HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: OPINIONS, EMOTIONS, AND THE USES OF ONLINE CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

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Public sentiment is crucial to the overall wellbeing of higher education. Recent polls point to a growing divide between the public and academia, as well as waning confidence in the necessity of higher education. And yet, polls tell us relatively little about how the various publics think and feel about our nation's colleges and universities. People's actual unfiltered thoughts, words, and conversations tell us more. With the advent of the internet and the ease at which people can in an instant transmit, view, and infect opinions worldwide, we now have an unprecedented ability via the digital public sphere to investigate and understand people's emotionally charged opinions. The number one reason people post online news comments is to express an opinion or an emotion, and yet researchers have largely ignored this rich online data source. While not a mainstream form of dialogue, online comments represent a backchannel into the conversations of digital publics. The purpose of my dissertation was to investigate online news comments to learn what they might tell us about the conversations people are having and what they think about higher education. Utilizing a multiple methods approach, I analyzed comments made in response to four news articles pertaining to higher education from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. My findings revealed commenters utilizing the online comments to engage in conversation by asking a multitude of questions, providing evidence to support their claims, and at times, replying to one another. Through these online conversations I distilled opinion themes pertaining to higher education, as well as the overall emotional tone of each forum. Implications for higher education include recognizing online news comments as a mechanism to

listen to the concerns and deliberations of the people within its publics, as well as an opportunity to engage with them.

I dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Melvin and Maryanne (Yenter) Windorski, and to Hanna.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Father of Public Relations Edward Bernays (1928b) believed "an educator should, in addition to his academic duties, bear a definite and wholesome relation to the general public" (p. 122). Bernays was critical of educators' ability, or lack thereof, to connect with and influence people outside academia. He described the significance of the relationship between the public to the educator as follows:

> This public does not come within the immediate scope of his academic duties. **But in a sense he depends upon it for his living, for the moral support, and the general cultural tone upon which his work must be based** [emphasis added]. (Bernays, 1928b, p. 122)

Today, with polls pointing to a growing divide between the public and academia, higher education's relationship with the public appears strained (Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo, 2017; Jaschik & Lederman, 2017; Schleifer & Silliman, 2016). And while polls have become synonymous with public opinion (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Goidel, 2011; Herbst, 2011a), they are not the only means to assess public sentiment, nor are they inherently the best way.

Bernays (1945) claimed, "The voice of the people which pollsters say is expressed in attitude polls, is rarely the unchangeable voice of the people" (p. 267). He went on to describe public opinion as follows:

> Public opinion is like an iceberg. The visible portion is the expressed attitudes, but the submerged portion of public opinion is sometimes potentially the more powerful. (Bernays, 1945, p. 267)

More recently, public opinion scholars Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015) assert "to focus on survey results alone is to miss most of the story" (p. 4). Even Goidel, co-editor of the *Survey Practice* journal published by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, questions the appropriateness of polling in today's environment. He argues that "in a

digital age, aggregating privately held individual opinions may be insufficient to the task of capturing an increasingly dynamic and interactive public" (Goidel, 2011, p. 12).

Many of the shortcomings of opinion polls stem from the concept that public opinion is conversational in nature. For example, Habermas (1996) believes public opinion to be much richer than survey results, something derived via dialogue within the public sphere. The process of public opinion formation is social in nature (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Habermas, 1996; Herbst, 2011b). Herbst (2011b) insists "that textured talk, dialogue, exchange, and conversation—not numbers—are the content of public opinion" (p. 95). And while it might be tempting to focus on mainstream conversations, Herbst (1996) warns us not to ignore communications that occur "on the margins of the public sphere" (p. 120). She believes such mechanisms for public expression "can create communication back channels" (p. 124), which "enable common citizens to voice opinions that might not ordinarily be heard" (p. 125). And while the effects of such backchannels often do not work quickly, in time they can affect the highest aspects of society (Herbst, 1996). In today's hyper-connected digital world, the possibilities for backchannels are greater than ever before. As Herbst (1996) points out, "the Internet certainly provides multiple opportunities for behind-the-scenes public debate" (p 130-131).

The purpose of my dissertation was to investigate one such digital backchannel for conversation—online news comments—to learn what they might tell us about the conversations people are having and what they think about higher education. "Dip into the comments", says *New York Times* columnist Michael Erard (2013), "and you can sense the currents that move American life" (para. 1). Dip into the comments is exactly what I did. Utilizing the comments made in response to four articles pertaining to Higher Education, two from *The New York Times*

and another two from *The Wall Street Journal*, I explored whether or not public sphere like characteristics manifested within the digital forums, the emotions conveyed via comments, as well as the public opinion themes that unfolded within. My results show deliberation did occur within the comments, and that they represent a place where commenters express emotions. My results also show that the themes that unfold within the online conversations provide valuable insight into the *textured talk* that is the makings of public opinion as it pertains to higher education.

In the following sections I first describe the problem that is the impetus of my research. I then explain the significance of the study followed by my research questions. Next, I provide a primer on terminology. Within the primer I briefly explain my use of terms *conversation* and *public opinion* within my study, as my way of employing the terms likely differs from how people commonly understand them. I end the chapter with an overview of how the rest of my dissertation is organized.

The Problem

Higher education has a problematic relationship with its publics. This is a problem because colleges and universities depend upon their publics for their existence. Whether in the form of public support via tax dollars, government backed financial aid, tax breaks, federal research grants, the local, state, and federal policy environments in which they operate, or the very students that fill its classrooms; higher education is reliant on its publics. Even private institutions receive significant support from the public (Vedder, 2018). I am not stating anything new here. After all, Bernays (1928b) recognized this dependency nearly a century ago when he claimed, “Education is not securing its proper share of public interest” (p. 121) and urged educators to improve their relationship with their publics. Several decades later, then Assistant

Secretary for Research and Improvement and Counselor to the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education, Chester E. Finn Jr. made a similar plea to higher education leaders. He offered the following description of higher education and how it perceives its relationship to the public:

> The denizens of and spokesmen for higher education, however, appear to have convinced themselves that in virtue of the self-evident value that their enterprise holds for the entire society, the public has an obligation to keep the academy both solvent and sovereign. I have never actually heard the reasoning set forth as brazenly as this, but here is how it seems to proceed: practically everything that colleges and universities do is intrinsically worthwhile and inherently beneficial; the procedures by which these things are done, the norms to which they are held and the standards by which they are evaluated are matters that only members of the academy possess the competence and authority to determine; hence funds should flow in from a variety of governmental and private sources without regard to the quality or quantity of what flows out, and those supplying the resources should exercise very little control over what is done with them; ordinary notions of productivity and accountability simply do not apply to the creation and transmission of knowledge or to the activities of those who claim to be engaged in that creation and transmission. (Finn, 1984, p. 51)

Finn is not alone in his criticism of higher education's apparent self-righteousness. Smith (2010) arrived at a similar conclusion, as he makes clear in his following assessment:

> But when academics who are not administrators confront fiscal adversity, they generally blame it on administrators, legislators, and others who, they claim, have no understanding of the "true" value of higher education as embodied in the academic ideology. They tend to attack economic reasoning (even the most obvious kinds, such as "There isn't enough money to pay for ...") as a sellout. They generally do not, nor are they asked to, defend their position. They are simply ignored. Few of them, in my experience, are willing to take the trouble to go beyond the accusation stage. The implication is essentially that the position on their side is self-evident, and if the people on the other side can't see it, they aren't worth responding to. This is not a very effective strategy. (Smith, 2010, p. 35)

Smith (2010) argues, "A significant factor in the crisis of public higher education is the continuing tendency of university faculty to explain their functions in terms of the academic ideology" (p. 164). He believes it is an ideology that non-academics no longer find as convincing as they once did (Smith, 2010).

Even though they are critical of higher education's relationship with its publics, Finn and Smith are also firm believers in the tremendous value colleges and universities bring to society.

For example, Finn (1984) argued that his scathing critique of higher education was "not to detract from its glories or to diminish its accomplishments, much less to suggest that it should be put out of its misery" (p. 51). Instead, the purpose of his criticism was to urge higher education leadership to realize their institutions' place in society is not self-evident and that the public can and likely will turn on them. Regarding his opinion and call for action Finn (1988) lamented, "So long as the appellate court is held in the faculty club or around the conference table at One Dupont Circle, I will always be overruled" (p. 39). And yet, he warned "the ultimate tribunal is the court of public opinion" (Finn, 1988, p. 39).

Fast forward to recent years and we find *the ultimate tribunal* judging higher education unfavorably. For example, a recent poll found the public's confidence in the necessity of higher education to be waning (Schleifer & Silliman, 2016). Another poll found a majority of university and college presidents believing the last U.S. Presidential election "exposed a disconnect between academe and much of American society" and that "anti-intellectual sentiment is growing in the U.S." (Jaschik & Lederman, 2017, p. 7). College presidents are aware of decreasing public support, but most see public opinion as "being influenced by false, or exaggerated, impressions" (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018, p. 23). According to a *New America* survey on higher education, "Only one in four Americans agree that our higher education system is fine just the way it is" (Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo, 2017, p. 11). A poll by Third Way found that out of 1,389 likely 2020 voters, "only 58% think colleges are doing a 'good' or 'very good' job at providing students a return on their investment" (Hiler & Erickson, 2019). Meanwhile, a 2019 Gallup poll found "About half of U.S. adults (51%) now consider a college education to be 'very important,' down from 70% in 2013" (Marken, 2019). This sizable drop in Americans' view of higher education prompted president emeritus of Missouri State University Michael T.

Nietzel (2019) to argue that the results should "send shivers through higher education leaders who have been struggling with several negative stories about fairness, costs, and overall state of higher education during the past year." Indeed, just a few years earlier a group of higher education leaders from across the nation convened at the University of Michigan "driven by a deep concern that the academy is facing a crisis of relevance" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 1) due to its inability to effectively connect with its publics.

If you are not a fan of polls, perhaps looking to trends in public funding of higher education will serve as a more convincing barometer of public perception. According to Webber (2018), "There has been a gradual decline in public financial support of higher education over the past 30 years" (p. 56). Even more recently we find between the 2007/08 and 2017/18 academic years, thirty-nine states experienced an overall decrease in state and local funding per FTE (College Board, 2019). Wisconsin and Michigan, my former and current home states, saw a -20% and a -12% change in state and local support per student (College Board, 2019). Granted, decisions on state and federal funding are made by politicians. But those politicians are elected by citizens and are in government to serve as proxies for their respective constituents, at least in theory.

Unfavorable polls and declines in public funding are but two of a variety of indicators that point to a problem in higher education's relationship with its publics. We could of course look at other ones, such as college accountability efforts and threats to tenure, to name just a couple more. And, we have not even begun to address more localized indicators specific to a given college or university, such as widespread protests against a university's handling of horrific sexual abuse within its confines. One does not have to look hard to see higher education has a problem when it comes to its relationship with its publics. It is a problem that has

President of Yale University, Peter Salovey (2018) proclaiming, “Leaders in higher education, including myself, must work to regain the public’s trust.” He asserts, “This begins with empathy - listening to people’s concerns and trying to understand them.” My dissertation utilizes a novel approach to listening to people. By utilizing readily available online news comments within the digital public sphere, I sought to better understand public sentiment towards higher education.

Significance

My research is significant in that it investigates the topic of higher education in the public sphere. The public sphere is “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas, 2006, p. 73) in which all citizens can access. Whenever people join in unrestricted conversation on matters of general interest a part of the public sphere is realized (Habermas, 2006). Higher education has an important role to play within this communal domain. However, it is a role that some believe it has neglected. For example, Price (2002) claims, “the academy has seemingly relinquished so many opportunities to engage” with the public. And yet, he believes “scholars remain better positioned than almost any other class of leaders to bring informed guidance to social settings and issues.” He argues, “this is a moment deserving of a bold and imaginative engagement with the public.” Price is not alone in his beliefs. Smith, Nichols, Legg, and Lupia all find higher education guilty of neglecting its publics. For example, Smith (2003; 2010) links the deteriorating condition of the public sphere to declining public support for higher education, as well as many other problems facing colleges and universities. He urges universities to reclaim their critical role in fostering and sustaining robust public conversations. Meanwhile, Nichols (2017) sees higher education’s absence from the public sphere as a dereliction of one of its most essential responsibilities asserting, “many experts, and particularly those in the academy, have abandoned their duty to engage with the

public" (p. 5). In a similar vein, Legg (2018) accuses academics of embracing "institutional isolation extremely uncritically" (p. 55). She asserts, "we have created an environment where we never have to genuinely engage with the many ordinary people who, it would appear, have been developing genuine ('living') doubts on a number of the beliefs that we have been taking for granted (liberalism being one key example, the value of a University education being another)" (p. 55). Higher education's absence from the public sphere has Lupia deeply concerned. He warns that if colleges and universities "want to be relevant in the public sphere, we have to step up our game, because we lost the monopoly on communication" (as quoted in Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 38). Lupia went on to assert, "If we do not, we will be absent in public and political discourse, which could lead to greater restrictions in public support of universities to create, test, and disseminate knowledge" (p. 38). My study is significant because it investigates an overlooked digital incarnation of the public sphere—that is, online news comments—where publics are having conversations about higher education.

According to Smith (2010), "the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and their staffs, the *Atlantic* and *Harper's*, the *Nation* and the *National Review*, the Brookings Institution, the news and information programs of the Public Broadcasting System, Harvard University—all of these are clearly examples of central, prestigious elements of legitimate public discourse in the United States and thus fixtures of the core public sphere" (p. 12). My study focuses on the first two—*The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*—and the online conversations that occur within their online comment forums. Both forums remain largely unexplored systematically from the perspective of what can be learned about public sentiment pertaining to higher education. While there are reports of news organizations eliminating online commenting from their websites, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* see them as assets and have

made concerted efforts in recent years to enhance their online conversations (Etim, 2017, Story, 2019).

Adding to the significance of my study is my detailed investigation of the evolution of online commenting at *The New York Times*. Comments have what Reagle (2015) describes as a "tarnished reputation as something best avoided" (p. 2). In chapter 6 I show how the opposite is true of online commenting at *The Times*. As one of the most historic and prestigious news organizations in the world, *The Times* has made online commenting an integral component of its institutional strategy. Quite a few of its staff participate within the online conversations that accompany their articles. For example, in an article by Carl Zimmer, Knvul Sheikh, and Noah Weiland (2020) titled "A New Entry in the Race for a Coronavirus Vaccine: Hope", Zimmer took time to listen and reply to several commenters. Two-time Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nicholas Kristof and Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman are just two more examples of contributors at *The Times* who quite often participate in the online conversations accompanying their articles (Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Rather than something to be avoided, my exploration of commenting at *The Times* shows commenting as a form of dialogue to be valued, cultivated and learned from.

Even though commenting at *The Times* is an exemplar in the news world, and the *WSJ* has made similar strides to elevate its online conversations, online comments are far from being a mainstream form of communication. As Louise Story (2019), Chief News Strategist at the *WSJ* admits, "there are also lots of people who subscribe to the Journal and never, ever take a peek at our comments sections." Nonetheless, being a non-mainstream form of communication does not diminish the significance of investigating such forums. Instead, it may very well make them an even more important form of dialogue to study. For example, former President of the University

of Connecticut and public opinion scholar Susan Herbst (1996) argues in addition to mainstream communications (e.g., mass media), it is necessary for scholars interested in public expression to focus on communications that occur "on the margins of the public sphere as well" (p. 120). Her rationale as to the significance of communications on the margins is as follows:

> By focusing on the margin-on those who stand outside the conventional public sphere-we can begin to understand the biases of mainstream media and institutions. More important, though, we begin to get a sense of how innovative public expression can be when it is not forced into the narrow format of opinion polling or focus group testing. (Herbst, 1996, p. 122)

Herbst (1996) offered talk radio as a meaningful form of public expression at the margin of the public sphere, which academics long ignored. Among the arguments she deemed unpersuasive as to why scholars were not giving talk radio its due attention where that "talk is not action (that is, voting), that the discourse is inane, and that the people who call in are not representative of the population" (Herbst, 1996, p. 122). Contrary to fellow scholars who choose to ignore non-mainstream communications, Herbst (1996) believes such mechanisms for public expression "can create communication back channels" (p. 124), which "enable common citizens to voice opinions that might not ordinarily be heard" (p. 125). She admits the effects of such backchannels often do not work quickly, but in time can affect the highest aspects of society (see Herbst, 1996 for several examples). In 1996, Herbst predicted talk radio would eventually become part of mainstream as more people—in particular the popular press and elected officials—took notice, and that new back channels would emerge. She claimed over twenty years ago, "What those back channels will look like is unclear, but the Internet certainly provides multiple opportunities for behind-the-scenes public debate" (Herbst, 1996, p. 130-131). Today, online news comment forums are at the margins of the public sphere and offer one such possible

back channel the internet makes possible. My research is significant because it explores online comments as a place for *common citizens to voice opinions that might not ordinarily be heard*.

Communications scholar Joseph Reagle (2015) says he continues "to be intrigued by what is happening in the margins—the seemingly modest comment" (p. 1). He asserts, "There is little novelty in the form of comment itself, but its contemporary ubiquity makes it worthy of careful consideration, especially given online comment's tarnished reputation as something best avoided" (Reagle, 2015, p. 2). Online conversations are right at our fingertips, and yet this near ubiquitous form of online discourse has largely gone uninvestigated (Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Li, Mueen, Faloutsos, & Hang, 2016; McDermott, 2016; Reagle, 2015; Santana, 2011; Taylor, Al-Hiyari, Lee, Priebe, Guerrero, & Bales, 2016; Trice, 2011). Within the online world the common advice is don't read the comments (Chen, 2017; Dash, 2016; Reagle, 2015; Shahanan, 2018). Researchers and higher education leaders, for the most part, appear to have uncritically accepted this common mantra. This lack of attention is concerning. As I indicated in my problem statement, higher education has a problematic relationship with its publics. Colleges, universities, and scholars alike have a readily available means to listen to public discussions to gain a better understanding of their publics yet have not given online comments their due attention.

Making the lack of attention to online comments even more concerning is the virus like nature of digital communications. As Pinker (2008) asserts, "Language is not just a window into human nature but a fistula: an open wound through which our innards are exposed to an infectious world" (p. 426). He argues the internet "not only provides a gigantic corpus of real language used by real people, but also acts as a superefficient vector for the transmission of infectious ideas" (Pinker, 2008, p. 20). Bohm (2004) made a similar argument as he depicted

what he saw as a “disease in thought” (p. 58) occurring collectively, which accelerates along with technology. Consider conversations in the pre-internet age, perhaps around the watercooler, the local tavern, or at the dinner table. Those conversations were relatively isolated compared to their digital counterparts today. If by some slim chance you had a highly visible speaking platform or managed to get through the traditional news gatekeepers and were able to publish a letter to the editor you might be speaking to a larger group, but typically your audience was quite small. The sentiment expressed, while still held in the hearts and minds of those who conveyed it would for the most part be invisible to the rest of us. Through conversation it might influence or infect others’ thoughts and feelings about the topic, but would remain hidden to those not part of the conversation. At least until it reaches a precipice of such magnitude even the most oblivious observer notices. Today, however, we live in a digitally connected world where people can convey and spread facts, opinions, beliefs, ideas, lies, and emotions around the world in a split second. Amplifying the spread is the unprecedented ability for people to connect with others who think and feel the same way throughout the world. Whereas in the past the spread of sentiment was a rather slow and hidden process, today, thanks to the internet, it can spread like an infectious disease with potentially toxic effects on public discourse and decision making and the process is much more visible. Well over one hundred years ago acclaimed sociologist and psychologist Gabriel Tarde (Tarde & Clark, 2010) petitioned scholars to pay much closer attention to conversations. It seems only prudent for us to pay attention to conversations that come in the form of online news comments and are only a computer screen away. My study is significant because it pulls back the curtain on this often overlooked—if not ignored—form of communication to see what it can reveal regarding online conversations about higher education topics.

My research pulls back the curtain not only by exploring online news comments as a digital manifestation of the public sphere, but also by exploring the opinions and emotions people reveal within the online forums. As it turns out, the number one reason people post online news comments is to express an opinion or an emotion (Stroud, Van Duyn, Alizor, Alibhai, & Lang, 2017; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). And while opinion and emotion might seem like two separate and different things, my literature review shows they are interwoven to such a great extent that studying one without the other makes little sense. In fact, scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of emotions in opinion research (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015). The traditional view of emotion is one of it being in opposition to reason (Barrett, 2017; Cavanagh, 2016; Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 2008; Haidt, 2013; Isen, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Prinz, 2012; Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, & Mayer, 2008; Solomon, 2008; Westen, 2008). From a philosophical, political, neurological, and psychological perspective the traditional view of emotion being in opposition to reason is on shaky ground. A growing number of scholars and body of literature from multiple disciplines are beginning to recognize what Hume (1958) proclaimed long ago: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume, 1958, p. 313). Bernays appears to have been keenly aware of the integral relationship between emotions and opinions in his following assertion:

> Here the specialist in swaying public opinion avails himself of the, findings of introspective psychology. **He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity. Analysis is the first step in dealing with a problem that concerns the public** [emphasis added]. (Bernays, 1928a, p. 961)

If we are to proactively and effectively shape opinions about higher education, we not only need to know the opinions people have, we also need to have some sense of the emotions such opinions and conversations invoke. My research is significant because it takes into account the emotional tone of the online comments in which people are conversing and expressing opinions.

Research Questions

In my research I investigated online news comments to learn what they might tell us about the conversations people are having and what they think about higher education. In Chapter 4 I explain in detail the conceptual framework for my study. I base it off an extensive body of literature and as such have placed the chapter after my literature review. For now, I offer a preview of my framework so you can see how it connects to my research questions.

My conceptual framework for my study consisted of the following components: public sphere, public opinion, emotion, influence, and online comments. The logic behind my framework for my dissertation begins with the public sphere. The public sphere being "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 2006, p. 73). For my research I took the perspective that public opinion is something richer than common poll results. Instead, conversation within the public sphere is at the root of public opinion. Emotion is a part of my framework because emotion is an integral part of opinion. My following research questions address the first three parts of my framework:

- R1: (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?
- R2: (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?

- R3: (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments?

The influence component of my framework was not under investigation per se within my study. However, it gets at the importance of my research and implications for higher education, which I weave into my discussion in Chapter 8.

A Primer on Terminology

Conversation and public opinion are terms most people are familiar with. However, my use of them within my dissertation likely differs from how many people traditionally understand these words. In the following sections I briefly explain how I use each term within the context of my research, as well as why.

Conversation

Throughout my writing I refer to online comments as a "conversation." I realize my use of the word might seem misplaced given online comments tarnished reputation. However, I use the term for several reasons. First, media scholars, such as Alejandro (2010), Batsell (2015), Chen (2017), Chen and Pain (2016), Henrich and Holmes (2013), Ksiazek (2015, 2016), Loke (2013), Santana (2016), Shanahan (2018), Stroud, Van Duyn, Alizor, Alibhai, and Lang (2017), Stroud, Van Duyn, and Peacock (2016), and Wolfgang (2016, 2019), use the term conversation when referring to online comments. According to Shanahan (2018), "Information posted by audience members in comment forums can be considered the digital iteration of conversation" (p. 19). "The back and forth among commenters creates a conversation in which ideas are debated and negotiated" (p. 2), claim Henrich and Holmes (2013). It appears scholars who deem online comments to be conversation recognize what Giese did early on. That is, "by and large people engaged in computer-mediated communication tend to conceptualize their

communicative acts as conversation despite the fact that they employ written rather than verbal modes" (Giese, 1998).

Second, a number of news organizations view their online comments as "conversations". For example, in 2019 the *WSJ* "relabeled 'comments' as 'conversations' to help create an environment where everyone is welcome and encouraged to share their thoughts" (Story, 2019). That same year *The Times* thanked its commenters announcing, "This year has been a series of news tsunamis, and you, our readers, absorbed it all with gumption — offering millions of comments that told your own stories and helped elevate conversations around tricky subjects" (Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Two-time Pulitzer Prize winning journalist at *The Times* Nicholas Kristof said, "We've moved from lectures to conversations" (Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* announced, "Journalists in our newsroom will take part in the comments to listen, engage and help keep the conversation healthy and on topic" (Readers' Representative Journal, 2019). *The Denver Post* (2014) claims its "goal with article comments is to provide a space for civil, informative and constructive conversations." *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe* are two more examples of prominent news organizations viewing their online comments as conversation (Amenabar & Barber, 2017; Boston Globe Media Partners, 2020).

