

The Contested Space of User-Generated Content on an English Local Newspaper Website during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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This study sets the groundwork for a transdisciplinary investigation of pandemic discourse. It focuses on one aspect of this discourse, namely the institutional, technological and regulatory conditions under which users of an English local newspaper are required to operate when posting comments on its website. It shows that users are subject to a high degree of oversight and control which is justified by the publishers on the grounds of enforcing civility and eliminating “toxicity” but which risks exercising a chilling effect on free expression at a time of international crisis where this is seen as being under attack in many parts of the world.

Keywords: local newspapers, pandemic discourse, public sphere, user-generated content

Introduction

Over the last two years the coronavirus pandemic has become a global health crisis which has caused unprecedented disruption to nations and their citizens throughout the world. Populations have experienced death and sickness on a massive scale and immense economic and social hardship. During the crisis, in the search for information, advice and support, citizens have made use of various forms of media, from the traditional broadcast media of television and radio to more modern forms of social media. In England, one traditional kind of media which has been in steady decline for more than a decade, namely local newspapers, has found a renewed sense of purpose in providing, through their online platforms, timely and targeted and trusted information for local people. Using the comments sections provided on many of those platforms, local people have been able to discuss the issues raised by the pandemic and exchange opinions both with each other and with the journalists providing the news. This paper constitutes the beginning of a long-term project to explore the conditions under which local citizens of one particular town in England have engaged with their local newspaper and the nature of the ensuing interactions. The goal of the project is to understand the relationships between users, journalists and publishers and critically evaluate the nature of these relationships not only in terms of their contribution to addressing the problems caused by the pandemic but also with respect to wider questions concerning the relationship between citizens and media organizations in the capitalist state such as free speech versus hate speech and the conditions of possibility for a Habermasian public sphere. In this paper I shall briefly sketch the background to the study and review the relevant literature before introducing the specific research context and offering some tentative observations on the relationships under investigation. As a starting point, let us consider what is meant by the term “pandemic”.

What is a pandemic?

A pandemic, in the literal as opposed to metaphorical sense, is a disease epidemic that spreads widely around the world. Until the emergence of the current coronavirus pandemic, arguably the most well-known example was the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which is thought to have infected over one-third of the world's population and killed around 50 million people.¹ Other examples include the bubonic plague (the Black Death) in the 14th century and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) pandemic which started in the 1980s.² Notable examples from the present century are the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) pandemic, both of which were caused by types of coronavirus, as indeed are some forms of the common cold.³

The coronavirus pandemic

While the current Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic requires little introduction from me here, to facilitate a better understanding of the discussion which follows it may be helpful to briefly summarize its main features. Note, however, that many details are still the subject of ongoing debate and as such may need to be revised in the light of new evidence.

The outbreak is generally believed to have started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and quickly spread through the rest of China and around the world. It was designated as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. Since the original outbreak, several variants of the virus have emerged, of varying virulence. At the time of writing, approximately 240 million cases have been recorded and estimates of the number of deaths range from 4.9 up to 19 million people if so-called "excess" deaths due to the pandemic but not the virus itself are included. The virus is mainly transmitted from person to person through breathing airborne droplets and particles. Infection may be asymptomatic but often leads to a range of flu-like and other symptoms, generally more severe in older people. Prevention involves various measures including social distancing, wearing masks, hand washing, ventilation and quarantining. Governments around the world have also responded by implementing measures such as lockdowns, travel restrictions and test-and-trace systems. The development of vaccines has been remarkably rapid and since December 2020, a number of them have been used for mass vaccination campaigns.

Throughout the entire world the pandemic has influenced every aspect of human existence. The economic, social and cultural effects of the pandemic have been unprecedented in scale and severity. The very nature of democracy and freedom, in those countries generally regarded as being democratic and free, has come into question, particularly in regard to the rights and duties of the state versus those of the individual. Of particular concern is the tendency for the various forms of inequality that existed before than pandemic, including those surrounding race, gender and class, to have been exacerbated. In response to these problems, but serving to further intensify them and cause widespread confusion, a great deal of misinformation has been circulated, and this has led to much critical reflection on the actions of the mass- and social media, their owners, producers and users.

