

THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF FLAMING
ON LEARNING FROM POLITICAL NEWS ONLINE

By

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ABSTRACT

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There is much debate among media professionals and academics concerning the role of interactive online media in the education of citizens about current political events. Generally, the media provide information about current events that can be used by individuals to make informed decisions in a democracy. Providing individuals with the opportunity to comment on news articles might aid this process by facilitating elaboration on the topic through online discussions, which has been causally linked to subsequent acquisition of knowledge. To test whether this is true, the present dissertation first tests if elaboration in fact predicts the amount of knowledge individuals acquire from a news article, and whether the availability of comments predicts elaboration.

The same online discussions, however, have also been linked to a polarization of viewpoints and the demise of conversations that potentially facilitate elaboration. One common characteristic of online comments that is said to be particularly disruptive is flaming. Flaming is the expression of hostility toward others in online communication and has been found to exert a negative influence on a variety of user perceptions and behaviors. The present dissertation investigates whether flaming affects the amount and quality of knowledge individuals acquire from the news they are exposed to by means of elaboration. In addition, this dissertation investigates if specific design features of online commenting sections, such as tools signaling a commenter's credibility as well as

political ideology, also affect elaboration. Finally, this dissertation assesses how credibility and political ideology interact with flaming when it comes to elaboration.

It is the goal of this dissertation to contribute to the literature on the consumption of and knowledge acquisition from political news online and provide news organizations with guidelines for the design of interactive news sites. To achieve this goal, two online experiments (n=312) were conducted in which participants were exposed to different online commenting scenarios and then tested on how much knowledge they acquired from the related news articles. OLS regression models and t-tests were used to determine the nature of the effects of flaming, credibility and political ideology on elaboration. Overall, the present data support a causal link between elaboration and knowledge for two of the three tested dimensions and show that flaming had a negative effect on perceptions of news credibility and elaboration. The availability of comments in general did not have a statistically significant effect on elaboration. Only when comments exhibit very specific characteristics, their availability leads to an increase in elaboration. This is not only true when individuals engage in those discussions, but also when they merely see them. Furthermore, the effect of flaming on elaboration is fully mediated by perceptions about the trustworthiness dimension of credibility of the commenters. Whether the political ideology of a commenter matches the political ideology of the reader does not play a significant role. Together the results of the present dissertation shed light on the benefits and drawbacks of online comments and further emphasize the importance of finding new ways to keep online discussions civil.

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TO MY WIFE AND CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Political theorists have long argued that an informed public is essential for a democracy to function (Mutz, 2006). Citizens should be aware of important issues and provide feedback to the political system by making informed decisions (Milner, 2002; Parks, 1941; Schudson, 1998). Within this process, the extent to which information is provided by the media and learned by the audience is central to the role of media in a democracy because most individuals derive their initial knowledge about current affairs through the media (Aalberg & Curran, 2011; Lasswell, 1960). In addition to traditional media (J. P. Robinson & Levy, 1996), the Internet has become a major part in this process. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research (2012) the Internet has surpassed newspapers and radio as a way of accessing current information. While television still is the primary distribution system for getting news (55%), the Internet (39%) is closing in, showing a 5% increase between 2010 and 2012.

However, online media are not only places where information about current affairs is acquired through news. The media does also aid the democratic process by fostering political conversations and opinion formation through the provision of a diversity of voices (R. Anderson & Dardenne, 1996; Ciofalo & Traverso, 1994; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). Discussions prompted by news media are a vital part of a democracy as studies have found a causal relationship between discussing political information, or even anticipating such discussions, and an increase of political knowledge (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Eveland, 2004; J. P. Robinson & Levy, 1996; Scheufele, 2000, 2002). This is one of the reasons why the Internet – and especially its ability to facilitate open discussions – has been proposed as a tool for fostering

democracy since the beginning of its widespread public use (Benson, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001; Downing, 1989). More specifically, the Internet was said to counter the speculated decline in face-to-face political discussions (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Putnam, 2000) by providing a forum for exchanging ideas (Papacharissi, 2004; Tsagarousianou, 1999) in forums or chat rooms.

While face-to-face interactions remain important, political conversations and socialization increasingly take place within electronic networks (Howard, 2011). With the implementation of interactive features, such as commenting sections, online news sites are increasingly offering places for individuals to engage in discussions (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011), providing opportunities for readers to receive information about current events while being exposed to a diverse set of viewpoints potentially different from their own (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005).

Although those discussions taking place online often fall short of the standards of formal political deliberation suggested by most deliberative theories of democracy (Fishkin, 1991), they can still serve an important role in forming political knowledge. Most individuals discuss current issues in informal conversations rather than official settings, which makes their social life as communicators more central and important than their formal exchanges as citizens (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). Informal political discussions, in this case, are those interactions taking place outside of formal, rule-bound structures that are closely intermeshed with everyday life and social interaction outside of the political realm (Conover, Searing, & Creve, 2002).

However, a stream of literature criticizing the role of the Internet in the democratic process argues against the idea of the Internet as a positive influence on

democracy. The argument is that discussions taking place on the Internet, while enabling widespread participation, are less civil and thoughtful than face-to-face discussions and are related to a polarization of politics (Bellamy & Raab, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998). In fact, concerns about low-quality comments, flaming, and polarized comments have led journalists to dismiss reader input (Nielsen, 2014), and generally prevented online comments from becoming a more important forum for discussion in many news organizations (Chung, 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Ortony & Turner, 1990). Many journalists fear the development of a negative communication culture and a dominance of a few users that cause a disturbance (Nielsen, 2012; Singer & Ashman, 2009). Furthermore, journalists are uncertain about the role they themselves should play in interacting with readers (S. Robinson, 2010), given that online news environments have changed the historical one-way directional form of communication between journalists and their publics into an interactive endeavor (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Recently, an increasing number of news outlets removed the opportunity to comment on their websites. Even some large general interest news outlets such as the “Chicago Sun Times” took such steps, while the “Washington Post” and “New York Times” were also discussing measures to address problematic user comments (Belluck, 2013; Farhi, 2014; Kirkland, 2014; LaBarre, 2013). News outlets do so citing research that negative reader comments can decrease perceptions about the quality of the website and distort the meaning of and opinion about the topic discussed in the article itself (A. Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006).

What has not been addressed, however, is the question of whether discussions have to exhibit certain characteristics, such as being civil, in order to facilitate the

acquisition of knowledge. Only if this is the case, flaming in online comments would actually affect the amount of information individuals acquire from online news and therefore have a negative impact on society in this crucial democratic regard. The present dissertation aims at contributing to the existing literature by investigating how flaming within online comments affects knowledge acquisition.

In addition, the present dissertation investigates two design features that could mitigate the potential effects of flaming. Implementing certain design elements on websites can promote socially desirable behavior (Garrett & Resnick, 2011), and news websites are actively looking for ways to improve commenting culture on their pages through developing and implementing new technological solutions (Kirkland, 2014). For example, it has been suggested that providing a more structured design and context can improve comment quality (Reid, 2014). Some community-driven news sites, such as reddit¹ and Slashdot², have already implemented specific design elements indicating user characteristics such as credibility/karma in order to provide additional context to the comments made by users on the site. Most online outlets of traditional newspapers or television stations, however, have not implemented such aids.

The present dissertation focuses on two design changes that could provide more context to commenting sections and therefore mitigate the potential effects of flaming: displaying the credibility as well as political ideology of commenters. These two factors were chosen because they are easy to implement in an online commenting environment

¹ reddit (reddit.com) is a social networking service and news website where registered community members can submit content, such as text posts or direct links. Only registered users can then vote submissions "up" or "down" to organize the posts and determine their position on the site's pages.

² Slashdot (Slashdot.org) is a technology-related news website which bills itself as "News for Nerds. Stuff that Matters". It features user-submitted and evaluated news stories about science and technology-related topics. Each story has a comments section; discussion is moderated by a user-based moderation system.

and have also been shown to exert huge influence on individuals' perception and processing of messages in previous research (i.e. Hovland & Weiss, 1953; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Taber & Lodge, 2006). If these design changes indeed have a positive effect on how readers learn from the news or mitigate the potentially negative effects of flaming, news organizations should be advised to integrate such measures in their commenting sections. Therefore, this dissertation has practical as well as theoretical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there has been an increase in the amount of research dedicated to the use of the Internet for democratic purposes and the role of online discussions (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014), little work has been done to determine the effect of specific characteristics of the content of these discussions (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Researchers have examined the use of social media as a communication tool within social movements, showing that it facilitated the organization of protests and taking movements from Internet participation to actual real-life involvement (Harlow, 2012; Lim, 2012; Pu & Scanlan, 2012; Starbird & Palen, 2012). It has also been addressed how social media offers minorities the opportunity to tell their story, potentially countering mass media coverage (Al-Ani, Mark, Chung, & Jones, 2012; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). Furthermore, it has been studied and how social media can become a pathway for young adults first involvement with the political realm (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Hooghe, Vissers, Stolle, & Mahéo, 2010; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006; Vitak et al., 2011). Finally, messages and cues received through social media have also been shown to influence voting behavior in national elections (Bond et al., 2012) in a direct causal relationship.

While those effects are undoubtedly important, this dissertation takes a step back and looks at the acquisition of knowledge as a more immediate effect of digital media use. Acquiring knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for the type of informed decisions that foster a democracy and build the foundation for many further participatory actions. Media are undoubtedly only one of many forms of how information can be distributed to the public, but low levels of knowledge within the population are nonetheless a major concern. Deliberating on policy solutions and making informed decisions becomes

difficult when even a fraction of the individuals involved do not know the facts (Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008), as “widespread misinformation can lead to collective preferences that are far different from those that would exist if people were correctly informed” (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000, p. 790).

Acquiring Knowledge from the Media

For individuals to establish an understanding of the world around them that enables them to become a vital part of the democratic process, they need to acquire knowledge, and one way to do so is from the content provided through the media (Aalberg & Curran, 2011; Milner, 2002). In order to understand how individuals acquire knowledge from the media, it is necessary to understand how information is processed.

In most theories on information processing, it is assumed that individuals actively engage in is the processing of information (Lang, 2000). They perceive stimuli, turn them into mental representations, do mental work on those representations, and reproduce them in the same or in an altered form. To this, there are three major sub-processes: encoding, storage, and, retrieval. How much knowledge an individual acquires upon exposure to a mediated message is the result of how much of the message was encoded, how well the encoded material was stored, and how much of the stored material is retrievable. During this process, not all information is processed equally, often due to limitations to individual’s processing capacities or outside factors (Lang, 2000). Naturally then, some information from a message may be fully encoded, stored, and can therefore be retrieved easily, while other information may not or only partially be retrievable.

Using different measures, it can then be assessed how thorough information was processed (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Hasher & Zacks, 1979; Tulving & Thomson, 1973). More specifically, the degree of knowledge acquisition can be separated into three categories: the ability to *recognize* information, to *recall* information and finally to *comprehend* it. These three processes are closely related, as the understanding of an issue (comprehension) relies on the storage of and access to knowledge (recognition and recall) to relate new information to the bigger picture (Booth, 1970; Woodall & Davis, 1983).

Among those three, recognition is the most sensitive measure, requiring the least amount of processing (Lang, 2000). It can be seen as a test of whether a specific bit of information was at least loosely encoded. If a piece of information item can only be recognized when it is presented with multiple cues (such as predetermined answers in multiple choice questions) it can be said that the individual did not fully process the information and that knowledge is rather shallow (Tulving & Thomson, 1973).

Cued recall is the next most sensitive measure and can be interpreted as an index of how thoroughly a specific bit of information was stored. In cued recall, only a single cue is presented to the subject to help the subject retrieve an item from memory (Tulving & Osler, 1968), such as asking a question about the message but not providing answer choices. Recall in the realm of news media research is defined as the ability to store information about a news event and its surrounding circumstances in memory and then access and retrieve this information at a later point in time (L. T. Berry, 2001; Booth, 1970; Findahl & Höijer, 1985; Woodall & Davis, 1983).

Finally, to *comprehend* information from the encountered information is the strictest measure of the degree of information processing. It can be explained as a test to

the actual retrieval and connection process. It tests how well an individual can retrieve a piece of information without any cues at all and/or how well the individual can draw inferences from the information contained in the message. Comprehension is defined as the process of incorporating new information into memory by comparing this new information to pre-existing schemata and establishing connections between the new and the old, forming an overall picture (L. T. Berry, 2001; Booth, 1970; Findahl & Höijer, 1985; Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001; Woodall & Davis, 1983).

Taken together, these three concepts constitute what this dissertation defines as the three levels of acquiring knowledge from the media: Acquiring knowledge means a media user's processing, storage and the integration of this new information into the existing mental system. It also means the ability to recollect this information and its surrounding circumstances and subsequently the ability to make sense of it.

Knowledge Acquisition Through Elaboration

Given this foundation, the question becomes: What factors outside of the natural capabilities of the recipient determine how well the information processing process works? For a long time, media exposure has been ascribed the main role when it came to learning about politics from media messages (Perloff, 1998; D. H. Weaver, 1996) and the consensus was that the media exposure had a direct effects on public affairs knowledge. However, researchers started questioning the direct effect and argued that knowledge gain from media exposure involves active information processing (Eveland, 2001, 2002; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994). Researchers advocating this point concluded that while previous research had indeed shown that exposure is a major predictor of learning

from the news media, it does not necessarily mean that it was the most powerful predictor to explain the variance within knowledge acquisition (Graber, 1994).

While attention has also been credited as an important factor in determining learning from the news (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Drew & Weaver, 1990, 1991; D. Weaver & Drew, 2001), elaboration has been found to be the more powerful variable. When all are studied in the same model, exposure and attention do not have any direct effect on knowledge gain but work completely through elaboration (Wei & Lo, 2008).

Elaboration functions as a means to learning (McLeod et al., 1999) and is defined as the inclination to think about the content of a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). More specifically, elaboration refers to the degree of cognitive effort an individual puts into thinking about the content of a message and relating this information to existing or simultaneously acquired knowledge (Perse, 1990; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995; Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001). Elaboration is the process of using prior knowledge to “expand and refine new material based on such processes as organizing, restructuring, interconnecting, integrating new elements of information, identifying relations between them, and relating the new material to the learner's prior knowledge” (Kalyuga, 2009, p. 402). The consensus is that the acquisition of knowledge is facilitated by conditions that prompt individuals to elaborate on the information they encounter (Stein, Littlefield, Bransford, & Persampieri, 1984).

Overall, it can be said that cognitive processes (such as elaboration) are central to learning from the news (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Eveland et al., 2005; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Eveland, 2001, 2002). Research in educational psychology has also established a strong causal link between increased

elaboration and the ability to more easily access newly encountered information, as well as performance in memory tests (J. R. Anderson, 1990; Estes, 1984; Greene, 1992).

To replicate these findings in the context of commenting on online political news, and explore if the three dimensions of the knowledge acquisition process are equally affected by elaboration, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the *recognition* of information that were presented to them in news articles.

H2: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the *recall* of information that were presented to them in news articles.

H3: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the *comprehension* of information that was presented to them in news articles.

Influencing Elaboration of News Content

If an increase in elaboration of media content is related to an increase in knowledge, then it would be beneficial for a democratic society to find ways in which news organizations could facilitate more elaboration. Discussions through interactive online media offer a promising avenue, as they enable discussions among members of the audience.

Researchers have long acknowledged the importance of interpersonal channels in regard to the dissemination of information. Work on the “two-step flow” of communication in politics (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1970; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1965), and research on the diffusion of information (Greenberg, Briston, & Farr, 1965; Greenberg, 1964; Larsen & Hill, 1954; Troidahl & Van Dam, 1965) found that while the mass media mostly remained the initial source of a particular piece of information,

interpersonal communication played an important role in the subsequent dissemination of that information. After research had neglected those findings for a considerable period, it was Levy (1978) who suggested that information gathered from the media might serve as a token for interpersonal communication. Building on this, Robinson & Levy (J. P. Robinson & Levy, 1986) argued that using news content as a means of communication increases the interpersonal utility a person attributes to news consumption and in turn might affect attention to the content and subsequent learning. More recently, researchers have picked up the topic and started investigating several aspects of political discussions more clearly with regard to learning. Studies testing the effect of discussion frequency on knowledge generally found that an increase in the amount of discussions predicted an increase in knowledge (Bennett et al., 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000; Eveland et al., 2005; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002).

Eveland (2004) refined previous findings by investigating possible reasons behind the positive effect of discussions on knowledge. He found that discussion does not influence knowledge through simple repeated exposure (which has been the traditional explanation in the two-step flow model), but through additional elaboration on the news content that takes place due to an anticipated future discussion as well as the elaboration taking place during the actual discussion itself. Making a similar argument, Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee (2005) concluded that anticipating or participating in discussions would increase the mental effort devoted to the content of conversation and the incorporation of news into the conversation that predicts knowledge. These findings are congruent with Eveland's Cognitive Mediation Model (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Eveland et al., 2003; Eveland, 2001, 2002), which states that cognitive processes such as

attention and elaboration are central to learning from the news. Eveland and Thomson (2006) found even further support for this argument by establishing that, controlling for prior knowledge, interest, news use, and news elaboration, political discussion frequency and discussion elaboration are positively related to political knowledge. Overall, the evidence for the link between increased elaboration due to anticipated and actual discussions and an increase in political knowledge is robust, even if almost all previous studies investigating this effect only used survey measures and were therefore not able to claim causality. Only Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak (2005) used panel data to employ a model comparison approach. Their results support a unidirectional model running from discussion to knowledge – and therefore support a causal relationship.