Perhaps the most important reason I refer to online comments as conversation is because this is how many commenters experience them. For example, when *The Times* announced the expansion of its online commenting Dr. John Burch of Mountain View, Ca exclaimed:

> Excellent. Beyond excellent! This is a wonderful advancement in the quest, globally, for the functionality of conversations that matter. Bravo! (Comment made in response to Etim, 2017)

Dr. Burch is not alone in his sentiment. Ma of NYC asserted, "I also experience the comment sections as conversations, and interesting and enlightening ones at that, for lots of reasons" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). For Jeezum H. Crowbar of Vermont, the participation of staff at *The Times* within the comment forums helps make them conversational. He asserts, "It's very interesting to see the columnists do read the comments, and that most of them take the experience as a kind of conversation, a step toward further thought on their topics" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). "Long live the 'conversations' via the comments section", proclaimed whs of ct (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Even people who simply read the comments, but do not comment themselves have indicated they feel part of a conversation (Barnes, 2015).

Some commenters experience online comments as they do in-person conversations. In the following excerpt from Bh's comment, they not only reveal that the online comments influence their thinking and voting, but they also liken them to a type of face-to-face conversation:

> …My passion for the environment (and middle class, healthcare, education, etc.) has necessitated my ongoing passion for politics and insistence on voting every election. The NYT and its brilliant commenters help refine my thinking, inform my votes, and battle my "State of the environment" depression through their compassion and humor.
>
> And often, I must confess, I skip to the comments to just bask in the global conversation, like I'm sitting at an interesting dinner party. Thank you, all. (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019)

In a similar vein, Marty of Pacific Northwest described the comments at *The Times* as "a dinner party with fine food & wine and a group of acquaintances who appreciate a lively and intelligent conversation" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). In comparison, he described the comments at *The Washington Post* as a "dive bar that some of us retire to afterward to speak a little more freely, drink a little more than we should, and laugh at decidedly non-PC

and probably more than a little juvenile humor" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019).

Seeing them as a place for conversation, commenters can be protective of their online forums. For example, Loyde Yates indicated the comment sections as his favorite part of the *WSJ* (comment made in response to A WSJ commenting experience, 2017). In 2017, when the journal announced changes to its online commenting he expressed concern the journal's changes would "reduce conversations between commenters" (comment made in response to A WSJ commenting experience, 2017). To help address Loyde's worries, weekend editor at the *WSJ* in London, Tom Olmstead replied to thank him for his feedback and asked, "Can you elaborate on why you believe the new software will 'reduce conversations between commenters?" (comment made in response to A WSJ commenting experience, 2017). He then invited Loyde to email him directly. In 2018, when *The Atlantic* decided to replace its comment sections with an online Letters section, Tom Carroll of Chicago, Illinois chimed in arguing "One cannot have the same sort of think-on-your feet, conversational interactions via a curated letters section that one can have in a comments section exchange" (The Conversation, 2018). More recently, when *Inside Higher Ed* announced the end to its reader comments 115thDream made the following impassioned plea:

> I, too, am disappointed. Yes we have a level-of-discourse problem, but I would rather have it on the table than to stop talking in public. And there is a lot of valuable conversation, information, and counterpoint that will be lost by shutting down the comments. (Not to mention that those of us who are academics--or those of us who think one way--need to hear our neighbors...ALL of them.)
>
> Hoping against hope that you will reconsider,
> Storm Bailey
> Luther College (comment made in response to Jaschik & Lederman, 2020)

A quick Google search and we find out that Storm Bailey of Luther College is a professor of philosophy. A quick read of his comment and we can see he is someone who values listening to and conversing with people from all walks of life.

Of course, there are scholars, news organizations, as well as commenters who do not refer to or consider online comments to be a conversation. However, regarding my research I do refer to them as such. I do so because of the reasons I just discussed. I also do so because I have spent a considerable amount of time over the past couple years immersed in online comments within a variety of news outlets. During that time, I have observed comments as conversation in the ways described within the literature, as well as by commenters. Also, from a more empirical perspective, my findings support my use of the term conversation. I share and discuss my findings in Chapters 7 and 8.

Public Opinion

As you will see in my literature review, as well as in my conceptual framework, I utilize scholarship on public opinion to inform my research. Public opinion is a term most people are familiar with. What many people might not know is that a universally agreed upon definition of public opinion is elusive (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Herbst, 2011b). And yet, opinion polls are likely the first thing that comes to mind when someone says "public opinion", as they have become synonymous with the term (Ginsberg, 1986; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Goidel, 2011; Herbst, 1993, 2011a). However, polls are not the only form of public opinion, nor are they necessarily the best means to gain a sense of it. For example, while acknowledging polls can have value, Hauser (1999) warns us, "Taken at face value they can be deceiving; weighed alone they offer a limited and sometimes superficial understanding of publics and what they believe" (p. 4). In a

similar vein, Ginsberg (1986) argues "polling can create a misleading picture of the agenda of public concerns, for what appears significant to the agencies sponsoring polls may be quite different from the concerns of the general public" (p. 81). I explore in more detail criticisms and shortcomings of opinion polls within my literature review.

There are other ways to investigating public opinion than via surveys and polling we are accustomed to. For example, Habermas (1996), whose work on the public sphere is frequently cited, claims public opinion is "not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons", and therefore "must not be confused with survey results" (p. 362). His work regarding the public sphere—"a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 2006, p. 73)—is widely cited in the literature. Whenever people join in unrestricted conversation on matters of general interest a part of the public sphere is realized (Habermas, 2006). Similar to Habermas, Herbst (2011b) asserts, "textured talk, dialogue, exchange, and conversation—not numbers—are the content of public opinion" (p. 95). As you will see from my literature review, Habermas and Herbst, as well as Hauser and Ginsberg, are not alone in their criticism of polls, nor are they alone in their belief that conversation is foundational to public opinion. Rather than utilizing poll or survey results, in my research I investigate public opinion by diving into the conversation taking place within the online comments.

Another aspect of public opinion in the way I utilize it that might differ from other peoples' understanding pertains to its scope. When people see poll results on the latest presidential approval rating or current election races, they likely presume them to have the scope of measuring the nation's pulse on the matter. Such an assumption by people is, of course, debatable, and I explore some of the shortcomings of polls within my literature review. For now,

what is important is the recognition that the scope of public opinion investigation does not need to be wide sweeping, as perhaps the opinion polls we are accustomed to appear to be. Such an expansive view of the public can be problematic, leading to messaging problems and tensions with one's intended audience(s) by privileging the interests of one group above all others (Ginneken, 2003). Hauser (1999) reminds us, "Rather than searching for '*the* public,' we should expect a developed society to be populated by a montage of *publics*" (p. 35). He went on to assert, "And rather than anticipating publics as already existing, we should seek them through actual discursive engagements on the issues raised in civil society as *emergences of society's active members*" (Hauser, 1999, p. 35).

Instead of searching for the monolithic public, we can focus our public opinion investigations on a smaller scale. It really depends on the "public" one is interested in learning more about. For example, Childs (1940) claimed, "There is no such thing as *the* public except in the sense that there may be a particular group of persons about which we are speaking" (p. 41-42). He went on to assert, "A public is simply any collection of individuals" (Childs, 1940, p. 41). A public can be with or without organization (Bernays, 1947; Childs, 1940). Childs (1940), as well as Bernays (1947), recognized the readers of newspapers and news magazines as types of publics worthy of attention regarding public opinion. Today, the online news comment forum represents a type of public worth our attention. This new organized public taking form in online news comment forums is still just one small part of a much larger overall public. And yet, the study of it is still a form of public opinion research. As Childs (1940) asserted, "If we are studying the opinions of the individual members of a forum audience it is quite as definitely a study of public opinion as if we were studying the opinions of the voters of the United States" (p. 44).

One final aspect of public opinion important to this primer on terminology pertains to the inclusion of emotion. In his seminal book *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann (1960) recognized emotions as being integral to opinions having claimed, "On many subjects of great public importance, and in varying degree among different people for more personal matters, the threads of memory and emotion are in a snarl" (p. 405). He believed the process "by which general opinions are brought to cooperation consists of an intensification of feeling and a degradation of significance" (Lippmann, 1993, p. 37-38). Likewise, Bernays (1928a) argued the following:

> Here the specialist in swaying public opinion avails himself of the, findings of introspective psychology. He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity. (Bernays, 1928a, p. 961)

Even with Bernays and Lippmann's astute observations, researchers have largely ignored emotions' relationship to opinion (Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Ginneken, 2003). Choosing rather to focus on the role of cognition with the belief that people's ability to reason is not only separate from, but is also more powerful than emotion (Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Ginneken, 2003).

Today, we find from a philosophical, political, neurological, and psychological perspective the traditional view of emotion being in opposition to reason is on shaky ground. A growing number of scholars are recognizing what Hume boldly proclaimed long ago. That is, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume, 1958, p. 313). I explore this body of literature within my review, but for now I offer a couple examples. Drawing from cutting-edge neuroscience research, Barrett (2017) asserts "you might believe that you are a rational creature, weighing the pros and cons before deciding how to act, but the structure of your cortex makes this an implausible fiction" (p. 79-80). Meanwhile, Marcus (2002) claims "people are able to be

rational because they are emotional; emotions enable rationality" (p. 7). It comes as no surprise then to find the study of emotion as a critical component of opinion gaining traction.

According to Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015), the study of emotion "is increasingly playing an important role in public opinion research" (p. 133). According to them, "Public opinion polls that ask people's opinions on various issues, without tapping their feelings, may fundamentally misrepresent their views" (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015, p. 132). It is worth restating Bernays's keen point about the specialist in swaying public opinion: "He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity" (1928a, p. 961). If we want to be able to effectively understand and shape opinion, understanding the basic emotions of one's audience is critical. As such, within my research I include a high-level assessment of the emotional tone of the comment forums I investigated.

Organization of My Dissertation

I have organized the remainder of my dissertation into seven chapters. In Chapter 2 I discuss in detail my research perspective. I present my research perspective as an independent chapter because I not only explain social construction as a perspective, but I also convey in detail how the perspective is uniquely suited for my research, such as its relation to the news, opinions, as well as emotions.

In Chapter 3 I present my literature review. I have organized it into the following subsections that correspond to my conceptual framework: A New Public Sphere?, Public Opinion, Emotion, Influence, and Online Comments. Within my online comments subsection, I place my review findings into further subsections that reflect the prior components of my framework. Fair warning, my review is extensive, spanning multiple disciplines. I believe it is

important to provide a thorough foundation of the constructs on which I base my framework. This foundation includes sharing historical underpinnings, interconnected elements, as well as ongoing debates pertaining to each component. A thorough foundation is of particular importance for the public opinion and emotion components of my framework because I challenge commonly held assumptions and dominant ideologies. I also use my literature review as an opportunity to call attention to much larger but connected issues that reach further than my research sample and empirical results. I do so to mitigate oversimplifying what I believe to be very complex and challenging problems.

In Chapter 4 I present my conceptual framework. I already provided a preview of it when I shared my research questions. I based my framework off an extensive body of literature. As such, I placed the chapter after my review to give my readers the substantial background that went into developing it.

In Chapter 5 I present my methods. In the chapter I provide an overview of my case selection, as well as my rationale for my multi-methods approach. I then present in detail my methods for each of my three research questions followed by limitations to my study.

In Chapter 6 I provide a detailed exploration of the evolution of online commenting at *The New York Times*. This chapter does not have a higher education focus per se. However, it serves as a detailed case of a historic and prestigious news organization's use of online commenting. Online comments have a tarnished reputation. This chapter serves to help rehabilitate that reputation and show online comments as something *The New York Times* values and learns from. If one of the world's most authoritative news organizations sees the value in this digital incarnation of conversation, perhaps it should give us all reason to second guess the mantra that is *do not read the comments*.

In Chapter 7 I present my findings from my three cases where I investigated the online news comments from popular press articles. I organized the chapter by the following higher topics: Technological Transformation, International Students, and Free College. Within each topic I provide an overview of the respective articles followed by my findings organized by research question.

I conclude my dissertation with Chapter 8. I organized my final chapter into the following sections: Discussion, Suggestions for Future Research, and Conclusion. Within the discussion section I go examine my findings and the implications for higher education. The line of inquiry I explored within my study is ripe for further analysis. As such, I offer suggestions for future research. I conclude by recapping my study as well as its importance.

CHAPTER 2: MY RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

For my research I utilized a social construction perspective. According to Gergen (2015), the concept of social construction proposes that "what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (p. 3). In other words, given we all have differing social relationships, what we take to be the *truth* will also differ, individually and within and across groups. For example, different religions profess different *truths*, and even within a given religion there can be differences in what its members perceive as *true*. People have committed some of the most noble, as well as the most horrific acts based on socially constructed realities manifested in religions. Governments have been formed, policies created, children raised, based on these varying realities. Perhaps one particular religion, faith, or non-faith is correct and all the others incorrect. Or, perhaps they are all different representations of the same thing. Perhaps you believe with absolute conviction that there is only one reality, and you might be right. But, if you are correct in your view of reality in the most absolute and universal sense, then does that not mean a whole lot of people are making decisions and taking actions based on fantasies?

While my dissertation is not about religion, religion to me is an easy way to demonstrate social construction, albeit a bit taboo. Trying to settle what is true and not true is also not the purpose of my research study. In this study I investigated the public opinions and emotions conveyed via online news readers' comments, to which social construction is a useful perspective. Public opinion scholar and former professor of politics at Princeton University Harwood L. Childs appeared to have recognized the power of social construction as it pertains to opinions when he made the following assertion:

> We live in a world of conflicting ideologies and philosophical systems. All of them start with certain assumptions, certain premises incapable of absolute proof. The only certainty

> is that every listing of human values takes us back ultimately to a premise, an assumption, a mere opinion. (Childs, 1940, p. 80)

There is no mistaking of Krippendorff's recognition of the power of social construction in public opinion. In his appropriately titled article "The Social Construction of Public Opinion", Krippendorff (2005) dissects the public opinion polling process to argue how even it is socially constructed. Public opinion scholars Eveland and Glynn (2008) contend how people perceive reality "has been, and likely will continue to be, a central component of the study of public opinion" (p. 161). As such, I approached my research from the position that people's sentiments do not form in isolation, but result from social relationships, and are not absolute facts even if people experience them as so.

People routinely perceive their opinions, from the most informed to the most ludicrous, as absolute truths and passionately defend them. World renowned theoretical physicist and philosopher David Bohm, who spent much of his career contemplating and offering profound insights on the construction of reality, described our tendency to unknowingly process our opinions as absolute truths as follows:

> Opinions thus tend to be experienced as "truths," even though they may only be your own assumptions and your own background. You got them from your teacher, your family, or by reading, or in yet some other way. Then for one reason or another you are identified with them, and you defend them. (Bohm, 2004, p. 10)

Bohm described our assumptions as reflexes and claimed we are largely unaware we have them. However, he observed when these reflexes are challenged "suddenly a person may jump up with an emotional charge" (Bohm, 1994, p. 249) to defend them.

We are emotional beings. We see emotionally charged defenses time after time, such as in political debates. If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably each think of numerous times when we have taken such passionate defenses ourselves. There is strong reason to believe

that none of us see things for how they really are. For instance, in her book *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, distinguished psychologist and neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) describes how one's brain wires itself to the environment and culture it finds itself within. She asserts, "Through prediction and correction, your brain continually creates and revises your mental model of the world" (Barrett, 2017, p. 62). Barrett (2017) claims that "in a sense, your brain is wired for delusion" (p. 65) and offers the following colorful description of how one perceives the world:

> Your own perceptions are not like a photograph of the world. They are not even a painting of photographic quality, like a Vermeer. They are more like a Van Gogh or Monet. (Or on a very bad day, perhaps a Jackson Pollock.) (Barrett, 2017, p. 283)

Perhaps those of us with higher levels of education might assume we see the world more clearly than others, but as my review of the literature will show this is not necessarily the case. Everyone is far less rational then traditionally assumed, and we see the world, as Barrett (2017) puts it, "through affect-colored glasses" (p. 80).

Barrett (2017) claims "social reality is not just about words—it gets under your skin" (p. 39). As evidence she points to research suggesting one's body metabolizes the same baked good differently depending on how one perceives it (e.g., a cupcake as opposed to a healthy muffin) (Barrett, 2017). As additional evidence Barrett (2017) discusses how "some of your synapses literally come into existence because other people talked to you or treated you in a certain way" (p. 34). While fascinating to think about, the power of social construction to change our bodily processes and cellular structure is far beyond the use of social construction as a research perspective within my study. And yet within the context of my work, it is important to at least keep in mind the potential of our words, such as inflammatory online comments, to physically affect other people.

Social construction has no shortage of critics. I think where it runs into problems is when one takes it too far. One can in effect use it to rationalize oneself out of rationalizing if taken to the extreme view of everything is relative. As Hacking (1999) states, "most constructionism is not universal" (p. 24). Social construction theorists Berger and Luckman (1991) contend "society exists as both objective and subjective reality, any adequate theoretical understanding of it must comprehend both these aspects" (p. 149). For example, Barrett (2017), a firm believer in social construction, recognizes "construction cannot make a solid wall unsolid (unless you have mutant superpowers), but you can redraw countries, redefine marriage, and decide who's worthwhile and who isn't" (p. 154). Gergen (2015) warns us that "constructionist ideas are not candidates for 'the new truth'" (p. 28). Instead, he describes the usefulness of constructionism as follows:

> Constructionism is not a set of beliefs or dogma to which one must be committed. Rather, constructionist ideas are more like tools for action. One may pick them up and use them at will. (Gergen, 2015, p. 225)

In the case of my current research, I used social construction as a tool to investigate and develop some understanding of people's constructed public opinions. I say "some understanding" to denote the limitation of my own understanding of another's socially constructed reality.

My subjective reality of a particular object or an idea may seem ludicrous to some, perhaps even most. This does not mean it is an inferior or a false reality. At the same time, it does not mean our socially constructed realities are of equal merit, and this is where things get tricky. For example, when it comes to constructed ideas, Hacking contends "they may be woolly, suggestive, profound, stupid, useful, clear, or distinct" (p. 22). His description contradicts the overgeneralization of social construction as being of the perspective that everyone's ideas or beliefs are of equal footing. Determining the usefulness of a given

subjective reality as opposed to alternative realities is complicated because we all belong to varying groups and subgroups, which at face value may seem to preordain a group's constructed reality as superior. However, being part of a group may in a way blind one to important observations that might otherwise alter one's constructed reality. As Le Bon (1969) cynically observed "from the moment that they form part of a crowd the learned man and the ignoramus are equally incapable of observation" (p. 24). According to Le Bon "as soon as a few individuals are gathered together they constitute a crowd" (p. 25), and the individuals' ability to be critical vanishes.

Le Bon's view on groups in the absolute sense in which he conveys it is rather too pessimistic for me. However, it does warrant consideration as to how one's belonging to a group might limit his or her view of reality. For example, I love when Gergen (2015) proclaims "I am limited by the fact that I have lived the better part of my life as a scholar" (p. vi). His statement conveys a level of humility I believe is important to have within a profession, another type of group. As Shirky (2008) contends, "a profession becomes, for its members, a way of understanding their world" (p. 58). A profession's understanding of the world can be disadvantageous (Shirky, 2008) because it, like the world understandings of others' professions, is limited. A profession is a social experience, and it contributes to one's socially constructed understanding of the way things are or should be. As Dewey (1927) asserted, "The sailor, miner, fisherman, and farmer think, but their thoughts fall within the framework of accustomed occupations and relationships" (p. 160). And yet, when one is immersed in a given tradition, constructions have the tendency to be seen as universal (Gergen, 2015). Gergen (2015) warns that "when we take our realities and values as essential and undeniable, we often trample on others' values and ways of life" (p. 28-29). Stated differently, Bohm (1994) contends people

have varying basic assumptions about "what is really necessary, what is really true, the way people ought to be, what our real purpose ought to be, and all that" (p. 249), which we are largely unaware of.

Social construction is a particular useful perspective for analyzing the news—of which online comments have become an integral part—because the news media plays a significant role in crafting how people come to view the world (Döveling, von Scheve, & Konijn, 2010; Herman & Chomsky, 2003; Lippmann, 1961; McCombs, 2014; Patterson, 2013). The world is a big place and each of us has relatively little firsthand experience of all it entails. Much of what we know of the world beyond our immediate grasp is as McCombs (2014) describes, "a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists' reports about these events and situations" (p. 1). Lippmann (1961) referred to all which one has no intimate experience with, which in the grand scheme is almost everything, as the *unseen environment*. Regarding trying to understand the unseen environment, Lippmann (1961) claimed the universal assumption is that the press "will present us with a true picture of all the outer world in which we are interested" (p. 320). Two components of his claim point to a socially constructed reality.

The first component is when Lippmann uses the words "true picture". These words may imply objectivity, but contrary to this implication Lippmann (1961) reminds us that "in respect to most of the big topics of news, the facts are not simple, and not at all obvious, but subject to choice and opinion, it is natural that everyone should wish to make his own choice of facts for the newspapers to print" (p. 345). In this sense, journalists exert influence on the pictures within the minds of their audience by the way they frame the issues (Nelson, 2011; Pinker, 2008; Roessler, 2008). Gergen offers the powerful example of a reporter covering the war in Afghanistan as a demonstration of the subjectivity in presenting a *true picture*. He points out

how the reporter could describe bodies lying on the road as "'five casualties', or as 'promising young men whose bodies have been ripped apart by an explosion'" (Gergen, 2015, p. 12). Both are accurate descriptions, but the value implications are far from equivalent (Gergen, 2015). They are also likely to create very different *true pictures* in the minds of the reporter's audience.

The emotions the contrasting descriptions trigger within a person are also likely very different, which in turn influences one's constructed reality of the event. Emotions play an important role in what we believe to be real. Near the end of the nineteenth century the Father of American Psychology William James (1950b) recognized the importance of emotions in the construction of reality. He stated, "speaking generally, the more a conceived object *excites* us, the more reality it has" (James, 1950b, p. 307). McCombs illustrates the news' propensity to influence the construction of reality in the way James describes by using the example of increased news coverage of crime. He claims a contributing factor to the increased public concern over crime during the 1990s, while crime rates were actually declining, was likely the increased coverage of crime in the media (McCombs, 2014), thereby exciting the public. In my literature review I explore in more detail the role of emotions in how a person thinks, conceives reality, as well as their role in influencing the actions one takes.

A universal *true picture* is elusive because we come at things from varying perspectives. Huxley (1960) reminds us "as for the meaning of the facts, that of course depends upon the particular system of ideas, in terms of which you choose to interpret them" (p. 277). Let us consider the hypothetical example of a report documenting cost savings resulting from a university utilizing more adjunct and fixed term faculty as opposed to tenured faculty. Some may enthusiastically interpret the report as a much needed and successful approach to combatting the rising costs of higher education. Others might fearfully view it as the

deprofessionalization of faculty and a direct assault on the quality of education. Neither meaning found within the report are necessarily false, but instead are shaded by *the particular system of ideas* one is a part of.

The second component of what Lippmann (1961) claims to be the universal assumption that the press "will present us with a true picture of all the outer world in which we are interested" (p. 320) with social construction implications is the use of the words "in which we are interested". Who makes up the "we" is an important consideration. Commonsense tells us it is very unlikely that "we", in the grandest sense of the word, are interested in all the same things. So then, whose interests is the news considering when it presents us with a *true picture of all the outer world*? According to Herman and Chomsky (2003), "the national media typically target and serve elite opinion", while presenting "a tolerably realistic portrayal of the world" (p. 303). They claim, "the media's interpretation of the world reflect the interests and concerns of the sellers, the buyers, and the governmental and private institutions" (p. 303) controlled by elites. Meanwhile, Hauser (1999) claims the media's portrayal of the public "is an abstract representation whose needs, thoughts, and responses are extrapolated from survey data" (p. 5). He asserts, "Although we supposedly are included in this picture, we seldom experience it as 'us' and usually narrate it as 'them'" (p. 5).

