civility such as enabling later commenting or completely disabling it for more controversial news stories, or even combining human moderation with artificial intelligence, as already implemented by the *New York Times*. While these proposed solutions can facilitate management of online incivility, they can also track down massive influxes of organized influence. Thus, they provide promise to tackle the problem of Russian trolling in news story comment spaces.

Governments have also proposed other Russian trolling management initiatives, some of which are policy driven (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020). For instance, by funding an agency that is tasked to combine efforts to promote fact-checking and media literacy to combat disinformation, the European Commission (2019) has unanimously acknowledged the seriousness of Russian trolling. A 2018 report addresses government funding for journalists, and other stakeholders, who help to advance information trans-

parency or media literacy initiatives (European Commission, 2018). The report also provides recommendations and guidelines for all EU member states to enable effective disinformation management. The UK launched government-based offensive cyber security initiatives (Devanny et al., 2021). However, although the report is stakeholder centered, it does not directly address how news portal comment spaces can be infiltrated by ideologically influencing trolls and bots.

Other international initiatives include governments around the world have prioritized disinformation management. For instance, Taiwan's government has launched an aggressive media literacy campaign and initiated a public service that involves the activation of fact-checking bots. And although Ukraine's government has not been as proactive as Taiwan's, Ukraine's private sectors have launched fact-checking online services through online platforms such as youscan.io, SemanticForce.net, and InfoStream.co app for apple products (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Bottom-up approaches to counteracting Russian trolling, applauded for their grassroots activities, have also evolved over the past several years, such as fact-checking initiatives Debunk.eu, a Lithuanian initiative that partners with news organizations and citizens in response to Russian trolling, and a fact-checking project curated by the Annenberg Public Policy Center ("Factcheck, Factcheck: A project," n.d.). Additionally, UNESCO has published a handbook about how to identify and resist fake news while circulating Twitter hashtags (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). These initiatives show how institutional efforts focused on providing identification and resistance efforts involve sharing fake news experiences and ideas about how to respond to them. Thus, the handbook specifies how journalists risk disinformation charges that could negatively impact their credibility. US efforts to counteract disinformation include academic initiatives such as Botometer ("Botometer," n.d.), which enables users to determine whether a Twitter profile is authentic or bot-generated, and Hoaxy, which allows for identification of false information.

Thus, in light of new context of disinformation, online news portals are facing new challenges in their content and comment moderation management practices. However, online space moderation remains extremely challenging, yet employing AI to combat it seems still unattainable. Scholars like Gillespie (2020) argued that the cost of false positives for solutions that aim at quantifying and scaling is too high—it is an act not of classification but of social and performative assertion of something that should be treated as is and will be thus contested. And it can be exploited as an argument for disinformation. Russian trolling deniers' arguments, presented in this book,

also argue that news portal moderation is an objectionably hierarchical top-down initiative. According to this misconception, news portal moderators are the media professionals and other social elites who exclude all other users from participating in decision-making processes. This misconception can be modified, however, by invoking that news portals comments are based on the idea of user-generated content; that is, all users can contribute to online content with sociotechnical affordances such as content rating and reporting options as forms of moderation.

Similarly, misconception that user-generated content moderation is invariably hierarchical or elitist can be redressed by treating community-based online moderation as an ideal to strive for when it comes to user-generated content in news portals. And while such moderation has been implemented in some instances—for example, the comment flagging in Lithuanian news portals—it can generate anxiety that whoever puts in most effort can dictate the norms of a given online community.

Content moderation has proved a major challenge, even if media companies are putting up resources to enforce best practices, as a Facebook initiative that resulted from challenges of defining what is "right" and their subjective and objective descriptions (Newton, 2019). Yet another measure for discouraging online influence involves comment activation for news stories only after a substantial amount of time has elapsed since their initial release (Almgren and Olsson, 2015). This measure was originally proposed to deal with reactive inflammatory comments. While it can prevent foreign influence through commenting, the major downside is that it can also discourage authentic user comments. Although this initiative is less extreme than the complete disablement of comments that Russian trolling deniers have suggested, it nevertheless generates troubling implications—that the need for public discourses is not so urgent after all and that the democratic foundations for such discourses are actually quite fragile.

