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# Conceptualizing, Creating, & Controlling Constructive and Controversial Comments: A CSCW Research-athon

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*CSCW '17 Companion*, February 25 - March 01, 2017, Portland, OR, USA  
ACM 978-1-4503-4688-7/17/02.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3022198.3022663>

**Abstract**

Many social media platforms provide features for commenting, which often provide affordances for people to give feedback to others. Around the theme of advancing research about online comments, this workshop aims to bring together a diverse range of researchers for cross-discipline community building and especially dedicated time for productive, early mixed-methods research. The workshop is structured around a research “hackathon,” where participants actively work on producing initial stages of research, theory, and design related to a central dataset (in the case of this workshop, public comments from a historical reddit.com corpus). Participants will form collaborative teams to tackle questions of interest that move forward current thinking around online comment behaviors, participants, quality, and design. The one-day workshop is led by 5 researchers, and it will accommodate up to 32 participants.

**Author Keywords**

Comments; hackathon; commenters; feedback; moderation; quality; design; social media; reddit

### ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

### Introduction

Online comment systems on social media and other communication platforms (e.g., news sites) are the digital public squares of American civic discourse. They provide opportunities for deliberation, information sharing, emotional support, and learning, between both friends and strangers. Online comments have the potential to illuminate multiple perspectives on a story, educate readers about differing viewpoints, add information not included in an article, and create common ground among diverse stakeholders [4].

Online comment systems are one of the primary social computing systems in which many people will participate, as these systems underlie a host of other interactions (blogs, news websites, social media, etc.) online. The act of giving and receiving comments on social media is associated with many social benefits, from an increase in well-being [1] to social support [11]. However, comment forums can become mired in negative user behavior, from angry comments and trolling to posting misinformation. In some instances, media institutions<sup>1</sup> or government officials and other decision makers [3] have abandoned reading online comments altogether due to these negative behaviors, despite the possibility of direct feedback from constituents that such forums afford. Still, these forums

are commonplace throughout the media and continue to have democratic potential.

There is a large body of research studying comments in different social computing systems going back 30 years [7]. As the adoption of internet technologies has increased around the world, the people with access to comment forums are more diverse, with very heterogeneous motivations, educational backgrounds, and perspectives. Further, commenting features and interactions have become more heterogeneous, as early open standards (e.g., IRC and Usenet) have shifted toward unique designs endogenous to particular systems. Still, regulation of these spaces continues to prove difficult, as spam and non-normative behavior (e.g., trolling, flaming, etc.) continue to persist [10]. In all online communities, there are different roles and stakeholders at play [9,12]. In comment systems, it is important to delineate the different stakeholders – from readers and commenters to moderators and platform administrators – as both outcomes and social processes can be shaped by these differences.

The goal of the workshop therefore will be to advance four areas of comment research – behaviors, people, moderation, and design – through

### Workshop Plan

#### Goals

- *Meet Colleagues:* Unite researchers in and around the HCI community who study and work on commenting behaviors and designs, making connections across disciplines and methods
- *Decide What's Important:* Set up a research agenda for continued work in these areas to structure the workshop

<sup>1</sup>

<http://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/2016/08/17/489516952/npr-website-to-get-rid-of-comments>

- *Make Something:* Provide researchers with datasets and establish cooperative “hackathon”-style working groups to produce lightweight, empirical (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) research products by end of workshop
- *Discuss Outcomes:* With research products from workshop, facilitate continuing collaborative efforts post-conference through knowledge sharing and inter-group review for paper submissions (e.g., CSCW 2018, CHI 2018)

#### Themes

We invite proposals from academic, industry, public sector, and activist researchers that touch on commenting in relation to:

- *Behaviors:* commenting participation, norms, and quality
- *People:* comment posters, repliers, and audiences
- *Moderation:* commenting promotion, deletion, and control
- *Design:* comment threads, replies, and interactions

#### Recruitment

Potential participants will be recruited through past related workshops and announcements on social media (Twitter, Facebook, mailing lists, etc.). Participants will be selected based on interest and experience, with the goal of increasing diversity of seniority (graduate students to senior faculty) and methodologies (theoretical to empirical, quantitative to qualitative). Attendance will be capped at 32 people to allow 4 teams (structured around high-level research question areas) of 8 participants for optimal peer support, a mix of methodologies and backgrounds, and small-group collaboration within teams.