Herman, Chomsky, and Hauser are not alone in their claims. Hebdige (2006) argues "it should be obvious that access to the means by which ideas are disseminated in our society (i.e., principally the mass media) is not the same for all classes", and that those less favorably positioned "have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world" (p. 150). Patterson (2013) claims "journalists' sense of their audience is wrong side up" (p.121). He explains by saying "what's happening at the top as it affects the fortunes of those at the top is

not what interests most people" (p. 121). In other words, the media's interpretation of the world might very well be different if they primarily focused on the interests of a different group, for example the poor. A press that focuses on the interest of the elites projects an image of the world that is different from how most people experience it (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Access to the means of disseminating ideas has drastically changed with the widespread use of the internet, which I further explore in my literature review.

Regardless of level of access, we all contribute to the construction of realities. Even the absence in the participation of a social mechanism, such as the news or online commenting, is a contribution because it may result in a presumed and perhaps undesirable reality going unchallenged. What I find appealing about social construction is that it posits a collective responsibility for one another and in the construction of realities. Returning to the example of how our actions "shape other people's concepts and behaviors, creating the environment that turns genes on and off to wire their brains, including the brains of the next generation", Barrett (2017) makes the following assertion: "Social reality implies that we are all partly responsible for one another's behavior, not in a fluffy, let's-all-blame-society sort of way, but a very real brain-wiring way" (p. 155). Consider Bohm's following proposition regarding thought:

> A key assumption that we have to question is that our thought is our own individual thought. Now, to some extent it is. We have some independence. But we must look at it more carefully. It's more subtle than to say it's individual or it's not individual. We have to see what thought really is, without presuppositions. What is really going on when we're thinking? I'm trying to say that most of our thought in its general form is not individual. It originates in the whole culture and it pervades us. We pick it up as children from parents, from friends, from school, from newspapers, from books, and so on. We make a small change in it; we select certain parts of it which we like, and we may reject other parts. But still, it all comes from that pool. (Bohm, 2004, p. 59)

Accepting Bohm's proposition has several fascinating implications for my research. For example, online commentary gives us unprecedented access to the collective pool of thought and

constructions of reality, which as Bohm puts it, *pervades us*. Think about it. We now have unsolicited thoughts on numerous topics from people around the world recorded online for virtually anyone to read indefinitely. We can see what people are thinking and feeling as it happens organically, as opposed to in a formalized research setting. We can peer into the constructed realities people come from, as well as see how they might be changing or solidifying. It may turn out that some of the *truths* people hold dear may seem crazy to you and I and can be easily proved false. In which cases we can look for emotionally compelling ways to alter perspectives. Or, perhaps we will become more aware of the limitations of our own perspectives.

From a higher education standpoint, peering into the socially constructed realities of others may provide useful insight into how to improve the public's confidence in our colleges and universities. Almost a century ago, Bernays recognized the value in investigating and evaluating social realities in various realms, including higher education. From a higher education standpoint, Bernays (1928) argued if the public has a negative mental picture of a university one of two problems might exist. The public's view might be wrong, in which case the institution should pursue means to alter the public's perception. Or, the public's mental picture might be correct, in which the institution itself should seek to change.

Before moving on to my literature review, there is one more excerpt from Bohm's work I think is important to consider. It comes in the form of a warning:

> The real crisis is not in these events which are confronting us, like wars and crime and drugs and economic chaos and pollution; it's really in the thought which is making it – all the time. Each person can do something about that thought, because he's in it. But one of the troubles we get into is to say, "It's they who are thinking all that, and I am thinking right." I say that's a mistake. I say thought pervades us. It's similar to a virus – somehow this is a disease of thought, of knowledge, of information, spreading all over the world. The more computers, radio, and television we have, the faster it spreads. So the kind of thought that's going on all around us begins to take over in every one of us, without our

> even noticing it. It's spreading like a virus and each one of us is nourishing that virus. (Bohm, 2004, p. 58)

He describes thought as pervading us and spreading like a virus. It spreads faster and faster with the advent of new communication technologies. Bohm died in 1992, well before the internet—the most prolific communication technology the world has ever known—became widely used. I admit I am pessimistic about the future, both from a higher education standpoint, as well as on a much broader and global scale. Thought, as something which pervades us appears to be breaking down in many respects. Childs (1940) appeared to have noticed this breakdown as it relates to public opinion eighty years ago. He claimed, "One of the most disturbing aspects of the whole subject of public opinion is the growing intensity of conflicts of opinion, the deepening cleavages between groups, the absence of generally accepted premises and goals" (Childs, 1940, p. 39). The socially constructed realities within society today appear to be so divergent there is little room for commonality. As Patterson (2013) contends, "It is nearly impossible to have sensible public deliberation when large numbers of people are out of touch with reality" (p. 4). I believe the internet is contributing to this breakdown in alarming, yet often overlooked ways. Some of what I discuss within my writing may seem grandiose, given for the time being my focus is not on what most people would likely consider potentially catastrophic breakdowns in thought. However, I believe it is crucial to draw attention to larger issues as they relate to this type of research and their implications on a broader scale. Also, I believe it is important to consider that catastrophic breakdowns in thought might be the result of the cumulative effect of the tiniest and seemingly harmless faults in perception. And finally, I cannot stress this enough, my use of social construction as a research perspective is not to say that everything is relative. But, it is to stress that there is power, whether constructive or destructive, in the socially constructed realities held within the hearts and minds of the public.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

I have divided my literature review into the following five sections: 1) A New Public Sphere?, 2) Public Opinion, 3) Emotion, 4) Influence, and 5) Online News and Comments. Each subsequent section builds upon the prior section(s). There are overlapping themes, such as the opinion, emotion, news, and comments, which appear in each section. I explore such themes in more depth within the respective sections named for each theme.

In the first section titled "A New Public Sphere?" I review literature pertaining to the concept of a public sphere—a place where Habermas argues public opinion is formed–as well as to the debate on whether or not the Internet is a new realization of the ideal. Given the news' crucial role in the public sphere I briefly explore it as well, along with its evolving gatekeeping function in the digital world.

In the second section titled "Public Opinion" I review literature pertaining to the concept of public opinion, a product of the public sphere. I also review the literature on public opinion polling and its shortcomings as well as the call for a more conversation-based formation of public opinion. By exploring the work of such notable scholars as Lippmann and Le Bon, I also discuss the makeup and the emotional power inherent in people's and group's opinions.

In the third section titled "Emotion" I review literature pertaining to the historical view of emotion as separate and in opposition to reason, as well as on the shift in thinking to a more interrelated view of the two. I make the argument that it is likely more effective to focus on emotions rather than reason when enacting difficult change and explore the conceptual and scientific evidence to support it.

In the fourth section titled "Influence" I review literature on how for good or bad people can manipulate the feelings of others to influence their behavior. I offer contemporary examples

of the use of online mechanisms to manipulate segments of the population. I also rely heavily on the work of Edward Bernays who gave considerable thought as to the need for education to improve its standing with the general public.

In the last section titled "Online News Comments" I review literature on online news consumption and on online news comments. I place the findings within subsections that mirror the prior four main sections. As like with the prior four main sections, there is also overlapping themes within the "Online News Comments" subsections. I utilize the literature to make the case that online news comment spaces are an important form of discourse, which higher education leaders should not ignore.

Herbst (1993) contends, "The reason why classical writing on public opinion was so interesting was that theorists seemed to know no disciplinary boundaries" (p. 143). She went on to assert, "In Fact, from the standpoint of late 20th-century social science, these writings seem wild and undisciplined" (p.143). Having spent considerable time immersed in the literature, I understand her point. As such, my extensive literature review spans multiple disciplines, including communication, journalism, political science, psychology, and education.

At times I use my literature review as a vehicle to call attention to items outside the scope of my current research, but which are closely related and call attention to much larger issues. I hope my readers will afford me this latitude. As Malin (2014) contends in his historical assessment of media technologies and emotion, "narratives of technological advancement tend to oversimplify what should be some very complex questions" (p. 245). My calling attention to larger, but related issues is my way of trying to avoid oversimplifying what is part of what I believe to be some very complex questions.

You will no doubt notice from time to time I express my own opinions, as well as my own emotions within my literature review, as well as throughout my writing in general. It seems only fitting, given my research is investigating opinions and emotions that I share some of mine. I realize this defies scholarly conventions. I suggest readers consider the use of my own opinions and emotions as a sort of interwoven reflexivity, which from time to time reminds them of my own subjectivity.

A New Public Sphere?

Researchers of the internet and online discourse often invoke the work of Jürgen Habermas and his concept of the public sphere (see Chen, 2017; Dahlberg, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007, 2013; Debatin, 2008; Durham & Kellner, 2006; Harlow, 2015; Jackson & Valentine, 2014; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; McDermott, 2016; Papacharissi, 2002; Shanahan, 2018; Trice, 2011). Habermas (2006) defines the public sphere as follows:

> By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. (p. 73)

The public sphere is not an institution or an organization, but instead as Habermas (1996) asserts "is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons" (p. 360). Habermas goes onto say "The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions" (p. 360). By detecting and intensifying the pressure on problems, the public sphere serves as "a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society" (p. 359).

Whenever people join in unrestricted conversation on matters of general interest a part of the public sphere is realized (Habermas, 2006). In this sense, there is not a size requirement for

the public sphere to begin to be realized, other than it must include more than just an individual. The people convening in this type of conversation constitute what Habermas (2006) refers to as a public body. Within a public body people are able to "confer in an unrestricted fashion" (Habermas, 2006, p. 73). As a public body grows larger it becomes necessary to have a form of media to communicate ideas and to influence others (Habermas, 2006). Without such media, Shepard (1909) argues, "conversation can only busy itself with the gossip of the village; where it is concerned with the affairs of the nation it is so diffuse that it requires itself organs to become definitely articulate" (p. 46). Traditionally these forms of media have included newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, the contents of which people discussed within social sites such as pubs and cafes (Durham & Kellner, 2006; Habermas, 2006). Habermas (1991) describes the press as "the public sphere's preeminent institution" (p. 181). Likewise, Tarde (Tarde & Clark, 2010) proclaimed, "The press unifies and invigorates conversations, makes them uniform in space and diversified in time" (p. 312). As such, the organizations and people in control of the media of the public sphere are in a position of great influence.

Within the U.S. we often consider the news to be a pillar of democracy serving benevolent purposes. However, in his historical assessment, Schudson questions the taken for granted view of the news in a democracy. He argues that "newspapers have not always been about, nor are they necessarily today about, providing the information to make democracy work in the communities they most directly serve" (Schudson, 2011, p. 64). In his following assertion Schudson attributes the often assumed view of the press to the egos of journalists:

> The relationship of news or journalism to democracy, then, is more complicated and far more attenuated in practice than in normative theory. Even in theory, it is journalism theory and not political theory that attributes great weight to journalism, and the self-love of journalists in this celebration is obvious. (Schudson, 2011, p. 64)

While he is critical of the inflated role people typically attribute to the news in democracy, Schudson recognizes the *crucial role* news has in democratic society, albeit a more nuanced one than often assumed.

According to McCombs (2014), the news media, with its selection of topics it decides to cover, is the beginning of public opinion formation. Thereby, the news holds significant influence over public opinion, as well as the public agenda. He claims, "This is not a deliberate, premeditated influence – as in the expression 'to have an agenda' – but rather an inadvertent influence resulting from the necessity of the news media to select and highlight a few topics in their reports about the most salient news of the moment" (McCombs, 2014, p. 2). McComb's claim that such influence is not deliberate or premeditated is questionable. After all, part of a news organization's agenda is to generate enough revenues to remain in existence (Lippmann, 1960). Therefore, it is plausible they have a deliberate motivation to cover stories that do not put off advertisers and which attract consumers. Bücher made such a critique of the news' conscious agenda over a hundred years ago.

In his chapter aptly titled *The Evolution of Journalism*, Bücher traces the historical origins and metamorphosis of the discipline to the time of the publication of his most acclaimed work, the book *Industrial Evolution*. Bücher (1901) claimed in most countries during the nineteenth century "The newspaper, from being a mere vehicle for the publication of news, became an instrument for supporting and shaping public opinion and a weapon of party politics" (Bücher, 1901, p. 240). He went on to assert, "For the newspaper publisher, however, it signified that from a mere seller of news he had become a dealer in public opinion as well" (Bücher, 1901, p. 240). Whereas McCombs has a rather innocent take on the agenda of the media, Bücher had a much more cynical one.

Within the capitalistic newspaper enterprise readers have little influence (Bücher, 1901). According to Bücher, “In this market, however, as generally in wholesale markets, the consumers of the goods, the newspaper readers, take no direct part; the determining factors are the wholesale dealers and the speculators in news: the governments, the telegraph bureaux dependent upon their Special correspondents, the political parties, artistic and scientific cliques, men on ‘change, and last but not least, the advertising agencies and large individual advertisers” (p. 242). Well over a hundred years ago he contemplated the future of news and said, “It would indeed be difficult for us to believe that the newspaper in its present development is destined to constitute the highest and final medium for the supplying of news” (p. 243). One can only imagine what Bücher might think about the Internet and today’s rapidly changing news landscape.

The internet, with its ability to connect people across the world at digital speed, is a potentially limitless public sphere. Many see it as a means to liberate the mass media from the control of only a powerful few. Papacharissi (2002) contends internet enthusiasts “promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the way for a democratic utopia” (p.10). Technologies, such as the internet, have eliminated barriers to participation in discourse allowing people across geographical, political, and other spectrums to find and engage one another in dialogue (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Papacharissi, 2002). With widespread access, and by allowing for anonymity, the internet has the potential to level the playing field among the so-called elite and the average citizenry (Jackson & Valentine, 2014; Reagle, 2015). The instantaneous nature of online text-based communications allows people from around the world to communicate with such minimal delays between participants it is comparable to face-to-face communication (Giese, 1998). Giese (1998) asserts “by and large people engaged in

computer-mediated communication tend to conceptualize their communicative acts as conversation despite the fact that they employ written rather than verbal modes."

Not everyone shares in Giese's likening of online text to that of face-to-face communication. For example, Turkle (2015) makes the following criticism of online communications:

> Face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. We attend to tone and nuance. When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of our online connections, we want immediate answers. In order to get them, we ask simpler questions; we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters. (p. 35)

While Turkle believes face-to-face communication unfolds slowly as compared to online communications, Bohman (2004) contends online communication may unfold more slowly than we anticipate. He believes the traditional requirement of a public sphere manifesting in face-to-face communication needs to be relaxed in today's technological mediated world. He challenges the assumption that "dialogue must be modelled on one-to-one communication", and asserts "the other's response can be understood in a quite expansive spatial and temporal sense, in that someone in the indefinite future could give a response, without the speaker even conceivably having intended to address that hearer" (Bohman, 2004, p. 133 - 144).

North recognizes the expansive spatial and temporal nature of online conversations as it applies to online discussion boards. Regarding any given user's post to the online forum she asserts, "From a narrow perspective this message is the start of a new text, but from a broader perspective it is part of an ongoing text comprising all the discussions on this board; it picks up and continues earlier discussions in what might be regarded as a 'long conversation', where particular themes and preoccupations are repeatedly returned to across different conversations (Maybin 2006: 29)" (North, 2007, p. 545). As you can see from the quote, she refers to the idea

of a "long conversation" developed by Janet Maybin. In her book *Children's Voices: Talk, Knowledge, and Identity,* Maybin (2008) defines "long conversation" as follows:

> While, as I shall discuss latter in the book, knowledge appears more fixed and non-negotiable within the authoritative discourse of textbooks and worksheets, the knowledge negotiated between children was often dialogically open. They returned again and again in their talk to particular questions and themes. It is as if the exploration of a particular theme in a particular account, or through a particular interaction, functions at a metalevel as a turn in what might be called a 'long conversation', which is carried on between children in different places and at different times, about the various ways of knowing which are involved in moving from childhood into adolescence in their particular cultural setting. (Maybin, 2008, p. 29)

Granted, Maybin developed the idea of a long conversation from the perspective of her research with children. However, we can see its application into conversations through adulthood. The countless conversations each of us has in our lifetimes are not walled off entities. Instead, we can view them as being *dialogically open* as we return again and again to *particular questions and themes* in life.

It is exciting, as well as frightening to consider the impact our unprecedented access to conversations captured indefinitely online might have on people's thinking and other aspects of society. To illustrate a scary possibility of the expansive spatial and temporal sense of internet dialogues, Samuels (2016)—whose work focuses on the dark and incendiary side of online conversations—shares the following concern:

> I began to get very irritated about what I was reading and concerned about the effect that it would have on African-Americans as a whole. I even wondered how long these types of comments would remain in Internet archives, on the off chance that some African-American elementary student researching a book report in the distant future might stumble upon the vile words. I imagined how any child would feel reading hateful words about any black person that they admired, including President Barack Obama. The child or adult might shrug it off and go back to playing video games or chatting with their friends on Facebook or Meebo, but it could affect them for much longer than anyone ever imagined. (Samuels, 2016, p xxi-xxii)

Sharing in Samuels concerns, Harlow (2015) points out how "once a racist comment might have been limited to a one-on-one conversation or a town hall meeting" (p. 26), but today with the help of the internet it has the potential to spread indefinitely. And while Samuels and Harlow are expressing concern over the negative effects online conversations might have on people now and into the indefinite future, the same concern can easily pertain to organizations, such as universities. Negative press and negative public commentary about an organization captured online could have unforeseeable consequence well into the future.

The expansive spatial and temporal sense in which a dialogue may exist, described by Bohman, is not a new phenomenon. It existed and continues to exist in print books, newspapers, and other traditional forms of media. Malin (2014) invokes the thoughts of Socrates in his historic depiction of the spatial and temporal potential of written communications in his following claim:

> In its transformation of time and space, Socrates suggested, the written word was simultaneously living and dead. **It detached the emotions of language from the body of the speaker and represented them in the disembodied form of the text. Like a drug, the written word stimulated emotion without a clear source, lending it an apparently evocative eerie power** [emphasis added]. (Malin, 2014, p. 7)

Malin's use of Socrates's work is itself an example of how one's words and emotions can continue on indefinitely. However, prior to the advent of the internet only a relatively small number of people had access to such forms of media to disseminate their ideas in a way that visibly spans time and space. Before the internet, the standard view of the relationship between media and its audience was one directional: information flowing from media to the audience (Shapiro & Jacobs, 2011a). The exponential growth in people digitally connecting with one another has challenged and in some cases dismantled the traditional gatekeeping function traditional institutions, such as the press, have served for centuries.

In traditional media of the public sphere, such as print newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as television and radio, there is a formal gatekeeper in the form of the editor, the company providing the media, or some other mechanism. However, in the online world many of these gatekeepers are nonexistent or serve a very different role (Alejandro, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Lee & Jang, 2010; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Nielsen, 2014; Nip, 2006; Shanahan, 2018; Spyridou & Veglis, 2008). For example, in traditional print media, as well as in some forms of online media, one can write a letter to the editor, but in the end the media—or powerful interests exerting control over the it—is the gatekeeper and decides which letters are worthy of publishing (Herman & Chomsky, 2006; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Nielsen, 2014; Nip, 2006; Santana, 2011). Habermas (1991) has been critical of the so-called public sphere facilitated by mass media having stated "the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (p. 171). At the time of his assertion the mass media he was referring to were radio, film, and television. However, today in an online world virtually anyone can post their opinion or ideas to a worldwide audience in various forms, such as online comments, with little to no formal editing or gatekeeping (Lee & Jang, 2010; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Nielsen, 2014; Santana, 2011; Shanahan, 2018; Shirky, 2008). The dismantling of many of the traditional gatekeepers prompted Shirky (2008) to optimistically proclaim "To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others" (p. 171).

While Shirky's proclamation has merit, it is too optimistic for my taste. While anyone with an internet connection has the potential to "publish" writing online there is no guarantee anyone besides the author will ever really look at it and "connect" with the writer or his or her writing. Regardless of the level of connecting actually happening online, people's exponential increase in their ability to contribute to the conversation has altered one of the traditional flows

of information within the public sphere. Rather than a one-way flow of information from media to the audience, we now have what Shapiro and Jacobs (2011a) call *informational interdependence* in the form of dynamic communicative relationships between media and the public. Instead of news conveyed from professional organizations to a passive audience, news is increasingly co-produced with common citizens (Alejandro, 2010; Batsell, 2015; Just, 2011; Shanahan, 2018; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2011a). As Just (2011) proclaims, through internet mechanisms, such as online commenting and social networking, "the audience has invaded the newsroom and is shaping the very definition of news" (p. 106).

Opening the floodgates to mass communication to anyone and everyone with an internet connection fuels the "utopian rhetoric that surrounds new media technologies", which Papacharissi (2002) says "promises further democratization of post-industrial society" (p. 9). For example, Shirky (2008)—while flaunting the unprecedented ability for people to organize, mobilize, and take collective action via the internet—proclaims "It isn't that our communication tools are cheaper; they are also better" (p. 77). He goes on to claim, "Our social tools are dramatically improving our ability to share, cooperate, and act together" (p. 304). However, not everyone views the internet and the so-called new public sphere with such optimism. Political scientist Jodie Dean, a fierce critic of the internet as a public sphere, exclaims that not only is the internet not a public sphere, "it is damaging to practices of democracy under contemporary technoculture" (Dean, 2003, p. 95). She makes the following dismal observation of the saturated anti-discourse of the internet:

> Today, the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond. Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions

> dominance or stickiness. Instead of engaged debates, instead of contestations employing common terms, points of reference or demarcated frontiers, we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies. (Dean, 2005, p. 53)

Dean offers what I find to be an all too often missing critical perspective of the internet. Rather than being enamored by the promises and hype of the online world, she considers the profound damage it might be causing. Teng, while not referring to the internet as a public sphere per se, echoes Dean's concerns in her following critique:

> We are not machines; feeding our quest for knowledge and defining our existences online delivers a synthetic fulfillment that is fleeting and unsustainable. Seeking such satisfaction via the Internet is like trying to quench thirst by sipping water from a fire hose. By drinking from the Internet's fire hose, we not only end up still thirsty, but we may get seriously hurt in the process. Because this onslaught of information disallows us from taking the time to truly consider any of it; we open ourselves to believing dangerous and unchecked falsehoods. (Teng, 2018, p. 227 - 228)

Shirky and Dean and Teng, at least regarding the effects the internet is having on society and discourse, are on opposite ends of the spectrum. With Shirky perhaps too optimistic, and Dean and Teng perhaps overly pessimistic.

So, is the internet a new public sphere or not? The purpose of this section of my literature review was not to settle this ongoing debate. Dahlberg (1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007, 2013) has focused much of his work on contemplating the potential for public sphere ideals to manifest on the internet, as well as to barriers preventing or slowing their manifestation. He has not arrived at a decisive answer, but recognizes the importance of continued investigation to determine the types and quality of conversations occurring online. In all likelihood the answer to the question is "it depends." There are likely constructive robust dialogues occurring online that epitomize a public sphere, as well as destructive anti-dialogues taking place. Making a broad and accurate statement as to whether or not the internet tends to materialize as a public sphere is likely premature, and perhaps impossible given the relative

newness, rapidly evolving nature, and sheer size of the internet. While sweeping claims are attention grabbing, Shapiro and Jacobs (2011a) warn against making such claims about the internet as being emancipatory or corruptive.

Regardless of the nature of dialogues taking place, the most important thing to do is to listen and try to understand. As Kahn and Kellner (2006) insist "those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the alternative public spheres and intervene accordingly" (p. 720). Recognizing the wide range in the kinds and quality of dialogues taking place on the internet, Herbst (2011) describes the value and importance of paying attention to online conversations as follows:

> In fact, the Internet—from truly ignorant chatter to incisive analysis—fills a gap we did not quite know existed. There has long been space for editorializing in newspapers and sparring of Sunday morning television pundits, but who knew that Americans would support such an expansive, varied, and intense mechanism for the expression of public opinion? To compare the talk of the political Internet to the eighteenth-century salons is the best we can do in looking for a historical correlate to what we see now. Like the Internet talk, the political talk of salons could be brilliant, uneven, wild, and ridiculous all at once. But the conversation of the salons reflected and shaped the culture of France and much of Western Europe and ignited the revolutions that would change our world forever. We do not take the salons lightly now; they are invaluable to historians. And we should treat the Internet in precisely the same way. (Herbst, 2011, p. 95)

Herbst recognizes the diversity in quality of dialogues taking place online and the unprecedented access we have into the expression of opinion by so many people. Public opinion, as Herbst claims, has reflected, shaped, and ignited societal revolutions. It is the concept of public opinion I explore in the next section.