Overall, the more individuals discuss a topic, the more they elaborate on the topic under question and should subsequently know more about it (Bennett et al., 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000; Eveland et al., 2005; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Holbert et al., 2002). And this is not only the case when individuals actively engage in discussions. Elaboration also happens when individuals are only reading online discussions without posting any comments. This finding has been ascribed to the fact that reading is an important part of deliberation, because a large part of rational discussion consists of reflecting on others' opinions (Smith, John, & Sturgis, 2009). Multiple studies have supported the notion that even reading online comments affects readers' perceptions and behaviors. For example, when readers encountered incivility in blogger commentary, they reported less open-mindedness and more attitude certainty on the discussed political issues (Borah, 2012). In addition, uncivil comments also affect readers' risk perceptions about the issue discussed in the article (A. Anderson et al., 2013), and their perceptions about the issue itself (Price

et al., 2006). Similar results have been found for online videos, where comments affected perceptions of and attitudes towards an issue (Shi, Messaris, & Cappella, 2014). Given those findings, the present dissertation predicts that individuals exposed to online comments should exhibit a greater amount of elaboration than individuals that are not exposed to online comments. To test this assumption in the context of political news online, this dissertation tests the following hypothesis:

H4: Individuals exposed to user comments will report more elaboration on the news article than individuals not exposed to user comments.

COMMENT CHARACTERISTICS AFFECTING ELABORATION

If the presence of comments beneath online news articles in fact increases elaboration, the current trend of news organizations shutting down user participation due to unwanted user behavior would be a negative force for the democratic process. Although most news outlets justify their shutting down of user comments by arguing that negative comments can decrease perceptions about the quality of the website and distort the meaning of and opinion about the topic discussed in the article itself (A. Anderson et al., 2013; Price et al., 2006), there is little empirical evidence that those uncivil comments would actually impact elaboration negatively. The next step of the present dissertation, therefore, is to test whether certain characteristics of user comments affect the amount of elaboration, and how potentially negative effects can be mitigated.

Flaming & Incivility in Online Comments

When individuals engage in computer mediated communication (CMC), such as discussions beneath political news on the Internet, their communication patterns change (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Walther, 1996). One of the most researched phenomena in this regard is called the *online disinhibition effect*, defined as a lowering of behavioral inhibitions in the online environment (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Dyer, Green, Pitts, & Millward, 1995; Joinson, 2001, 2007; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008; Suler, 2004).

As a result, individuals often feel less restrained when using CMC and, therefore, express themselves more openly. Individuals receive important benefits from self-disclosures made through CMC, show acts of kindness and generosity, and generally

open up, which has the potential to foster more open discussions (Suler, 2004). These positive results of disinhibited behavior online are called *benign disinhibition*.

On the other hand, the lowering of behavioral inhibitions in the online environment has also been associated with antisocial behavior. If individuals perceive a lack of repercussions for behaviors that violate the norms, they are more likely to express negative emotions or engage in certain behaviors beyond the point that would usually be seen as adequate in regular interactions. As a result, individuals often affect others negatively without any personal gain and engage in behaviors in which they would never engage in the real world (Suler, 2004). Behaviors such as discrimination (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001), social loafing (people exerting less effort and relying on others to achieve a goal when they work in a group) in online communities (Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010), certain practices on online gaming sites (Williams & Skoric, 2005), the development of hate sites (Chau & Xu, 2007), violent pornographic and pedophilic sites (Malamuth, Linz, & Weber, 2005), cyberbullying (Huang & Chou, 2010), insulting comments on YouTube (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010), and organizational conflicts (Turnage, 2007) have all been attributed to the online disinhibition effect (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). This phenomenon is called *toxic disinhibition* (Suler, 2004).

While research has found that people are attracted to some diversity in online forums (Stromer-Galley, 2002), and that some sub-groups of people are actually enjoying such toxic behavior either as active participants or spectators, the consensus is that most people who post comments in online spaces enjoy expressing their opinion and hearing the opinions of others in a constructive and practical way (Hill & Hughes, 1997; Light &

Rogers, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2007). Therefore, toxic disinhibition is a potential threat to a democratic society as it threatens civil discourse, the free and respectful exchange of ideas that is a crucial principle of public life and the fundamental tone and practice of democracy (Herbst, 2010). In the realm of online news, however, uncivil communication patterns are more and more common (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Flaming. A well-known example of toxic disinhibition is flaming (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004; Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). Flaming is defined as the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language (Moor et al., 2010). It typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments (Dyer et al., 1995) and can also be observed in the use of capital letters, colors and bold face, the disproportionate use of question marks and exclamation points (Turnage, 2007), and in the mixture of letters, numbers, and other typography to create negative words without actually spelling them out (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012), such as “ID10T”.

Flaming can be considered a sub-dimension of incivility in online comments. Incivility refers to an unnecessarily disrespectful tone used in communication that can include hostility, aggression, intimidation, insults, offensive language, uninhibited behavior, sarcasm, or an unfriendly tone. While incivility can also consist of ignoring other members of the community or disrupting communication patterns, flaming consists of strictly directed verbal attacks intended to offend either people or organizations. They are often in the form of profanity or personal attacks (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2006; Reinig & Mejias, 2004). In the context of online news, flaming would usually be directed

at an individual or organization mentioned in the related article, the journalist or news organization that published the article, or users who commented beneath it. It would rather not be directed at the topic (for example: health care) of the article.

In general, flaming is rather social-context dependent than a distinct characteristic of a specific medium (Kayany, 1998), and a context in which online flaming frequently occurs is discussions revolving around political news. Individuals commenting on political topics usually do so in an emotional fashion (Park, Ko, Kim, Liu, & Song, 2011), even more so than individuals commenting on other subjects.

Effects on Knowledge Acquisition. The main concerns in relation to flaming during political discussions on the Internet is the potential decrease in the amount of thoughtful discussion, the increase in polarized views about politics (Bellamy & Raab, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998), and that the negative comments distort the meaning of and opinion about the topics discussed in the news articles itself (A. Anderson et al., 2013; Price et al., 2006). Several studies found that flaming is indeed a common practice in online media environments. In an interview study, for example, the majority of YouTube users described flaming as common (Lange, 2007). This is congruent with survey research, in which the majority of the participating online commenters indicated to “regularly” encounter flaming (Moor et al., 2010). The same has been found for online gaming, where the majority of users report that they “often” see flaming (Elliott, 2012). Overall, eight in ten Americans reported the lack of civil or respectful discourse as a somewhat serious or very serious problem (Coe et al., 2014). And this even holds true on major news websites, as a study recently found that from articles that included discussion, 55.5% included at least one uncivil comment (Coe et al., 2014).

The problem with flaming is, that these acts of communication could have negative consequences for the participation and perceptions of news readers (Papacharissi, 2004). While some readers might find it amusing, the majority actually states that such behavior should not be the norm (Elliott, 2012). In general, the majority of users consider flaming as annoying (Moor et al., 2010). This is important because when users become annoyed, they might refrain from further engaging with the news article and therefore elaborate less on the presented content. If this actually happens, however, is unclear. While flaming is considered especially disruptive in educational environments (Chester & Gwynne, 1998), it is also usually considered to be a minor issue in traditional educational environments due to the more controlled procedures and the potential repercussions (Chester, 2006).

Looking more broadly at how individuals process information when confronted with flaming, the results vary. In the context of political commentary online, individuals confronted with flaming in the comments associated with an article as a result were significantly less open minded and had a greater attitude centrality than participants that had not been exposed to flaming (Borah, 2012). This is important in the context of the present dissertation as open mindedness and attitude centrality could affect the amount of elaboration an individual is willing to engage in negatively. Furthermore, a hostile and destructive communication climate was found to negatively influence participation in knowledge sharing communities (van den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004), which could further decrease an individual's willingness to elaborate.

The presence of flaming might also interfere with elaboration and subsequent knowledge because dealing with it could use up much of the limited capacity that

individuals have available to process information (Lang, 2000). The Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing states that processing messages requires resources – and that resources are limited. If individuals are exposed to flaming comments after receiving a message, the majority of their mental capacity might be allocated rather to the unpleasant comments than to the content of the original message. This would cause no further elaboration on the actual text will to occur.

Only few studies found that flaming might not always be a negative influence. Uncivil comments in online political discussions, for example, had no significant impact on individuals' willingness to participate in a discussion (Ng & Detenber, 2005). This study, however, did not take place in a news environment, but in a forum setting. Participants might have made a clear distinction between an informative news environment driven by a media organization, and a purely human interaction component such as a discussion board (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2000) and therefore reacted differently based on their experiences with the discussion culture in such venues. Similarly, while uncivil discussions among politicians promoted viewer interest in a television setting (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), this interest is likely directed at the way the politicians behaved and not directed at the subject matter of the discussion. The same is true with findings indicating that flaming could cause amusement (Elliott, 2012). Finally, some studies found that being exposed to flaming and uncivil discussions could increase the willingness to participate in discussions (Borah, 2012) and foster political engagement (Brooks & Geer, 2007). This, however, only applied under specific circumstances and with certain limitations. While participants in the aforementioned studies were more willing to engage in activities, it remained unclear whether participants

elaborated more as a result. The combination of the discussed topics in the aforementioned studies (for example gay rights) and the negative comments about those issues might have just triggered the desire to present an opinion that had already been formed in participants' minds, without requiring additional elaboration.

Taken together, being exposed to flaming in online comments should affect the amount of elaborative behavior individuals engage in negatively. To test this assumption, the present dissertation tests the following hypothesis:

H5: Participants exposed to flaming in online comments will report less elaboration than participants not exposed to flaming in online comments.

Mitigating the Effects of Flaming

If commenting sections are positively affecting elaboration, but the practice of flaming is a negative force, then it becomes a worthwhile endeavor to help news organizations to address this issue by building news systems that foster elaboration and mitigate the negative effects of flaming. Those systems would allow online media to inform their readers better and therefore help citizens to make better informed decisions.

In order to achieve this goal, there are various factors news organizations could manipulate to influence how individuals evaluate user comments and subsequently elaborate on and acquire knowledge from the related content. A particular focus in many current attempts to guide user behavior on news sites lies on the design of commenting sections. It has been suggested that implementing certain design features can promote desirable behaviors, such as participation and less political fragmentation (Garrett & Resnick, 2011). Many news websites are experimenting with technological design

solutions related to user comments (Kirkland, 2014). Those efforts often aim at providing a more structured design and context to the process of commenting (Reid, 2014).

Two potential design features, displaying the credibility of a commenter and his/her political ideology, are of particular interest because they can easily be implemented into existing commenting sections and promise results based on their theoretical foundations. Therefore, the present dissertation tests whether showing readers the credibility as well as political ideology of commenters influences the amount of elaboration individuals engage in. Furthermore, this dissertation tests whether those two factors moderate the effect flaming has on elaboration.

Source Credibility. Credibility is a complex concept that has been defined as “believability, trust, perceived reliability, and dozens of other concepts and combinations” (Self, 2010, p. 435). It is one of the main criteria influencing attitudes toward print and online news (Sundar, 1999), and has been described as a construct created to explain “a communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). A credible source is often described as a source that is perceived to be able to provide correct information and as willing to release it without bias (Hass, 1981).

The above mentioned definition makes an important point. As Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) note, the credibility of a source is defined by the judgments of the individual receiver of the message and not necessarily dependent on the actual quality of the transmitted information (accuracy, truthfulness). Credibility should not be seen “as an objective property of the source, but as a receiver perception” (Gunther, 1992, p. 148). There are three factors that constitute source credibility mentioned in the existing

literature: perceived *expertise*, *trustworthiness* and *attractiveness* (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1952; Ibelema & Powell, 2001; Milburn, 1991; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978).

Hovland, Janis and Kelly, (1953) define *expertise* as the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions. More specifically, expertise in this case refers to the extent to which the originator of a message is perceived to have the ability and knowledge to make the statement under question in a correct manner (McCracken, 1989). In other words, it is the extent to which the communicator is qualified to provide valid and accurate information or discuss a particular subject (Hovland, Janis & Kelley 1953). If the source of a political comment, for example, is identified as a political science professor that has published multiple books on the issue under question, the perception of expertise should be high, because he would likely be perceived to display “correct knowledge” (Hass, 1981, p. 143).

Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid. Therefore, trustworthiness is "the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken 1989, p. 311) and thus refers to an audience's belief that the communicator provides information in an honest, fair, sincere, and honorable manner (Ohanian 1991). If a source is seen as biased or as communicating the message for a purpose other than information, the credibility of the source is harmed (Hass, 1981). Perceptions of a messenger's honesty, accountability, objectivity, character, goodwill, and concern for the public welfare (Frewer, Howard, Hedderley, & Shepherd, 1997; Priester & Petty, 1996; Swenson, Constantinides, & Gurak, 2002) have all been used to measure trustworthiness (Freeman & Spyridakis,

2004). Translated to online comments about political news this would mean that if the source of a political comment is personally affected by the issue under question, the perception of trustworthiness should be low.

The third dimension of credibility is *source attractiveness* (McGuire, 1985). The physical attractiveness of a communicator influences perceived trust and expertise, with more attractive sources generally being seen as more trustworthy and having more expertise (Patzner, 1983). More attractive sources are also said to be more persuasive than unattractive sources (Eagly & Chaiken, 1975). However, this persuasive effect only held true under very restricted circumstances (Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970). For example, only individuals with a high tendency to rely on heuristic processing were affected by the attractiveness of the source (DeBono & Telesca, 1990). Furthermore, it is unclear how source attractiveness affects the overall credibility in the context of commenting on political news online. While attractive people are generally considered to be more intelligent (Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004), being seen as extremely attractive might affect perceptions of professionalism and expertise negatively.

Effects of Credibility. The effects of credibility have been investigated for an extended period of time. Sherif (1935) was one of the first to state that the same factual information could generate entirely different experiences and responses based on the relationship individuals receiving the message have with the source. A variety of source characteristics, such as *trustworthiness* and *expertise* discussed above, can enhance or detract from the meaning of a message (E. Wilson & Sherrell, 1993).

Individuals generally discount information from untrustworthy sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1952; Wiener & Mowen, 1986), while high credibility sources are considered to

be more fair and their conclusions are considered to be more justified (Greer, 2003; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Credibility affects persuasive outcomes (O'keefe, 1987) in a way that expert sources generally stimulate more behavioral compliance than sources with less expertise (Crisci & Kassinove, 1973; J. A. Ross, 1973; Woodside & Davenport, 1974). Information coming from high credibility source also leads to the greatest attitude change, while sources low in credibility result in unchanged attitudes (Milburn, 1991).

This is because individuals seem to be more resistant to persuasion attempts by low credibility sources (Greenberg & Miller, 1966). In addition, high credibility sources also stimulate more positive attitudes toward a message and its sender than less credible sources (Haiman, 1949; Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1952; H. H. Johnson & Izzett, 1969; Warren, 1969). Another reason for this phenomenon is that highly credible sources increase the acceptance of the message itself. This increase in acceptance is due to the fact that individuals associate a message coming from a highly credible source with a positive outcomes such as being factually correct and agreeing with experts' opinions (Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983; Hovland et al., 1953).

On the other hand, there is the argument that individuals are trying to avoid effortful information-processing whenever possible and therefore look for shortcuts when evaluating messages (Eagly, Chaiken, & Wood, 1981; Taylor, 1981). One of those shortcuts is credibility. The degree to which a message is scrutinized (or in other words: elaborated upon) depends on the extent to which an individual can assume that the information is correct because it comes from a trustworthy source. If a source is trustworthy, individuals could engage in less elaboration and more easily accept the

message (Priester & Petty, 1995). However, this only seems to be true for participants with a greater tendency to avoid effortful information-processing in general.

Overall, it there is more evidence that high-credibility sources should have the greater impact on perceptions and behaviors than low-credibility sources (Pornpitakpan, 2004). As a result, individuals should engage in more message-relevant thinking (Heesacker et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). To test this assumption in the context of the present dissertation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Participants exposed to comments predominantly posted by highly credible sources will elaborate more on the news articles.

In addition to the direct effect on individuals' elaborative behavior, perceiving comments to be posted by highly credible commenters should also affect the perceptions about the news article beneath which they were posted. Previous research has shown that the comments surrounding a news article affect the perceptions about the article itself (A. Anderson et al., 2013; LaBarre, 2013; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). The environment in which news are presented affects the audiences' perceptions about the content itself (Borah, 2012; Greer, 2003; Mackay & Lowrey, 2011). In addition, the climate of those discussions themselves has been found to affect readers' opinions (Price et al., 2006). Overall, it can be stated that outside cues play an important role for readers' judgments about the content that is placed in relation to it (Greer, 2003). Therefore, flaming in online comments should also lower the perceived credibility of the news article. This is reflected in the following hypothesis:

H7: Participants exposed to comments predominantly posted by highly credible sources will rate the accompanying news article as more credible than participants exposed to comments predominantly made by low credible sources.