Indeed, the pandemic has been accompanied by a so-called "infodemic" which, according

to the WHO, means “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak”.⁴ This is regarded as being a matter of grave concern because, amongst other things, it causes “confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health.”⁵ In response to this, the WHO seeks to reduce the problem through so-called infodemic management which it says involves the following four kinds of activity: listening to community concerns and questions; promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice; building resilience to misinformation; engaging and empowering communities to take positive action. What is remarkable about these activities is the degree to which they coincide with the stated aims of socially responsible online news outlets during the pandemic, something I shall discuss in more detail below.

The coronavirus pandemic in England

Before going further, I would like to briefly remind readers of one salient point regarding the specific national context of this study. It is important to understand that, unlike the other three constituent nations of the United Kingdom, namely Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, England does not have its own devolved parliament. Instead, matters relating solely to England are dealt with by the UK government in London.⁶ It was under such an arrangement, therefore, that, in terms of responding to the pandemic, the four nations were empowered to take their own decisions regarding measures such as lockdowns and self-isolation. In consequence, although there was a degree of coordination and cooperation, the responses differed in many respects. In this section I shall confine my remarks to the situation as it pertained in England.

The first cases of Covid-19 in England (and, in fact, the first in the UK) were reported on 31 January, 2020 in the city of York. This and other notable events of the pandemic in England, up to the end of September 2021, are summarized in Table 1. As of the time of writing, in England there have been just over 6.2 million confirmed cases and about 118,000 deaths.

The pandemic in the news

It is fair to say that during the last two years the pandemic has dominated the world’s news agenda like nothing else in living memory apart from war. One particularly contentious part of the infodemic is the veritable tsunami of statistics and data that have been produced. To what extent have they helped or hindered people’s understanding of the situation? In this paper I have endeavored to limit the number of figures I cite, but in making the case for the importance of understanding how the world’s media has responded to the pandemic, I think it is useful to have an idea of the amount of news it has generated, particularly in newspapers. As just one example of this, then, a search of the newspaper database *Nexis Uni* for the word “pandemic” used in headlines of English language news reports found just 815 instances for 2019 but over 524,000 for 2020.⁷

Table 1. Timeline of Covid-19 Pandemic in England up to September 2021

Date	Notable events	Monthly		Cumulative	
		Cases ⁸	Deaths ⁹	Cases	Deaths
2020 Jan	First case in England reported. First wave of infection starts.	2	0	2	0
Feb	First Briton dies (on <i>Diamond Princess</i> cruise ship in Japan).	19	0	21	0
Mar	Government launches first public health campaign. First lockdown starts.	20,987	2,287	21,008	2,287
Apr	Lockdown continues.	97,335	21,666	118,343	23,953
May	Lockdown easing begins.	33,833	9,265	152,176	33,218
Jun	First local lockdown starts in and around Leicester.	8,411	2,630	160,587	35,848
Jul	Face masks made compulsory in most indoor public venues.	100,761	734	261,348	36,582
Aug	Restrictions eased for summer holidays.	28,790	270	290,138	36,852
Sept	Schools reopen but restrictions tighten.	98,204	577	388,342	37,429
Oct	Second wave of infection starts. Tiered system of local “circuit breaker” lockdowns starts.	470,102	3,703	858,444	41,132
Nov	Second lockdown starts.	543,348	10,055	1,401,792	51,187
Dec	Restrictions eased over Christmas “bubble” period. Mass vaccinations begin.	738,164	12,931	2,139,956	64,118
2021 Jan	Third lockdown starts. Schools close.	1,201,293	29,330	3,341,249	93,448
Feb	Quarantine of international travelers from designated countries starts.	317,103	14,875	3,658,352	108,323
Mar	Phase 1 of lockdown easing. Schools reopen.	142,370	3,166	3,800,722	111,489
Apr	Phase 2 of lockdown easing.	58,160	674	3,858,882	112,163
May	Cases begin to rise due to spread of Delta variant.	57,167	228	3,916,049	112,391
June	Third wave of infection starts.	258,269	303	4,174,318	112,694
Jul	End of lockdown: “Freedom Day”.	939,746	1,222	5,114,064	113,916
Aug	Further easing of restrictions.	766,070	2,465	5,880,134	116,381
Sept	Most restrictions ended.	766,829	3,219	6,646,963	119,600