Public Opinion

Father of Public Relations, Edward Bernays stated the necessity of public opinion as follows:

> Industries, public utilities, ***educational movements*** [emphasis added], indeed all groups representing any concept or product, whether they are majority or minority ideas, succeed

> only because of approving public opinion. ***Public opinion is the unacknowledged partner in all broad efforts*** [emphasis added]. (Bernays, 1928b, p. 38)

If we accept Bernays's assertion then it means we could have the most sound and robust research and data available on an idea, proposal, policy, or some other item, but it will mean little to nothing if we are unable to get public opinion behind it. While the power of public opinion might not be as cut and dry as Bernays asserted, it is hard to deny its value. Whether on a macro (eg. state or country) or micro scale (eg. college department or unit), we can likely all think of numerous examples where opinion was a catalyst for or barrier to change.

So, what is *public opinion*? Bernays (1928a) claimed "Public opinion, narrowly defined, is the thought of a society at a given time toward a given object; broadly conceived, it is the power of the group to sway the larger public attitude" (p. 958). However, Bernays's definition is not universally accepted. As it turns out, a universally agreed upon definition of public opinion is elusive (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Herbst, 2011b). Herbst (2011b) believes the term *public opinion* belongs at the top of any list of "nebulous concepts" (p. 85). She asserts "the meaning of public opinion is both enormously complex and endlessly in transition" (p. 85). One might point to common day opinion polls as they have become synonymous with public opinion (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Goidel, 2011; Herbst, 1993, 2011a). However, viewing polls as a representation of public opinion is problematic in a number of ways.

One of the ways in which it is problematic lies in the contradiction in how polls are conducted and the word public. According to Habermas (1996) public opinion is "not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons", and therefore "must not be confused with survey results" (p. 362). If we consider the following first

entry definitions of the word *public*, as both an adjective and a noun, from the Oxford English Dictionary, Habermas's assertion seems obvious:

> Adjective: In general, and in most of the senses, the opposite of private
>
> Noun: In a public place; before spectators or onlookers; publicly, openly, without concealment

While the results of an opinion poll might be public, the actual giving of individual opinions is done in private.

Herbst (2011b) makes similar points about polls while offering the following assessment of early concerns of the polling industry as it came about in the 1930s:

> The polling industry was seen as promising but worrisome, throwing a wrench into the way Americans thought about politics. After all, conversation, meetings, and assembly were—as Tocqueville so deftly documented—the heart and soul of American political opinion expression. Where, in the course of opinion polling, was the conversation and debate? If a person is to interview me in confidence about my views, adding them to the anonymous opinions of others and publicizing these for the world to see, where's the dialogue? (Herbst, 2011b, p. 90)

While acknowledging the weak academic debate over opinion polling, Herbst (2011b) quotes one of its critics, Lindsay Rogers, as having observed that "instead of feeling the pulse of democracy, Dr. Gallup listens to its baby talk" (as cited in Herbst, 2011b, p. 90).

Some scholars view opinion polls or baby talk polls if you prefer, as having a corrosive effect on society. Bernays (1945) believed polls create a false sense of a permanent public opinion, one that "helps to maintain the status quo" (p. 267). He went on to argue, "Certainly in a fast moving world this is a dead weight" (Bernays, 1945, p. 267). Meanwhile, Postman (2006) believed opinion polls are not really a reflection of opinions, but of emotions. He was critical of the proliferation of so-called opinion polls presented in the media. Postman viewed them as contributing to the misleading, superficial, and often irrelevant information promulgated by the mass media. More recently in his analysis of how the news constructs and utilizes polls Bennett

(2011) concluded that opinion polls are "more often an element of news drama than a democratic accountability mechanism" (p. 256). He based his conclusion on the following three related issues: decisions on topics to poll on are driven by "implicit journalistic perceptions of power and agendas of political institutions" instead of "independent assessments of public interest" (p. 256), the tendency for poll questions to be "worded to fit the most dramatic and simple news narratives" (p. 256), and the ignoring of poll complications (e.g., issues with sampling) by the media. Postman and Bennett's concerns are echoed by Dunaway (2011) who claims, "the result is a 'perfect storm' of growing public and media reliance on an increasing array of public opinion polls, many of which may use questionable methods and provide misinformation" (p. 71).

Consider the controversial topic that is the Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA), otherwise known as Obamacare. Some people are outright opposed to Obamacare, but support ACA (Enten, 2013; Hamblin, 2013). You might ask, but how can a person be simultaneously opposed and in support of the same piece of legislation? Hamblin (2013) points to ignorance, while Enten (2013) partially attributes it to the powerful emotions associated with the term Obamacare. Postman would likely have attributed it to both ignorance and emotions, as he believed news is increasingly "packaged as entertainment" (p. 107). He was fearful of a society that takes ignorance to be knowledge, a state he believed we are steadily approaching.

In any opinion poll, whether on healthcare, foreign policy, or education reform, one might wonder if the questions pollsters ask represent what is most important to respondents on the given topic. Regarding education, Billingham and Kimelberg (2016) realized the educational priorities of elites might not reflect the priorities of the public. In their research they analyzed forty-five years of PDK/Gallup Poll surveys, "an annual survey of Americans' attitudes

regarding educational issues" (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2016, p. 532). Billingham and Kimelberg (2016) compared trends in "predetermined forced choice survey questions" to trends in responses to the following open ended question: "What do you think are the biggest problems that the public schools of your community must deal with?" (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2016, p. 542). The open-ended question appeared in the PDK/Gallup surveys every year. They "found notable divergences between the issues that matter most to those in charge of collecting the data—the survey designers, as well as the politicians, lobbyists, activists, and educators who advise them—and the issues that matter most to the general public" (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2016, p. 542). Bernays (1945) once said, "Today the poll has muffled dissenting voices" (p. 266). Perhaps today, based on Billingham and Kimelberg's work, we can say polls muffle what matters most to the general public.

Yet another reason equating an opinion poll with public opinion is problematic is a question of technique and its appropriateness for what one is actually trying to measure. For example, while contemplating social scientists' uncritical embracement of polling, Herbst (2011b) offers the following consideration: "but I do wonder whether the impatience to just get out there and 'do something,' regarding opinion measurement, masked a discomfort with the public itself" (p. 90). She questions if our reliance on the expedient measurements opinion polls provide are "in the best interests of a diverse democratic nation" (Herbst, 2011b, p. 91). Herbst relies heavily on Blumer's original critique of opinion polls in making her case for a richer analysis of public opinion. Blumer's (1948) bold critique questioned whether public opinion scholars might be trying to perfect their technique (i.e., polling in the form of aggregations) at the expense of considering whether their technique was even appropriate for what they were trying to measure. He expressed embarrassment to have to convey what he thought should be

common sense to scholars, namely that society "is not a mere aggregation of disparate individuals" (Blumer, 1948, p. 544). Blumer's critique was largely dismissed by the scholarly community (Herbst, 2011b), his argument even being described as having "misfired" (Newcomb, 1948, p. 549). But it is his argument, according to Herbst, that is timelier than ever as she makes the following assertion:

> Surprisingly, not long after Blumer had been pronounced dead, the arrival of the Internet—the most important change in our communication environment since the introduction of television—leads us directly back to Blumer. I would argue that Blumer is more right than ever before: public opinion is most productively defined as a phenomenon in motion, replete with power dynamics, social stratification, and, ***most of all, conversation*** [emphasis added]. If Blumer were alive today, he would view our blogs, Web pages, and constant chatter as extraordinarily helpful in understanding public opinion. In fact, it is precisely the sort of textured discourse that is so superior to the aggregation of anonymous individuals gathered in our artificial "publics" produced by polls. (Herbst, 2011b, p. 92)

Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015) assert "to focus on survey results alone is to miss most of the story" (p. 4). Even Goidel, public opinion scholar and co-editor of the *Survey Practice* journal published by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, questions the appropriateness of polling in today's environment. He argues that "in a digital age, aggregating privately held individual opinions may be insufficient to the task of capturing an increasingly dynamic and interactive public" (Goidel, 2011, p. 12). Such a dynamic and interactive online public has some researchers turning to new and relatively overlooked data sources, such as online comments (see Cho & Hong, 2009; Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Lee, 2012; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Matthews, 2015; McDermott, 2016; Santana, 2011), as a means to gauge public opinion.

Instead of or in addition to opinion polls one might point to a vote as representative of public opinion on a given matter. However, this is problematic as well. For example, Lippmann (1993) questioned whether or not an election is an expression of the popular will. He recognized

that opinion is much more complex than a check on a ballot, as he made clear in his following assertion:

> Presumably we have a number of thoughts on this and that with many buts and ifs and ors. Surely the cross on a piece of paper does not express them. It would take us hours to express our thoughts, and calling a vote the expression of our mind is an empty fiction. (Lippmann, 1993, p. 46)

When you consider in many cases votes occur in private and only the results are public, an election has some of the same shortcomings opinion polls have when considered to be a representation of public opinion.

So, if public opinion is not opinion poll results or election results, then what is it? Habermas (1996) believes public opinion to be much richer than survey results, something derived via dialogue within the public sphere. Within the public sphere, Habermas argues, various points of view are openly communicated and "the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions" (p. 360). The process of public opinion formation is social in nature (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Habermas, 1996; Herbst, 2011b). Unlike in an opinion poll, within the public sphere there is opportunity for dialogue among all participants with varying viewpoints as they are forming their opinions. In an opinion poll the result is open, but the communication is private. In the public sphere both the communications and results are open. If you want to disagree with and engage in a conversation with a specific person within the public sphere you can do so. There is an opportunity to find out more about why a person is of a particular opinion on a given topic and in turn try to influence it. Whereas in an opinion poll we know little about the people whose opinions were tallied beyond some basic demographic information.

In her historical assessment of the evolution of public opinion, Herbst (2011b) claims in eighteenth-century Europe "wherever one found public opinion, it was somehow tied to talk—not to counting people, ideas, or election returns (there were no general elections)" (p. 87). She claims, "even with the emergence of the newspaper, public opinion was a conversational concept" (p. 87). Herbst insists "that textured talk, dialogue, exchange, and conversation—not numbers—are the content of public opinion" (p. 95). In addition to Habermas's and Blumer's work, Herbst (1993), as does Krippendorff (2005), points us to the work of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who lived from 1843 to 1904, to help us understand public opinion as conversation. Long ago Tarde (Tarde & Clark, 2010) announced, "But now it is advisable to study in greater depth an unexplored domain, that factor of opinion that we have already recognized as the most continuous and the most universal, its invisible source, flowing everywhere and at all time in unequal waves: conversation" (p. 307). Public opinion is social in nature and the primary means it is formed is via discourse (Tarde & Clark, 2010). For Tarde, conversation is foundational to public opinion. He was not alone. Shepard (1909) proclaimed, "The simplest primary organ of public opinion is conversation" (p. 45). For Shepard, the benefits of public opinion as conversation were obvious. He stated the advantages as follows: "No special equipment is required; no pecuniary expense is involved; it is not necessary to interest or assemble large numbers of people, and yet all classes and conditions of men can with equal advantage participate in this mode of public-opinion-making" (Shepard, 1909, p. 46). For Shepard, Tarde, Blumer, and Herbst, public opinion begins with conversation.

While the debate as to whether the internet is a public sphere or not is unsettled, it does present us with unprecedented access to conversations people are having. Arriving at an authoritative definition of public opinion is outside the scope of my dissertation. I tend to agree

with the criticisms of polls just discussed and the potential damage they might be causing to discourse and our society. For the purpose of this research, I took the position that public opinion is something much richer and nuanced than opinion polls and is the result of social processes. In other words, public opinion is socially constructed. As discussed earlier, social construction proposes that "what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (Gergen, 2015, p. 3). In other words, given we all have differing social relationships, what we take to be the *truth* will also differ, individually and within and across groups. We can substitute the word *opinion* for *truth*. This is because if *truth* can vary depending on social relationships it is more a belief or an opinion than absolute fact. I realize this proposition likely makes some of my readers uncomfortable, given the unfortunate era of so-called fake news and alternative facts society currently finds itself within. Substituting the word opinion for truth is not a ploy to make everything relative. Quite the opposite. Some opinions, let's call them the *most informed opinions*, are vastly superior to other held sentiment. Nevertheless, opinions that may seem ludicrous, even delusional to most people are not viewed that way by the people who hold such beliefs. Opinions, whether sound or crazy, are potentially powerful and can shape society for better or for worse.

Walter Lippmann's work on public opinion offers valuable insight into both the power of opinions and their makeup. In his seminal book aptly named *Public Opinion*, Lippmann critiqued in detail the irrationality he believed drives most individual and collective behavior resulting in breakdowns in society. The irrationality he describes largely stems from how we come to perceive the world and our individual and collective realities. Lippmann (1960) claimed "The world is vast, the situations that concern us are intricate, the messages are few, the biggest part of opinion must be constructed in the imagination" (Lippmann, 1960, p. 68). Much of what

we imagine of the world and its affairs stems from what other people and institutions (e.g., the news) report to us (Lippmann, 1960, McCombs, 2014), which Lippmann described as a "pseudo-environment" (p. 15), and more recently McCombs described as a "second-hand reality" (p. 1).

One part of Lippmann's claim in need of revising pertains to there being few messages. In 1940, Princeton University Professor of Politics and public opinion guru Harold L. Childs claimed, "Nationwide hook ups, feature pictures displayed at the same time throughout the country and over the world, newspapers and magazines with circulations in the millions can produce opinion revolutions as different from the slow evolutionary changes of the past as TNT is different from gunpowder" (Childs, 1940, p. 9). Childs died in 1972. Today, with the advent of 24-hour news channels, the internet, social networking sites, and the plethora of other technological means of sharing at digital speed results in the number of messages being plentiful, if not overwhelming. Given its low barrier to entry, the internet "acts as an amplifier for *any* sort of message" (Debatin, 2008, p. 67). In today's environment we can extend Childs's analogy and say the proliferation and continual onslaught of digital communications can produce opinion revolutions as different from the slow evolutionary changes of the past as a nuclear bomb is different from TNT. Or as Alejandro (2010) puts it, "In the social media sphere, news is word of mouth on steroids" (p. 12). The world is still vast and the situations we face are often, perhaps more than we admit intricate, as Lippmann once asserted. But our opinions largely constructed in imagination can seem even more like absolute truth as we are more easily able to find others who share in our social reality (Goidel, Kirzinger, & Xenos, 2011).

Absolutes are problematic, but commonly assumed. I think people like absolutes because they take comfort in certainty. Taking shelter behind an absolute provides one with a sort of

protection, although imagined, against being wrong. Lippmann perhaps stated it best when he made the following assertion:

> Generally it all culminates in the fabrication of a system of all evil, and of another which is the system of all good. Then our love of the absolute shows itself. For we do not like qualifying adverbs. They clutter up sentences, and interfere with irresistible feeling. We prefer most to more, least to less, we dislike the words rather, perhaps, if, or, but, toward, not quite, almost, temporarily, partly. Yet nearly every opinion about public affairs needs to be deflated by some word of this sort. But in our free moments everything tends to behave absolutely,—one hundred percent, everywhere, forever. (Lippmann, 1960, p. 156)

And yet, we are all guilty, some more than others, in making absolute statements or conclusions when what we have to say warrant qualification. For example, consider the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential election. How many pundits and so-called experts on TV said something to the effect of "there is NO chance Trump will win"? How many common day citizens said the same? These are of course, rhetorical questions. The point is absolutes are problematic because they exclude possibility and flexibility.

Le Bon found the opinions held by crowds to be particularly pernicious and unwavering. He believed crowds to be incapable of reason (Le Bon, 1969). Regardless of the focus of the crowd's attention, Le Bon defined the convictions held by it as religious sentiment (Le Bon, 1969). According to Le Bon (1969), "This sentiment has very simple characteristics, such as worship of a being supposed superior, fear of the power with which the being is credited, blind submission to its commands, inability to discuss its dogmas, the desire to spread them, and a tendency to consider as enemies all by whom they are not accepted" (p. 43). I think such religious sentiment exists within many higher education debates. For example, from my vantage point it appears people often believe universities should be ran like businesses or that universities are not businesses and any argument to the contrary fundamentally misses what higher education

is about. As if there are not a great number of things both perspectives could learn from one another and utilize to their mutual benefit.

Let us for a moment consider the general public as a crowd. Lippmann (1993) believed the public only become interested in an event when it has "been melodramatized as a conflict" (p. 55). In other words, once the public perceives an event as an emotionally charged conflict. One such example of an emotionally charged conflict is the current state of higher education. I realize the words "current state" is vague, but for the purpose of this illustration it will suffice. Higher education insiders might think the public is not well informed enough to have a say in how colleges and universities should or should not change. After all, higher education is a very complex enterprise facing challenges stemming from multiple sources of various current and historical natures. Based on Lippmann's following assertion, I think it is safe to say he would agree with the insiders:

> We must assume that the members of a public will not anticipate a problem much before its crisis has become obvious, nor stay with the problem long after its crisis is past. They will not know the antecedent events, will not have seen the issue as it developed, will not have thought out or willed a program, and will not be able to predict the consequences of acting on that program. (Lippmann, 1993, p. 54)

However, simply because the public is not well informed on the melodramatized conflict—which according to Lippmann is essentially always the case—does not mean they will not exert great influence. For Lippmann (1993) proclaimed "The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece" (p. 55). There is of course, no guarantee the public will correctly identify the hero and villain. An important thing to remember is a person's status as an insider or outsider varies from situation to situation, so one moves in and out of what is considered a public (Childs, 1940; Lippmann, 1993). In other words, in the case of a higher

education insider, he is an insider to higher education conflicts, but an outsider to other realms where he is not an intimate part of. According to Lippmann, in those other realms he is a part of the public and is subject to the same tendencies as just described.

The concept of the crowd as it pertains to public opinion is of particular importance in regards to my current research. In Le Bon's time the crowds he was referring to were physical ones. In order to form a crowd people needed to have means to be within close proximity to one another. Today with the internet people can form virtual crowds regardless of distance, and with people from all across the world. And while some view the idea of virtual crowds with unbridled optimism, as discussed in the prior section, others fear it will lead to the creation of echo-chambers where people only connect to people with similar opinions thereby reinforcing their beliefs (Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Papacharissi, 2002; Turkle, 2015). The evidence of such balkanization of the public via the internet is as of yet inconclusive (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). However, it is not too difficult to imagine how online spheres could cause such a problem. For example, prior to the internet one's ability to find and connect with people of similar opinion on a particular topic was quite limited. Now if one has an internet connection he or she can simply go online and search for and connect with potentially millions of other people with the same opinion. In addition to the exponential increase in ability to connect with likeminded people, the internet also provides anonymity, which may result in people expressing opinions—civil or uncivil—they might not otherwise be comfortable sharing (Harlow, 2015; Insler, 2016; Ksiazek, 2015; Reagle, 2015; Samuels, 2016; Sax, 2011; Shanahan, 2016; Warzel, 2012).

Besides the crowd pathology and its effect on opinion, another important pathology worth important attention pertains to the opinions of the well-educated. In the news we hear so-called expert opinions, often from professors at prestigious universities or leading professionals

within a given industry. The assumption is they have focused much of their life and work on a particular topic, and therefore they know more about it and have more informed opinions. But even so-called expert opinions can be problematic. For example, Lippmann (1960) argued that "sometimes a little expertness on a small topic may simply exaggerate our normal human habit of trying to squeeze into our stereotypes all that can be squeezed, and of casting into outer darkness that which does not fit" (Lippmann, 1960, p. 116). Renowned theoretical physicist David Bohm was aware of this tendency within scientists. He believed too often in science people view their conclusions as "necessary and inevitable", which in turn leads to "very little disposition to look for evidence to the contrary" (Bohm, 2002, p. 19). Bohm argued "even when such evidence does arise, as in modern physics, the general tendency is to minimize its significance or even to ignore it altogether" (p. 19). "Skeptical of science's presumption of objectivity and definitiveness" (p. xviii), acclaimed neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994) makes a similar claim asserting, " I have a difficult time seeing scientific results, especially in neurobiology, as anything but provisional approximations, to be enjoyed for a while and discarded as soon as better accounts become available" (p. xviii). This tendency to presume objectivity and definitiveness does not just apply to physicists and neuroscientists. Political science and public opinion scholars Shapiro and Jacobs (2011b) contend the more educated, informed, and engaged people are the more likely they are to dismiss evidence which contradicts their deeply held beliefs and are "particularly susceptible to emotional reasoning and to reaching views that are not consistently wise or 'correct'" (p. 726).

I think Lippmann, Bohm, Damasio, and Shapiro and Jacobs' assertions about the opinions of experts warrant special consideration within academia. After all, higher education is composed of so-called experts. I say so-called not to be derogatory—there certainly are

legitimate experts within colleges and universities—but to denote that not everyone with an advanced degree is an expert even if he or she considers him or herself one. Professors and higher education leaders should be careful not to dismiss the general public's opinions of colleges and universities as naïve or ill-informed. Perhaps the opinions others express simply do not fit within our own stereotypes as to what higher education should be about or how it should be ran. Perhaps one's own presumed expertness precludes him from seeing the value in what others have to say. Regardless, there is power in opinions, in both democratic and tyrannical environments (Key, 1961).

Thankfully, Lippmann offers a solution to never miss what we can learn from opinions, which should resonate with higher education members. Lippmann proclaimed, "in truly effective thinking the prime necessity is to liquidate judgments, regain an innocent eye, disentangle feelings, be curious and ***open-hearted*** [emphasis added]" (Lippmann, 1960, p. 56). I think it is important to note he used the term *open-hearted* instead of *open-minded*. Lippmann (1960) believed "On many subjects of great public importance, and in varying degree among different people for more personal matters, the threads of memory and emotion are in a snarl" (p. 405). And while Lippmann astutely observed the power of emotions, researchers have largely ignored their relationship to opinion (Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Ginneken, 2003). Instead, scholars have focused on the role of cognition with the belief that people's ability to reason is not only separate from, but is also more powerful than emotion (Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Ginneken, 2003). In the next section I explore why this belief is problematic and why it is important for us all to pay more attention to emotions.

Emotion

The number one reason people post online comments on news stories is to express an emotion or an opinion (Stroud, Van Duyn, Alizor, Alibhai, & Lang, 2017; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say "to express an emotional opinion", rather than creating the illusion of a dichotomy between emotion and opinion, given how interrelated the two are. Public opinion scholars Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015) claim the study of emotion "is increasingly playing an important role in public opinion research" (p. 133). They even go as far as to argue that "Public opinion polls that ask people's opinions on various issues, without tapping their feelings, may fundamentally misrepresent their views" (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015, p. 132). Emotions are integral to opinions, just as emotions are integral to virtually every aspect of our lives. Director of the Oxford Centre for Emotions and Affective Neuroscience (OCEAN), Elaine Fox makes this point clear in the following opening to her book titled *Emotion Science*:

> Emotions are at the heart of what it means to be human. Indeed, emotions are at the heart of what it means to be alive. (Fox, 2008, p. XV)

I agree with Fox and I would like to think most people would agree with her as well. However, traditionally, both philosophically and scientifically, emotion has not received the attention it deserves.

The traditional view is one of emotion being in opposition to reason (Barrett, 2017; Cavanagh, 2016; Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 2008; Haidt, 2013; Isen, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Prinz, 2012; Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, & Mayer, 2008; Solomon, 2008; Westen, 2008). Over 250 years ago David Hume asserted, "Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform

themselves to its dictates" (Hume, 1958, p. 311). In direct defiance to the common preference to reason Hume boldly proclaimed, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume, 1958, p. 313). From a philosophical standpoint, society has largely ignored Hume's proclamation (Solomon, 2008).