Finally, being exposed to high credibility news sources could lead individuals to engage in more systematic processing when evaluating the message (Chu & Kamal, 2008), because they see the message as being more important. Taking this to the current example of acquiring knowledge from online news, the superiority of a credible news article would positively affect the amount of elaboration individuals engage in in relation to the message (Hovland & Weiss, 1952; Jones, Sinclair, & Courneya, 2003; Kelman & Hovland, 1953). This is consistent with results from educational studies in which students who perceive their teachers to be highly credible report better learning outcomes (Pogue & AhYun, 2006). Therefore, the present dissertation tests the following hypothesis:

H8: Participants who report a high perception of credibility for the presented news articles as more credible will report more elaboration.

Even more importantly for the context of this dissertation, displaying the credibility of a commenter might also influence the effect that flaming has on elaboration and subsequently the acquisition of knowledge. Individuals are more affected when others' behaviors violate category-based expectations for their respective ingroup (Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charlton, & Mulholland, 1997; Burgoon, 1993; Jussim, 1991). In the case of the present dissertation, this would mean that commenters with a high credibility rating should not be expected to engage in flaming behavior. Having

earned a high credibility rating suggests being a frequent and positive contributor to the site. Research has shown that those frequent contributors can have profound influence on perceived credibility, opinion climate, and openness of discussions on online forums (Blom, Carpenter, Bowe, & Lange, 2014; Koop & Jansen, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009). Expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon, 1993; Jussim, 1991), suggests that individuals evaluate others more extremely when their behaviors violate stereotyped expectations for their salient ingroups. Several studies have found empirical evidence supporting this assumption (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993; Jussim, Fleming, Coleman, & Kohberger, 1996). Therefore a highly credible user should be evaluated differently when engaging in flaming (which is not expected) than a low credibility user (where it might be expected).

Kelley (1973), on the other hand, states that individuals have more faith in the truthfulness of a message when the source violates the expectancy of what the message was anticipated to be. In this case, highly credible sources would not be expected to engage in flaming behavior but rather post civil comments (Fragale & Heath, 2004). If this is the case, flaming might raise the interest which would lead individuals to elaborate more on the information (Eagly et al., 1981; Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978; Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001; Priester & Petty, 1996). Overall, it seems logical to assume an interaction exists between flaming and credibility. To investigate this question further, the following hypotheses and questions are presented:

RQ1: Will the effect of flaming on elaboration differ based on whether participants have been exposed to comments posted by high or low credibility users?

Political Ideology. The second important factor potentially influencing elaboration directly and moderating the effects of flaming on elaboration is the readers' political ideology – or more specifically the interaction of the own political ideology with that of other users. Being affiliated with one of the two major political parties in the United States has long served as a major part of social identification (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004), but more and more individuals are not positioning themselves on either side. While past research had suggested that the influence of political ideologies are comparable to the importance of religion and ethnicity when it comes to the development of knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Goren, 2005; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991; Sears & Funk, 1999), a 2014 Gallup poll revealed that 42% of Americans identifies themselves as independents (Gallup, 2014). In addition, the gap between the political views of affiliates of different parties is decreasing, creating an overlap (Fiorina, 2002; Huckfeldt, Mondak, Craw, & Mendez, 2005). That means that individuals voting for a republican candidate can consider themselves as liberals while individuals voting democrat see themselves as conservative (Cantril & Cantril, 1999; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Huckfeldt, Levine, Morgan, & Sprague, 1999; Weisberg & Devine, 2010).

What has remained, though, is that individuals often have a clear idea about their *political ideology*. An ideology can be seen as a mental model guiding an individual's interpretation of facts and attitudes on issues. It has been described as a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2006, p. 72) and “the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that

environment should be structured” (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 24). The key here is that ideologies are representing a shared understanding among one group that is distinctively different from a shared understanding of a conflicting group (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2008). Ideologies, much as political affiliation, serve as tools for social categorization and differentiation within the political realm, and is traditionally placed on a two-dimensional continuum between the two major categories: liberal and conservative. This resembles a long-lasting ideological divide concerning preferences for change versus stability (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Generally speaking, the main distinction between liberal and conservative are a) advocating versus resisting social change, and b) rejecting versus accepting inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Central to and enduring in liberalism are the concepts of individualism and equality of opportunity, rooted primarily in notions of freely choosing individuals seeking economic gain within a context of continual competition, meritocracy (the holding of power by persons selected competitively according to talent or ability) and a free market economy (Kramnick, 1998). Liberals oftentimes have very different opinions about issues (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Friese, Fishman, Beatson, Sauerwein, & Rip, 2009; Jost et al., 2008; Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010) than conservatives do, which subsequently might lead members of the different groups to have very different perceptions about facts presented in the news (Gilens, 2001; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006; Kuklinski et al., 2000; J. M. Wilson & Gronke, 2000). Even though the facts remain the same.

Effects of Political Ideology. In competitive political settings, the success of one ideological group is often considered negative for the other ideological group. Usually, evidence in support for one position is perceived to be challenging the position of the

conflicting group, especially when message recipients are located at the extremes of the political spectrum (Blom, 2013). Given this, it seems logical that perceptions about encountered information and the subsequent processing of the information change depending on whether the information is considered positive or negative for the own group. In fact, political ideology often functions as a perceptual screen that causes individuals to overemphasize information in favor of their opinions (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), even in cases dealing with purely factual information (Bartels, 2002). Generally speaking, individuals who are affiliated with a certain viewpoint, such as those provided through their political ideology, are likely to examine new information about a related issue in a biased manner. In other words, people seem unable to ignore their prior beliefs when processing arguments or evidence (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2008). They are more likely to uncritically accept information that is in line with their beliefs than information that is disconfirming their attitudes or challenging their point of view (D'Alessio & Allen, 2007; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). In addition, individuals often simply neglect considerations about the truthfulness of the facts they use to arrive at a conclusion when they see them as supporting their view (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008). When a piece of information is considered to fall within the borders of the accepted viewpoints of the own group, this information is usually judged as fair and unbiased. When, on the other hand, the information is not deemed acceptable by the standards of an individual's interpretation of the group opinion, it is increasingly considered unfair and propagandistic (Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957). This disconfirmation bias describes the practice of subjecting arguments incompatible with prior beliefs to more scrutiny, more extensive refutational analyses, in order to

delegitimize opposing messages by identifying flaws in those arguments or their sources and make them weaker than arguments compatible with prior beliefs (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Lau & Russell, 1980; Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006; Slothuus & Vreese, 2010; Wong & Weiner, 1981).

This practice might even lead individuals to increase their support for their initial position as a response to learning new negative information about their beliefs (Redlawsk, 2002). Overall, information judged as in line with an individuals' beliefs is usually cognitively processed less heavily than negative information (Pratto & John, 1991). Taber and Lodge (2006; see also Taber, Cann & Kucsova, 2009) coined the term *politically motivated reasoning* to describe this phenomenon.

This motivated skepticism has consequences when it comes the acquisition of knowledge from the news. What those consequences are, however, is not entirely clear. The initial assumption was that individuals who have a strong political ideology engage in more elaboration when they encounter information originating from the opposing side of the political spectrum, because they would internally counter-argue content that is potentially contradicting their viewpoints as long as the content falls somewhat into their latitude of acceptance. Otherwise it might be rejected without elaboration (Atkins, Deaux, & Bieri, 1967; Eagly & Telaak, 1972). But if it falls into the latitude of acceptance and individuals as a result indeed elaborate more, as a consequence they would remember more about an issue when it goes against their political ideology. In fact, research has shown that individuals seem to use less information to reach a conclusion about information consistent with their own views (Jacobson, 2010), and therefore remember

fewer facts about an issue when the provided information comes from a source that is perceived as supporting their own position (Turner, 2007).

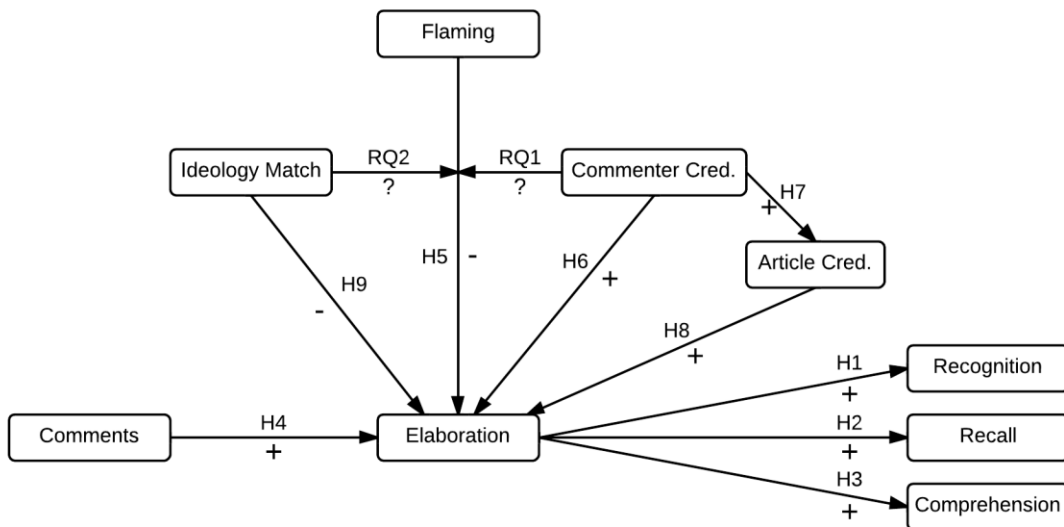
However, there are also conflicting results. Despite the potential increase in elaboration when faced with information countering an individuals' own viewpoint, participants in some studies remembered more information that was supporting their initial opinion (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Meffert et al., 2006; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). This, though, can be attributed to the fact that participants spent more time processing negative information, but used this investment of cognitive resources to convert incongruent negative information into support for a preexisting preference. This does not mean that individuals did not remember the information contradicting their viewpoints, but that they translated it into a positive version supporting their view.

Overall, since the present dissertation does not ask for value judgments but tests specific knowledge, individuals encountering comments made by commenters with a conflicting political ideology are expected elaborate more on the corresponding article. Based on the reviewed literature on politically motivated reasoning and confirmation-disconfirmation bias (e.g. Edwards & Smith, 1996; Meffert et al., 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Taber, Cann & Kucsova, 2009; Redlawsk, 2002), then, this dissertation assumes that the political ideology of the majority of commenters influences the amount of elaboration an individual engages in positively. In addition, this dissertation assumes that the potential effect that flaming has on the amount of elaboration is mediated by the effect of political ideology. To investigate this issue further this dissertation tests the following hypothesis and asks the following research question:

H9: Participants exposed to comments made by commenters with a matching political ideology will report less elaborative behavior than participants exposed to comments made by commenters with a conflicting political ideology.

RQ2: Will the effect of flaming on elaboration be mediated by the fact that comments come from commenters that match readers' political ideology?

*FIGURE 1:
Conceptual Model of Influences on Elaboration*



METHOD

Since “experiments are important to the theoretical development of fields like journalism and mass communication because they provide the most rigorous way to establish causal relationships between independent and dependent variables (as well as moderators and mediators), relationships critical for building and evaluating theory” (Thorson, Wicks, & Leshner, 2012, p. 112), this study explores the proposed hypotheses and research questions using two closely related experiments. Experiment 1 is a 2 (flaming: yes vs. no) x 2 (credibility: high vs. low) x 3 (repetition) factorial design conducted to investigate the effects of elaboration on the three dimensions of knowledge acquisition (H1 – H3), and flaming on elaboration (H5). This experiment also tests if flaming affects the credibility of the commenter (H6), the credibility of the commenters is related to the perceived credibility of the article (H7), if the perceived credibility of the article is related to elaboration (H8), and if there is a direct effect of commenters’ credibility in elaboration (H9). In addition, the first experiment tests whether credibility moderates the effects of flaming on elaborative behavior (RQ1). A control condition, which only contains the news articles but no user comments, is also introduced to test the effect of overall comments on elaboration (H4), using separate individual sample t-tests to compare the means of the respective groups with the control group. Experiment 2 consists of a 2 (flaming: yes vs. no) x 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) x 3 (repetition) factorial design conducted to further investigate whether political ideology affects elaboration directly (H10), and moderates the effect of flaming on elaboration (RQ2).

Sample

428 participants (final N = 312) for the two experiments (Experiment = 137, Experiment 2 = 143, Control Group = 32) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. Participants were required to be residents of the United States and at least 18 years of age to assure that they are old enough to vote and understand the English language news articles. They received a monetary incentive of 76 US-cents for their participation, which is slightly higher than the average running rate for participation on Mechanical Turk and was intended to increase participation and quality of the results.

The average participant was white (80.5%), 37.14 years old, had a 4-year college degree (40.2%), and reported a combined household income between \$25,000 and \$49,999 (34%). There were slightly more female (50.9%) participants and those indicating a liberal political ideology (59.9%). Hispanics/Latinos are somewhat underrepresented in this sample. Overall, however, this sample matches the general US population well, as a comparison with census data reveals (see Table 1).

Mechanical Turk is an online task-completion system in which people can request others to perform a task and pay them without having to meet in person. The online service has seen an increase in use for scientific studies and has been found to be a viable alternative for data collection (Paolacci, Chandler, & Stern, 2010), provided the tasks for participants are formulated clearly (Kittur, Chi, & Suh, 2008). Data generated through Mechanical Turk offers several advantages over other data collection methods.

While the use of a student sample, for example, draws questions about the generalizability of the results making it problematic to draw conclusions about the general population (Abelman, 1996; Cunningham, Anderson, & Murphy, 1974), data

collected through Mechanical Turk has been shown to be more demographically diverse in many regards than standard Internet samples and significantly more diverse than typical American college student samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; J. Ross, Irani, Silberman, Zaldivar, & Tomlinson, 2010). Participants come from diverse backgrounds, spanning a wide range of age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and country of origin (Mason & Suri, 2012), which is especially important considering that one of the main variables of this dissertation, political ideology, needs participants to come from both ends of the political spectrum. Finally, the data obtained through Mechanical Turk are at least as reliable as those obtained via other methods, such as student samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

TABLE 1:
Comparison of Study Sample and US Population

	Sample	US Population*
Age	37.1 years	37.2 years
Male	49.1%	49.1%
Female	50.9%	50.9%
Conservative	24.7%	19%
Liberal	59.9%	43%
Moderate	15.5%	36%
< \$50,000 Income	58%	median income = \$51,017
White	80.5%	77.9%
African American	8%	13.13%
American Indian	3%	1.3%
Asian	4.7%	5.1%
Other	6%	6.2%
Hispanic	7.4%	16.9%

Notes. * According to Census Data from the 2010 and 2012 US Census (factfinder.census.gov) and the GALLUP Poll (GALLUP, 2014)

In addition, individuals participating in online experiments through Amazon's Mechanical Turk are especially important to this dissertation, because they are most likely to encounter the messages under question and be affected by it in a real world environment. These participants, who spend a considerable amount of time on the Internet and use the medium for work, can be considered at the forefront of technological change (de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). Since this population frequently uses online media for news consumption and is therefore likely to experience the effects of online comments, it is most relevant for this type of research. The majority of participants (69.3%) indicated to use the Internet "every day" or "more than once a day" to read about current events/news. In addition, more than half of the participants (50.3%) reported that they consider news websites as their main source of political news.

Development of Stimulus Material

This dissertation used online news articles that were designed specifically for the experiment, and were held constant across conditions. The comments placed underneath the news articles were varied as a function of the four conditions in each experiment.

News Articles. The articles used in the present dissertation are based on real-world local political news, but names and places were changed to control for prior knowledge and prevent participants from looking up information about the mentioned events on the Internet while taking part in the experiment. To create the news articles, three political news stories were chosen from the website of a local newspaper. The names of the newspaper, authors, as well as places and individuals mentioned in the news stories were replaced (see Appendix I for the stimulus material). The city in which the events take place was portrayed as "Riverside", which is the least specific because most

US states have a place called Riverside (Tilque, 2001). The names of the authors as well as all acting persons were replaced with ones from the list of the most common last names according to the U.S. census (United States Census Bureau, 2000) and the most popular given names of the 80s according to the social security administration (Social Security Administration, 2014) to reduce recognizability.

In addition, all articles were shortened to a length of about 400 words. This means that the average English speaking person should be able to carefully read each story in about 2.5 minutes (Ziefle, 1998). Adding the same time to read the comments, participants should not need more than 5 minutes for each of the 3 articles. Overall, this allowed them to finish the experiment in about 20 to 25 minutes. After the articles were created, phrases were entered into Google to verify that the original articles or articles or dealing with the same topic could not be found. None were found.

In addition to preventing participants from looking up the reported events on the Internet and invalidating the measures of knowledge acquisition, using articles dealing with an unknown political event also serves the purpose of creating an environment that specifically aids the purpose of the experiment. In the real world, receiving political news online, especially when current and unfolding events are concerned, represents an uncertain situation for many people. While individuals who regularly follow the news on a particular topic might have a different, fairly set schema for assessing news, many individuals might be uncertain. In those situations, individuals often are not sure of how to evaluate the encountered information and therefore rely on others to provide context (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). In this case, individuals might use comments provided by other users as a heuristic device for evaluating the meaning of the encountered information.