Theoretical background and previous studies

The project of which present study forms the first stage is transdisciplinary and draws on a wide range of theories, methods and fields of study. Most notably, it is informed by critical discourse analysis of the Faircloughian variety and, through that, systemic functional linguistics although they do not figure explicitly in this paper.¹⁰ Before the pandemic, much research on online comments had already been conducted by scholars in a variety of disciplines. This topic has been examined from the perspective of audience engagement, moderation of comments, the attitudes of journalists and the public sphere.¹¹ In response to the pandemic, scholars have not been slow to investigate how the media has been impacted by it, how it has responded to it, and the degree to which it has or has not fulfilled its role.¹² There have been studies into newspapers and even, specifically, local newspapers.¹³ However, most studies have been quantitative and paid little or no attention to actual texts although some such studies are beginning to emerge.¹⁴ What is still largely absent from the literature are studies of alternatives to the conventional kinds of online comment structures that might involve a greater degree of democratic accountability and offer more control to citizens.

The present study

In this study, I have chosen to focus on the contested space represented by the online comments section of a local newspaper of one particular English town. Ragton is a medium-sized English town located somewhere between London to the south and the border with Scotland to the north.¹⁵ Like many other towns around the country, it has suffered over the last half-century from the decline of its principal industries and the social problems that it engendered, notably those to do with poverty, drugs and crime. More recently the growth of online shopping and other activities has had a negative impact on consumer activity in the town, as evidenced by the large number of vacant retail units around the town centre. However, in recent years the emergence of some green economic shoots in and around the town have given hope for better days to come and the sense of a distinctive Ragtonian identity in the town remains strong. This has seen the citizens weather the vicissitudes of the coronavirus pandemic better, perhaps, than some other comparable towns, with numerous instances of neighborhood communities “pulling together” and individuals making sometimes quite heroic efforts to support vulnerable people. One factor in sustaining the citizen’s sense of identity and bolstering their resilience in the face of the pandemic has been the local newspaper, the *Ragton Chronicle*.

The *Ragton Chronicle*

As a print newspaper, the *Ragton Chronicle* traces its origins back to Victorian times. Although the paper has undergone numerous changes of ownership, manner of publication and format, it is currently a paid-for daily tabloid owned by Reach plc, a major UK media conglomerate formerly known as Trinity Mirror.

Although the *Ragton Chronicle* is one of the more successful titles within the company’s

extensive portfolio, such success is only relative since, as with the rest of the UK newspaper industry, the paper's circulation has shown a steady fall in recent years. The latest officially-audited figures show that it currently sells less than 10,000 copies per day, which is less than half the number than it sold just five years ago, at around which time the media studies scholar Mick Temple was offering the following prophesy:

The evidence is overwhelming: rapidly declining sales and radical cost-cutting exercises indicate the daily local printed newspaper will soon be dead. The traditional audience is also literally dying—and to most of our young people, the idea of getting news twelve hours after it has happened in a form which dirties your hands and involves felling half a forest, looks as quaint as relying on a carrier pigeon for the latest football scores.¹⁶

While reports of the death of local newspapers, by Temple and many others, may have been somewhat exaggerated, the evidence of the sector's seemingly inexorable decline continues to mount. Unsurprisingly, such a decline in the circulation of printed newspapers leads to a correspondingly downward pressure on advertising revenue. In Reach's case, this has led to various attempts at restructuring its operations including through the consolidation of titles, introduction of new technology, downsizing, outsourcing, job losses and worsening conditions of employment for the journalists who remain. It has also focused the company's attention on the importance of its digital offerings which, in the case of the *Ragton Chronicle*, means its online version, *Ragton Live*.