Instead of embracing the power of emotion, the dominant ideology in Western societies has been that reason can and should prevail over emotional reactions and decisions (Barrett, 2017; Haidt, 2013; Kahneman, 2015; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Marcus, 2002; Prinz, 2012; Westen, 2008). However, a growing number of scholars and body of literature from multiple disciplines are beginning to challenge this longstanding belief. Drawing from cutting-edge neuroscience research, Barrett (2017) asserts "you might believe that you are a rational creature, weighing the pros and cons before deciding how to act, but the structure of your cortex makes this an implausible fiction" (p. 79-80). She goes on to make the following Hume-like assertion:

> Affect is in the driver's seat and rationality is a passenger. It doesn't matter whether you're choosing between two snacks, two job offers, two investments, or two heart surgeons— your everyday decisions are driven by a loudmouthed, mostly deaf scientist who views the world through affect-colored glasses. (Barrett, 2017, p. 79-80)

Barrett is not alone in her claim. For example, Haidt (2013) calls the dominant ideology the "rationalist delusion" (p. 33) and asserts "anyone who values truth should stop worshiping reason" (p. 104). In a similar vein, Westen (2008) claims the dominant view of "a dispassionate mind that makes decisions by weighing the evidence and reasoning to the most valid conclusions—bears no relation to how the mind and brain actually work" (p. ix). When it comes to politics, he makes the following critique of Democrat campaign failures:

> With the exception of the Clinton era, Democratic strategists for the last three decades have instead clung tenaciously to the dispassionate view of the mind and to the campaign strategy that logically follows from it, namely one that focuses on facts, figures, policy statements, costs and benefits, and appeals to intellect and expertise. They do so, I believe, because of an irrational emotional commitment to rationality-one that renders

> them, ironically, impervious to both scientific evidence on how the political mind and brain work and to an accurate diagnosis of why their campaigns repeatedly fail. (Westen, 2008, p. 15)

I cannot help but find aspects of his critique to be characteristic of academia as well. Academia prides itself on facts and figures and appeals to intellect and expertise. In my opinion, many within higher education have an irrational emotional commitment to rationality which contributes to the disconnect between academia and the general public. Consider as an example the recent advice higher education leaders Peterson and Rudgers (2018) gave to higher education. Believing "higher education is no longer sitting on a pedestal" and anticipating eroding public support this year, they gave the following recommendation to colleges and universities:

> Be clear about the value your institution provides to students, alumni, employers and the region. Translate jargon into language, data and concrete examples that demonstrate relevance and value. (Peterson & Rudgers, 2018)

Peterson and Rudgers's advice seem to encourage higher education to appeal to the dispassionate mind, the kind of mind Westen argues does not exist. Nowhere in their advice do they appear to place any explicit focus on emotionally connecting with the public.

If we accept that a dispassionate mind is for the most part non-existent then there is a clear but often overlooked mismatch between Peterson and Rudgers' advice and the problem it seeks to address. If people are frustrated with, disappointed in, or pissed off at higher education, focusing on the data and sound analytic arguments to try and convince them to see things differently may actually make things worse. Consider the following assertion by Heath & Heath:

> Trying to fight inertia and indifference with analytical arguments is like tossing a fire extinguisher to someone who's drowning. The solution doesn't match the problem. (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 107)

There assertion is likely a tough pill for many within academia to swallow. After all, many scholars pride themselves on sound research and analytic arguments to make their case. It is not that reason and rigorous data analysis and presentation are not important, but that people's obsession and focus on them is misplaced when having a challenging conversation or trying to enact difficult change (Haidt, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2010; Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

For example, imagine you are in an emotionally charged argument with a significant other, family member, close friend, or a boss. Tempers are flaring, talking morphs into yelling, with both sides thinking they are right. Let's say most people would agree you are right and the person you are arguing with is being irrational, perhaps even delusional in what he or she is asserting. During the argument, do you think it would be a good idea or a successful approach to getting your point across to pull out a laptop with spreadsheets of data, statistical analyses, and charts and say to the person you arguing with "See, look at the data…clearly I am right and you are wrong"? Unless you are arguing with a Vulcan—non-Star Trek fans please google Vulcan—I am going to assume in many, if not most cases it would likely make the situation worse. This is because we are far more emotional and far less rational than people realize or like to admit.

Haidt offers the vivid metaphor of a rider on an elephant to convey the relationship between emotion and reason. As he puts it, "the rider is our conscious reasoning—the stream of words and images of which we are fully aware", whereas "the elephant is the other 99 percent of mental processes—the ones that occur outside of awareness but that actually govern most of our behavior" (Haidt, 2013, p. XXI). The automatic processes the elephant consists of include intuition and emotion (Haidt, 2013). Haidt claims automatic processes "have been running animal minds for 500 million years" (p. 53) and have done so efficiently. He goes on to assert, "When human beings evolved the capacity for language and reasoning at some point in the last

million years, the brain did not rewire itself to hand over the reins to a new and inexperienced charioteer", but instead "the rider (language-based reasoning) evolved because it did something useful for the elephant" (p. 53). And while the elephant (i.e., emotions and other automatic processes) "is not an absolute dictator", Haidt contends, it "is far more powerful than the rider" (p. 79). Returning to our imagined emotionally charged argument, Haidt (2013) argues "you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments" (p. 57). Instead, "if you want to change people's minds, you've got to talk to their elephants" (p. 57).

Historically scientists have viewed emotion and cognition as separate domains (Blanchette & Richards, 2010; De Houwer & Hermans, 2010; Fox, 2008). Recognizing the rise of affective neuroscience as a serious and maturing line of inquiry, Davidson (2003) came up with a list of seven sins in emotion research with the first sin being the assumption that "affect and cognition are subserved by separate and independent neural circuits" (p. 129). Fox (2008) believes committing this sin today is inexcusable because the "neuroanatomical facts cannot be ignored and indicate that affective and cognitive processes involve many different and overlapping brain regions" (p. 349) and are deeply integrated. As Fox asserts, today there is a growing body of literature showing "that affect and cognition are actually integral and inseparable parts of each other" (p. 190) right down to the neural level (Damasio, 1994; Fox, 2008). Researchers have found the relationship between emotion and cognition to be a two-way street, in that cognitions can have strong effects on emotions and vice versa (Fox, 2008). In what he himself labels as a "radical assertion", Marcus (2002) claims "people are able to be rational because they are emotional; emotions enable rationality" (p. 7). He argues that instead of being independent of emotion, "rationality is a special set of abilities that are recruited by emotion

systems in the brain to enable us to adapt to the challenges that daily confront us" (Marcus, 2002, p. 7). To remove emotion would hinder our ability to reason.

Only recently have researchers begun to look at the integral relationship between emotion and cognition instead of focusing on cognition in isolation (Blanchette & Richards, 2010). And yet within the last few decades there has been a growing number of scholars and body of research that supports the idea that emotion influences such things as economic behavior (Rick & Loewenstein, 2008), decision making (Barrett, 2017; Blanchette & Richards, 2010; Isen, 2008; Prinz, 2012; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008), implementing change (Heath & Heath, 2010; Kotter & Cohen, 2002), problem-solving (Isen, 2008; Prinz, 2012), perception (Barrett, 2017; Ledoux & Phelps, 2008; Prinz, 2012), memory (Kensinger & Schacter, 2008; Ledoux & Phelps, 2008; Levine & Edelstein, 2010; Prinz, 2012), and attention (Prinz, 2012; Yiend, 2010). Emotions can be damaging to our ability to reason, but so too can the absence of them (Damasio, 1994). Emotions can override one's ability in certain situations to consider evidence contrary to one's beliefs (Barrett, 2017; Damasio, 1994; Marcus, 2002). Negative emotions tend to narrow one's thinking whereas positive emotions tend to open one's thinking (Haidt, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2010; Isen, 2008; Konijn & ten Holt, 2010; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Prinz, 2012). Konijn and ten Holt (2010) claim "The attention-narrowing effects of negative emotions such as fear, appear to lead people to become less open minded, less accepting of dissenting opinions, and less accepting of out-group members" (p. 52).

"Less accepting of out-group members" returns us to the idea of the crowd, which I have already touched on in prior sections on social construction and public opinion. In his seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Gustave Le Bon (1969) described in detail the power of emotions in driving the actions and thinking of a crowd. Collective emotion can be

exhilarating and is often harmless, such as in the collective emotion one feels cheering alongside other fans at a sporting event. Le Bon recognized the value of the convictions of crowds and proclaimed, "It is not by reason, but most often in spite of it, that are created those sentiments that are the mainsprings of all civilisation — sentiments such as honour, self-sacrifice, religious faith, patriotism, and the love of glory" (p. 67). But the vast part of his attention in his book is on the negative effects of crowds. Le Bon argued that "the masses have never thirsted after truth", and "they turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduces them" (p. 64). He went on to conclude "Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim" (p. 64). It is important to note, Le Bon's conception of a crowd could be as small as a few individuals coming together. He argued, "It is not necessary that a crowd should be numerous for the faculty of seeing what is taking place before its eyes to be destroyed and for the real facts to be replaced by hallucinations unrelated to them" (p. 25). Today with the internet, the potential for the creation of crowds, whether virtual or physical, big or small, is practically limitless.

Le Bon's seminal work is well over a century old, but perhaps timelier than ever. Consider for a moment his following assertion:

> Given to exaggeration in its feelings, a crowd is only impressed by excessive sentiments. An orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmations. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings. (Le Bon, 1969, p. 30)

Sound like anyone you know? Perhaps someone who is seemingly an artful master at wielding the power of emotions within a crowd to push his agenda? The person I am alluding to is the current U.S. President. And while he does not refer to Le Bon's work in forming his own

assessment of the Trump phenomenon, Singer's following argument echoes the tenets of crowd psychology:

> Collective emotion is the only truth that matters. A group caught up in a cultural complex has highly selective memory—if any historical memory at all—and chooses only those historical and contemporary facts that validate their preexisting opinion. Evidence of this is that no matter what Trump does or how many lies he tells, his base remains steadfast in its support of him, as the polls tell us. (Singer, 2017, p. 289)

The idea that within a crowd collective emotion is the only truth that matters, as Singer contends, is a scary thing to consider. Granted, in my current research I am not looking at anything as significant as the election of a country's leader. However, the concepts of the crowd and its collective emotions are very much an important consideration in my work.

Le Bon (1969) believed that "To bring home conviction to crowds it is necessary first of all to thoroughly comprehend the sentiments by which they are animated, to pretend to share these sentiments, then to endeavour to modify them by calling up, by means of rudimentary associations, certain eminently suggestive notions, to be capable, if need be, of going back to the point of view from which a start was made, and, above all, to divine from instant to instant the sentiments to which one's discourse is giving birth" (p. 66). I think he is wrong to suggest one should *pretend* to share the sentiments of the people he or she is trying to convince. In my opinion doing so would be disingenuous and could potentially make things even worse. Instead, I believe a better step after one has comprehended the sentiments conveyed by the crowd would be to convey empathy to the groups' emotions. My thoughts on the matter aside, research has shown the power of emotions in changing a crowd.

For example, in their research which included interviewing about 400 people from 130 organizations, Kotter and Cohen (2002) concluded that "the heart of change is in the emotions" (p. 2). They assert "Change leaders make their points in ways that are as emotionally engaging

and compelling as possible" (p. 178). Now consider what this finding means for higher education. If we view scholars and their research as a vehicle for change, are they making their points *as emotionally engaging and compelling as possible*? Sword (2012) describes scholarly writing—a primary mode of communicating research findings—as the very opposite of being emotional. Instead of speaking to the far more powerful elephant (i.e., emotions), scholars appear to be focusing on speaking to the rider (reason). Whether or not this is contributing to the disconnect between academia and the general public is debatable. However, as I discussed earlier, there is growing scientific evidence that warrants an increased focus on emotions when trying to connect with people of varying viewpoints. And yet, there are many people who continue to ignore the elephant as Fox makes clear in her following assertion:

> While the role of affect is increasingly being recognized in contemporary cognitive psychology and neuroscience there remain many who ignore the potential importance of emotions and mood states in cognition. The evidence reviewed in this book suggests that this is a mistake. (Fox, 2008, p. 345)

I would like to think most educators know of the powerful relationship and interconnection of emotion and reason even if they do not explicitly acknowledge it as a crucial part of their practice or proactively seek to capitalize on it. My favorite teachers, the ones I most respect, may or may not have been the most knowledgeable among the faculty at the various schools I attended. But for me they were the ones who captivated my attention by forming emotionally compelling connections with me. In her book *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*, Cavanagh (2016) makes a compelling case for the acknowledgment and utilization of emotions in education to enhance learning experiences. She begins her argument with the following question: "The classroom setting is already a highly charged emotional atmosphere; why not harness that power and direct it at

learning" (p. 7)? We can extend her question beyond the traditional boundaries of a classroom to life in general, which is of course, a highly charged emotional atmosphere. And this is the point scholars, such as Haidt, Marcus, Westen, Heath and Heath, Kotter and Cohen, and others are getting at when they urge us to focus more on emotion rather than naively relegating it to enemy of reason status.

The media knows the power of emotions, in particular negative emotions (Altheide, 2010; Fuller, 2010; Konijn & ten Holt, 2010; Patterson, 2013; Patterson, 2016). Noting a clear focus on the negative across a variety of news topics, Patterson (2016) claims the real bias of the media "is a decided preference for the negative" (p. 5). According to Altheide (2010) when it comes to the news, "Audiences are cultivated through fear and crisis" (p. 261). Titles of popular press articles, such as *The Washington Post* article "Everyone thinks the current state of higher education is awful…Who is to blame?" written by Drezner (2015), a professor at Tufts University I might add, or the *Detroit Metro Times* article "Why Michigan State University is a mess" by Lessenberry (2018), head of the journalism faculty at Wayne State University, aim to capitalize on people's emotions. At the very least, it is a safe bet authors and editors are aware such emotionally charged titles are likely to draw the attention of readers.

Pantti (2010) describes the news as an "emotional public sphere" and claims "In contemporary mediated societies, media work as an intersection of personal and collective public emotions: personal emotions become public and public emotions shape personal emotions" (p. 222). Beckett and Deuze (2016) assert "As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed" (p. 2). In fact, they consider emotion "to be a crucial building block of good journalism" (p. 1). "Trustworthiness in the networked journalism age is", as Beckett and Deuze (2016) argue, "increasingly determined

by its emotional authenticity" (p. 4). They go on to argue for what I label as an elephant and rider approach to journalism in their following assertion:

> As journalism reinvents itself, it must ask how best an aspiration to objectivity might be fostered in this environment. It isn't by insisting that the authorities know best—let alone the journalistic authorities. It will be about linking news to emotion: connecting with communities, creating constructive journalism that deploys positive psychology, and linking up with the culture of sharing on social networks. (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 4)

I find their assertion to be very applicable to academia as well. Like journalism, academia is unlikely to bridge the gap between it and the general public by insisting scholars know best. This is not to say that in many cases academia does not know best, but that in order to make a more effective and sustaining connection with the public they should focus on emotion. Just as news organizations are already mining audience data to better understand the emotional makeup of their audiences (Beckett & Deuze, 2016), higher education would be wise to do the same.

An important consideration regarding emotions is that they are not necessarily contained within the person experiencing them. They can cascade to other people infecting them with the same or similar emotions. This may seem rather obvious within our own personal everyday face-to-face life. After all, common advice when I was growing up was to surround oneself with positive people. However, in an online world we may not realize just how contagious our emotions might be to people we will likely never see or interact with face-to-face. Recognizing the potential for emotions to spread via the various forms of social media, Nabi, So, and Prestin (2010) contend "As media scholars, we do ourselves a disservice to think of emotional responses to media as strictly intrapersonal phenomena" (p. 129). In one of the more recent and disturbing research studies, Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock (2014) demonstrated the infectious nature of emotions via social media. By manipulating the content of news feeds for 689,003 Facebook users, Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock found that "When positive expressions were reduced,

people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred" (p. 8788). I label their study as disturbing for two reasons. First, the ethical nature of their work is highly debatable given the people whose news feeds were manipulated might not have viewed their creating of a Facebook account as constituting informed consent to such an experiment. And second, it is scary to think how the internet may contribute to the global spread of emotional states at digital speed. More than a hundred years before the advent of the internet Le Bon (1969) warned that "Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes" (p. 73). It is a warning I believe we all need to take even more seriously in today's digital world.

The news, whether knowingly or not, play an influential role in the spread of emotions. One such example is what Sustein and Kuran (as cited in Kahneman, 2011) refer to as the availability cascade. While discussing Sustein and Kuran's work on heuristics, Kahneman offers the following depiction of how the media can play a role in the availability cascade:

> In particular, the importance of an idea is often judged by the fluency **(and emotional charge)** [emphasis added] with which that idea comes to mind. An availability cascade is a self-sustaining chain of events, which may start from media reports of a relatively minor event and lead up to public panic and large-scale government action. On some occasions, a media story about a risk catches the attention of a segment of the public, which becomes aroused and worried. **This emotional reaction becomes a story in itself** [emphasis added], prompting additional coverage in the media, which in turn produces greater concern and involvement. The cycle is sometimes sped along deliberately by **"availability entrepreneurs," individuals or organizations who work to ensure a continuous flow of worrying news** [emphasis added]. The danger is increasingly exaggerated as the media compete for attention-grabbing headlines. Scientists and others who try to dampen the increasing fear and revulsion attract little attention, most of it hostile: anyone who claims that the danger is overstated is suspected of association with a "heinous cover-up." The issue becomes politically important because it is on everyone's mind, **and the response of the political system is guided by the intensity of public sentiment**. **The availability cascade has now reset priorities** [emphasis added]. Other risks, and other ways that resources could be applied for the public good, all have faded into the background. (Kahneman, 2011, p. 142)

You may recall from my earlier section on social construction that McCombs (2014) attributes an increased public concern on crime during the 1990s when crime was actually declining to increased news coverage. His attribution is an example of the availability cascade. With the example of the availability cascade, we can see how the influential role of emotions can make something seem more real than it really is. And while establishing whether or not such cascades currently exist within the media is not within the scope of my current research, it is worth considering how such cascades might exist within news pertaining to higher education shaping priorities for bad or good.

So-called availability entrepreneurs, as Kahneman refers to, seek to capitalize on perpetuating a state of widespread and heightened anxiety throughout society. Their work, which includes the work of some journalists, can have a toxic effect in our ability to make sense of the world. For example, Patterson contends…

> When everything and everybody is portrayed as deeply flawed, there's no sense making distinctions on that score, which works to the advantage of those who are more deeply flawed. Civility and sound proposals are no longer the stuff of headlines, which instead give voice to those who are skilled in the art of destruction. The car wreck that was the 2016 election had many drivers. Journalists were not alone in the car, but their fingerprints were all over the wheel. (Patterson, 2016, p. 5)

And while Patterson's remarks were about the 2016 election, his assertion extends much further. According to Patterson (2016), the negative focus of the press on most every topic has a corrosive effect on our ability to think and talk clearly about those very same topics. If we accept his assertion, think of what that might mean for higher education. Higher education has no shortage of critics and its own negative headlines and book titles. For example, a common starting point for the technical disruption of higher education crowd is the assertion that higher education is deeply flawed. While the merit of their default assertion is debatable, it might be

wise to consider Patterson's argument and contemplate whether all the negative press colleges and universities receive is simply giving voice to those who are skilled at the art of destruction.

As indicated earlier, the emotions we experience do not occur in isolation, nor are they confined to the causing experiences. In other words, our emotions do not exist within a box. For example, let us say you have a fight with a loved one. The emotions the two of you experience do not begin and end within the context of that specific fight. It is not like as if you both start with a fresh emotional slate in all subsequent fights or even cordial experiences with each other. Unless you have reached a Buddha like state of mindfulness, I assume this concept is obvious. The idea that our emotions from a given experience can leave a sort of emotional residue, which can accumulate and affect our future experiences, is an important consideration in my current research. It is important because some of the comments I analyzed are a few years old. It is also important because I believe it would be naïve to think emotions experienced by an individual or group in a given situation or towards a given topic do not carry over, at least to some extent, to other situations and topics. For example, if a commenter expresses anger about the influx of international students on campuses, it is possible this anger might affect how they view other aspects of higher education.

I realize the suppositions I just made might drive some of my readers crazy. But consider for a moment the following claim made by distinguished neuroscientist and psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett regarding the role of emotions, both past and present, in how we experience the future:

> The bottom line is this: the human brain is anatomically structured so that no decision or action can be free of interoception and affect, no matter what fiction people tell themselves about how rational they are. Your bodily feeling right now will project forward to influence what you will feel and do in the future. It is an elegantly orchestrated, self-fulfilling prophecy, embodied within the architecture of your brain. (Barrett, 2017, p. 82)

In other words, the emotions we experienced yesterday, last week, or years ago affect our present day and future experiences, emotions, and actions. It would be shortsighted to think of an issue the public was pissed off about several years ago as no longer affecting how they think and feel about the topic today or about other seemingly unrelated issues.

We might not even be aware of how our past or even current emotions are affecting how we perceive things. As Fox (2008) contends "emotions can operate at different levels and may not necessarily be conscious" (p. 352). The operating of emotions, conscious or unconsciously, can occur within an individual or within a group, as in crowds. Singer (2018) points to the power of built-up unconscious feelings within a group psyche in an ominous way, labeling it as "shadow energies" (p. 288). He attributes much of Trump's success to unleashing such energies within his base through the use of trigger words, such as "political correctness". According to Singer, "the notion of a trigger word activating a complex goes back to Jung's early word-association tests, in which certain words detonated powerful emotions contained within personal complexes" (p. 288-289), which upon being unleashed "takes on a life of its own" (p. 289). Singer's claim is in line with an argument articulated by Lippmann nearly a hundred years ago.

Lippmann (1993) claimed the ability to make a general will out of a multitude of opinions is "an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees" (p. 37). He went on to assert the following:

> It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas. Because feelings are much less specific than ideas, and yet more poignant, the leader is able to make a homogeneous will out of a heterogeneous mass of desires. The process, therefore, by which general opinions are brought to cooperation consists of **an intensification of feeling** [emphasis added] and a degradation of significance. Before a mass of general opinions can eventuate in executive action, the choice is narrowed down to a few alternatives. (Lippmann, 1993, p. 37-38)

An intensification of feeling implies a buildup of emotions, something that occurs over time. Lippmann (1993) argued "The victorious alternative is executed not by the mass but by individuals in control of its energy" (p. 38). In other words, the one who is able to harness the accumulated emotional energy of a public detached from any one specific idea wields great power. The use of accumulated emotional energy is not inherently good or bad. Its nature is dependent upon those who leverage it and to what ends.

In our online lives we face a barrage of emotional communications the likes of which we have never seen before. The conscious, as well as unconscious effect of our emotions, and the buildup of *shadow energies* if you will, might be occurring in unanticipated ways. For example, recognizing the power of media to invoke emotions within its audience, Konijn and ten Holt (2010) ask "What is the unconscious and 'creeping' impact of mass media on all of us" (p. 48)? They assert "we might find that emotional responses are being conditioned into us without our own awareness or consent" and that "mass media might hold far more sway over our lives than any of us realize" (p. 49). Konijn and ten Holt's propositions are concerning. And while I am not attempting to verify or measure the potential creeping impact of mass media on our emotional state, it is important to recognize the emotions conveyed within the comments subject to my research may carry forward into the indefinite future.

I assume many within higher education—professors and grad students in particular—probably think they are significantly more rational than the average person, given their advanced educational attainment. I am not alone in my assumption. For example, Readings (1999) argued that the popular belief in the University as being "a model of rational community, a microcosm of the pure form of the public sphere" (p. 20) is a fallacy. He made what I found to be a humorous assertion that "this claim for an ideal community in the University still exerts power,

despite its glaring inaccuracy—evident to anyone who has ever sat on a faculty committee" (p. 20). Interestingly, Readings's claim received support in the form of an Amazon posted book review—a type of online comment—seemingly made by Frank Fear (1997) of Michigan State University with the subject line stating, "Faculty will read this book and say, 'Ah, yes!'" In a not so humorous and somewhat apocalyptic assertion, Smith (2018) claims "Much of American higher education now embodies the problems it was intended to transcend and transform: unreason, duplicity, refusals of accountability, incapacities to grasp complexity and see the big picture, and resorts to semi-masked forms of coercion". Granted, Readings, Fear, and Smith's assertions are anecdotal, but I cannot help but wonder how many professors and grad students in private would agree with them. I know I find elements of truth in their assertions based on my own experiences in multiple institutions of varying types. Perhaps we can view academia as a sort of crowd and apply Le Bon's (1969) assertion that "In a crowd men always tend to the same level, and, on general questions, a vote, recorded by forty academicians is no better than that of forty water-carriers" (p. 106).