Similarly, the venue in which the articles appear to be published resembles a generic online news site, but not a specific site in particular, by taking a news website template from the Internet and then stripping it of all logos and names. This was done to avoid participants from carrying over their own opinions about the specific news sites, which could have potentially affected their judgment of credibility and other variables important for this dissertation (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006; T. J. Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012; Mackay & Lowrey, 2011).

Commenting Sections. This dissertation manipulates three main variables by altering the content and the appearance of the comments posted beneath the news article. There are three manipulations: the tone of the comments (flaming vs. no flaming), the credibility of the commenter (low vs. high), and the political ideology of the commenter (liberal vs. conservative). The operationalization of the variables is discussed below:

Flaming. Literature indicates several characteristics of flaming in online comments (Dyer et al., 1995; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Moor et al., 2010; Turnage, 2007). Those include insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language (Moor et al., 2010), using derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments (Dyer et al., 1995), using capital letters, colors and bold face, as well as the disproportionate use of question marks and exclamation points (Turnage, 2007). A recent study (Coe et al., 2014) found that the most prevalent form of incivility is name-calling, followed by vulgarity, and aspersions. In addition, flaming often uses a mixture of letters, numbers, and other typography to create negative words (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). To create a flaming condition, the comments displayed beneath the news article were designed to resemble a combination of these characteristics (see Appendix I). In the non-

flaming condition, the comments contain any of these characteristics. Several versions of the stimulus material were pre-tested using a different set of participants on Mechanical Turk (N = 41). Using the flaming measure of this dissertation, participants' responses indicated if the manipulations in fact changed the perceptions of flaming. The 15 comments generating the highest and lowest perceptions of flaming were used for the actual experiment. An independent samples t-test was computed, comparing the mean flaming scores between the flaming and no-flaming group. A statistically significant difference was found ($t(39) = 4.25, p < .001$). Results show that participants who saw the flaming comments reported a greater perception of flaming ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.63$) than participants exposed to non-flaming comments ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.58$).

Credibility of the Commenter. To avoid confounding the results, the present dissertation only manipulates one dimension of credibility: trustworthiness. The remaining two dimensions, expertise and attractiveness, are held constant. Trustworthiness is manipulated in two ways. First, a trustworthy commenter is indicated by displaying their name and picture as well as a trustworthy occupation (GfK Verein, 2014). The low-credibility condition, on the other hand, might only display a pseudonym of the commenter and/or indicate that they engage in a less trustworthy occupation. Since individuals frequently employ cognitive heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information and information sources online (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010), the trustworthiness of the commenter is also indicated by two heuristic devices employed by some online news websites, such as reddit and Slashdot. The first of the devices indicates that the high-credibility commenter has been verified by the news website as a trustworthy commenter by adding a verification symbol to the profile. The second device

indicates how other users of the site have supposedly rated the credibility of the commenter based on the quality of their previous comments. While this seems like a minor change, Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) have shown that even minor changes (such as adding an address or an external link, which are similar in nature to the ones undertaken in the present dissertation), can change perceptions of source credibility. For the high credibility commenter, both indicators are high/active, while the low-credibility commenter has a low trustworthiness score and no certification (see Appendix I for examples). Several versions of the stimulus material were pre-tested using the credibility measures of this dissertation to verify that the manipulations in fact change the perceptions of credibility of the commenters. The items generating the highest and lowest perceptions of trustworthiness were be used for the actual experiment. An independent samples t-test was computed, comparing the mean trustworthiness scores between the high and low-credibility groups. A statistically significant difference was found ($t(33) = 2.40, p < .05$). Results show that participants who saw the comments manipulated to resemble trustworthy commenters report a greater perception of trustworthiness ($M = 5.01, SD = .81$) than participants exposed low credibility commenters ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.10$). No statistically significant differences were found for the expertise ($t(33) = 1.72, p > .05$) and attractiveness dimensions ($t(33) = 1.01, p > .05$) of credibility.

Political Ideology. To indicate commenters' political ideology, distinct mentions were implemented in the text of the comments itself (i.e. "For me as a liberal, this issue is..."; "From my conservative point of view..."). In addition, logos and symbols of liberal/conservative organizations were used in some comments to further indicate the political ideology of the commenter. Several versions of the stimulus material were pre-

tested on Mechanical Turk using the political ideology measure of this dissertation to verify that the manipulations in fact change the perceptions of political ideology of the commenters. The items generating the most extreme perceptions on either side of the political ideology spectrum were used for the actual experiment. An independent samples t-test was computed, comparing the perceived political orientation of the commenters between the group manipulated to be perceived liberal and the one manipulated to be perceived conservative. A statistically significant difference was found ($t(31) = 6.23, p < .001$). Results show that participants who saw the comments manipulated to resemble liberal commenters rated them as more liberal ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.52$) than participants exposed low comments manipulated to resemble conservatives ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.10$).

Procedure

Participants were presented with the link to the online experiment on the Amazon Mechanical Turk website. From there, they were guided to the actual experiment, which was run using the Qualtrics survey software. After the informed consent page, participants reviewed an introduction page introducing them to the stimulus material and procedures. After the introductory passage, participants saw a series of three randomly ordered news articles in their assigned condition. A survey flow randomization command was employed to randomly assign participants to the four conditions of the two experiments and the control condition from a single survey link (see Table 2). The Qualtrics survey software automatically ensured that the number of people in each condition was approximately equal by placing participants randomly in the appropriate groups. After data cleaning, the number of participants in each group varies only between 32 and 38. The viewing time for each of the articles was measured to monitor exposure

time to the stimulus material. The average participant viewed each of the articles for about 200 seconds (min = 70.35, max = 1012.85, SD = 130.51). Following exposure to the three news articles, participants completed the questionnaire. After completing the questionnaire, participants were shown a survey completion code which they had to enter into the Mechanical Turk application to receive the incentive.

TABLE 2:
Overview of Experimental Conditions

		Credibility				Political Ideology	
		high	low			liberal	conservative
Flaming	yes	1 (N=34)	2 (N=34)	Flaming	yes	5 (N=36)	6 (N=32)
	no	3 (N=35)	4 (N=34)		no	7 (N=37)	8 (N=38)

* plus control condition (N= 32)

Study Measures

During the experiment, participants were directed to different portions of the survey instrument assessing the variables relevant to the present study. Demographic questions and quality control items were asked before participants had been exposed to the stimulus material. The manipulation checks were repeated after each news article participants have been exposed to. The knowledge test was conducted following exposure to all three articles (for a detailed description of all study measures see Appendix I).

Manipulation Checks & Quality Control. To ensure the quality of the dataset generated to test the hypotheses and research questions of this dissertation, several manipulation checks and a quality control question were employed.

Quality Control. After being exposed to the stimulus material, participants were provided a question that asked them to click on a specific answer from the given set. This eliminated participants that mindlessly “click through” the questionnaire. This helped

ensure the quality and accuracy of the data being collected (Roe, 2012). In addition, participants were asked whether they had read the comments beneath the article. If participants failed to answer the quality check questions correctly, they were immediately directed to the end of the study and their previous responses excluded from analysis.

Flaming. To assess whether the manipulation of tone within the comments was successful, this dissertation employed a 4-item 7-point Likert-type scale assessing whether participants perceived the majority of comments they saw as using offensive language such as swear words, insulting phrases, and having a positive tone (reverse coded) in general (Dyer et al., 1995; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Thompsen & Foulger, 1996). Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with a Promax rotation (oblique) of the 4 questions from this flaming scale was conducted. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable (KMO=.851). A single factor was extracted after examining the Scree Plot of the data (see Table 3). The reliability of this newly constructed flaming scale was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. The scale yielded an Alpha of .95.

TABLE 3:
Principal Axis Factoring with Promax Rotation of Flaming

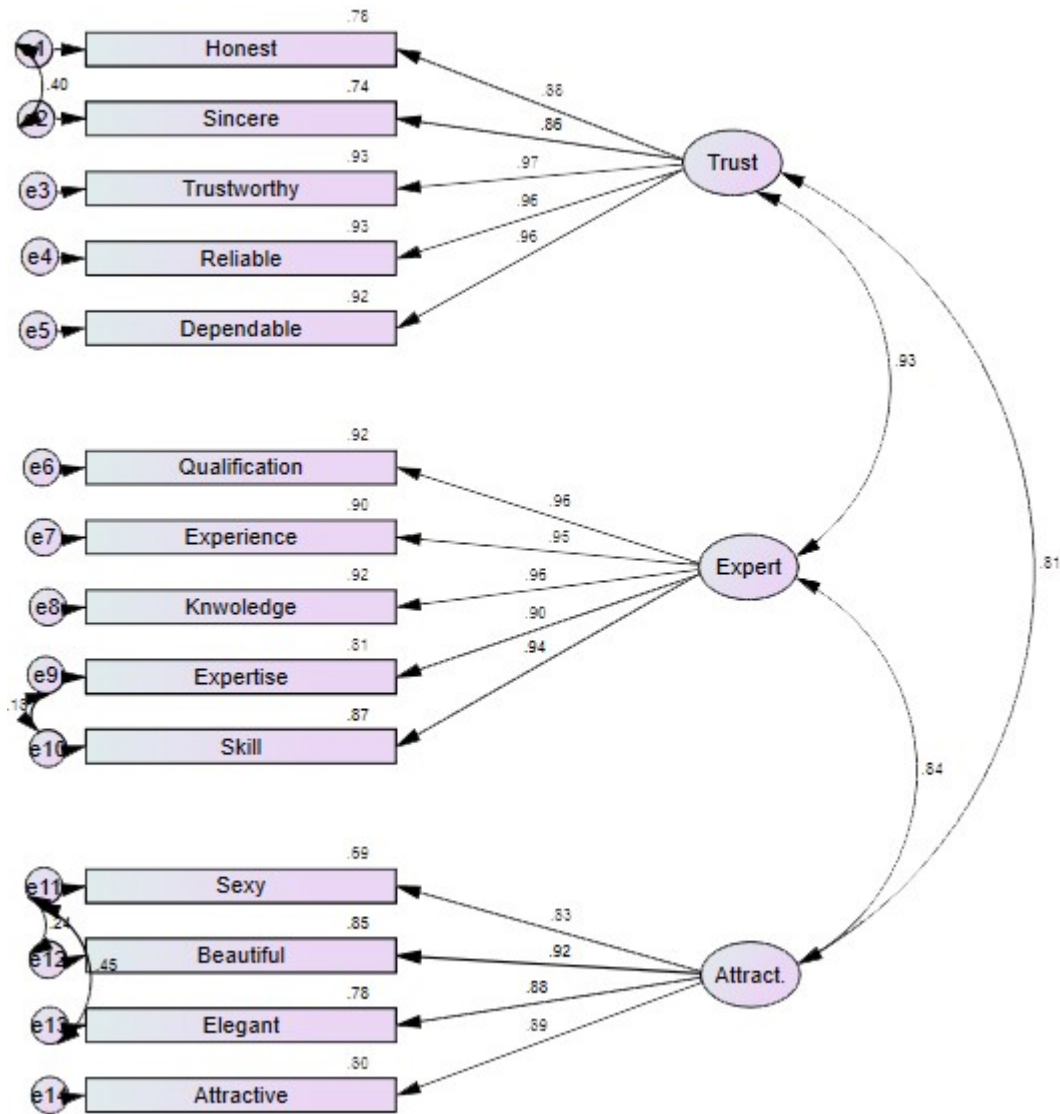
Scale Item	Flaming
The comments posted beneath the news articles... used offensive language (such as swear words, shouting)	.942
... used insulting phrases (against involved parties)	.945
... can be considered flaming	.936
... were generally friendly*	.821
Eigenvalue	3.49
Variance Explained (%)	83.31
Alpha	.95

Notes: * reverse coded item; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .85; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square = 1228.35; df = 6; p < .001

Political Ideology of Commenter. In order to assess whether the manipulation of the political ideology of the majority of commenters produced different perceptions within participants, participants were asked to indicate the perceived political ideology of the commenters on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “1 = Very conservative” to “7 = Very liberal” (Blom, 2013; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

Credibility of Commenter. To measure participants’ perceptions of source credibility, subjects were asked to rate the majority of commenters on a 7-point bipolar adjective scale measuring perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. The measure was originally developed by Ohanian (1990) and is the most-used instrument to measure source credibility today, offering high reliability and validity (Ohanian, 1990). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the software package AMOS 22.0 to verify the factor structure of the original scale (see Figure 8). Model fit was evaluated using the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) - which should be under .10 for a satisfactory model and .05 for an excellent model - and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which should be above .90 for a sufficient model (Kline, 2011). The three-factor structure ($\chi^2 = 168.08$, $df = 70$, $p < .001$) produced an acceptable model, CFI = .98, NFI = .97, RMSEA = .067. All of the factor loadings were significant at the $p < .001$ level, confirming the three dimensions of the Ohanian (1990) scale. Trustworthiness ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.46$) was five items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$), Expertise ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.35$) was five items ($\alpha = .94$), and Attractiveness ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.03$) was four items after deleting the “classy/not classy” item from the original scale to improve validity of the dimension ($\alpha = .84$).

FIGURE 2:
Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Commenter Credibility Scale



Notes. Factor loadings were significant at the $p < .001$ level. Estimates are standardized.

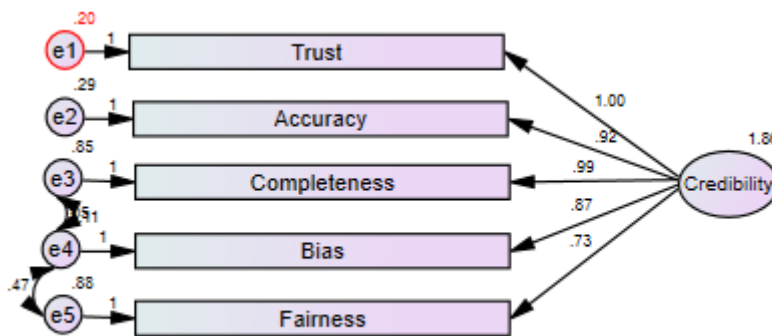
Demographics. Participants responded to questions asking for demographic information such as date of birth, gender, race, ethnicity, household income, and education level. In addition, participants were asked to indicate how much they use the Internet for news consumption, and how often they discuss political issues.

Political Ideology of Participant. In order to assess the effects of conflicting political ideologies between commenter and participant and assess a potential moderation effect, the political ideology of the participants was measured. Participants were asked to describe their political ideology, indicating their preference on the same 7-point Likert scale that was used to measure the perceived political ideology of commenters (Blom, 2013; LaMarre et al., 2009), ranging from “very conservative” to “very liberal”.

Credibility of the Article. To test whether the credibility of the commenters affected the perceptions about the credibility of the identical news articles, a second credibility measure specifically designed to measure credibility perceptions about content and not the source of the content was needed. To enable this analysis, the five-item credibility scale developed by Meyer (1988) was used. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) observed that media credibility is comprised of fairness, (un)bias, telling the whole story, accuracy, respect for privacy, watching out after people’s interest, concern for community well-being, separation of fact and opinion, trustworthiness, concern for public interest, factuality, and reporter training level. Rimmer and Weaver (1987) reported a Cronbach’s Aalpha of .90 for the Gaziano and McGrath scale for both newspapers and television. Meyer (1988), however, criticized the Gaziano and McGrath scale as lacking face validity and theoretical grounding. He replicated Gaziano and McGrath and developed a shortened five-item news credibility scale. The items – fair, unbiased, tells the whole story, accurate, and can be trusted – yielded a Cronbach alpha of .83. Meyer scale is said to have face validity “as the concept of believability is reflected in each of the five items” (Rubin, Palmgreen, Sypher, & Beatty, 1994, pp. 234–236) and was therefore used in the present dissertation. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was

conducted using the software package AMOS 22.0 to evaluate the validity of the original scale items given the present data (see Figure 9). Model fit was evaluated using the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) - which should be under .10 for a satisfactory model and .05 for an excellent model - and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which should be above .90 for a sufficient model (Kline, 2011). The one factor solution ($\chi^2 = 2.06$, $df = 3$, $p = .560$) produced an good model, CFI = 1, NFI = .99, RMSEA = .001. All of the factor loadings were significant at the $p < .001$ level. The five News Credibility items ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.30$) yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .95

*FIGURE 3:
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis of News Credibility*



Note. Factor loadings were significant at the $p < .001$ level. Estimates are standardized.

Elaboration. To assess the amount of elaboration participants engage in, an adapted version of the elaboration items used by Eveland and Thomson (2006) was employed. While the original scale measured elaboration during general television and radio consumption with six Likert-type items (such as “I generally think about the arguments I see on TV”), the adapted scale focused particularly on elaboration related to the articles encountered during the experiment. Therefore, the two questions aimed at radio consumption from the original scale were deleted and the four remaining items

were modified to match the online news environment. The new scale consists of four 7-point Likert-type items, such as "While reading the article, I found myself thinking about the topic", and "While reading the article, I was wondering how I might comment on the issue". Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Promax rotation (oblique) of the 4 statements was conducted, allowing correlation between the individual constructs. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable (KMO=.684). A single factor was extracted after examining the Scree Plot (see Table 6). The updated elaboration scale yielded a relatively low but still acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .62 (Fisher, 2008). While the original scale had an alpha of .79, the decrease in Alpha can be attributed to the decrease in scale items (from 6 to 4) in the scale used for this dissertation. While one item of the scale had a factor loading of only .466, deleting this item did not result in an increase in the alpha value. Therefore, the item remained in the scale to preserve more of the original measure.