Ragton Live

The overall appearance of the *Ragton Live* website is plain, functional and generic. Perhaps this is not surprising given that it shares its basic design with every other of Reach's *Live* offerings. Even those in Scotland, such as *Glasgow Live*, are the same. Indeed, readers of one particular paper may experience a curious sense of *deja-vu* when they access another site with, at first glance, only the background colour of the top page's header appearing to change. Of course, the titles are different, and much of the content too, but the lowest-common-denominator blandness of the design seems at serious odds with the stated aim of the company to emphasize what is distinctive in each local area and deepen relationships with its readers. I cannot help but wonder how much more money the company would have needed to spend to introduce a modicum of local flavor into the designs. As it is, we see here the kind of standardization and concomitant streamlining of operations and economies of scale that a large organization like Reach has the resources to achieve. The financial incentive too in sharing journalistic output more-or-less seamlessly across the various sites and cutting costs are obvious.

The website has slightly different versions for viewing on a computer or a smartphone. When viewed on a computer¹⁷, the top page consists of several sections. The arrangement and number of these sections varies slightly as the site is updated. For brevity, only the principal elements will be described, omitting minor details. Every element mentioned below functions as a hyperlink.

The background colour for the pages is white and all lettering is in a san serif font resembling Arial. Framing the whole page rather like a table viewed from the side are advertisements, one

across the top of the screen and one extending about halfway down each side.¹⁸ While scrolling down removes the “table top” advertisement from view the two “legs” remain. Across the space within the “table” is a bright banner displaying the name *RagtonLive* (with no space between the two words), currently with the words *Black history is our history* on a colourful pan-African style background beneath it. The banner also contains links to some of the main sections of the site (including “News”, “Business” and “Environment”), icons for links to the paper’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts, and a search function (indicated by a magnifying glass icon). At the right hand edge of this banner, coloured grey, is a head and shoulders icon, also unlabeled, which links to the sign-in/register page, which I will refer to in more detail below.

Below the banner comes the leading news story. This invariably includes a full-width (within the advertisements, that is) photograph, usually in landscape format with, below it, the headline and, smaller and less distinctly, a lead sentence. In cases where a specific photograph concerning the topic is not available (or at least has not been used) a generic agency photograph is used.

Below the main story, the page becomes a loosely tiled arrangement of older stories or those deemed less newsworthy. Each story is represented by a photograph with a headline below but no lead sentence. If the story includes video content, as many of them do, the photograph has a triangular “play” icon on it. On the line below the headline, in faint grey lettering, is the name of the news sub-section to which the story belongs (such as “Crime”, “Entertainment” or “Shopping”). On the same line, for those stories for which the comment facility is activated, there is a small speech bubble icon with a number beside it indicating the number of comments, also in faint grey.¹⁹ On scrolling down the page, this grid of stories is periodically interrupted by a larger photograph and headline which, like the lead story, extends across the whole page. Also, below the first few lines of the grid, the right hand side of the page becomes a long column of smaller photographs with their associated headlines.²⁰

The tiles of news stories are interspersed with an ever-changing array of advertisement and “advertorial” tiles, the latter usually leading to contents from one of Reach’s national newspapers. Prominent amongst the advertisements is one, which is always displayed, for a free service called, “InYourArea” (again, with no spaces). This is Reach’s hyperlocal news aggregator site. The advertisement invites users to input their postcode in order to enter the InYourArea site and receive local news and other information including such things as council services, planning applications and, more recently, the pandemic.

The footer of the page is black with white and grey lettering. In its centre there is a logo indicating that the publication is regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO). While this may serve to convey a sense of legitimacy, it should be noted that IPSO has been criticized as a toothless watchdog that is owned and controlled by the very newspapers it is supposed to regulate.²¹ At the very bottom of the page are links to various types of “small print” including “About us”, “Work for us” and “Advertise with Us”. This is where one finds the “Corrections and Clarifications” section, which would appear to be in need of some corrections itself. This is because, firstly, it offers no way to report problems. Although the first sentence on the page reads, “If we have published anything that is factually inaccurate, please click here to contact the editor and, once verified, we will correct it here as soon as possible,” none of the words in the sentence or anything else on the page is actually hyperlinked to the company. Secondly, the next

sentence states that, “The Ragton Chronicle website is published by Trinity Mirror PLC, which is a member of IPSO, the Independent Press Standards Organisation,” which has clearly not been revised since the website was renamed *Ragton Live* and the company was renamed Reach plc.