Le Bon, as it turns out, was quite pessimistic as to the ability of an academic crowd being any less driven by emotion than any other crowd, which he made clear in his following assertion:

> It does not follow because an individual knows Greek or mathematics, is an architect, a veterinary surgeon, a doctor, or a barrister, that he is endowed with a special intelligence of social questions. All our political economists are highly educated, being for the most part professors or academicians, yet is there a single general question — protection, bimetallism, &c. — on which they have succeeded in agreeing? The explanation is that their science is only a very attenuated form of our universal ignorance. With regard to social problems, owing to the number of unknown quantities they offer, men are substantially, equally ignorant. In consequence, were the electorate solely composed of persons stuffed with sciences their votes would be no better than those emitted at present. They would be guided in the main by their sentiments and by party spirit. (Le Bon, 1969, p. 106)

Again, I am sure there are many who might read his assertion and disagree with his assessment, perhaps for more emotional reasons than one is willing to admit. I realize some might think I am just taking an opportunity to beat up on higher education. Perhaps. But my main motive is to convey that more education does not mean less emotion, and there is nothing wrong with that. As Fox (2008) proclaims, "Emotions are at the heart of what it means to be human" (p. XV). Where I think we run into problems is when people deny the power of emotion or assume they can make it the slave of reason. And while I do not claim to be an expert on emotions, I hope the literature just discussed makes it readily apparent as to why it is important to pay emotions their due attention.

So, what are emotions? Seems like a straightforward and simple question, but as it turns out, a consistent definition remains elusive (Barrett, 2017; Fox, 2008; Mauss & Robinson, 2010; Solomon, 2008; Stets & Turner, 2008). James was critical of attempts to describe or define emotions. He described attempts to define emotions as "one of the most tedious parts of psychology" (James, 1950b, p. 448). Regarding the process of describing emotions, he went on to lament as to how "its subdivisions are to a great extent either fictitious or unimportant, and that its pretenses to accuracy are a sham" (p. 448). The purpose of my research is not to settle on a definitive definition of emotions, but instead use existing research and theories to elaborate upon what emotions might be. Just because an agreed upon definition has not yet been reached does not mean we cannot investigate and try to better understand them, as evidenced by the plethora of research on emotions.

Fox (2008) claims "*emotions* are often considered to be discrete and consistent responses to an internal or an external event which has a particular *significance* for the organization" (p. 16). She goes on to assert "*sensing significance* or *evaluating* an object of situation is a key

component of emotions" (p. 16). "Emotions are public affairs", says Fox, whereas feelings "are private to the individual experiencing them" (p. 17). In this sense, we can consider the states people convey in online comments to be emotions instead of feelings because the comments are public. According to Fox (2008), scientists have utilized several different frameworks to study emotion, with the social construction of emotion being among the most influential. Whereas the classic view of emotions views them as "artifacts of evolution", "fixed", and "universal" (Barrett, 2017, p. xi), the social construction of emotion views emotions as an active construction fed by "sensory input and past experience" (Barrett, 2017, p. 31). Barrett (2017) more fully defines the theory of constructed emotion as follows:

> In every waking moment, your brain uses past experience, organized as concepts, to guide your actions and give your sensations meaning. When the concepts involved are emotion concepts, your brain constructs instances of emotions. (Barrett, 2017, p. 31)

The theory of constructed emotion fits well with my adoption of a social construction research perspective in my current work.

Barrett (2017) asserts "What we colloquially call emotions, such as anger, fear, and happiness, are better thought of as emotion categories, because each is a collection of diverse instances" (p. 23). For example, a person may be angry and still speak in a controlled voice or he might be angry and flailing his arms up and down while yelling (Barrett, 2017). And while a conclusive definition of emotion remains to be determined, categories assist in our ability to speak about and investigate emotions. One such form of categorization is to broadly classify into two groups, negative and positive (Prinz, 2012). With regards to the value or usefulness of any single particular way out of the infinite number of ways of enumerating and grouping emotions, James (1950b) claimed "the only question would be, does this grouping or that suit our purpose best?" (p. 485). For my research I have decided the emotion classifications identified by the

Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program suit my purposes the best. LIWC uses the broad categories of positive and negative emotions, along with three subcategories of negative emotions: anxiety, anger, and sadness (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015).

Like public opinion, emotion is a nebulous term, which researchers struggle to arrive at a consensus on. However, just as many scholars see the apparent power in public opinion, many also see power in emotion. Public opinion and emotion are highly interrelated, perhaps inseparable. People who harness the power of emotional public opinions can wield it for good or bad, as I explore in more detail in the next section on influence.

Influence

According to the *Father of Public Relations* Edward Bernays (1928a), historically "Public opinion was made or changed formerly by tribal chiefs, by kings, by religious leaders" (p. 959). However, ninety years ago he announced, "Today the privilege of attempting to sway public opinion is everyone's" (Bernays, 1928a, p. 959). Bernays proclaimed, "But to-day because ideas can be instantaneously transmitted to any distance and to any number of people, this geographical integration has been supplemented by many other kinds of grouping, so that persons having the same ideas and interests may be associated and regimented for common action even though they live thousands of miles apart" (Bernays, 1928b, p. 13). He made these statements ninety years ago! And while Bernays lived to the ripe old age of 103, he died in 1995 well before the ubiquity of the internet, an unprecedented mechanism for the instantaneous transmission of ideas all around the world.

Historically very few had the ability to influence massive audiences given the high costs of reaching millions of people (Bernays, 1928b). However, today anyone with an internet connection can reach such an audience instantaneously with a few keystrokes and mouse clicks.

In the early days of the Internet Chomsky (2002) was asked about the kind of impact he thought the internet would have on activism and organizing, to which he gave the following answer:

> And that's probably the way it's going to go in general: **it'll be used as another technique for control and manipulation** [emphasis added], and for keeping people in their roles as mindless consumers of things they don't really want. Sure—why should the people who own society do things any differently? (p. 278)

It would be nice to be able to say that Chomsky was completely wrong in his prediction. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that his answer was correct.

Perhaps the most infamous evidence to date is Russia meddling with various U.S. affairs via online mechanisms. In a 2017 piece on NPR titled *How Russian Propaganda Spreads On Social Media* Laura Sydell (2017) discusses the insidious way the country of Russia has used the internet as a tool to manipulate. As an example, she talks about a Facebook group page called Blacktivist, which caught the attention of a Black Lives Matter supporter, M'tep Blount. The page apparently had over 400,000 followers and portrayed videos of police brutality against African-Americans. According to Sydell (2017), "the Blacktivist page was not like Black Lives Matter, at all", but instead "it appears to have been linked to Russia" and has subsequently been removed. The following excerpt describes one way online manipulation can work:

> Jeff Hancock, a psychologist who heads Stanford University's Social Media Lab, says that propaganda via a page like Blacktivist was not aimed at changing Blount's mind. **It was actually meant to trigger strong feelings** [emphasis added].
>
> "Propaganda can actually have a real effect," he says. "Even though we might already believe what we're hearing, this can heighten our arousal, our emotions."…
>
> This kind of propaganda, he says, is designed to enhance divisions among people and increase "the anger within each other. **It's really truly just a simple divide-and-conquer approach** [emphasis added]." (Sydell, 2017)

Based on Hancock's assertion, propaganda targets and seizes the power of emotions. Just like Bernays (1928b) argued, "By playing upon an old cliché, or manipulating a new one, the

propagandist can sometimes swing a whole mass of group emotions" (p. 50-51). The design of propaganda which propagandists utilize is not necessarily something so complex only evil geniuses are capable of devising. It can be as simple as inciting divisiveness among people and groups.

The simple divide-and-conquer approach Hancock refers to is not something only employed by one country against another. People and organizations of all shapes and sizes can use it, like all propaganda, at various micro and macro levels. For example, as part of his strategy to turn Wisconsin into a "right to work state"—a change that would affect a great number of higher education professionals, along with employees from other sectors—then Governor Scott Walker was unknowingly recorded saying "The first step is we're going to deal with collective bargaining for all public employee unions, because you use divide and conquer" (Sargent, 2012). I am not suggesting that the governor or his supporters used the internet as a means to sow division. But it is not difficult to imagine the possibility of a person or a group utilizing online means to incite anger, whether on a local or a global scale.

Another form of manipulation is the use of misinformation. In the early 1900s Dewey (1927) asserted "Of course there has been an enormous increase in the amount of knowledge possessed by mankind, but it does not equal, probably, the increase in the amount of errors and half-truths which have got into circulation" (p. 163). He believed our capacity for critical thinking and discriminating judgment were not keeping pace with the growth of misinformation. We are, in my opinion, in desperate need of critical consideration of Dewey's assertions in the online digital world we live in today. One of the commonly assumed benefits of the internet is having the world's information at your fingertips. While to a certain extent the common

assumption has credence, far less understood or even considered is the harmful effects of increasingly widespread errors and half-truths Dewey warns of.

Today with the internet a half-truth or outright complete falsehood may live on indefinitely in cyberspace with pernicious effects. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 64% of adults in the U.S. believe "fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events" (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016, p. 3). This belief was shared across most demographics, including educational attainment (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). Based on the poll results, 23% of Americans have shared fake news, with 14% doing so knowing the story was fake and 16% realizing it was fake after the fact (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016, p. 3). Even more concerning than the spread of fake news, at least in my opinion, is the unprecedented ability for people to find others who believe the same thing regardless if it is real or fake, thereby making it seem that much more real to them. A person might even be able to find research to support the fake story. As Haidt (2013) contends, "Science is a smorgasbord, and Google will guide you to the study that's right for you" (p. 99).

Thanks to technology, manipulation can even be automated! For example, an increasing number of groups, including governments, politicians, and militaries, are utilizing auto-generated messages (i.e., social bots) to interact directly with and influence people (Woolley, 2016). Woolley (2016) contends "bots suppress free expression and civic innovation through the demobilization of activist groups and the suffocation of democratic free speech" (para. 7). He believes the ubiquity of such malicious automated actors on social platforms, including online news sites, is in dire need of attention. Again, perhaps the most recent and publicized example of this has to do with Russian linked manipulators trying to influence U.S. affairs. Twitter Inc. (2018) reported to Congress that between September 1 and November 15, 2016

@realDonaldTrump account tweets were retweeted 469,537 times by Russian-linked automated accounts. In a series of tweets on March 1, 2018 co-founder and CEO of Twitter Jack Dorsey admitted to underestimating the power of its platform to be used for manipulation:

> **We have witnessed abuse, harassment, troll armies, manipulation through bots and human-coordination, misinformation campaigns, and increasingly divisive echo chambers** [emphasis added]. We aren't proud of how people have taken advantage of our service, or our inability to address it fast enough. (Dorsey, 2018a)
>
> We love instant, public, global messaging and conversation. It's what Twitter is and it's why we're here. **But we didn't fully predict or understand the real-world negative consequences** [emphasis added]. We acknowledge that now, and are determined to find holistic and fair solutions. (Dorsey, 2018b)

The abuse Dorsey refers to are the same kinds of abuse that can and do occur within online news comments. Granted, my research is not on Presidential elections, but the realization of automated manipulation should be concerning to all because it could be utilized on a much smaller scope. While it is unlikely anyone can fully predict the future or understand the real-world negative consequences, this does not mean we cannot or should not exercise caution and spend more time thinking about potential consequence of an online world.

Huxley (1960) forewarned that "the art of mind-control is in the process of becoming a science" (p. 287). Childs (1940) issued a similar warning having argued that "when innumerable groups suddenly begin to realize the importance of public opinion" the result is "a race unlike the international armaments race; a race for superiority in weapons of aggressive propaganda which may be as disastrous as the race for battleship supremacy" (p. 131). Huxley and Childs's warnings made long ago are eerily coming true. I realize this may sound like the stuff of science fiction. But consider some of the literature I reviewed in the prior section on emotion in addition to this section. The troves of data with potential insights into what causes people to think and feel certain ways is growing at an accelerating rate as people live more of their life digitally

connected or disconnected, depending on your perspective. According to a science *nonfiction* piece by CBS News, ex-president of Facebook Sean Parker said the social media giant is "'exploiting vulnerability in human psychology'" (Facebook ex-president, 2017). In yet another piece, when former Google product manager Tristan Harris was asked "Is Silicon Valley programming apps or are they programming people?" (Cooper, 2017) he gave the following answer:

> Inadvertently, whether they want to or not, they are shaping the thoughts and feelings and actions of people. **They are programming people** [emphasis added]. There's always this narrative that technology's neutral. And it's up to us to choose how we use it. This is just not true. (Cooper, 2017)

Parker and Harris's remarks seem to indicate the realization of Huxley's prediction to at least some extent.

Online comments are a type of social media producing massive amounts of data about people. There are news articles that generate thousands of online comments. One such example, *The Guardian*—a British daily newspaper—received seventy million online comments on its website between 2006 and 2016 (Gardiner, Mansfield, Anderson, Holder, Louter, & Ulmanu, 2016)! That is a hell of a lot of data on a hell of a lot of people—or perhaps social bots—and on their opinions and emotions. *The Guardian* has a counter on one of its webpages where you can see how many comments people left on their site since 7:00 am each day, along with how many were blocked. At 7:10 pm Eastern Standard Time on March 1, 2018 the counter was at over 28,550 comments with about 510 blocked by moderators (Gardiner, Mansfield, Anderson, Holder, Louter, & Ulmanu, 2016). And while I am not suggesting we shut down the internet to prevent the possibility of online manipulation, whether through Facebook, Twitter, Google, online comments, or some other form, I am urging us all to exercise more caution and controlled optimism when we consider the possibilities of an online world.

Now that we have the dark and depressing stuff out of the way, there is a potential silver lining. Just as manipulation can have devastating effects, it can have positive effects as well. When we think of manipulation and its best friend propaganda images of oppressive dictators and secretive evil agendas might immediately come to mind. However, this need not be the case. Bernays (1928b) and Childs (1940) acknowledged for many the term propaganda carries a negative connotation. However, Bernays (1928b) argued "in any instance, propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published" (p. 20). Childs (1940) considered the goodness or badness of propaganda is a matter of perspective. Westen makes a similar argument as made by Bernays and Childs. While pointing to the belief Democratic campaigns appear to have that the effective utilization of emotions is manipulative, Westen makes the following assertion:

> But there is no necessary relation between reason and morality or between emotion and immorality. You can tell the truth or lie with arguments and statistics, just as you can lead or mislead with emotionally compelling words, images, and analogies. (Westen, 2008, p. 134)

Based on Bernays, Childs, and Westen's points, the use of emotions to influence others is not inherently good or bad.

Interestingly, Bernays spent some time contemplating how one prominent sector could use the power of emotions for good: the education sector. Bernays was critical of educators' ability, or lack thereof, to connect with and influence the general public. He dedicated an entire chapter in his seminal book *Propaganda* (Bernays, 1928b) to detailing the imperative for educators and education to wisely understand and utilize propaganda to improve its standing with the public. Like Bernays, Childs also emphasized the importance of propaganda in education. He argued "Every educator is a philosopher of education itself, advocating educational ideals which he is deliberately and dogmatically seeking to inculcate in the minds of

students" (Childs, 1940, p. 88). Childs went on to say, "The educator need not cringe when confronted with the label propaganda" (p. 88) and that "Education is propaganda" (p. 127).

Some within education might argue utilizing propaganda is not within their job description, but Bernays made the following argument to the contrary:

> In a democracy an educator should, in addition to his academic duties, bear a definite and wholesome relation to the general public. This public does not come within the immediate scope of his academic duties. **But in a sense he depends upon it for his living, for the moral support, and the general cultural tone upon which his work must be based** [emphasis added]. In the field of education, we find what we have found in politics and other fields—that the evolution of the practitioner of the profession has not kept pace with the social evolution around him, and is out of gear with the instruments for the dissemination of ideas which modern society has developed. (Bernays, 1928b, p. 122)

Regarding higher education, it is important to keep in mind the diversity among institutional types and needs. The level of dependence upon the public for one's living, moral support, and general cultural tone upon his work depends, which Bernays points to, will likely vary from one institution type to another and from one position to another. But regardless of institution type or level of prestige, it seems commonsense that the institution and its employees are dependent upon the public to a great extent. To ensure education's good standing with the public, Bernays (1928b) proposed that colleges help future teachers realize their jobs have two important components: "education as a teacher and education as a propagandist" (p. 122).

Another reason for the disconnect between the public and education, according to Bernays (1928b), has to do with what he described as "a difficult psychological problem" (p. 123). He believed an educator, whether a high school teacher or college professor, "cannot but feel a sense of inferiority because he finds himself continually being compared, in the minds of his own pupils, with the successful business man and the successful leader in the outside world" (p. 123). Perhaps some people reading this dissertation will disagree with Bernays's belief, but I

cannot help but find some level of truth in it. The constant reassertion of some individuals' academic and scholarly pedigree within the halls of academia makes me question the self-confidence of those puffing their chests out. I also think there is some level of truth in the opposite direction. That is, a sense of inferiority felt by some in the public in relation to those in academia.

Whether it is a sense of inferiority, superiority, indifference, or some other feeling there appears to be a level of discomfort within academia to engage with the public. Some academics are beginning to acknowledge the discomfort. For example, Nichols points a finger at higher education as being part of the problem in his following assertion:

> On the other hand, many experts, and particularly those in the academy, have abandoned their duty to engage with the public. They have retreated into jargon and irrelevance, preferring to interact with each other only. Meanwhile, the people holding the middle ground to whom we often refer as "public intellectuals"—I'd like to think I'm one of them—are becoming as frustrated and polarized as the rest of society. (Nichols, 2017, Introduction)

While not explicitly singling out higher education, Marcus expresses similar sentiment as Nichols when he says "activists, often learned academics in pursuit of some particular cause and convinced of the rightness of their aims, denigrate the public for failing to adopt their conclusions or even give them the courtesy of attention" (Marcus, 2002, p. 137). While it is unclear if Marcus's group of learned academics is meant to include higher education leaders or simply meant to mean college educated activists, it is clear higher education leaders are activists, given their active involvement in informing and shaping public policy in all realms.

Bernays (1928b) believed "The public is not cognizant of the real value of education, and does not realize that education as a social force is not receiving the kind of attention it has the right to expect in a democracy" (p. 121). I believe Bernays's ninety year old argument is true today. I have and continue to struggle in conversations with people outside academia when

trying to convey how a college degree is so much more than just job preparation. Bernays would likely first attribute my struggle to a deficiency in training as he asserted, "First of all, there is the fact that the educator has been trained to stimulate to thought the individual students in his classroom, but has not been trained as an educator at large of the public" (Bernays, 1928b, p. 121). Bernays would also probably point to a problem of perception given he argued "A second reason for the present remoteness of education from the thoughts and interests of the public is to be found in the mental attitude of the pedagogue—whether primary school teacher or college professor—toward the world outside the school" (p. 122). Bernays recognized the importance of shaping the public's perception of education and the important role educators play in positively influencing it.

Regarding higher education, he singled out university presidents' crucial role in public perception management:

> It may be a new idea that the president of a university will concern himself with the kind of mental picture his institution produces on the public mind. Yet it is part of the president's work to see that his university takes its proper place in the community and therefore also in the community mind, and produces the results desired, both in a cultural and in a financial sense. **If his institution does not produce the mental picture which it should** [emphasis added], one of two things may be wrong: Either the media of communication with the public may be wrong or unbalanced; or his institution may be at fault. The public is getting an oblique impression of the university, in which case the impression should be modified; or it may be that the public is getting a correct impression, in which case, very possibly, the work of the university itself should be modified. (Bernays, 1928b, p. 131-132)

Bernays assertion points to social construction principles in that he acknowledges the mental pictures (i.e., socially constructed realities) different people and groups hold can and do vary. He also pushes against relativism, a common gross mischaracterization of social construction, when he says "one of two things may be wrong", with both of the two things pertaining to one side misconstruing the other. In other words, while neither mental image represents absolute

truth, likely one needs more adjustment then the other. Social constructionism aside, the more important aspect of Bernays's assertion is the responsibility he places on the university leadership in winning over the hearts and minds of the public.

And while Bernays believed it was crucial for educators to appeal to the hearts and minds of the public and positively influence their perceptions, he did not believe the use of propaganda should take the place of what is more traditionally thought of as education. He made this point clear in his following assertion:

> **Under no circumstances should the engineering of consent supersede or displace the functions of the educational system** [emphasis added], either formal or informal, in bringing about understanding by the people as a basis for their action. **The engineering of consent often does supplement the educational process** [emphasis added]. If higher general educational standards were to prevail in this country and the general level of public knowledge and understanding were raised as a result, **this approach would still retain its value** [emphasis added]. (Bernays, 1947, p. 114-115)

We can call the engineering of consent, which he believed to be a supplement to the educational process, effective marketing. If effective marketing is too much of a business related term for some of my higher education readers, we can also call it effective communication. Or, how about we call it *genuine and effective emotionally compelling arguments*? Regardless of what we call it, effectively connecting with the public will always be necessary within education, as Bernays made apparent in his following claim:

> Even in a society of a perfectionist educational standard, equal progress would not be achieved in every field. **There would always be time lags, blind spots, and points of weakness; and the engineering of consent would still be essential** [emphasis added]. The engineering of consent will always be needed as an adjunct to, or a partner of, the educational process. (Bernays, 1947, p. 115)

In good times and in bad, there will likely always be misunderstandings between academia and the general public. Higher education can either sit back and let the misunderstandings fester into

larger and more difficult to control issues, or they can actively get involved in positively influencing the public's perception.

As a first step to influencing public perception Bernays believed it was critical to first gain a better understanding of what the public feels and thinks. He offered the following advice on how to go about doing just that:

> Here the specialist in swaying public opinion avails himself of the, findings of introspective psychology. **He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity. Analysis is the first step in dealing with a problem that concerns the public** [emphasis added]. (Bernays, 1928a, p. 961)

The purpose of my current research is to get a general sense of the basic emotions and desires of a subsection of the public as conveyed through online news comments, which I explore in more detail in the next section.

Online News Comments

Now that I have reviewed the literature on the public sphere, public opinion, emotion, and influence, it is time for me to turn my attention to the data source for my research, online news comments. In this section I place my literature review findings within subsections that mirror the prior four main sections starting with *a new public sphere*.

A New Public Sphere?

Habermas (1991) describes the press as "the public sphere's preeminent institution" (p. 181), and today much of that institution has moved online. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, eighty-one percent of Americans get at least some of their news from the internet (Mitchel, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). Another poll from the center found online news participators to "highly prize news sites that facilitate commenting on stories" (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010, p. 47). Some people see online commenting as a

potential means to more fully realize the ideals of the public sphere. For example, Chen (2017) believes "that comment streams have the potential to be the salons and cafes of days gone by, where people gathered together—drawn by the news—to talk about important issues of the day" (p. 11). In a similar vein, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) contend "This kind of high-tech interaction is a journalism that resembles conversation again, much like the original journalism occurring in the publick houses and coffeehouses four hundred years ago" (p. 25). News organizations have also recognized the public sphere like potential of online comments. According to a 2013 report by the World Editors Forum—a global organization representing 18,000 publications in more than 120 countries—"In many parts of the globe, **online comments have become an essential ingredient** [emphasis added] of a thriving news publication: readers feel that they have a right to make their contribution in **an online environment that is becoming increasingly more dialogue-based** [emphasis added] than one-way broadcasting" (Goodman, 2013, p. 5). One specific example, *The Wall Street Journal* sees public sphere like attributes within online commenting and a bright future for the dialogue mechanism, as made apparent by the following quote attributed to the paper:

> We're really ready for a more comment centric future. **It's democraticising** [emphasis added], and I think we should be held accountable, and for the journalistic excellence of our work. Our readers are relentlessly energetic and have a very discerning eye for what are the strengths and weaknesses of this content, so it makes us better journalists and our news organizations are much more plugged into the modern era. (as cited in Goodman, 2013, p. 65)

While the extent to which online comments are democraticising is certainly debatable, which I discuss a little later, it is clear many news organizations see their value in facilitating conversation.