TABLE 4:
Principal Axis Factoring with Promax Rotation of Elaboration Scale

Scale Item	Elaboration
I thought about how this relates to other issues and news I have encountered before	.575
I found myself thinking about the topic	.543
I found myself thinking about the arguments presented in the article or by the commenters	.508
I was wondering how I would comment on the issue	.466
Eigenvalue	1.82
Variance Explained (%)	27.51
Alpha	.62

Notes: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .684
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square = 116.49; df = 6; p < .001

Knowledge Acquisition. To assess the potential differences in the three dimensions of knowledge participants have acquired from the presented online news articles, a measure based on previous literature (C. Berry, 1983; McNamara, Kintsch, Songer, & Kintsch, 1996; Woodall, Davis, & Sahin, 2011) testing the underlying concepts of the recognition, recall, and comprehension was employed. McNamara, Kintsch, Songer, and Kintsch (1996) operationalize knowledge acquisition from written information as different levels understanding an individual is able to communicate after reading a text. One of their main measures consists of multiple-choice, true-false, fill-in-the-blank, and short-answer questions. The questions are classified into three different types: (a) text-based questions for which the necessary information was stated in the original text, (b) inference questions that required some type of inference or analytic reasoning, and (c) non-text questions that dealt with information that did not occur in any of the three texts but was related to the general topic. The present dissertation did not use the third category, as the purpose in the original study was mainly to control for prior knowledge, which is not necessary in the present dissertation given the artificial nature of the content. Instead, this dissertation used cued recall and recognition questions based entirely on the articles to assess participants' ability to reproduce the content, and a set of questions based on both text content and prior knowledge to assess participants' deeper understanding of the encountered text (measuring comprehension). An example of a text-based cued recall question is: "The name of the mayor described in the article was _____." An example of an inference question measuring comprehension is: "Given the information from the text you just read, is it likely that the city will have to lay off employees in the near future?" Recognition questions were in the multiple choice format.

Overall, the present dissertation used eight recall (two cued free text entry questions, six recognition multiple choice questions) and two comprehension questions (multiple choice) to measure the different levels of knowledge acquisition. The six recognition questions and the two comprehension questions were automatically assessed by the Qualtrics survey software and received a score of “1” if the participant had answered correctly and “0” if the participant did not. The two text entry recall questions were reviewed and judged by two researchers that were familiarized with the following scoring criteria. If the short answer by a participant contained the correct answer a score of “1” was awarded. If not, a score of “0” was awarded. The first question asked for the name of the mayor of the city portrait in the articles. In order to be judged as correct, the answer had to include at least the correct last name of the mayor. The second question asked for the name of the city that was portrait in the articles. In order to be judged as correct, the answer had to include the correct name of the city. The two coders coded the entire dataset and intercoder reliability for the dichotomous variables was assessed using Scott’s Pi. Question one achieved a Scott’s Pi of .87, while question two achieved a Scott’s Pi of .95. Standards of acceptable reliability (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005) were met.

Data Preparation

To ensure a high quality of responses, the collected data were thoroughly tested for irregularities. Participants who failed to correctly answer the quality check questions of the or simply clicked the same answer for all questions of the survey were excluded from the analysis. In addition, the time participants spent reading the articles was measured to ensure sufficient exposure to the stimulus material.

The average participant viewed each of the articles for about 200 seconds (min = 70.35, max = 1012.85, SD = 130.51). 39 participants who had not spent at least an average of two minutes with each of the stimulus material items were excluded.

Outliers. To prevent that some data points skew the outcome and accuracy of the multiple regression analysis undertaken for this dissertation, the underlying data were tested for statistical outliers and if they had an over proportionate influence on the results. Cook's D is utilized to measure the relative change in the predicted values when individual observations are removed from the analysis. An observation has no influence when there is no or a marginal difference between the predictions with or without the observation (Cook, 1979). According to Cook and Weisberg (1982), scores greater than 1.00 can be considered a problematic. However, there are also more strict recommendations that base the decision to remove an observation from the sample according to a calculated score based on sample size and variables included in the regression model. If any of the D values is greater than the calculated score, they can be considered to exert a relatively large influence on the regression results (DiNardo, 1993; London & Robinson, 1989). None of the Cook's D values generated for this dissertation dataset comes close to the value Cook and Weisberg (1982) recommend: the highest score is .087. However, there were 21 cases that should be considered suspicious when compared to the calculated score of the more strict recommendation (the result of the calculation was .013) was applied. All of those cases were examined and excluded from analysis due to the suspicion that participants did not enter the results thoroughly. In addition, the data were tested using the outlier labeling rule (Hoaglin, Iglewicz, & Tukey,

1986; Hoaglin & Iglewicz, 1987) and five cases were deleted as they did not meet the standards of the test. All those measures combined reduced the sample size to 312.

Normality. While the predictors in a regression model do not need to be normally distributed (Box & Watson, 1962; Fields, 2009), Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were conducted on the standardized residuals of the OLS regression models to verify that the assumption of normally distributed error terms was met. Results for the regression model predicting knowledge acquisition indicate that the errors were normally distributed ($D(312) = 0.31, p > .05$; skewness = $-.12$, kurtosis = $-.38$). Results for the regression model predicting elaboration also indicate that the errors were normally distributed ($D(280) = 0.38, p > .05$, skewness = $-.31$, kurtosis = $-.24$). No transformation of the data was undertaken.

Multicollinearity. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is determined for each bivariate relationship to examine whether multicollinearity possibly distort the regression results. This is usually problematic when the VIF-score is far beyond “4.00” and it is highly undesirable when it reaches double-digits. While there was a VIF-score that eclipsed 4.00, this was only the case when “Race” was entered as individual dummy variables (White, African American, Native American, Asian), which are naturally related. The highest score here was 4.95. For all other variables, the highest recorded score was 1.86.

Data Analysis

General Analysis

Manipulation Check: 2x2 factorial ANOVAs were conducted to test for differences in the perceptions of a) the tone of the comments, b) the credibility of the

majority of commenters, and c) the political ideology of commenters based on the experimental conditions of Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. In addition, a repeated measures ANOVA was computed to test for repetition effects.

Elaboration: To investigate whether elaboration predicts the recognition (H1), recall (H2) and comprehension (H3) dimensions of knowledge acquisition, three ordinary least-squares regression models were computed predicting the three dimensions from elaboration while controlling for age, gender, race, education and income.

Comments: To assess whether the presence of comments (H4) increased elaboration, eight separate independent samples t-tests were computed, comparing the mean elaboration score of the control group (N=32) containing no comments to the mean elaboration score of each of the experimental conditions containing comments.

News Credibility affecting Elaboration: To test if the perceived credibility of the news article affects the credibility of the article (H7), and if the credibility of the article affects elaboration (H8), two ordinary least-squares regression models were computed predicting first the credibility of the news article from the credibility of the commenter while controlling for age, gender, education, income and race. The second regression model the predicted elaboration from the perceived credibility of the news article while controlling for age, gender, education, income and race.

Experiment 1

Flaming & Commenters' Credibility: To test if flaming (H5), and the credibility of the commenters (H6) directly affect elaboration, and whether there is an interaction effect between the two variables (RQ1), an ordinary least-squares regression model was computed predicting elaboration from participants' being in a flaming condition (yes = 1,

no = 0), being in the high or low credibility condition (high = 1, low = 0), the interaction term of those variables, while controlling for age, gender, education, income, and race.

Experiment 2

Flaming & Political Ideology: To further test if flaming affects elaboration (H3), and a match/contradiction between the political ideologies of participants and commenters directly affect elaboration (H9), and whether there is an interaction effect between these variables (RQ2), an ordinary least-squares regression model was computed predicting elaboration from participants' being in a flaming condition (yes = 1, no = 0), participants having been exposed to matching or contradicting political ideologies (match = 1, contradiction = 0), and the interaction term of those variables, while controlling for variables such as age, gender, education, income, and race.

Results

General Analysis

Manipulation Checks: To test whether the random assignment of participants to the different experimental conditions indeed created a sample that does not differ in any of the main demographic variables, a set of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to verify that there was no statistically significant difference among groups. Results of the analysis show that there were no significant differences between participants of the different the experimental groups in age ($F(8,303) = .618, p = .708$), race ($F(8,303) = .881, p = .533$), gender ($F(8,303) = 1.217, p = .288$), education ($F(8,303) = .956, p = .470$), income ($F(8,303) = 1.659, p = .108$), and political ideology ($F(8,303) = 1.034, p = .410$).

For experiment one, flaming and credibility scores were compared using a 2 (no flaming / flaming) x 2 (high credibility / low credibility) between subjects analysis of variance. There was a statistically significant main effect of flaming, $F(1, 133) = 625.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .83$. Overall, participants in the flaming conditions ($M = 6.53$, $SD = .68$) perceived statistically significantly more flaming than participants in the non-flaming conditions ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.24$). Likewise, there was a main effect of credibility, $F(1, 133) = 6.40$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .46$. Overall, participants in the high-credibility conditions ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .84$) scored statistically significantly higher on the scale measuring the trustworthiness dimension of credibility than participants in the low-credibility conditions ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.08$), showing the anticipated effect.

For experiment two, flaming and political ideology scores were compared using a 2 (no flaming / flaming) x 2 (liberal / conservative) between subjects analysis of variance. There was a statistically significant main effect of flaming, $F(1, 276) = 251.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .64$. Overall, participants in the flaming conditions ($M = 6.10$, $SD = .17$) perceived statistically significantly more flaming than participants in the non-flaming conditions ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .16$). Likewise, there was a main effect of political ideology, $F(1, 133) = 72.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .70$. Overall, participants in the conservative condition ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.22$) scored statistically significantly lower on the scale measuring the political ideology of the commenters than participants in the liberal conditions ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.14$). A lower score on the political ideology scale means perceiving the commenter as more conservative, and therefore represents the intended effect.

Finally, repeated measures ANOVAs were computed with the three measurements of the Flaming, Credibility, and Political Ideology. No effects of the repeated exposure were found in the data underlying this dissertation.

TABLE 5:
Average Scores for Manipulated Variables

Experimental Condition	Variable		
	Flaming	Trustworthiness	Political Ideology
Flaming / High Cred.	6.53 (.67)	2.99 (1.33)	4.53 (1.31)
Flaming / Low Cred.	6.58 (.76)	2.70 (1.10)	4.29 (1.38)
No Flaming / High Cred.	2.71 (1.24)	4.98 (.84)	4.29 (.98)
No Flaming / Low Cred.	2.43 (.93)	4.31 (1.08)	3.79 (1.04)
Flaming / Liberal	5.78 (1.65)	2.83 (1.50)	5.47 (1.52)
Flaming / Conservative	6.57 (.96)	2.91 (1.24)	2.66 (1.09)
No Flaming / Liberal	2.26 (1.12)	4.51 (1.23)	5.62 (.92)
No Flaming / Conservative	2.40 (.98)	4.60 (.97)	2.53 (1.18)

Note. For Political Ideology, a high score (max = 7) indicates a strong liberal ideology, a low score (min = 1) a strong conservative ideology

Elaboration: To investigate whether elaboration predicts the three dimensions of knowledge acquisition, three ordinary least-squares regression models were computed predicting recognition (H1), recall (H2), and comprehension (H3) from elaboration while controlling for age, gender, education, income and race using the entire sample (N=312) as a basis for analysis. The regression equation for recognition was significant ($F(9,302) = 5.89, p < .001$) with an adjusted R^2 of .13. The relationship between elaboration and

recognition was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .10 and a beta weight of .12. The more participants elaborated on the content, the more facts they recognized during the multiple choice / true-false section of the knowledge test. More specifically, for every 1 point increase in the elaboration score, there was a .1 increase in the score for recognition. While this is statistically significant, the effect in the real world must be considered rather small. Even if participants would increase their elaboration score from the minimum recorded (2) to the maximum recorded (7), they would still not answer one more recognition question correctly. In addition, when comparing the effect of elaboration on recognition with the other variables included in the model, it needs to be noted that age ($B = -.01, \beta = -.15$) and being of Caucasian decent ($B = .84, \beta = .36$) exert greater influence. **Still, Hypothesis 1 was supported.**

The regression equation for recall (H2) was significant as well ($F(9,302) = 2.76, p < .01$) with an adjusted R^2 of .05. The relationship between elaboration and recall was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .09 and a beta weight of .10. The more participants elaborated on the content, the more likely they were to state the two facts in the free text entry portion of the knowledge test correctly. More specifically, for every 1 point increase in the elaboration score, there was a .09 increase in the score for recall. Again, considering what this means in the real world, the effect needs to be considered rather small. Even if participants would increase their elaboration score to the maximum, they would not answer an additional question correctly. In addition, when comparing the effect of elaboration on recall with the other variables included in the model, it needs to be noted that age ($B = -.01, \beta = -.13$) and gender ($B = -.29, \beta = -.17$) exert greater influence. **Still, Hypothesis 2 was supported.**

Finally, the regression equation for comprehension (H3) was significant as well ($F(9,302) = 2.76, p < .01$) with an adjusted R^2 of .07. The relationship between elaboration and comprehension was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .09 and a beta weight of .11. The more participants elaborated on the content, the better they could answer questions asking them to infer some information from the test that was not specifically given. More specifically, for every 1 point increase in the elaboration score, there was a .09 increase in the score for comprehension. Again, considering what this means in the real world, the effect needs to be considered rather small. Even if participants would increase their elaboration score to the maximum, they would not answer an additional question correctly. . In addition, when comparing the effect of elaboration on recall with the significant effect of age ($B = -.02, \beta = -.25$), it needs to be noted that age exerts greater influence. **Still, Hypothesis 3 was supported.**

Comments: To assess whether the presence of comments increases elaboration (H2), eight separate independent samples t-tests were computed, comparing the mean elaboration score of the control group ($N=32$) containing no comments to the mean elaboration score of each of the experimental conditions containing comments. No statistically significant differences were found for the comparison between the control group and the Flaming / High Credibility Condition ($t(64) = .03, p > .05$), the Flaming / Low Credibility Condition ($t(64) = .64, p > .05$), the No Flaming / High Credibility Condition ($t(65) = .96, p > .05$), the No Flaming / Low Credibility Condition ($t(64) = .39, p > .05$), the Flaming / Liberal Condition ($t(66) = .23, p > .05$), the Flaming / Conservative Condition ($t(66) = .03, p > .05$), and the No Flaming / Conservative Condition ($t(68) = 1.23, p > .05$). A statistically significant difference was found for the

comparison between the control group and the No Flaming / Liberal Condition ($t(67) = 2.26, p < .05, d = .55$). Results show that only participants who saw very specific comments (no flaming, liberal commenters) did engage in more elaborative behavior ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.01$), than participants who did not see comments at all ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.27$). With this medium sized effect (Cohen, 1988) for only one out of eight comparisons, **Hypothesis 4 therefore needs to be considered as not supported.** Only under very restricted circumstances did comments lead to more elaboration.