Terms and conditions

Let us now turn to the terms upon which the publishers invite users to participate in the “conversation”. Each page’s footer contains a link to the website’s Terms and Conditions page. Such texts are a form of legal boilerplate that virtually all sites which feature user-generated content utilize. Generically, they are rather remarkable in being full of statements about what “you”, the user, “acknowledge” or “agree”. Although it is likely that few users ever bother to read these, I would like to discuss a few points which bear on the subject of the present paper, namely how users comment on articles. The page tells users, firstly, that “You agree that you will not use the Site to submit, or knowingly or recklessly receive, any material including without limitation, comments and reviews that:”, followed by a list of seven items of which the first, shown below, is of most concern to this study (and, one suspects, given its prominent position in the list, the publishers themselves).

are in any way, obscene, threatening, abusive, offensive, defamatory, invasive of another’s privacy, in breach of confidence, embarrassing to any person, likely to deceive, inaccurate, misleading, hateful, blasphemous, pornographic, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable;

While seeking to maintain a degree of civility in the comments section may well be a laudable aim, such an all-encompassing clause as this would appear to allow the removal of just about any comment. As if this were not clear enough, the section on their monitoring of the site states:

You acknowledge that we have no obligation to monitor any user generated content on the Site but in our sole discretion, we have the right to delete any such content and we may remove any such material at any time.

As even a cursory glance at the comments section of the site reveals, such deletions are made frequently and are likewise frequently complained about by users. It seems to be the lack of explanation as to why a particular comment has been deleted that is of particular concern to users. But persistent breaches of this rule or persistent complaints about it can lead to the user’s account on the site being terminated, in which case, the text goes on, “you may not open another account on it or otherwise continue to use the Site”. If by “use” they include “view”, then this indeed seems a draconian (albeit practically unenforceable) sanction. But as if that were not enough, in some cases they may also “disclose such information [about user’s identity or location] to the police, your Internet service provider and any third party”.

One final clause worthy of mention here relates to the rights to the comments submitted by users. It states:

If you send us, upload or post content, you grant us a perpetual, royalty free, irrevocable,

non-exclusive right and licence to use, reproduce, publish, communicate to the public, translate, create derivative works from and distribute such content into any form, medium or technology now known or hereafter developed. In addition, you waive any and all moral rights in such content.

The overwhelming impression gained by these terms and conditions is that, notwithstanding the company's stated aim of forming ever stronger relationships with the local community, ultimately such relationships are envisaged as being based upon a very unequal footing in terms of, to use Fairclough's terms, both the power *over* language and power *within* language.²² While this might be regarded as an entirely normal state of affairs in a modern, democratic society such as England, it seems far from the ideal Habermasian public sphere. At least, one would hope, the site's terms and conditions would offer users something in return for all the conditions being imposed upon them. Quite surprisingly, however, they seem astonishingly lenient when it comes to the producers themselves. Under a section starkly entitled "Do not rely on this information on this site", they state:

We make no representations, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that the content on the Site is accurate, complete or up to date and we do not accept any responsibility for any of such content.

One would have thought that professional journalists would be willing to stand by the accuracy of their reporting, particularly given the stringent conditions the site imposes on mere amateur contributors.

Community standards

At the head of each comment section appended to a news article is the statement, "Commenting is subject to our house rules". This links to a page entitled "Community Standards" which sets out, in more user-friendly terms, what is described as an "addition" to the Terms and Conditions. Much of it is reasonable, such as "Please be relevant" and "We will not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic or other hate-speech or anything that could be interpreted as such." However, their commitment to open engagement is thrown into doubt by the statement that "We reserve the right to moderate or delete User Generated Content and if for any reason we edit any post or edit or close any thread, we will not enter into any discussion of our reasons for doing so."