Batsell (2015) insists the role of the twenty-first century journalist is not only to inform, "but to bring readers directly into the conversation through digitally powered techniques such as

real-time coverage, alternative story forms, crowdsourcing, beat blogging, ***user-generated content, and comment forums*** [emphasis added]" (p. 43). Research has begun to show the influence online comments and commenters have on the evolving role of newspapers and their journalists. For most journalists, comments have affected their work to some extent (Santana, 2011). Santana (2011) discovered that over 98 percent of reporters read online comments, with 37 percent of them indicating they read them "often". According to a 2016 report by the World Editors Forum, most news organizations believe online comments are important with fifty-three percent saying they add to the debate and provide new ideas, and forty-seven percent indicating the online conversations promote diverse opinions (Huang, 2016). In some cases commenting is a formal part of journalists' responsibilities, even linked to bonuses (Chen & Pain, 2017). In a recent study Chen and Pain (2017) interviewed 34 journalists from a range of news venues, including traditional newspapers and web-only publications. They found "a shift toward journalists embracing commenting and seeing reading comments and responding to them as an essential part of their job" (p. 887). However, some journalists still resist engaging in comments seeing it as potentially compromising their objectivity (Chen & Pain, 2017). According to Chen and Pain (2017), journalists are trying to figure out how to make online spaces more conducive to robust and civil dialogue. News organizations hope making commenting a formal part of journalists' work will result in higher quality online conversations (Ksiazek, 2015), and there is evidence to support their belief. In his analysis of 333,605 user comments from twenty news sites Ksiazek (2016) found journalist participation in the commenting to not only result in more comments, but also more civil discourse.

Online commenters are also affecting the content news organizations formally produce. For example, Nielsen (2014) found that 18.5 percent of editors are sometimes adding content in

anticipation of comments, while 5.4 percent are often or always doing so. Some reporters are excluding sources or avoiding writing about topics entirely out of fear commenters will inflict emotional harm upon them (Goodman, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Samuels, 2016). According to a quote attributed to *The Denver Post* (as cited in Goodman, 2013), "Some people say they are too scared to be quoted in an article because they are afraid of what commenters will say" (p. 13). There is also evidence showing commenters would like journalists to participate more in online discussions. For example, Stroud, Van Duyn, and Peacock (2016) found that 60.9 percent of people who either comment or read comments would like journalists to clarify factual questions presented within the comments. 40.5% would like journalist to be active in commenting and 26 percent would like journalists to direct the conversation (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016).

Online comments and the interaction between commenters and journalists are blurring the line between journalist and commenter. Chen (2017) calls online news comments "quasi-journalistic spaces" (p. 11), and along with her colleague Pain suggests "journalists are participating in 'reciprocal journalism'" (Chen & Pain, 2017, p. 876). According to a quote attributed to *The Times of India* (as cited in Goodman, 2013), "Commenting in a way is a form of journalism" (p. 11). Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang (2016) claim "it is perhaps not too far a stretch to say that commenting itself constitutes a kind of participation in journalism that places commenters at least within striking distance of the field" (p. 688). While acknowledging online news comments spaces can be "messy", McDermott (2016) argues they "can also be a space where thoughtful deliberations are presented, and where under-represented perspectives, particularly in terms of traditional media coverage, can be given a public platform" (p. 188), as evidenced by her research. However, even with opening the floodgates to mass communication within media, there appears to be some level of enduring respect for the institution of journalism

as we traditionally know it. In their analysis of online comments from three national news organizations over a span of two years, Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang (2016) found commenters to be at times "nostalgic" (p. 688) of traditional journalism norms.

Whereas the 2013 World Editors Forum report recognized the essentiality of online news comments, the more recent 2016 report acknowledged "In the three years since, newsroom resources have been under even greater pressure, and the temperature of online debate has risen significantly, posing real challenges for newsrooms trying to manage potentially brand-damaging and legally tricky comment sections" (Huang, 2016, p. 4). The challenges stem from the relaxing and diffusion of the traditional gatekeeping function news organizations have historically carried out. Regarding online news comments, Santana (2016) claims, "By providing the forums, journalists diffuse part of their gatekeeping responsibilities to non-journalist commenters, empowering them as secondary gatekeepers to decide what content appears alongside the news" (p. 141). And while eighty-two percent of the organizations surveyed still allow online commenting (Huang, 2016), some are attempting to reclaim their gatekeeping function by shutting down comment threads all together.

One example of a news organization turning off their online commenting feature is the news magazine *The Atlantic*. On February 2, 2018 Editor in Chief Jeffrey Goldberg (2018) announced the magazine was creating essentially an online version of the traditional letters to the editor section already present in its print edition. At the same time he made the following announcement regarding the magazine's online comment sections:

> We've also made the not-unrelated decision to close our comments section. Over the years, robust conversation in The Atlantic comments section has too often been hijacked by people who traffic in snark and ad hominem attacks and even racism, misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish invective.

> Instead of hosting these sorts of unhelpful, even destructive, conversations on TheAtlantic.com, we are choosing now to **elevate respectful, intelligent discourse and argument** [emphasis added]. **We want smart and critical readers** [emphasis added] to have a more visible role on our site, and we're looking forward to hearing from you, and publishing you. (Goldberg, 2018)

Goldberg's statement is a clear indication of *The Atlantic* reclaiming a more traditional gatekeeping role. Some people applauded the decision within the new online letters to the editor section. For example, Luddy Harrison from San Diego, California stated "I applaud your decision, and only wish that more online publications would follow your lead" (The Conversation, 2018). Others expressed disappointment in the decision. Tom Carroll of Chicago, Illinois who claims to have made over 15,000 comments said the decision was "baffling and disappointing" and that "One cannot have the same sort of think-on-your feet, conversational interactions via a curtailed letters section that one can have in a comments section exchange" (The Conversation, 2018). He went on to argue "The lack of spontaneity and opportunity for genuine exchange of ideas constitutes a serious step back" (The Conversation, 2018). Michael McElveen of Houston, Texas seemed to imply he would no longer be a patron of *The Atlantic* in his following statement:

> I make it a habit to not patronize any site that doesn't have a comments section. Your moderated letters section is no good to me. I don't want to see what you've deemed appropriate. I want unfiltered, raw, comments; in all their hateful, gory truth. How people respond to an article is just as interesting as the article itself. (The Conversation, 2018)

As Michael's statement points out, *The Atlantic's* criteria as to what constitutes respectful and intelligent discourse might differ from many of its readers. Even the most unsophisticated or vitriolic of comments may present valuable moments for dialogue and insight.

You may recall from my earlier section on social construction, the media plays an influential role in how people come to perceive the world. Traditional letters to the editor, whether in print or digital, limits the dialogue as well as public perception. Unless of course,

every single letter submitted makes it into the newspaper or magazine, which is clearly not the case. This can have a silencing effect on marginalized populations and reaffirm perceptions that might not be representative of the greater public. For example, in their research on traditional letters to the editor and online news comments in response to the Jena Six news story—a prominent case of racial tensions—McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012) found online comments to represent more balance in range and tone of arguments than did the letters to the editor. They contend the "Ability to post anonymous comments, the absence of media gatekeepers and a younger audience are potential reasons why online reader comments differed from reader letters" (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012, p. 303).

Some news organizations pick and choose which articles they allow commenting on. For example, on January 3, 2016 *The Chronicle of Higher Education* announced they were moving from a self-described laissez-faire approach to commenting—allowing commenting on almost everything with infrequent moderation—to allowing comments on only about a dozen articles per week with increased moderation (From the Editors, 2016). The editors claimed much of the conversation has moved to external social media, such as Facebook. They acknowledged the old approach "made for some freewheeling and fascinating discussions", but had "also produced threads that have bothered many readers" (From the Editors, 2016). They announced the mission of the increased moderation as "to publish the most valuable comments we receive—the ones that provide interesting insights, thoughtful questions, strong points, and cogent criticisms" (From the Editors, 2016). An interesting side-note, the article announcing the change to comments received 204 comments. While the decision to allow commenting on only certain pieces is not as outright of a reclaiming of the traditional gatekeeping role, it still is reclaiming it to a certain extent. In a recent study Santana (2016) investigated 2,100 news stories from fifty

news websites and found that controversial stories were less likely than non-controversial stories to include a comment section. By not allowing comments on controversial topics news organizations might preclude crucial, albeit likely uncivil conversations from occurring. Santana (2016) recognizes this possibility and claims "At the center of this pattern of forum exclusion is the paradox that the champions of free speech are, in their effort at reducing incivility, sometimes silencing the public and preventing public dialogue" (p. 151).

It is important to recognize controversial topics do not inherently preclude deliberation from occurring within online news comments. For instance, in her study where she analyzed 3,508 comments posted on news stories pertaining to the controversial topics of the 2016 presidential race, same-sex marriage, and the removal of the Confederate flag from government buildings, Chen (2017) found deliberation to occur more often than incivility. She even found that comments can be uncivil and deliberative at the same time (Chen, 2017). The comments she analyzed were from articles on the websites of *Fox News*, *Huffington Post*, *NBC News Digital*, *The New York Times,* and *USA Today*, whose audiences vary according to political viewpoints. Even though *The New York Times* is selective as to which articles it allows commenting on, its community manager Bassey Etim claims "If the news value of the story is high enough we will allow comments even if it's going to be a struggle to moderate" (as cited in Goodman, 2013, p. 18). By not allowing commenting on so-called controversial topics, news organizations might be preventing valuable deliberations from occurring.

Shanahan (2018) attributes part of the corrosion of online discourse to news organizations who neglect "their own leadership role as reliable conveners and moderators of public debate" (p. 9). Shutting down online comments or only allowing commenting on non-controversial topics seems to me a dereliction of journalist leadership, as Shanahan describes it. She believes

news organizations that have shifted their online conversations to Facebook or Twitter are simply passing the buck (Shanahan, 2016, 2018). Shanahan (2018) asserts "In my view, news outlets undermine journalism's critical role in modern democracy—and their own viability—when they ignore the digital conversations prompted by their content, when they shut down the forums they control, and when they pass responsibility for public discourse to third-party social media platforms" (p. 12-13). While fully recognizing the vitriolic nature of many if not most online comment threads, she provides the following warning to news organizations:

> If news companies and journalists don't prioritize interactive communication with their audiences or provide welcoming and productive places where their community members can talk with each other, the audience will organize itself and find other online feedback channels to engage, entertain themselves and call out uncomfortable truths. A hands-off approach digital conversation pushes the market away and further diminishes journalism's role in our hyperconnected democratic society. (Shanahan, 2018, p. 13)

Shanahan is not alone in her claims. Loke (2013), who investigated six thousand online reader comments made in response to the emotionally charged incident of the murder of a twenty-five year old Latino man, knows full well as to the hateful and uncivil rhetoric that can take place within commenting forums. And yet, she stands firm in her belief in the value of such spaces and the critical need for journalists to get involved, as she makes readily apparent in her following powerful claim:

> This slew of bigoted expressions existing on journalists' space now poses a new challenge and a new task for journalists. **It is crucial that journalists recognize the ongoing conversations in their society** [emphasis added]. Whether or not the certain perceptions abound because of racism or if it fueled racism, **it is the journalists' responsibility to understand the roots of these conversations and begin engaging their public in a meaningful conversation** [emphasis added]. This, however, is **not a direction to claim that the function of the online comments' section is merely to promote the truth according to journalists** [emphasis added], but rather **to understand how the process of a community's truth is constructed** [emphasis added], therefore allowing journalists to better know and serve their audience. (Loke, 2013, p. 193-194)

Loke's claim makes a number of important points. With all its faults, online comments represent an ongoing conversation. We can either ignore it or pay attention and work hard to engage in constructive dialogue. Also, that the socially constructed truth according to journalists might be different than the truth as perceived and understood by the public. Shutting down or ignoring online comments does not make incivility, hatred, bigotry, and ignorance magically disappear. Likely the only ways to quell online incivility and irrational online discourse is to either shutdown the internet entirely or look for ways to intervene, educate, and improve the ongoing dialogue.

News organizations appear to be recognizing that shutting down commenting or offloading it to popular social media platforms might not be such a good idea. For example, many have expressed concern that the issues with online comments do not disappear because people will simply find other venues to express their thoughts (Huang, 2016). Also, news organizations are concerned they might suffer a "loss of reader relationship and data, the lack of control and possibly, future sustainability" (Huang, 2016, p. 5). Some organizations, for example *The New York Times* and *Pakistan's Dawn*, have reaped such benefits as reader loyalty and business revenue by proactively maintaining their online comment forums (Huang, 2016). Moving online comments to external popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, may also result in deterioration in the quality of online dialogue. For example, in one study Rowe (2015) found the deliberative quality of reader comments left on *The Washington Post* website to be higher than those left on the organization's Facebook forum. He discovered the opinions expressed on Facebook to be homogenous, whereas *The Washington Post* website commenters expressed more ideological diversity (Rowe, 2015). Rowe (2015) arrived at the conclusion that "the trend toward Facebook news consumption is somewhat worrying" (p. 553) because it may

inhibit deliberation as compared to online news comments. Given the potential rich business value of online new comments, news organizations are striving to find ways to improve them.

Technology developers are actively thinking of ways to *improve* online commenting forums. I italicized the word *improve* because what technologists consider an improvement might be seen as a step back by another group. Li, Mueen, Faloutsos, and Hang (2016) have proposed a way to profile commenters as a means to proactively identify uncivil behavior. Logins and algorithms to filter out content deemed inappropriate are additional technological strategies (Erard, 2013; Ksiazek, 2015; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). A recent report produced by the World Editors Forum claims that "In general, publishers are also looking for technology with artificial intelligence and self-learning capabilities" (Huang, 2016, p. 18) as a means to moderate online news comments. Zamith and Lewis (2014) analyzed 126 idea submissions to a news innovation contest on how to improve online news comments. They were able to distil the data down to the following four themes on how to improve online comments: "a need to (1) better organize content, (2) moderate content more effectively, (3) unite disjointed discourse, and (4) increase participation while promoting diversity" (Zamith & Lewis, 2014, p. 567). And while on face value all of these ideas might sound like improvements, Zamith and Lewis recognize a perceived improvement may prove to be damaging. Zamith and Lewis (2014) believe low-cost and easy-to-build online commenting systems that would yield more robust and civil dialogue are a real possibility. However, they express concern that new systems might simply perpetuate existing issues, such as fragmentation (Zamith & Lewis, 2014).

An important thing to realize at this point, if it is not already obvious, is that for good or bad technology is constantly evolving. The shortcomings and flaws of commenting forums today might be resolved or exacerbated in the near future. As long as there is the potential to

generate valuable data about an organization's customers and improve its overall marketability and profitability, there will most likely be concerted efforts to "perfect" online commenting. For example, the Coral Project (2018)—a collaboration of the Mozilla Foundation, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*—seeks "to increase the diversity of voices and experiences reflected in news reporting, and to improve journalism by making it more relevant to people's lives." The project has already produced three open-source commenting products to help improve the discourses taking place on news websites (Coral Project, 2018). According to their website, the staff at the project have "interviewed more than 350 people in 150 newsrooms in 30 countries, as well as commenters, trolls, and people who never comment" (Coral Project, 2018) and they have an open invitation to talk to anyone and everyone.

The prevalence of incivility has resulted in the creation of professional roles as comment moderators. Some have described the comment moderator as "the dirtiest job on the internet" (Sax, 2011). According to Sax (2011), comment moderators can make between $40,000 to $80,000 a year, "but need to be prepared for daily exposure to humanity at its vilest" (para. 8). Given moderating comments can mean big business with news organizations outsourcing their filtering work to earning annual revenues in the millions of dollars (Sax, 2011), technologists and other professionals might be seeing dollar signs in their future.

Considering the vast multitude of news venues throughout the world utilizing the public discussion mechanism on a plethora of topics it is highly unlikely they are all vitriolic cesspools or all robust utopian democratic dialogues. The scale may at the moment tilt to the vitriolic, but that does not mean there are not pockets of real conversation occurring to positive ends. For example, Chen (2017) provides a more middle ground position in the debate as to whether or not online commenting is a public sphere in her proposed idea of "deliberative moments" (p. 11).

She defines deliberative moments as "brief forms of public deliberation, small bites, if you will, that offer some support for the ideals of free debate, inclusiveness of viewpoints, and discussions across difference encompassed by democratic deliberation" (Chen, 2017, p. 176). Chen argues "The value of these moments is that they open the door at least a crack to true discussion, even if that door shuts rather quickly if things escalate" (Chen, 2017, p. 177). Chen believes cracking the door open is definitely worth it and asserts "A partially open door is better than one that is perpetually shut" (p. 177). I tend to agree with her. The cracks she refers to might not occur without these online discussion spaces. Even if they did it is less likely we would know of their occurrence because they would take place offline and largely out of sight.

Public Opinion

To varying degrees, online news comments can be public sphere-like. According to Habermas (2006), the public sphere is "**a realm of our social life** [emphasis added] in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (p. 73). Note he says "a realm of our social life" and not "our social life in its entirety". This is an important distinction because public opinion need not be so expansive as to include all of society, but instead we can investigate and analyze it as it pertains to various realms. Bernays was aware of this nuance in what constitutes a public, which he made clear in his following assertion:

> There is today even another category of the public group which must be kept in mind by the engineer of consent. **The readers of the New Republic** [emphasis added] or the listeners to Raymond Swing's program are as much voluntary groups, **although unorganized** [emphasis added], as are the members of a trade union or a Rotary Club. (Bernays, 1947, p. 117)

Bernays considered the opinions of a public represented by the readers of a news publication, in this case the *New Republic*, as being an important group to understand the opinions and emotions of. In his day, the readers of a particular newspaper or magazine were unorganized in that it was

unlikely to know of others reading the same periodical outside of the people you personally knew. However, today with online news comments a highly visible level of organization among readers across geographic and demographic distances takes shape.

The Center for Media Engagement, formerly The Engaging News Project, at The University of Texas at Austin is producing some of the most extensive work on online commenters and the realm of social life they represent. In 2016 the Center published results from a survey, which included data "from 600 news commenters, 506 people who have not commented on news or read news comments, and 365 people who read news comments but have not themselves left a comment" (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016, p. 2). Based on their findings across various digital spaces, including news websites and social media, 55.3% of people post and read online news comments, 1.7% post but do not read them, 24.6% do not post, but read comments, and 20.2% do not post or read comments (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Most people post and read comments on social networking sites. However, 14.6% of people who have posted a comment have done so on a news site or app (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Also, 41.8% of people who read comments, but do not post them have done so via a news site or app (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). A slight majority, 50.7%, neither read nor post comments on news sites. However, the fact that there is a sizable percentage (35%) of people who do not post but read online comments on news websites shows the influence of online comments may extend well beyond simply the people who actually comment. Not to mention the fact that online news comments posted on news websites can be easily shared via Facebook, Twitter, and other common social networking platforms, thereby further extending the comments potential reach and influence.

Overall, people commenting and reading news comments are younger and more educated than people who do not (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). 62.3% of commenters and 70.8% of people who read comments but do not comment themselves have at least some college or more of higher education, whereas 48.3% of people who do not read or post comments have at least some college or more of higher education (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). 63.1% of commenters and 68.4% of comment readers have incomes of fifty thousand dollars or more, with 42.8% and 52.2% making more than seventy-five thousand respectively (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). 53.3% of commenters and 45.2% of comment readers are male (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). 63% of commenters and 65.5% of comment readers identify as white, non-Hispanic (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Overall, it appears the online news commenting public might be more diverse and affluent than one might expect.

Granted, online news commenters might not be representative of the general population, but there is much we can learn from them. For example, Henrich and Holmes (2013) contend "due to the high number of comments available on certain articles, they can reflect the perspectives of a large segment of the population" (p. 2). They claim, "Comments have the potential to increase our understanding of public opinions, how the public makes decisions and how beliefs are formulated, yet comments have only rarely been used as data" (Henrich & Holmes, 2013, p. 1). Along the same lines as Henrich and Holmes, Wolfgang (2018) makes the following pitch to journalists on the value of commenters and comments as a source of public opinion:

> But a comment has more substance than ratings and clicks and is based on an active audience model. Through providing interpretation, opinion, and analysis, the commenter fits a new channel of gatekeeping: a community sensemaker who helps with developing understanding of the news and constructing a shared vision of the world. The sensemaker furthers community interests by challenging others to reflect and think about their community, its values, and its goals. The journalist should see the sensemaker as a

> provider of public opinion, interpretation, and analysis and resist the urge to banish their commentary from their site. (Wolfgang, 2018, p. 35)

Wolfgang, as well as Henrich and Holmes, see comments as a valuable source of public opinion formation. A source rooted in conversation where people can challenge one another's opinions.

Online news comments have built-in advantages over other more traditional data sources. For instance, Taylor, Al-Hiyari, Lee, Priebe, Guerrero, and Bales, (2016) assert "In stark contrast to the reliance on self-report and questionably reliable memories that characterizes traditional research, user-generated content in the public domain allows researchers to observe actual behaviors and communications as they naturally unfold" (p. 565). In a similar vein, Mann and Stewart (2000) believe online communications is capable of being "more open, reactive and spontaneous than many traditional written accounts".

Given the often unfiltered and uninhibited nature of many comments, the online comment might reveal valuable insight into what people truly think and feel about a given topic. Features such as anonymity may make it easier for people to voice minority and perhaps unpopular ideas, and yes, uncivil remarks as well. However, online news comment forums might not be as disastrous and nonsensical as many might assume, as Loke makes clear in her following assertion:

> Although the research has shown that anonymity has indeed allowed some in the public to be more audacious online**, the overall content found in the comments sections are not just "haphazard rants of lunatics" as many journalists assume** [emphasis added]. There is no denying that some commenters relish in instigating shock, but a closer investigation of the comments indicated that though **the conversations may not contain the most sophisticated discourses, there exist reflections of society's pulse** [emphasis added]. (Loke, 2013, p. 194)

She goes even farther in her following assertion, making the claim that without online comments and all the vile that often comes with, we might not truly know and understand the varied public opinions that exist:

> We live in a society today that has long suppressed politically insensitive expressions. The suppression has been very successful in curbing outward expressions but it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to accurately measure the success in altering personal beliefs meant to result with the implementation of political correctness. **Publicly banning certain words, rejecting various ideas, and suppressing select discourses have only shifted bigoted ideologies into the private sphere** [emphasis added]. Now within the safety of anonymity in the public, readers' comments have allowed the public to be more flagrant in expressing a slew of politically incorrect expressions. **Readers' comments have unveiled a segment of the public, and the revelation is not an appealing one. Are journalists going to take the lead and attempt to make a difference, or are they going to force comments on an out-of-sight-out-of-mind path** [emphasis added]? (Loke, 2013, p. 194)

Regarding heated debates in higher education, instead of asking if journalists are going to take the lead and attempt to make a difference, we could ask are higher education leaders. Are online news comments and commenters representative of society as a whole? Of course not. But they do represent a particular realm of social life, as Habermas would refer to it, and can be revealing as to what that realm thinks and feels. Even if what online comments reveal is unappealing or even frightening, would it not be better to be aware of it then to naively pretend it does not exist? At least if we are aware of it, we can proactively seek to influence it in a positive more constructive direction. As Erard (2013) proclaims, "Dip into the comments, the American text genre of the moment, and you can sense the currents that move American life". If those currents are moving American life in the wrong direction, at least by being aware of it we can look to correct it.