TABLE 6:
Mean Elaboration Scores Across Experimental Conditions

Experimental Condition	Elaboration		
	M	SD	N
Flaming / High Cred.	4.87	1.10	34
Flaming / Low Cred.	4.69	1.11	34
No Flaming / High Cred.	5.11	.75	35
No Flaming / Low Cred.	4.99	1.01	34
Flaming / Liberal	4.93	.94	36
Flaming / Conservative	4.87	1.23	32
No Flaming / Liberal	5.49*	1.01	37
No Flaming / Conservative	5.21	1.12	38
Control Group	4.87	1.27	32

Note. * Indicating statistically significant differences from Control Group; $p < .05$

Commenters' Credibility affecting News Credibility: An ordinary least-squares regression model was computed using the data generated by both experiments (excluding

the control group in which participants did not see comments) to determine whether the trustworthiness dimension of the perceived commenter credibility affected the perceived credibility of the news article while controlling for age, gender, education, income and race (H7). A significant regression equation was found ($F(9,270) = 4.72, p < .001$) with an adjusted R^2 of .11. The relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of the commenters and the perceived credibility of the news articles was significant at the $p < .001$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .20 and a beta weight of .23 (see Table 9). The regression coefficient shows that an increase in the trustworthiness of the commenters is related to an increase in the credibility rating of the article. More specifically, for every 1 point increase in the trustworthiness score, there was a .2 increase in the score for the credibility of the news article. Considering that the trustworthiness score dropped by about 2 points in the presence of flaming, the effect can be considered quite profound in the real world. If comments beneath a news article contained flaming, readers considered the corresponding news article as significantly less credible. In addition, the relationship between the gender of participants and the perceived credibility of the news articles was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to -.301 and a beta weight of .15. Female participants generally ascribed the news articles a lower credibility than male participants. Finally, the relationship between the education of participants and the perceived credibility of the news articles was significant at the $p < .01$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .17 and a beta weight of .17. Participants with a higher level of education generally rated the news articles as more credible than participants with a lower level of education. Comparing those effects to the effect that the trustworthiness of the commenters has on

the credibility of the news article to the significant effects of age and gender, it can be noted that the effect for trustworthiness was more pronounced. Therefore, it can be said that it is rather significant in the real world. **Hypothesis 7 was supported.**

TABLE 7:
Predictors of Perceived News Article Credibility (N = 270)

	B	SE	β
Constant	19.455	11.844	
Age	-.008	.006	-.080
Gender	-.301	.149	.117*
Education	.166	.059	.170**
Income	-.034	.059	-.034
Race – White/Caucasian	.601	.397	.184
Race – African American	.296	.466	.063
Race – Native American	1.018	.560	.140
Race – Asian	.779	.531	.118
Commenters' Trustworthiness	.203	.050	.231***
adjusted R ²	.107		
F(9,270)	4.732***		

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

To test if the credibility of the article affects elaboration (H8), an ordinary least-squares regression models was computed predicting elaboration from the perceived credibility of the news article while controlling for age, gender, education, income and race. A significant regression equation was found ($F(9,270) = 2.81, p < .01$) with an R² of

.06. The relationship between the perceived credibility of the news article and elaboration was significant at the $p < .01$ level and had a regression coefficient equal to .15 and a beta weight of .18 (see Table 10). The more credible the news articles were perceived, the more participants elaborated on their content. More specifically, for every 1 point increase in the news credibility score, there was a .15 increase in the elaboration score. While statistically significant, considering the relatively small effect that elaboration has on the three dimensions of knowledge acquisition, the significance of this result in the real world needs to be considered small. Still, **Hypothesis 8 was supported.**

Experiment 1

Flaming & Commenters' Credibility: To test if flaming (H5), and the credibility of the commenters (H6) directly affect elaboration, and whether there is an interaction effect between the two variables (RQ1), an ordinary least-squares regression model was computed predicting elaboration from participants' being in a flaming condition (yes = 1, no = 0), being in the high or low credibility condition (high = 1, low = 0), and the interaction term of those variables, while controlling for age, gender, education, income, and race (see Table 8). The resulting regression equation was not statistically significant ($F(11,125) = 1.77, p > .05$) with an adjusted R^2 of .05. Even when removing the demographic variables that were not significant (age, gender, income, race), the equation remained non-significant. In both cases, however, the relationship between being exposed to flaming and elaboration was significant at the $p < .05$ level, which leads to the conclusion that the effect of flaming can be considered significant. With all demographic variables included in the model, being exposed to flaming had a regression coefficient that is equal to -.42 and a beta weight of -.21. The regression coefficient shows that being

exposed to flaming relates to a statistically significant decrease in elaborative behavior. In other words, flaming has a direct negative effect on elaboration. More specifically, when being exposed to flaming, the elaboration score drops by .36. When considering the significance of this effect in the real world, however, it needs to be taken into consideration that a .36 decrease in elaboration would only relate to a very minor change in actual knowledge acquisition. However, comparing the effect of flaming to the significant effect of education ($B = -.14$, $\beta = -.18$), it can be said that the effect of flaming on elaboration is more profound. **Hypothesis 5 is supported by the present data.**

The relationship between being exposed to comments made by credible commenters and elaboration was not significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to .15 and a beta weight of .08. The credibility of the commenters does not have a direct effect on elaboration. **Hypothesis 6 was not supported.**

Finally, the interaction term of flaming and credibility was entered into the regression model, it was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to $-.36$ and a beta weight of $-.18$. Interestingly, though, upon entering the interaction term, the initial flaming measure was automatically removed from the analysis because the tolerance level for collinearity was reached. This indicates that flaming has a very strong impact on credibility, overshadowing the experimental manipulation. **To answer RQ1, there is an interaction effect between flaming and credibility.**

In addition, the relationship between education and elaboration was significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to $-.14$ and a beta weight of $-.18$. The regression coefficient shows that an increase in the level of education correlates with a statistically significant decrease in elaborative behavior. The more formal

education participants had, the fewer they elaborated on the content. More specifically, a jump from the lowest educational status (some High School) to the highest (Doctoral Degree) would relate to a .98 decrease in elaboration.

TABLE 8:
Predictors of Elaboration from Experiment 1 (N = 137)

	B	SE	β
Constant	28.269	13.096	
Age	-.011	.007	-.149
Gender	.025	.174	.012
Education	-.143	.071	-.184*
Income	.003	.071	.004
Race – White/Caucasian	-.393	.463	-.129
Race – African American	.473	.629	.089
Race – Native American	-.156	.833	-.019
Race – Asian	.628	.641	.118
Flaming	-.419	.241	-.209*
Credibility	.100	.238	-.050
adjusted R ²	.047		
F(11,125)	1.770		

Note. Age = actual birth year of participant. An increase in “Age” therefore means a higher birth year / younger participant. * p <.05. ** p <.01. *** p <.001

Experiment 2

Flaming & Political Ideology: The data generated by Experiment 2 was first used to verify the result found in Experiment 1 that flaming has a direct effect on elaboration

(H5). In addition, Experiment 2 investigates if a match/contradiction between the political ideologies of participants and commenters (H9) directly affect elaboration, and whether there is an interaction effect between flaming and political orientation (RQ2). An ordinary least-squares regression model was computed predicting elaboration from participants' being in a flaming condition (yes = 1, no = 0), participants having been exposed to matching or contradicting political ideologies (match = 1, contradiction = 0), and the interaction term of those variables, while controlling for age, gender, education, income, and race (see Table 9). The resulting regression equation was not statistically significant ($F(11,131) = 1.45, p > .05$) with an adjusted R^2 of .04. Even when removing the demographic variables the equation remained non-significant. In both cases, however, the relationship between being exposed to flaming and elaboration was significant at the $p < .01$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to -.63 and a beta weight of -.29. The regression coefficient shows that being exposed to flaming relates to a statistically significant decrease in elaborative behavior. More specifically, when comments beneath a news article contained flaming, the elaboration score decreased by .63. This effect can be considered quite profound. The data from the second experiment therefore **supports Hypothesis 3** and replicates the findings from Experiment 1.

On the other hand, the relationship between being exposed to comments made by commenters that match participants' political ideology and elaboration was not significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to -.33 and a beta weight of .18. Whether commenters have corresponding or conflicting political ideology does not have a direct effect on elaboration. **Hypothesis 9 was not supported.**

Finally, the interaction term of flaming and being exposed to comments from commenters with a matching political ideology was not significant at the $p < .05$ level and had a regression coefficient that is equal to .47 and a beta weight of .16. **To answer RQ2, there is no interaction effect between flaming and political ideology.**

TABLE 9:
Predictors of Elaboration from Experiment 2 (N = 143)

	B	SE	B
Constant	34.089	16.186	
Age	-.014	.008	-.153
Gender	-.182	.191	-.084
Education	.009	.074	.011
Income	-.059	.071	.004
Race – White/Caucasian	.099	.499	.039
Race – African American	.479	.553	.146
Race – Native American	.314	.641	.062
Race – Asian	-.242	.679	-.045
Flaming	-.632	.240	-.290**
Political Match	-.326	.259	-.147
Flaming*Political Match	.466	.379	.163
adjusted R ²	.038		
F(11,131)	1.447		

Note. Age = actual birth year of participant. An increase in “Age” therefore means a higher birth year / younger participant. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Summary

The results of the present dissertation show that flaming has a negative effect on perceptions of news credibility and also affect elaboration negatively. Elaboration in turn has a positive effect on the three dimensions of knowledge acquisition, namely: recognition, recall, and comprehension. Furthermore, the availability of comments in general does not have a statistically significant positive effect on elaboration. Only when comments meet very specific criteria (such as being favorable to the audiences characteristics), they do lead to an increase in elaboration.

Furthermore, flaming has a strong influence on the perceived trustworthiness of the commenters. User that engage in flaming are generally perceived as less credible, which further influences the perceptions of news credibility. The present data also supports the previously reported causal link between elaboration and knowledge. Not only that, the present dissertation also shows that all three levels of knowledge acquisition (recognition, recall, comprehension) are related to elaboration. Whether the political ideology of a commenter matches the political ideology of the reader did not play a significant role in either predicting elaboration or moderating the effect of flaming. Table 10 summarizes the results of the present dissertation.

TABLE 10:
Summary of Hypotheses and Research Question Results

Hypothesis / Question	Result
Hypothesis 1: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the recognition of information that were presented to them in news articles	Supported
Hypothesis 2: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the recall of information that were presented to them in news articles	Supported
Hypothesis 3: Individuals scoring higher on elaboration will also score higher when tested on the comprehension of information that were presented to them in news articles	Supported
Hypothesis 4: Individuals exposed to user comments will report more elaboration on the news article than individuals not exposed to user comments	not supported
Hypothesis 5: Participants exposed to flaming in online comments will report less elaboration than participants not exposed to flaming in online comments	Supported
Hypothesis 6: Participants exposed to comments predominantly posted by highly credible sources will elaborate more on the news articles.	not supported
Hypothesis 7: Participants exposed to comments made by high credible sources will rate the accompanying news article as more credible than participants exposed to comments predominantly made by low credible sources	Supported
Hypothesis 8: Participants who report perceiving the news article as more credible will report more elaboration	Supported
Hypothesis 9: The amount of elaboration a participant reports will differ based on whether participants have been exposed to comments from commenters that match or conflict with their own political ideology?	not supported
Research Question 1: Will the effect of flaming on elaboration differ based on whether participants have been exposed to high or low credibility comments?	Yes
Research Question 2: Will the effect of flaming on elaboration be mediated by the fact that comments come from commenters that match readers' political ideology?	No

DISCUSSION

Informed citizens are essential for a democracy to function – and the media provide information about current events that can be used by individuals to make informed decisions. But what is the role of interactive online media in this process? This dissertation sought to explain how different characteristics of online comments on news websites affect elaboration and learning in the context of political news. An online experiment was used to expose participants to different online commenting scenarios in and measure the effects of flaming, credibility and political ideology.

Knowledge Acquisition through Elaboration

One of the main assumptions and hypothesis of the present dissertation was the causal link between elaboration and knowledge acquisition found in previous studies. Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee (2005) had concluded that the amount of mental effort devoted to the content predicts knowledge, while Eveland's Cognitive Mediation Model (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Eveland et al., 2005, 2003; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Eveland, 2001, 2002), also states that cognitive processes (such as elaboration) are central to learning from the news. The data underlying the present analysis further supports this link. But not only this. The present dissertation also expands the notion of elaboration as an important variable for knowledge acquisition by employing a more fine grained measure of knowledge acquisition. Individuals reporting more elaboration (in the form of thinking about the presented arguments and topics), scored higher when tested on the recognition, recall and comprehension of the content they had encountered.

This expands the findings of previous studies investigating the link between elaboration and knowledge as those studies generally investigated this relationship in an even more interpersonal communication context that was removed from the actual consumption of news. This is especially important, as it further indicates that it is not even necessary for individuals to actively anticipate a future discussion about the content they encounter (as it has often been implied by previous studies). In the current experiment, participants were aware of the fact that the news articles they encountered were presented as screenshots and that the discussions were not “live”. In addition, participants had no personal relation to the content, as people and places contained in the articles were made up. In previous studies, it was often assumed that news content would serve as a token for future interpersonal communication (Levy, 1978; J. P. Robinson & Levy, 1996) and therefore foster the acquisition of knowledge. In the present dissertation, this was very likely not the case. The results therefore emphasize that even simple exposure to a discussion that had already ended and was merely visible leads to an increase elaboration and knowledge about the related topic.

Flaming, Comments & Elaboration

One of the major arguments used by opponents of the potential shutdown of the comment functionality on many news sites is that the ability of the Internet to facilitate open discussions is a great asset for democracy. The supporters of an open Internet base their argument on findings that discussions play a major role in the dissemination and processing of information (Greenberg et al., 1965; Greenberg, 1964; Katz, 1957; Larsen & Hill, 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1965; Troidahl & Van Dam, 1965). The general

consensus is that the more individuals discuss a topic, the more they subsequently know about it (Bennett et al., 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000; Eveland et al., 2005; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Holbert et al., 2002) and can participate in civic life.

What these studies did not consider, however, is that discussions might have to exhibit certain characteristics in order to be beneficial. The present study adds to this discussion by providing results showing that only very specific discussions have a statistically significant positive effect on elaboration and are potentially beneficial to citizens in a democracy. In the case of the present dataset that overrepresented participants with a liberal political ideology, those discussions mustn't include flaming and had to come from commenters with the same political orientation. This is in line with studies showing that individuals were more engaged with information that was seemingly supporting their initial position (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Meffert et al., 2006; Schmitt et al., 2004). These results become even more important when considering the profound effects of flaming found in the present dissertation.

The two experiments undertaken provide further support for the detrimental effects of flaming. It does not only affect the perceived trustworthiness of the individual engaging in flaming negatively, but also affects perceptions about the content that was associated with the occurrence of flaming and hinders elaboration. This is in line with previous research showing that negative comments can decrease perceptions about the quality of the website and distort the meaning of and opinion about the topic discussed in the article itself (A. Anderson et al., 2013; Price et al., 2006). Furthermore, users might be annoyed (Moor et al., 2010) by the occurrence of flaming and refrain from spending more time with and elaborating on news article. This is not only true when individuals

engage in those discussion, but also when they merely see them, providing support for the notion that reading is an important part of deliberation, because a large part of rational discussion consists of reflecting on others' opinions (Smith et al., 2009). Why this is the case, is to be seen. It might be that flaming disrupts information processing at a certain point. The data underlying this dissertation show that even all participants could answer some of the questions of the knowledge test, but that participants who elaborated more were able to do better. This suggests that flaming might disrupt a process that had already started when participants were reading the article. Readers will usually read the text before they reach the commenting section which is usually placed beneath it. However, after the initial read-through of the text, the elaboration might be triggered by certain cues. One of these cues might be exposure to discussions. When readers encounter uncivil discussions, they might be driven away and choose not to elaborate further on the text. Their cognitive resources might be taken up by the emotional nature of the flaming (Lang, 2000) and therefore less resources for active elaboration might be available, which would explain the results.

The decision of some large general interest news outlets such as the “Chicago Sun Times” to remove the commenting functionality from their website (Belluck, 2013; Farhi, 2014; Kirkland, 2014; LaBarre, 2013) seems to make sense. And that is not only true from a self-preservation perspective, in which the news organization is trying to preserve its image, but also from a knowledge acquisition perspective. The results of the present dissertation show that flaming is associated with a decrease in the perceived credibility of the user, which is in turn related to a decrease in the perceived credibility of the related news article. This decrease in perceived credibility further decreases elaboration.

From a practical standpoint, shutting off commenting sections on news websites seems to be a valid tool in terms of preserving the credibility of the news organization and also for preventing the negative effects of flaming. While comments that fulfill very specific characteristics can increase elaboration, it seems difficult to practically monitor such online discussions in a way that prevent flaming and the detrimental effects it brings with it. Still, it would be beneficial for news media and a democratic society to find ways that allow user participation on news websites but limit the amount of flaming. How this can be achieved remains an open question, though. One step could be to require users to register with their real names in order to comment in order to prevent flaming. The present dissertation investigated two potential design interventions and whether they mitigated the effects of flaming. Results show that neither providing a credibility rating for commenters nor indicating their political ideology has a statistically significant effect on the negative relationship between flaming and elaboration. Contradicting previous research on politically motivated reasoning (Edwards & Smith, 1996; Meffert et al., 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Taber, Cann & Kucsova, 2009; Redlawsk, 2002) results of the present dissertation did not show that participants engaged in different elaboration patterns based on whether the comments they encountered came from users having matching or conflicting political ideologies. This might be due to the fact that the motivated reasoning is mainly triggered when facts are presented in regards to a political issue that the participants feels strongly about due to his/her political ideology. The effect might not exist (or not be as significant) when the information in the news article itself does not make any distinct political statement and only the comments provide an indication of a political stance. Participants in the present dissertation likely did not feel

challenged in their political ideology as a result of reading comments coming from a user having a different ideology, as the comments itself did not attack/challenge members of the conflicting political ideology directly. In addition, the very nature of the online experiment might have contributed to the results. While the current online experiment used fictional news stories, individuals likely need to feel a certain attachment to the acting individuals in order to trigger motivated reasoning. Finally, providing credibility ratings for users to be displayed with each of their comments also did not have the anticipated effect. While providing such additional information might serve as a heuristic shortcut for users to assess the trustworthiness and expertise of other users, it could not mitigate the negative effects of flaming. In the present dissertation, there was no difference on the perceptions of flaming based on whether the comments came from commenters with high or low credibility. This is likely due to the fact that flaming had a huge impact on the overall credibility of the commenters, with commenters engaging in flaming usually been seen as less trustworthy. This effect was so profound that it overshadowed the credibility cues on the user profiles. In general, though, the data suggest that the effect of flaming is entirely mediated by the perceptions of trustworthiness of the commenter.