Anonymity of user accounts

One item of the top page of the site, and indeed of all the pages on the site, which has not yet been mentioned is a small bell-shaped icon that floats permanently in the bottom right corner of the screen, regardless of how the pages are scrolled. Clicking on this opens a pop-up window which lists, on one of its three tabs, up to five of the site's stories that have active conversations, showing headline, thumbnail photo and the number of comments, all hyperlinked to the particular story. Before one can participate, however, one must set up an account, which can be done either directly

or via Google or Facebook. Setting an account involves agreeing to the site's terms and conditions. Users can either set their account up with their real name or a nickname. It appears that very few accounts on *RagtonLive* use a real name, and even those that do take the form of a name may not, in fact, be the users actual name. The nicknames are frequently witty and inventive, with several making reference to the town or region in some way.

Moderation

One thing that many users may not be aware of is that the comments section of the *RagtonLive* website is actually a separate, though “fully-integrated” and somewhat sinisterly-called “customer acquisition platform” provided by a Canadian company called Viafoura.²³ They appear to be doing well: “Viafoura partners with over 600 media brands to engage, convert and monetize their digital audiences.” Whether intentional or not, there is a suggestion here of a sequential progression envisaged for users, such as a fly might experience on encountering the enticing architecture of a funnel web spider's burrow, from being engaged, to being converted, to being monetized. Needless to say, this is not the way it is presented to users of *RagtonLive*. But after one look at their very slick website it is easy to see why publishers like Reach are attracted to it. The site is full of enticing exhortations to: “Get first-party data to track engagement across your property and make decisions to convert visitors into paid subscribers and attract ad revenue,” and “Engage, convert and monetize your digital audience with Viafoura's suite of engagement and content moderation solutions.”

From the contents of the site it is clear that a keyword within this industry is “toxicity”, which is construed as the opposite of “civility”. The traditional difficulty for online news platforms with purging a discussion of toxicity is the high cost in terms of employing human moderators. But customers need have no fear because Viafoura has the answer: AI. As the website announces:

Prevent Toxicity. Our Intelligent Auto Moderation Engine was designed by linguists and engineers to capture tone and recognize multiple forms of toxicity. It is tailored to match your specific community guidelines to keep your community safe from hate speech, harassment and abuse. ...Viafoura ensures you can enforce civility across your community without driving up costs.

Is civility something that should be “enforced” rather than, say, encouraged or promoted? If so, how is it done? The website shows an interesting (presumably simulated) mock-up of an online comment section illustrating how their system operates using the following curious and uncontextualized sample sequence:

Amanda: I never really thought of it this way. I now have a different view on life, thank you ... [Comment Approved]

Ruth: The author is such a spineless snowflake. Be better. [Comment Removed]

Whereas Amanda's comment keeps so far within the bounds of civility as to be verging on the beatific (is this what Viafoura means by “convert”?), is Ruth's comment really so very toxic? It seems that such is Viafoura's view:

Viafoura cuts down your moderation costs by letting your moderators focus on highlighting the **best** of your community, not handling its **waste**.

So Ruth's comment (or are they referring to people like Ruth herself here?) is not only "toxic" but actually toxic "waste" to be moderated out of existence. There is only one word to describe Viafoura's attitude: ruthless.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out the groundwork for my long term project on pandemic discourse as reflected in the online comments section of a particular English local newspaper's website. At this stage, the main conclusion that I draw from the present study is that the two sides in the relationship between the publisher, Reach, and the users of the website is that the encounter is astonishingly asymmetrical. It is one in which Reach, tooled up with Viafoura's toxicity terminating technology, enters the encounter as very much the controlling partner. Given this relationship, it is hardly surprising that users are critical of the terms under which they are invited to participate. Just how critical those users are, and what linguistic and discursive strategies they employ to express that criticism, will form the subject of the next paper in this series.