Participants will be asked for 4 brief, but required, statements as part of their workshop application:

- A short statement about their experience as a commenting researcher, to demonstrate their interest in and engagement with the research space
- A short statement about their personal experience as a commenter, to demonstrate their empathy for research subjects, problems, and designs
- A short statement about one or two research questions they are interested in working on during the workshop, specifically identifying at most two of the four themes, to demonstrate potential contribution at the workshop
- A short statement on specific ways in which they could collaborate on commenting research with someone from a different methodological background, to demonstrate potential for collaboration (e.g., if the applicant is a quantitative researcher, we ask them to consider qualitative intersections with their own work, and vice versa; for mixed-methods researchers, we ask them to explain how they might help facilitate these cross-method connections)

#### Preparation

##### DATA

To focus the goals and discussion of the workshop, participants will be granted access to a collection of shared, similar datasets from reddit.com. While reddit may not generalize to all commenting platforms or experiences, it provides a contemporary set of online communities with a diverse group of behaviors, topics, and participants [2,5,6,8].

## PRE-WORKSHOP PLANNING

Two weeks before CSCW, participants will be expected to attend a 1-hour pre-conference online video conference meeting, where workshop organizers will provide access to datasets, organize topic areas with suggested teams (based on workshop applications, but these are flexible), and answer any questions. We will also point participants with specific interests to particular portions of the dataset. For any participants who wish to explore qualitative methods (e.g., conduct interviews during workshop time), we will ask them to consider plans for this work at this point before the workshop.

*Workshop Schedule*

BREAKFAST (8:30AM - 9:00AM)

Attendees will meet and mingle over food.

INTRODUCTIONS & REVIEW (9:00AM - 9:30AM)

The organizers will introduce the structure of the conference and present a short commenting research review. Participants will take part in a warm-up exercise.

PRESENTATIONS (9:30AM - 10:20AM)

Participants will offer a short presentation on their own commenting research or related work.

TEAM & RESEARCH QUESTION FORMATION (10:20AM - 10:50AM + 10 MINUTE BREAK)

Organizers will split up participants into thematic teams, providing diversity in methods for each area.

INITIAL "HACKING" EXPLORATION (11:00AM - 12:00PM)

Teams will spend time talking with each other to arrange small projects for the workshop. They will begin to explore data and structure team directions.

LUNCH (12:00PM - 1:00PM)

Participants will join a lunch together and discuss directions.

"HACKING" (1:00PM - 2:20PM + 10 MINUTE PROJECT UPDATES FROM EACH TEAM + 10 MINUTE BREAK + 2:40PM - 3:45PM + 15 MINUTE PROJECT CONCLUSIVE UPDATES FROM EACH TEAM)  
Participants will rejoin their teams and work throughout the afternoon, with the goal of producing a fast analysis or research agenda by the end of the workshop.

REVIEW: OUTCOMES? (4:00PM - 5:00PM)

Participants will come together again to discuss the design implications of their findings: what systems, research agendas, and policies can be worked toward based on this workshop? What collaborations can take place in working towards papers (or more) as a final product of the workshop collaboration?

DINNER (1 HOUR BREAK + 6:00PM - 8:00PM)

Attendees will mingle over food and drinks.

**Organizing Committee**

*Eric Gilbert*

Eric Gilbert is an Assistant Professor in the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech. His research is in social computing broadly, and he has a new grant from the NSF on moderating online comments with machine learning.

*Cliff Lampe*

Cliff Lampe is an Associate Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on sociotechnical features of social computing systems that lead to prosocial outcomes. His research covers social media, civic participation, and commenting systems among other topics.

*Alex Leavitt*

Alex Leavitt got his PhD from the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, where he studied social media interactions and collaboration, focusing his dissertation on breaking news commenting on reddit. He currently is a Quantitative UX Researcher at Facebook.

*Kat Lo*

Katherine Lo is a PhD student in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. Her research focuses on how moderators develop practices to maintain healthy and safe communities in online platforms; in particular, she examines the practices employed by moderators and users in vulnerable communities.

*Lana Yarosh*

Svetlana Yarosh is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science & Engineering at University of Minnesota. Her research focuses on the positive benefits of comments in online health communities (particularly those focused on recovery from substance use disorders), such as increased social connectedness and exchange of reciprocal social support.

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