Practical Implications: Flaming makes you look stupid and ugly

Finally, as a by-product of the analyses undertaken to answer the research questions and investigate the hypotheses posed by the present dissertation, valuable insights into the broader effects of flaming were generated. Results show that while the expertise and attractiveness dimensions of the user-credibility construct remained identical across

conditions (all participants saw the same profile images), the perceptions about commenters' expertise and attractiveness differed widely based on flaming. In general, commenters who engaged in flaming behavior were statistically significantly rated as less attractive and as possessing less expertise than their civil counterparts. In other words: stop flaming, it makes you look ugly and stupid. Maybe conveying these findings to online users that are likely to engage in flaming could help prevent such behavior. News organizations and other websites facing the issue of flaming might use this knowledge to design campaigns aimed at users educating them about the effects of flaming on their perceived attractiveness and expertise as a way of reducing the unwanted behavior.

Summary

Results show that flaming has a negative effect on perceptions of news credibility and elaboration, and that the availability of comments in general does not have a statistically significant positive effect on elaboration. When comments do not contain flaming, however, they do lead to an increase in elaboration. Furthermore, the effect of flaming on elaboration is fully mediated by perceptions about the credibility/trustworthiness of the commenters. Users that engage in flaming are also perceived as less attractive and as possessing less expertise. The present data also supports the previously reported causal link between elaboration and knowledge, which makes the overall findings important. Whether the political ideology of a commenter matches the political ideology of the reader does also not play a significant role. Together the results of the present dissertation shed light on the benefits and drawbacks of online comments in the news environment and further emphasize the importance of finding ways to keep online discussions civil.

Limitations

While the present dissertation employed a sample that represented the general population of the United States well in several regards (see Sample), the overall size of the sample can be considered limited. Initially, the online experiment for the present dissertation was presented to 505 individuals. However, due to a technical issue with Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, one batch of the data collection was opened to participants worldwide instead of only to residents of the United States. This allowed 86 individuals from India to take part in the experiment within a short time frame. Those cases had to be excluded from the analysis, as the participants provided significantly different results in some of the key variables that might have skewed the results. While IP checks have been undertaken to identify all participants that took part in the experiment from outside of the United States, this still represents a limitation of the present dissertation.

Furthermore, participants being recruited over the Internet differ from a general US sample because they are likely to spend more time online. Individuals looking to participate in studies or other micro-tasks through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service are likely to be used to carrying out such tasks and using computers and the Internet in general. While this might make them distinctly different from other parts of the general population, those individuals spending time online are the appropriate sample for this kind of research. Since they spend more time online, they are more likely to encounter flaming within online comments and therefore experience the effects. This makes investigating how those stimuli change their behavior a worthwhile endeavor.

In addition, the present dissertation explored the relationship between online comments and elaboration only in a specific context. While it is reasonable to believe that

the principles found in the present research apply to other topics than local politics, caution is advised when trying to generalize into other areas. It might be that certain sub-cultures (gaming, sports) or demographics (college students) respond differently when being exposed to flaming due to a different cultural meaning. There might also be a difference in the perception of the severity of flaming between the sample used for the present study (rather familiar with the online commenting culture) and the general population. Individuals not used to the often rather rude culture of the Internet might have an even stronger reaction when exposed to flaming in a news context.

Another limitation of the present dissertation is the relatively small amount of variance explained by the regression models. This leaves room for speculation whether other variables that have not been part of the present study play an important role in the elaboration/knowledge acquisition process. Variables such as personal involvement with the issue (in the present dissertation not applicable due to the artificial nature of the stimulus material), or other personality traits might contribute to an individual's decision to engage in elaborative behavior when consuming political news online. However, the low amount of variance explained can in part also be attributed to the nature of the underlying data. While regression analyses assumes true continuous data, the data generated though the Likert scales is considered categorical (ordinal). However, when using Likert data as a dependent variable in regression, the assumption can be made that that the distance between categories is equal, especially when using items with a true midpoint (five or seven items). Especially if multiple Likert items are combined into indexes, what adds values and variability to the data, and if the assumptions of normality are met, analysis with parametric procedure can still be followed (Allen & Seaman, 2007;

Jamieson, 2004; Lubke & Muthén, 2004). As a result, however, the variance explained by the regression model can naturally be lower than with true continuous data.

Finally, the way some of the variables of the present study were designed opens up the results for potential confounds. Both the Trustworthiness and Political Ideology manipulation used more than one distinct feature to achieve the intended effect. Trustworthiness was not only manipulated by varying the “verified user” status and the credibility rating each commenter had attached to their profile, but also by manipulating the occupations of the commenters. While the manipulation check revealed that the stimulus material had the intended effect on participants’ perceptions, it cannot be stated clearly which of the two manipulations contributed how much to the effect. The same is true for Political Ideology, where not only political symbols/logos were used to identify an either conservative or liberal political ideology. Some of the comments also contained textual cues indicating the political orientation of the commenter (“As conservative, I”).

The present study assumed based on previous literature that flaming would be perceived as annoying and a disturbance in the context of political news online. However, this might not be the case across all participants. In some areas of online communication and for some users it might be a common or even entertaining practice that could actually foster elaboration. This issue that might be addressed in future research by asking participants about their attitudes towards flaming and using the result as a moderator in a model predicting the effects of flaming on elaboration.

Future Research

While the present dissertation sheds light on some much debated questions, future research might pick up some of the areas that this dissertation did not focus on. Some factors, such as personal interest in politics and personal investment in a particular matter, have not been the focus of this dissertation but could influence the amount of elaboration individuals engage in significantly. Also, instead of using self-report measures for elaboration researchers might want to explore the implementation of eye-tracking software to analyze where readers are actually looking when confronted with flaming. In addition, using magnetic resonance imaging to assess potentially different activity patterns within the brain might be a fruitful pursuit.

Also, given that only civil online comments have a positive effect on elaboration, it is important to conduct further research on methods to moderate discussions on the Internet. Automated methods of scanning online comments for flaming might be a helpful tool for media organizations to allow users to comments on their websites while being able to monitor the content in a cost effective manner.

CONCLUSION

What is the role of interactive online media in the education of citizens about current political events? Does the Internet benefit democracy by providing individuals with the opportunity to comment on news articles might aid this process by facilitating elaboration on the topic through discussion, which has been causally linked to subsequent acquisition of knowledge. The same online discussions, however, have also been linked to a polarization of viewpoints and the demise of conversations that potentially facilitate elaboration. In times where more and more news organizations are limiting user participation on online news sites, the present dissertation provides a split answer. Yes, comments have the potential to increase elaboration of news content. This is not only true when individuals engage in those discussion, but also when they merely see them, providing support for the notion that reading is an important part of deliberation, because a large part of rational discussion consists of reflecting on others' opinions (Smith et al., 2009). But in order to have this positive effect, comments need to exhibit very particular characteristics. More specifically, comments need to be civil in nature and match the preferences of the audience. When they contain flaming, the effect is reversed.

This emphasizes further the negative effects of flaming found in previous research (Chester & Gwynne, 1998; Moor et al., 2010). Flaming has a distinct statistically significant negative effect on elaboration and also affects perceptions about users and the related content negatively. It remains important for media professionals and academics to explore venues allowing media organizations to make best use of user participation while limiting the appearance of flaming to ensure benefits for a democratic society.

APPENDIX

Survey Instrument

Quality Control

- Please select the picture showing an elephant (cat, dog elephant, fish)
- Please click on the answer that contains the number 4 (1,2,3,4)

Manipulation Check: Flaming

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: The comments posted beneath the news article I read... (7-point Likert-type scale)

- ...used offensive language (*such as swear words, shouting*)
- ...used insulting phrases (*towards involved parties or other commenters*)
- ...can be considered flaming
- ...were generally positive in tone (*reverse coded*)

Manipulation Check: Political Ideology of the Commenter

Please indicate whether you think the comments posted beneath the news article you read came from somebody having liberal or conservative political views.

- 7-point Likert-type scale with the following values : (1 = Very Conservative) - (2 = Conservative) - (3 = Somewhat Conservative) - (4 = Neutral/Neither Liberal or Conservative) - (5 = Somewhat Liberal) - (6 = Liberal) - (7 = Very Liberal)

Manipulation Check: Credibility of the Commenter (Ohanian, 1990)

Please indicate whether you think the individuals posting the comments beneath the news article you read possess the attributes listed below (7 point bipolar scale).

- Attractive – Unattractive, Classy – not Classy, Beautiful – Ugly, Elegant – Plain, Sexy – not Sexy, Honest – Dishonest, Sincere – Insincere, Trustworthy – Untrustworthy, Expert - Not an expert, Experienced – Inexperienced, Knowledgeable – Unknowledgeable, Qualified – Unqualified, Skilled – Unskilled

Demographics

- In which year were you born?
- What is your gender?
- What is your highest educational degree?
- What is your current household income?
- Are you Hispanic or Latino?
- How would you describe yourself? (*American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White*)
- How often do you use the Internet to read about current events/news?
- How often do you read about politics on the Internet?
- How often do you engage in conversations about politics on the Internet/offline?

Political Ideology of Participant

Please indicate whether you have rather liberal or conservative political views.

- 7-point Likert-type scale with the following values : (1 = Very Conservative) - (2 = Conservative) - (3 = Somewhat Conservative) - (4 = Neutral/Neither Liberal or Conservative) - (5 = Somewhat Liberal) - (6 = Liberal) - (7 = Very Liberal)

Credibility of the News Article (Meyer, 1988)

Please indicate whether the news article you just read was... (7 point bipolar scale).

- Fair - Unfair
- Unbiased - Biased
- Telling the whole story - Not telling the whole story
- Accurate - Inaccurate
- Trustworthy – Not trustworthy

Elaboration (based on Eveland & Thomson, 2006)

While reading the articles and the comments beneath them...

- I found myself thinking about the topic
- I thought about how this relates to other issues and news I have encountered
- I found myself thinking about the arguments presented in the article
- I was wondering how I would comment on the issue

Knowledge Acquisition

Please try to answer the following questions about the articles you just read.

- The articles dealt with a place called _____ [fill in the blank]
- The mayor of the city mentioned in the articles is called _____ [fill in the blank]

- The city in the article will lay off many employees in the near future [true, false]
- Which two of the following fields will not be touched even if the city has to save money? [education, management, PR, parks & recreation, public safety]
- What was strange about the potential elections taking place? [there was potentially fraud involved, they were all uncontested, not all candidates were known, they were out of term due to special circumstances]
- Usually there is fierce competition in the city elections [true, false]
- The city mentioned in the articles had a recent decrease in crime rates [true, false]
- Why were residents furious about the chairman of a council? [he wanted to increase taxes, he wanted to cut benefits, they thought he was being racist, they thought he had embezzled money, they thought he was corrupt]
- Given your knowledge and the information from the text, do you think the city mentioned in the article has had a solid financial past? [yes, no]
- Given your knowledge and the information from the text, do you think that the city mentioned in the articles is a prospering community? [yes, no]

Overview of Stimulus Material

FIGURE 4:
Experimental Stimulus 1

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversidenews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson does not expect to lay off any city employees this year or next, and is ruling out any layoffs of public safety employees and teachers, he said yesterday.

"It really depends upon how bad the economy would have to go down. Certainly I wouldn't want to touch public safety. I wouldn't want to touch education. ... It depends upon what the crisis is," Johnson told the News yesterday. "I don't anticipate - at least this year or fiscal next year - really major cuts as far as major staff reductions, but you really don't know what's going to happen."


Newly hired Chief Financial Officer Matthew Williams, who will start work May 7, said he plans an immediate review of city departments to look for efficiencies. "I think Riverside is in pretty good shape at the moment, but one of the first things I'm going to do is take my team and have them walk me through the city budget and do a top-to-bottom review of every department in the city internally to see where we stand," he said. "It will be an ongoing process as long as I'm there. We will analyze and look at all efficiencies that we can. We will also look at what programs are working best."

An unpredictable market could force the city to make some tough decisions, he said.

"I think we're all hopeful that a decision to make layoffs never has to be made, but we also recognize the potential for another recession like the one we had over the past five years," Williams said. "That's why I think it's irresponsible to take any potential solution off the table."


However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS

- 


Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
FUCK THIS !!!

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 


Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
EFFICIENCIES!!! Whenever I hear some of those stupid politicians say that, I want to throw up. Seriously.

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 


Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
Could some of you completely retarded online nuts please read the entire story before you post crappy comments?

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 

Joshua Robinson - Riverside University
What pile of shit! As if those filthy managers would ever cut their own salary. Why can't they start there!?!?!?

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 

Amanda White - SouthRiver Pharmacy
Seriously, that IDIOT major promises stuff that he will never keep. That's bullshit!!!

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 5:
Experimental Stimulus 2

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



Elections will be canceled this year in the Park Cities, if precedent holds.

Every race in Waterwood Park and Crimson Park, including the school board election, is uncontested. Candidates will assume the roles in the spring — including the position of Waterwood Park mayor. That title will go to Mary Wilson, an 80-year-old real estate developer who is running without a challenger.


"That is a blessing for me because I'm not much of a campaigner," Wilson said. "I'm a worker ant." And Wilson said he takes the uncontested races as a sign "that things in the city are running pretty smoothly."

Waterwood Park and Crimson Park may be home to prominent political supporters and the Riverside Library, but its city and town elections tend to go quietly.

Waterwood Park will gain one new council member this election since council member James Anderson has reached his six-year term limit. Robert Moore, a 65-year-old architect and developer, will succeed him. Three current council members will serve another term.


In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

COMMENTS

- 


Amber Brown - Exterior Architects
ARE YOU KIDDING?! Does this stupid newspaper have nothing else to do? There are more important things out there!!!

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 

Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
It's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet and peaceful... No matter what some CRACKPOT USERS say!

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago
- 

Amy Miller - Miller Ophthalmology
I can't believe what some people are saying here... READ YOU MORONS!

Verified Commenter
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 6: Experimental Stimulus 3

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversidenews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



Several community members called on Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson Wednesday to remove Councilman Joshua Brown as the chairman of council's law and public safety committee following comments he made about blacks and crime.

During the April 14 committee meeting, Brown said "black people must take ownership" of their behavior in light of the fact that the majority of this year's homicide victims were black men.

David Jones, a man who spoke for a group at Wednesday's full council meeting, said Brown should be held accountable for his words. "We're not asking you to take him off of everything, to kick him off of council. We know you can't do that," Jones said to Mayor Johnson. "But, you are responsible for his appointment which makes you responsible for his behavior."

Homicides are up by 50 percent this year, when compared to the same time period last year.

The escalation led council and others to question how police can get tougher on crime. "We want to be aggressive, but we also want to be right," Police Chief James Miller told members of the committee. However, the arrest-first policy associated with zero tolerance has filled the courts with first-time, minor offenders, police officials have said. Even when cases are dismissed, people can be shadowed for years by error-ridden criminal records, discouraging them from helping police in the future.

During the reported meeting, Brown repeatedly lashed out, suggesting that "excuses" are being made for the level of black-on-black violence, and that "black people must take ownership of these murders across this country. Our children are dying, so I have not gotten to the point that I think the moral voices are crystal clear that we're going to find you and hold you accountable."

COMMENTS

 **Brian Harris** - Riverside Fire Department
I can't believe that such FUCKING RACIST SKUNKS can still be in a leading position!!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Brandon King** - Riverside School District
Brown has a point and this CRAPPY newspaper is botching up the story!!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Eric Gonzales** - Regional Jet Airlines
SHUT UP, RACIST!!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Ashley Wright** - Riverside University
WHAT A FUCKING RACIST!!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Megan Taylor** - Nurse @ Woodford Hospital
SHIT MAN, THAT GUY IS RIGHT!!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Amy Miller** - Miller Ophthalmology
I can't believe what some people are saying here... READ YOU MORONS!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Dr. Heather Moore** - Cloud Community College
FUCK THIS !!!
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

 **Rachel Smith** - Riverside Hospital
FUCK. WHAT A CLUMSY IDIOT
Verified Commenter
Credibility Score
Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 7: Experimental Stimulus 4

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversidenews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson does not expect to lay off any city employees this year or next, and is ruling out any layoffs of public safety employees and teachers, he said yesterday.

"It really depends upon how bad the economy would have to go down. Certainly I wouldn't want to touch public safety. I wouldn't want to touch education. ... It depends upon what the crisis is," Johnson told the News yesterday. "I don't anticipate - at least this year or fiscal next year - really major cuts as far as major staff reductions, but you really don't know what's going to happen."

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An unpredictable market could force the city to make some tough decisions, he said.

"I think we're all hopeful that a decision to make layoffs never has to be made, but we also recognize the potential for another recession like the one we had over the past five years," Williams said. "That's why I think it's irresponsible to take any potential solution off the table."

However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS



Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
FUCK THIS !!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



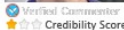
Andrew Hall - First Merit Bank, LLC
EFFICENCIES!!! Whenever I hear some of those stupid politicians say that, I want to throw up. Seriously.



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - FastTrack Car Sales
Could some of you completely retarded online nuts please read the entire story before you post crappy comments?