Grassroots Initiatives in the Fight With Russian Trolls

Regardless of the challenges of grassroots moderation, grassroots movements have been proposed as the most meaningful way to deal with Russian trolling, as argued by Szulecki (2018), who stated: "The only way to defeat civilizational and moral crisis through grassroots, organic work to overcome decay—with education in humanitarian values at the core" (p. 326).

Lithuanian elves showcase such grassroots initiatives: They organized

themselves to review news portals' comments and flag suspicious content that might have been generated through foreign influence. Lithuanian elves describe themselves as concerned citizens who monitor news portal comments and call out users whose comments suspiciously resemble Russian trolling posts ("Debunk.eu," n.d.). The media coverage of anti-Russian trolling initiatives has included interviews of some of these volunteer elves. One interviewee, who went by the pseudonym "Hawk," claimed that elves act only defensively in online news portals: They neither engage in cyberattacks nor disseminate counterpropaganda. Although the story about Lithuanian elves was released in 2019, elf operations had started earlier, with the eruption of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, which brought to light the battlefield of facts in the online sphere during this conflict and their power of creating chaos and foster disinformation. In this book, there are several examples of how Lithuanian elves have been attacked. At times, called out Russian trolls addressed their rebuttals to elves by naming them as such. These exchanges provide evidence of the perceived oppositional forces. One is acting as Russian trolls, and the other, that debunks Russian trolling, calls themselves elves.

Similarly, when treating community values in user-generated content contexts, Wikipedia can serve as a successful example for expectation building geared toward meaningful online contributions. In Wikipedia the success of the content contribution and Wikipedia engagement has been found to be dependent on the nurturing of the community, that is, involved and dedicated users who help to foster the community's values (Panciera et al., 2009). While Wikipedia and news portals seem to be very different, their shared element is the community of users who contribute and others who benefit from the shared good—that is, the value that user-generated content provides to communities. Therefore, community values should be fostered on news portals' comment sections. Such values can inform moderation as a practice. Thus, moderation that emerges from the communities enables a continuous enforcement of the community rules with the awareness of practices that are outside of those rules. Such approach could protect communities from threats of dark participation.

Even if the initiatives outlined here provide hope for a more transparent online public sphere, there are some caveats to counteracting Russian trolling. One such caveat is the effect of what Rojas (2010) referred to as corrective actions. Corrective action, can be a powerful argument to counteract Russian trolling by engaging with them and pointing out any argumentative flaws. Such corrective action in the form of counteraction assumes a noble task to correct flawed content found online, in this case, in the news portals'

comments. In the long run, however, corrective action can realize the objectives of Russian trolls: Users end up engaging in futile, self-defensive, and digressive discussions instead of focusing on the actual problem (i.e., Russian trolling) and its plausible solution. Examples of this corrective action included users' calling out Russian trolls and contesting skepticism regarding Russian trolling, illustrated in the previous chapters of this book. Thus, instead of clarifying issues, corrective action generates more online chaos—users end up in a vicious cycle of endlessly diverted arguments, whereby much energy is expended and clarity is only negligibly impacted. Such resource-consuming scenarios exemplify how loss (i.e., energy) can exceed benefit (i.e., clarity). Similarly, another challenge for grassroots activists, like the Lithuanian elves, is that they have become targets of the attacks by Russian trolling deniers, who "fight back" by accusing them as a mere opposition with an "agenda." Thus, the rational approach—debunking facts—cannot be easily implemented in the *affect-instilled* information warfare of disinformation. Traps of corrective action can affect forms of genuine activism. For instance, Lithuanian news portals were home to an active Russian trolling opposition by volunteer elves who worked to call out Russian trolling. To combat Russian trolling, elves were explicit about using the "callout" technique, even if it might not have been sufficient to combat Russian trolling.

To sum up, comment spaces are convenient target points for the agents of dark participation. Before the challenges of such participation had been documented, the lack of consensus about how to handle online news portal comments had been singularly problematic across all platform types, as argued in recent research (e.g., Boberg et al., 2018; Ekström & Westlund, 2019). Thus, within the context of dark participation, a major question lingers regarding the best practices on how to moderate online spaces, when it is now a generally known fact that not all messages are authentic.