Notes

- 1 Brown, Jeremy 2018. *Influenza: The Hundred-Year Hunt to Cure the Deadliest Disease in History*. New York: Atria. Note that the first case of this virus was not detected in Spain but rather in the USA.
- 2 Although HIV is thought to have originated in the 1920s in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) it did not become a pandemic until the 1980s.
- 3 The full scientific name for the virus responsible for the current pandemic, which is genetically very similar to the previous SARS virus, is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2, commonly abbreviated to SARS-CoV-2.
- 4 "Infodemic" page of the World Health Authority's website: www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic (accessed 10 October 2021).
- 5 www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic (accessed 10 October 2021).
- 6 While there has been considerable debate over whether MPs from the other countries should be allowed to vote on matters pertaining solely to England—the so-called "West Lothian Question"—and several legislative measures were introduced to deal with the problem, in the summer of 2021 all such measure were abolished.
- 7 For scholars who might be interested in knowing roughly analogous figures for what might be described as the academic pandemic infodemic, the number of articles featuring the word "pandemic" found on ProQuest for 2019 was 6,300. This jumped to 103,445 in 2020. Likewise, Google Scholar returned approximately 26,600 hits for 2019 and 199,000 for 2020.
- 8 The statistics for cases of Covid-19 infection are extremely complex and still subject to revision, with considerable variation between figures derived in different ways using different methodologies and criteria. Therefore, these figures should be taken as simply indicative of the trends rather than precise.
- 9 The figures for deaths, while less subject to reinterpretation and revision than those for cases, are nevertheless to be regarded likewise as indicative of the trends. All figures used here are taken from the official UK government coronavirus website (coronavirus.data.gov.uk/) (accessed 10 October, 2021).
- 10 For introductions to these two fields see the following. Fairclough, Norman, 1989. *Language and Power*, London: Longmans. Halliday, M.A.K. 1994 *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2nd ed. London: Arnold.
- 11 Krebs, Isabelle and Juliane Lischka. 2017. Is audience engagement worth the buzz? The value of audience engagement, comment reading, and content for online news brands. *Journalism* 20 (6) 714–732. Meyer, Hans and Michael Clay Carey. 2014. In moderation: examining how journalists' attitudes toward online comments affect the creation of community. *Journalism Practice* 8 (2) 213–228. Zamith, Rodrigo and Seth Lewis. 2014. From public spaces to public sphere: rethinking systems for reader comments on online news sites. *Digital Journalism* 2(4)

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 - 13 Bento, Ana, Thuy Nguyen, Coady Wing, Felipe Lozano-Rojas, Yong-Yeol Ahn and Kosali Simon. 2020. Evidence from internet search data shows information-seeking responses to news of local COVID-19 cases. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117 (21) 11220–11222.
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 - 15 Ethical considerations have led me to the decision that the precise identity of the town and its newspaper should be anonymized. As for the names used by the newspaper’s readers in their comments, although the majority of those are nicknames rather than actual names, they have, in all cases been anonymized too, as have the comments themselves. Likewise, I have anonymized the journalists and, as far as possible, the texts of the news articles.
 - 16 Temple, Mick. 2015. The imminent death of the British local press, *Journalism Education* 4 (1) 72–79.
 - 17 In my case, using a desktop PC running Windows and the Firefox browser to access the site from Japan. It is possible that the appearance of the website might be different if using other hard- or software or from a different location. The appearance of the mobile version of the site is essentially a simplified version of the computer one and will not be discussed here.
 - 18 My impression after prolonged engagement with the site is that these advertisements are to some degree “targeted” at the viewer based on such things as their location and browsing history, but I have not been able to rigorously verify this. For those viewers who dislike advertisements, it is worth noting that the site lacks, or is not currently utilizing, any kind of ad blocker blocking function.
 - 19 So faint and small are these icons that it took me quite a long time before I even noticed they were there. If audience “engagement” is a key aim of the publishers, then one might have expected them to be displayed more prominently.
 - 20 The fact that in this sentence I chose to write “smaller photographs with their associated headlines” rather than “headlines with their associated smaller photographs” is an indication of how important visual images are to our engagement with online texts such as this. Such being the case, it is hardly surprising, and much to be welcomed, that systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse scholars are paying attention to the analysis of multimodal texts. See Baldry and Thibault, 2006. *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis*. London: Equinox.
 - 21 Carr, Oliver. 2018. Out with the old, and in with the old: walking the tightrope of press regulation. *Manchester Review of Law, Crime and Ethics*, 7 14–25.
 - 22 Fairclough, Norman. 2001. Language behind power (pp. 46–57), in *Language and power*, 2nd ed. London: Longman.
 - 23 Although the company logo uses a lowercase v, the company’s website uses both capital V and lowercase v. All quotes are taken from the website: viafoura.com (accessed 10 October 2021).