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



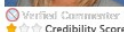
Joshua Robinson - ...retired and angry
What pile of shit! As if those filthy managers would ever cut their own salary. Why can't they start there!???!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Mrs. X - SuperMom
Seriously, that IDIOT major promises stuff that he will never keep. That's bullshit!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 8:
Experimental Stimulus 5

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



Elections will be canceled this year in the Park Cities, if precedent holds.

Every race in Waterwood Park and Crimson Park, including the school board election, is uncontested. Candidates will assume the roles in the spring — including the position of Waterwood Park mayor. That title will go to Mary Wilson, an 80-year-old real estate developer who is running without a challenger.

"That is a blessing for me because I'm not much of a campaigner," Wilson said. "I'm a worker ant." And Wilson said he takes the uncontested races as a sign "that things in the city are running pretty smoothly."

Waterwood Park and Crimson Park may be home to prominent political supporters and the Riverside Library, but its city and town elections tend to go quietly.

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In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

COMMENTS



Sexy Amber - The Downtown Bar
ARE YOU KIDDING?! Does this stupid newspaper have nothing else to do? There are more important things out there!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
It's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet and peaceful... No matter what some CRACKPOT USERS say!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Techworld Sales
BOOOORING... BOORING!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 9: Experimental Stimulus 6

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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During the April 14 committee meeting, Brown said "black people must take ownership" of their behavior in light of the fact that the majority of this year's homicide victims were black men.

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COMMENTS



Kim Kool - Beach Bum
I can't believe that such FUCKING RACIST
SKUNKS can still be in a leading position!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



King Kong - Walmart
Brown has a point and this CRAPPY
newspaper is bolching up the story!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Riverwalk Night Club
SHUT UP, RACIST!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Ashley Wright - Riverside HighSchool
WHAT A FUCKING RACIST!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Megan Taylor - Riverside HighSchool
SHIT MAN, THAT GUY IS RIGHT!!!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Riverside Bank
I can't believe what some people are
saying here... READ YOU MORONS!



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Rocking Rachel - Riverside Hospital
FUCK. WHAT A CLUMSY IDIOT



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 10: Experimental Stimulus 7

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversidenews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



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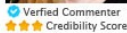
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However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS



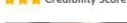
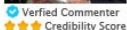
Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
As a democrat I think the current policies failed. I don't like that they want to save money...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



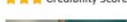
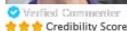
Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
Whenever I hear somebody talk about saving money on our government, I get the shivers...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



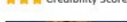
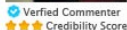
Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
Could some of you people please read the entire story before you comment?



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



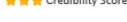
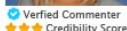
Joshua Robinson - Riverside University
Sorry to say this, but why don't these managers ever start with their own salaries when it comes to saving money? Just saying...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amanda White - SouthRiver Pharmacy
I don't know. Somehow I'm always afraid that politicians don't keep their promises...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 11:
Experimental Stimulus 8

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



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In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

COMMENTS



Amber Brown - Exterior Architects
Lovely. But not sure why this even makes the news...

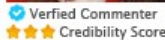


★ ★ ★ Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
It's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet and peaceful...

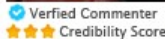


★ ★ ★ Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Riverwood University
Well... not much going on in our town ;)



★ ★ ★ Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 12: Experimental Stimulus 9

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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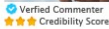
The escalation led council and others to question how police can get tougher on crime. "We want to be aggressive, but we also want to be right," Police Chief James Miller told members of the committee. However, the arrest-first policy associated with zero tolerance has filled the courts with first-time, minor offenders, police officials have said. Even when cases are dismissed, people can be shadowed for years by error-ridden criminal records, discouraging them from helping police in the future.

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COMMENTS



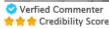
Ben Harris - Riverside Fire Department
I can't believe that people with those kind of attitudes can still be in such a position



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



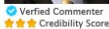
Brandon King - Riverside School District
Sorry to say, but Brown has a point...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Regional Jet Airways
How can there even be a discussion about this?



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



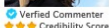
Ashley Wright - Riverside University
This guy should be removed.



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



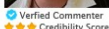
Megan Taylor - Nurse @ Woodford Hospital
Well, the man is right.



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Miller Ophthalmology
I can't believe what some people are saying here... please think first.



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Dr. Rachel Smith - Riverside Hospital
Wow. Rather clumsy for such an experienced politician, but he is not too far off...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 13: Experimental Stimulus 10

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversideneeds.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson does not expect to lay off any city employees this year or next, and is ruling out any layoffs of public safety employees and teachers, he said yesterday.

"It really depends upon how bad the economy would have to go down. Certainly I wouldn't want to touch public safety. I wouldn't want to touch education. ... It depends upon what the crisis is," Johnson told the News yesterday. "I don't anticipate - at least this year or fiscal next year - really major cuts as far as major staff reductions, but you really don't know what's going to happen."

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However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS



Heather Moore - Winter Real Estate

I don't like that they want to save money...



Verified Commenter



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Andrew Hall - Leyland Bank

Whenever I hear somebody talk about saving money on our government, I get the shivers...



Verified Commenter



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - FastTrack Car Sales

Could some of you please read the entire story before you post your comments?



Verified Commenter



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Joshua Robinson - ...retired and angry

Sorry to say this, but why don't these managers ever start with their own salaries when it comes to saving money? Just saying...



Verified Commenter



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

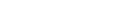


Mrs. X - SouthRiver Pharmacy

I don't know. Somehow I'm always afraid that politicians don't keep their promises...



Verified Commenter



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 14:
Experimental Stimulus 11

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



Elections will be canceled this year in the Park Cities, if precedent holds.

Every race in Waterwood Park and Crimson Park, including the school board election, is uncontested. Candidates will assume the roles in the spring — including the position of Waterwood Park mayor. That title will go to Mary Wilson, an 80-year-old real estate developer who is running without a challenger.

"That is a blessing for me because I'm not much of a campaigner," Wilson said. "I'm a worker ant." And Wilson said he takes the uncontested races as a sign "that things in the city are running pretty smoothly."

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In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

COMMENTS



Sexy Amber - Exterior Architects
Lovely. But not sure why this even makes the news...



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
It's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet and peaceful.



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Techworld Sales
Well... not much going on in our town ;)



Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 15: Experimental Stimulus 12

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Kim Kool - Beach Bum

I can't believe that people with those kind of attitudes can still be in such a position



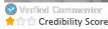
Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Brandon King - Sales Associate

Sorry to say, but Brown has a point...



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Riverwalk Night Club

How can there even be a discussion about this?



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Ashley Wright - Riverside Community College

This guy should be removed.



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Megan Taylor - Riverside HighSchool

Well, the man is right.



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Riverside Bank

I can't believe what some people are saying here... please think first.



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Rachel Smith - Walmart SuperCenter

Wow. Rather clumsy for such an experienced politician, but he is not too far off...



Credibility Score

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 16: Experimental Stimulus 13

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversideneews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



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However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS



Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
FUCK THIS !!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
EFFICIENCIES!!! Whenever I hear some of those stupid politicians say that, I want to throw up. Seriously.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
Could some of you completely retarded online nuts please read the entire story before you post crappy comments?

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Joshua Robinson - Riverside University
I usually like to see some movement in the government, but that's pile of shit! As if those filthy managers would ever cut their own salary. Why can't they start there!?!?!?

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amanda White - SouthRiver Pharmacy
Even as a liberal I have to say: That IDIOT major promises stuff that he will never keep. That's bullsh!t!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 17:
Experimental Stimulus 14

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Amber Brown - Exterior Architects
ARE YOU KIDDING?! Does this stupid newspaper have nothing else to do? There are more important things out there!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
As a liberal it's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet and peaceful... No matter what some CRACKPOT USERS say!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Riverwood University
BOOOORING... BOORING!!! Even for me as a liberal...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 18: Experimental Stimulus 15

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversidenews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Brian Harris - Beach Bum
I can't believe that such FUCKING RACIST SKUNKS can still be in a leading position!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Brandon King - Riverside School District
I usually favor equality for all people. But Brown has a point and this CRAPPY newspaper is botching up the story!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Regional-Jet Airlines
SHUT UP, RACIST!!! And I say that not only because of my liberal political views. Seriously.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Ashley Wright - Riverside University
WHAT A FUCKING RACIST!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Megan Taylor - Nurse @ Woodford Hospital
SHIT MAN, THAT GUY IS RIGHT!!! And trust me, as a liberat I wouldn't say that just like that

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Riverside Bank
I can't believe what some people are saying here... READ YOU MORONSI

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Dr. Rachel Smith - Riverside Hospital
FUCK WHAT A CLUMSY IDIOT. And I don't say that just because I'm a liberal...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 19: Experimental Stimulus 16

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversidenews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
FUCK THIS !!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
EFFICIENCIES!!! Whenever I hear some of those stupid politicians say that, I want to throw up. Seriously.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
Could some of you completely retarded online nuts please read the entire story before you post crappy comments?

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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I usually support a strong government, but that's pile of shit! As if those filthy managers would ever cut their own salary. Why can't they start there!?!?!?

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amanda White - SouthRiver Pharmacy
Even as a conservative I have to say: That IDIOT major promises stuff that he will never keep. That's bullshit!!!!

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 20:
Experimental Stimulus 17

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversideneews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Riverwood University
BOOOORING... BOORING!!! Even for me as a conservative...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 21: Experimental Stimulus 18

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 22: Experimental Stimulus 19

Home > Local Politics

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By Michael Smith
msmith@riversidenews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
As a democrat I think the current policies failed.
I don't like that they want to save money...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
Whenever I hear somebody talk about saving money on our government, I get the shivers...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amanda While - SouthRiver Pharmacy
I'm liberal. And somehow I'm always afraid that politicians don't keep their promises...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 23:
Experimental Stimulus 20

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014

1 4 Share 0 1

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Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
As a liberal it's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Riverwood University
Well... not much going on in our town. I still think people should have a choice

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 24: Experimental Stimulus 21

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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COMMENTS



Ben Harris - Riverside Fire Department
I can't believe that people with those kind of attitudes can still be in such a position

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Brandon King - Riverside School District
I usually favor equality for all people.
But: Sorry to say, Brown has a point...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Regional-Jet Airlines
How can there even be a discussion about this? And I say that independent of my liberal political views. Seriously.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Ashley Wright - Riverside University
This guy should be removed.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Megan Taylor - Nurse @ Woodford Hospital
Well, the man is right. And trust me, as a liberal I would not say that if it wasn't true...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Riverside Bank
I can't believe what some people are saying here... please think first.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Dr. Rachel Smith - Riverside Hospital
Wow. Rather clumsy for such an experienced politician, can't believe it... And I don't say that just because I'm a liberal...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 25: Experimental Stimulus 22

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversideneews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson does not expect to lay off any city employees this year or next, and is ruling out any layoffs of public safety employees and teachers, he said yesterday.

"It really depends upon how bad the economy would have to go down. Certainly I wouldn't want to touch public safety. I wouldn't want to touch education. ... It depends upon what the crisis is," Johnson told the News yesterday. "I don't anticipate - at least this year or fiscal next year - really major cuts as far as major staff reductions, but you really don't know what's going to happen."

Newly hired Chief Financial Officer Matthew Williams, who will start work May 7, said he plans an immediate review of city departments to look for efficiencies. "I think Riverside is in pretty good shape at the moment, but one of the first things I'm going to do is take my team and have them walk me through the city budget and do a top-to-bottom review of every department in the city internally to see where we stand," he said. "It will be an ongoing process as long as I'm there. We will analyze and look at all efficiencies that we can. We will also look at what programs are working best."

An unpredictable market could force the city to make some tough decisions, he said.

"I think we're all hopeful that a decision to make layoffs never has to be made, but we also recognize the potential for another recession like the one we had over the past five years," Williams said. "That's why I think it's irresponsible to take any potential solution off the table."

However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

COMMENTS



Dr. Heather Moore - Cloud Community College
As a republican I think the current policies failed.
I don't like that they want to save money...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Andrew Hall - Woodford Hospital
Whenever I hear somebody talk about saving
money on our government, I get the shivers...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Chris Jackson - Central Way Hospital
Could some of you people please read the
entire story before you comment?

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Joshua Robinson - Riverside University
I like to keep the things the way they are.
And I don't think managers should ever
interfer with our government.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amanda While - SouthRiver Pharmacy
I'm conservative. Still, I'm always afraid
that politicians don't keep their promises...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 26:
Experimental Stimulus 23

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



Elections will be canceled this year in the Park Cities, if precedent holds.

Every race in Waterwood Park and Crimson Park, including the school board election, is uncontested. Candidates will assume the roles in the spring — including the position of Waterwood Park mayor. That title will go to Mary Wilson, an 80-year-old real estate developer who is running without a challenger.

"That is a blessing for me because I'm not much of a campaigner," Wilson said. "I'm a worker ant." And Wilson said he takes the uncontested races as a sign "that things in the city are running pretty smoothly."

Waterwood Park and Crimson Park may be home to prominent political supporters and the Riverside Library, but its city and town elections tend to go quietly.

Waterwood Park will gain one new council member this election since council member James Anderson has reached his six-year term limit. Robert Moore, a 65-year-old architect and developer, will succeed him. Three current council members will serve another term.

In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

COMMENTS



Amber Brown - Exterior Architects
Lovely. But not sure why this even makes the news...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Melissa Young - ReadLight Bookstore
As a conservative it's nice to see that some neighborhoods are still so quiet

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Nick Johnson - Riverwood University
Well... not much going on in our town ;) But hey, I'm conservative - so I like it...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 27: Experimental Stimulus 24

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversideneews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



Several community members called on Riverside Mayor Christopher Johnson Wednesday to remove Councilman Joshua Brown as the chairman of council's law and public safety committee following comments he made about blacks and crime.

During the April 14 committee meeting, Brown said "black people must take ownership" of their behavior in light of the fact that the majority of this year's homicide victims were black men.

David Jones, a man who spoke for a group at Wednesday's full council meeting, said Brown should be held accountable for his words. "We're not asking you to take him off of everything, to kick him off of council. We know you can't do that," Jones said to Mayor Johnson. "But, you are responsible for his appointment which makes you responsible for his behavior."

Homicides are up by 50 percent this year, when compared to the same time period last year.

The escalation led council and others to question how police can get tougher on crime. "We want to be aggressive, but we also want to be right," Police Chief James Miller told members of the committee. However, the arrest-first policy associated with zero tolerance has filled the courts with first-time, minor offenders, police officials have said. Even when cases are dismissed, people can be shadowed for years by error-ridden criminal records, discouraging them from helping police in the future.

During the reported meeting, Brown repeatedly lashed out, suggesting that "excuses" are being made for the level of black-on-black violence, and that "black people must take ownership of these murders across this country. Our children are dying, so I have not gotten to the point that I think the moral voices are crystal clear that we're going to find you and hold you accountable."

COMMENTS



Ben Harris - Riverside Fire Department
I can't believe that people with those kind of attitudes can still be in such a position

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Brandon King - Riverside School District
Yes, I'm a bit old fashioned and conservative. But: Sorry to say, but Brown has a point...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Eric Gonzales - Regional-Jet Airlines
How can there even be a discussion about this? And I say that despite my usually rather conservative political views. Seriously.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Ashley Wright - Riverside University
This guy should be removed.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Megan Taylor - Nurse @ Woodford Hospital
Well, the man is right. And I don't say that because I usually vote conservative...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Amy Miller - Riverside Bank
I can't believe what some people are saying here... please think first.

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago



Dr. Rachel Smith - Riverside Hospital
Wow. Rather clumsy for such an experienced politician, but he is not too far off... And I don't say that just because I'm a conservative...

Reply - Rate Comment - Follow Post - 1 hour ago

FIGURE 28:
Experimental Stimulus 25

Home > Local Politics

Mayor says no layoffs expected



By Michael Smith
msmith@riversideneews.com
02:48 p.m. on April 30 2014



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"It really depends upon how bad the economy would have to go down. Certainly I wouldn't want to touch public safety. I wouldn't want to touch education. ... It depends upon what the crisis is," Johnson told the News yesterday. "I don't anticipate - at least this year or fiscal next year - really major cuts as far as major staff reductions, but you really don't know what's going to happen."

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An unpredictable market could force the city to make some tough decisions, he said.

"I think we're all hopeful that a decision to make layoffs never has to be made, but we also recognize the potential for another recession like the one we had over the past five years," Williams said. "That's why I think it's irresponsible to take any potential solution off the table."

However, he agreed with Johnson that public safety employees and those in education should be safe even if Riverside's purse strings tighten.

FIGURE 29:
Experimental Stimulus 26

Home > Local Politics

Park Cities will get new officials but won't have elections



By Patricia Thomas
pthomas@riversidenews.com
08:43 a.m. on April 30 2014



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Every race in Waterwood Park and Crimson Park, including the school board election, is uncontested. Candidates will assume the roles in the spring — including the position of Waterwood Park mayor. That title will go to Mary Wilson, an 80-year-old real estate developer who is running without a challenger.

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In Crimson Park, Town Council will vote whether to officially cancel elections at its May 24 meeting. All of its races are uncontested.

FIGURE 30:
Experimental Stimulus 27

Home > Local Politics

Community members call for councilman to be removed from law and public safety committee



By Daniel Davis
ddavis@riversidenews.com
05:23 p.m. on April 30 2014



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