According to McDermott (2016), while there exists considerable research about online media's potential as a public sphere, "little scholarly attention has focused on analyzing the public discourse that ensues within these types of deliberations about contemporary social, political and cultural issues" (p. 187). McDermott (2016) has used online comments as a public sphere to analyze and understand the Canadian public's understanding of the issue of children's physical activity habits. She analyzed 291 comments posted by 239 readers in response to a

CBCNews article on the matter. She described the use of online comments as providing "**an occasion** [emphasis added] to examine some of the Canadian public's deliberations and discussion" (McDermott, 2016, p. 178). I like how she says "an occasion" because while the online comments are not representative of the whole discourse taking place both on and offline, it does provide an occasion to learn about part of the conversation. In a similar fashion, Matthews (2015) utilized online blog comments as an occasion, to borrow McDermott's term, to observe arguments of climate change skeptics. In his study he did not attempt to address the arguments, but instead he simply identified the opinions (Matthews, 2015), recognizing the crucial first step in influencing the public as identified by Bernays: gain a better understanding of what the public thinks and feels (Bernays, 1928a).

Emotions

Shanahan (2018) argues "The condition that drive information sharing online indicate emotions rule" (p. 48). Online news comments are no exception. The number one reason people post online comments on news stories is to express an emotion or an opinion (Stroud, Van Duyn, Alizor, Alibhai, & Lang, 2017; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Given how interrelated emotions and opinions are we could easily say the number one reason is to express an emotional opinion. Chen (2017) believes "Commenting streams may just be a place where emotions escalate, as people try to assert deeply held moral convictions" (p. 178). She describes online news comments as a "debate unvarnished, exposing a jaundiced underbelly of emotion peppered with moments of rationality" (Chen, 2017, p. 117). Perhaps the most apparent evidence of emotions within online comments comes in the form of incivility.

Turkle (2015) claims our digital technologies are "implicated in an assault on empathy" (p. 4). She fears society has yet to fully contemplate the negative effects of its technological

vices. The prevalence of incivility in online communications, including online news comments, appear to lend credence to Turkle's claim. To describe how on the internet a seemingly typical person can degrade into an uncivil commenter, Reagle (2015) refers to the rather colorful "Internet fuckwad theory" which "posits that 'a normal person + anonymity + an audience = total fuckwad'" (p. 95). Indeed, many see anonymity as the main culprit behind online incivility. Shanahan (2018) claims "When rude, hateful and harassing comments smother the contributions of civil audience members, the comment stream ceases to become useful" (p. 7). In her new book *Online Incivility and Public Debate: Nasty Talk,* Assistant Professor of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin Gina Masullo Chen (2017) takes the following position on incivility:

> I argue that incivility is not something to be feared. Rather, it is a natural, yet undesirable, part of the human condition. In some cases, it is a necessary evil that we must tolerate to have the type of engaged electorate that informs a strong democracy, but some forms of incivility are so harsh that they offer no contribution to public discourse. (Chen, 2017, p. 4)

She claims incivility "oozes throughout society" (Chen, 2017, p. 4), and existed well before the Internet. A question I have pondered while reviewing the literature is whether the Internet has simply shined a spotlight on incivility that may have already existed, but was formerly festering within the shadows of society.

Chen (2017) contends, "Rather than wring our hands and wish for a mythical 'civil society,' I suggest that understanding how and when incivility operates helps us arrive at strategies to reclaim the online public debate" (p. 4). Chen is advocating for a more proactive and fully aware approach to addressing incivility, rather than the reactive approach of shutting down comments and hope incivility goes away. If we do not allow for incivility in our communications does it really go away? Or, does it simply become more hidden? And if it

becomes more hidden, could it potentially be getting even worse without our knowing it? These are of course, rhetorical questions. In my opinion, Locke (2013) draws acute attention to the potential danger of silencing or tampering down on heated online commentary in her following assertion:

> However, sanitizing language does nothing to actually modify the deeper rooted believes. **The change is merely cosmetic** [emphasis added]. (Locke, 2013, p. 193)

In other words, de-emotionalizing online comments and debates does not eliminate the emotions and beliefs held within the hearts and minds of the expressers.

Passion is important in debates. Chen (2017), recognizing the importance and power of emotion argues "it seems unlikely that people could make a reasoned argument, supported by fact, and open to others' viewpoints without feeling some passion on the subject" (p. 36). She believes in today's divisive environment "we cannot shut off debate, even if it is tremendously uncomfortable or hurtful at times" (Chen, 2017, p. viii). Wolfgang (2016) believes several deficiencies in news site commenting policies are a contributing factor to uncivil discourses, such as not explicitly "encouraging individuals to read postings of others before participating, to think critically about their positions first, and to try to build on the ideas of others rather than simply attacking other's positions" (p. 777). He argues news organizations should not only explicitly promote respectful dialogue within their policies, but also include "a defense of robust passionate political confrontation" (Wolfgang, 2016, p. 777), and should make their policies more readily visible.

On average news organizations delete about eleven percent of comments deemed offensive or spam (Goodman, 2013). However, not all organizations moderate their online forums, so the actual levels of incivility likely vary from site to site. Regardless of the level of incivility, there may be a hidden benefit to such discourse. For example, Chen (2017) believes

uncivil comments can motivate people to action. She calls this kind of response the "defensive effect" and describes it as follows:

> The defensive effect predicts that when people are confronted with uncivil disagreement— rife with name-calling, insults, or profanity— this begins a chain reaction. First, it stirs negative emotions, and then this emotional response triggers a defense mechanism, making them more likely to speak out or get politically involved in the issue. In essence, if the incivility boosts their negative emotions enough, it discounts a natural urge to stay quiet in the face of disagreement. (Chen, 2017, p. 181)

Chen (2017) has tested her defensive effect hypothesis on such heated online debates as abortion, gun control, climate change, same-sex marriage, removal of the Confederate flag, and the 2016 presidential election. The results of which suggest emotional responses, positive or negative, do prompt people to take some form of action, such as getting involved politically (Chen, 2017). However, if the level of incivility does not prompt a high enough emotional response it can result in a chilling effect on a person's intent to get involved (Chen, 2017). And while by no means does Chen encourage the use of incivility, she does recognize it can provoke people to get involved and take action, potentially to constructive ends.

I know many of my readers, like many people, probably avoid reading comments. They may assume all they are is hate filled speech with nothing to offer besides inciting anger. This assumption may actually be contributing to the incivility found in online comments. Chen calls for an attitude change in how people perceive online comments in her following hopeful assertion:

> However, what is even more vital is that attitudes about commenting streams should change. I hear so often from both journalists and friends that comment streams are cesspools. "Don't read the comments," they warn. But in analyzing thousands of comments, that is not what I found. Certainly, there was incivility. Comments made me cringe or wonder about the humanity of my fellow Americans. Some made me embarrassed for my country. **Many made me angry** [emphasis added]. Yet, so many comments offered thoughtful points or showed a populace that cares deeply about its country, its laws, and its people. Not every commenter was eloquent. Many could use a lesson in spelling and grammar. **But there was often heart in what was being said**

> [emphasis added], so that, more than anything else, I found writing this book gives me hope for the future of online discourse. (Chen, 2017, p. 182-183)

Online news comments may very well provoke strong negative feelings, such as anger and hostility. However, there is also, as Chen affirms, a lot of comments that show people care deeply about contested issues.

Influence

According to a report by the World Editors Forum, "several editors believe that their comments sections are being used by disguised politicians and political activists to spread their views" (Goodman, 2013). Regardless of whether people and organizations are or are not using them to manipulate the public, they are a potent venue to influence people or learn more about those one might want to influence, given it is an environment laden with emotion. Research has already begun to show the contagious effect users' comments can have on others. For example, Lee and Jang (2010) have found the comments of others to have a significant effect on the personal opinions of those less prone to analytical thinking. In a study conducted by Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, and Malinen (2015) they found participants exposed to prejudiced online comments were more likely to express prejudiced sentiments themselves, as opposed to participants exposed to anti-prejudiced ones. Chen (2017) claims "Trolls are fueled not by passion of their beliefs but by a desire to disrupt others with no real purpose except to humiliate" (p. 83), which in turn is a form of manipulation. You may recall from earlier that some journalists and editors are adding content in anticipation of comments (Nielsen, 2014), or excluding sources or avoiding writing about certain topics out of fear of retaliation from online commenters (Goodman, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Samuels, 2016). In effect, to an extent online commenters have shown the ability, whether knowingly or not, to manipulate what journalists report on.

News organizations can and do use online news comments to manipulate. By deciding whether to allow commenting or which comments are of value, they shape the discussion and public perception of the issues. Any change in gatekeeping has the potential to alter the way people talk about a given topic. Research has shown by having journalists actively engage with online commenters they can improve the civility of online conversations (Stroud, Muddiman, Scacco, Curry, & Peacock, 2014). As it turns out, a majority of commenters want journalists and experts to chime in to help improve the dialogue (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). While I am not aware of any existing research on the matter, it might be interesting to see if the active engagement of education leaders in online news comments—in particular on contentious education debates—might have a similar affect and result in more civil and rational discourses. Many people within higher education would fit within the category of experts, a particular group commenters want to hear from. Nevertheless, by simply learning more about the emotional opinions conveyed within various social realms—in the case of my research as represented within online news comments—we can take that first crucial first step in the process of proactively and positively influencing public sentiment on higher education, or perhaps changing our own.

CHAPTER 4: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

My framework consists of the following five components, which mirror my literature review: 1) the concept of the public sphere, 2) public opinion, 3) the power of emotion, 4) influence, and 5) online news comments. I have depicted my framework as a stacked Venn diagram in *Figure 1*. The outer three circles pertain to my following research questions:

- (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?
- (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?
- (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments?

The second innermost circle (Influence) gets at the significance of my research, and the innermost circle (Online News Comments) is the means through which I investigated my research questions.

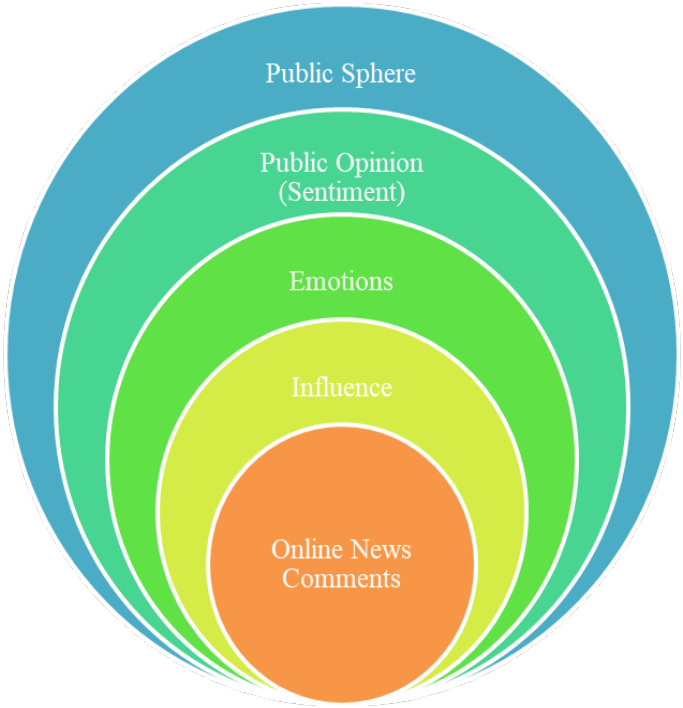

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

As the stacked diagram conveys, there are overlapping relationships among my framework components. You may recall from my prior chapter that Habermas (2006) defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (p. 73) in which all citizens can access. Within his definition alone we see the overlap of the constructs of public sphere and public opinion. Moving to emotion, the overlapping circles depict emotion as an integral component of public opinion. As we learned from my literature review, the study of emotion "is increasingly playing an important role in public opinion research" (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015, p. 133). If we want to understand and proactively shape public opinion, it makes sense to investigate public spheres and people's emotional opinions expressed and deliberated within. After all, Bernays (1928a) proclaimed, the specialist of influencing public opinion "knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity" (p. 961). Online news comments provide us with a novel and as of yet, underutilized mechanism for investigating public spheres, opinions, and emotions (Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Li, Mueen, Faloutsos, & Hang, 2016; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; McDermott, 2016; Trice, 2011).

In my research I analyzed online news comments accompanying popular press articles using my framework as a guide. I did so to determine the extent people are utilizing these digital forums as a means to engage in conversation and to explore what online comments might reveal about the opinions and emotions people express while talking about higher education. I realize the term "higher education" is a general one. Whereas scholarly conversations and research may home in on a specific finite aspect of a much larger and complicated phenomenon, day-to-day conversations among the public are likely more general in nature covering diverse aspects. I think many people have had the experience with friends or family where they find themselves

wondering how they ended up talking about something seemingly distant from the original starting point, given the tangential and organic nature of many conversations. There is no telling where a conversation will go once it starts. Whereas the first person to post a comment on a news story might be doing so in response to the article, subsequent commenters might be commenting on the comments left by other people. Or, they may be raising additional points and opinions directly or indirectly related to the original news piece. One person might be talking from the viewpoint of a community college whereas another from a research university or from any number of other perspectives. They might even bring up completely unrelated items. Such is the nature of conversation. Therefore, going into my research I did not have a razor-sharp focus on a finite aspect of the tension between higher education and the general public. I accepted that participants (i.e., online commenters) in the conversation likely come from very diverse perspectives and that the conversation may very well delve into areas not anticipated.

To provide focus to my research and analysis I selected four articles and their corresponding comments to serve as case studies within the following thematic areas of higher education discussions: technological transformation, international students, and free higher education. I selected an article from *The New York Times* for the theme of technological transformation, a *Wall Street Journal* article for international students, and two articles from both news outlets for the theme of free higher education. Just like with the term "higher education" my thematic areas are also broad topics. I selected articles not to serve as all-encompassing examples of each respective theme. Instead, each article represents an entry point to a conversation about the theme. Simply because an article represents an entry point to a conversation does not mean the conversation stays on topic. There exists the possibility some of the participants in the conversation do not even read the article that was the starting point of the

dialogue, but instead are just looking at and responding to the comments. However, after a preliminary review at the start of my research, I was able to determine each respective article did provide focus to the conversation.

I am not the first to utilize online news comments as an entry point to much larger conversations. In her research McDermott (2016) utilized online comments made in response to a single news article about children's physical activity habits in Canada. While the 291 comments posted by 239 readers is not representative of the entire Canadian public it did provide "**an occasion** [emphasis added] to examine some of the Canadian public's deliberations and discussion" (McDermott, 2016, p. 178). In a similar fashion, Bell and Sanderson (2016) analyzed 114 reader comments made in response to a *New York Times* op-ed written by Dr. Bennet Omalu. Dr. Omalu, widely known for having discovered chromic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in deceased National Football League players' brains, as well as for having his discovery portrayed in the critically acclaimed movie *Concussion* starring Will Smith, argued in his opinion piece that children should not play tackle football (Bell & Sanderson, 2016). Bell and Sanderson utilized the 114 online news comments as an occasion, to use McDermott's term, to observe the tensions the public wrestles with regarding sports safety. In addition to observing and identifying the public deliberation on the topic, they also utilized the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) software program to measure the emotional tone (i.e., positive or negative) of readers' comments. Morehead, O'Hallarn, and Shapiro (2016) investigated online news comments to observe the public debate on a new football stadium proposal at Old Dominion University, while Laestadius and Caldwell (2015) turned to online news comments to understand public perceptions of *in vitro* meat. These are just some of the

examples of researchers using news articles and the ensuing online news commentary as an entry point to a much larger conversation.

Similar as in the research just mentioned, my research focus was less about the articles I selected then it was about the conversations which ensued and the emotional opinions conveyed within. I utilized the comments initially prompted by the four articles I selected as four occasions to examine the online deliberations of the public. The study of online news comment forums may reveal valuable insights that extend beyond the online comments regarding public opinion. For example, in a study where they compared three approaches of capturing public opinion on public health topics Giles and Adams (2015) found analysis of online news comments to reveal similar insights as systematic reviews and focus groups did. They concluded that online news comments are a robust data source yielding certain benefits over more traditional methods to opinion analysis, such as being a quicker and cheaper alternative (Giles & Adams, 2015). Unlike more traditional methods, such as in focus groups or interviews, the study of online comments allows researchers to witness conversations as they organically unfold (Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Taylor, Al-Hiyari, Lee, Priebe, Guerrero, & Bales, 2016). In my research I tapped into this rich, yet mostly overlooked source of data to peer into public conversations about higher education. In the next chapter I share the methods I utilized to do so.

CHAPTER 5: METHODS

For my study I utilized a multi-methods approach to address my following research questions for each of my cases:

- R1: (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?
- R2: (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?
- R3: (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments?

In what follows I first provide an overview of my case selection and data. Second, I discuss my rationale for a multi-methods approach. Third, I discuss specifics on each of the methods I employed organized by research question. I conclude by detailing limitations of my study.

Overview of Case Selection and Data

Schreier (2012) contends "because in-depth case-oriented research is very time-consuming, qualitative studies typically include only a few cases, sometimes as few as one case only (the single-case study)" (p. 26). For the purpose of my study I selected four news articles, two from both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and their ensuing online news commentary as my cases. Each article represents an entry point to a conversation about one of the following three higher education themes: technological transformation, international students, and free college. As you may recall from my framework section, the articles I selected are by no means all-encompassing examples of each respective theme. Instead, each article represents an entry point to a conversation about the theme. I utilized the online comments made

in response to each article as four occasions to examine the online conversations and emotional opinions of the virtual publics that take shape in online commenting forums.

For my technological transformation theme I selected an article from *The Times*, for international students an article from the *WSJ*, and for free college an article from both online newspapers. Smith (2010) identifies *The Times* and the *WSJ* as "examples of central, prestigious elements of legitimate public discourse in the United States and thus fixtures of the core public sphere" (p. 12). He believes readers of such media "typically see themselves as opinion leaders and often are seen in this way by others" (p. 14). The *WSJ* and *The Times* rank number two and three respectively in circulation behind only *USA Today* (Cision Media Research, 2019). *The Times* has the fifth most popular news website and the *WSJ* has the eleventh most popular (eBizMBA, 2020). Both websites allow for online commenting on a select number of articles and moderate their comment forums.

While articles can be about any topic, controversial topics often generate a high volume of comments (Liu, 2016). Each of my selected articles received a considerable number of online comments, comparable to the number of comments used in similar studies (see McDermott, 2016; Bell & Sanderson, 2016). Not all comments were retrievable at the time I captured the data for analysis purposes, likely due to either commenters deleting their accounts or their comments. For example, in the case of the *WSJ* the message "This commenter has reset their account" appeared at times within the forum in place of an actual comment. I captured all retrievable comments and pertinent details into spreadsheets. I then used QDA Miner Lite and Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) in my analysis processes. I present additional details on each article's respective comments in chapter 7.

Rationale for Multi-Methods Approach

Dahlberg (2004a) asserts quantitative approaches to researching the public sphere "result in a serious loss of meaning" because there are important aspects of the phenomenon that are "less amendable to quantification" (p. 31). This serious loss of meaning necessitates the use of qualitative research if one is to develop a more thorough understanding of the public sphere under investigation (Dahlberg, 2004a). However, a qualitative approach by itself often results in "vague or generalist" evaluations of a given public sphere (Dahlberg, 2004a). Dahlberg (2004a) claims neither approach, quantitative or qualitative, by itself "is adequate for enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the extent online communicative practices facilitate the public sphere" (p. 32). I agree with Dahlberg's argument and I believe the same is true for arriving at a comprehensive evaluation of public opinion (sentiment), the result of the public sphere. As such, I utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods in my research.

Qualitative research fits nicely with a social construction research perspective in that it recognizes people looking at the same data can arrive at varying interpretations (Schreier, 2012). As such, objectivity as a criterion is not upheld within qualitative studies (Schreier, 2012). However, my use of quantitative content analysis methods serves to mitigate some of the subjectivity inherent in qualitative studies.

R1: Methods

My first research question is as follows: (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums? The method I employed in addressing this question was a deliberation index developed by Gina Masullo Chen. Chen serves as "an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Associate Director of the Center for Media Engagement in the Moody College of Communication at UT Austin" (Gina

Masullo Chen, 2020). She derived her index on what she refers to as deliberative moments. Chen (2017) defines a deliberative moment as "brief forms of public deliberation, small bites, if you will, that offer some support for the ideals of free debate, inclusiveness of viewpoints, and discussions across difference encompassed by democratic deliberation" (Chen, 2017, p. 176). Deliberative moments are instances of the ideals of the public sphere manifesting, if only momentarily. In her research, Chen (2017) developed a deliberation index based on the presence of evidence or legitimate questions in a comment. She coded the presence of evidence in a comment as a one and the presence of a legitimate question(s) also as a one, for a total possible deliberation index of two per comment (Chen, 2017). I utilized Chen's deliberation index in my research as a means to determine if the ideals of the public sphere are present within the online comments I analyzed. I based the following description of what I considered evidence off prior work by Chen (2017), Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, and Curry (2015), Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014), and Stromer-Galley (2007).

Evidence

If a commenter provides a hyperlink, describes information from other sources (e.g., "According to…"), utilizes numbers or figures, cites the source article, or provides a personal example or story, I coded it as evidence regardless of whether or not the evidence was true.

I based the following description of what I considered legitimate questions on Chen's (2017) work.

Legitimate questions

I will deem any question or questions a commenter poses that does not contain any elements of incivility as legitimate. An example of uncivil non-legitimate question is "Why are you such an idiot?"

After I coded each comment for elements of deliberation, I then calculated an average deliberation index for each respective comment forum.

R2: Methods

My second research question is as follows: R2: (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling? Admittedly, this question was the most difficult for me to address methodologically. And before I describe my approach, it is important that I first describe why I found this question most difficult to address.

It has been my contention throughout my study that public opinion is rooted in conversation. I base my argument on scholars, such as Herbst (1993, 2011b), Hauser (1999), Blumer (1948), Habermas (1996; 2006), Tarde (2010), and Shepard (1909), who view conversation as foundational to public opinion. However, my study is not a conversation analysis. In a conversation analysis, one "looks for detailed qualitative evidence of how participants work to organize their interactions endogenously within each specific situation" (Albert, 2018, p. 99). Detailing the organization of participant's interactions is not the purpose of my study. Nevertheless, as I have argued and supported via the literature, online comments represent a kind of conversation, one that is the data source for my research.

Herbst has long been an advocate for a return to conversation in the study of public opinion. In her historical assessment of public opinion research, she made the following argument:

> Conversation is difficult to study: It is dynamic and complicated. Observing political discussions is also incredibly labor intensive. Yet if we are really interested in public opinion formation-how people arrive at opinions through their contact with media and with friends-we must take conversation more seriously. (Herbst, 1993, p. 144-145)

Having spent considerable time swimming in, at times drowning in the online comments, I can attest to Herbst's (1993) assertion that studying conversation is not an easy feat. Comments are messy. They are messy because within very basic community guidelines that uphold a level of civility, commenters can talk about pretty much anything. And while commenters within the forums I investigated stayed mostly on topic—that is they talked about aspects of higher education—they did not limit their discussion to any one aspect. Often commenters would offer multiple opinions within a single comment. Some commenters posted multiple times, offering varying shades to their sentiment. Multiple opinions within a given comment, as well as opinions on varying but related aspects of higher education, makes it very difficult to place commenters sentiment into neatly demarcated opinion poll like responses (e.g., strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, etc.). In fact, doing so would run counter to my public opinion as conversation rationale I have stressed. What I needed was flexible qualitative guidance that would allow me to address the sentiment texture within the online comments, which I found in interpretive description.

Sally Thorne (2016), one of the original developers of the method, describes interpretive description as follows:

> Interpretive description is a strategy for excavating, illuminating, articulating, and disseminating the kind of knowledge that disciplines with an application mandate tend to need in order to enact their mandate—whether it be healing, educating, serving, or building something on behalf of society. Such work is fundamentally complex and messy, often representing the kinds of wicked problems that defy whole or coherent theorizing and demand instead a multiplicity of insights, perspectives, and approaches, used intersectionally together within increasingly dynamic contexts. (p. 11)

Rather than try to force one's research into the prescribed confines of a given method, interpretive description allows for flexibility. It is as Sandelowski (2016) states, "In the 'real' world of inquiry, methods are not the fixed entities with unbending rules for implementing them

they are depicted as being in the methods literature" (p. 19). In my work, I took guidance from Thorne and colleagues' work on interpretive description, as well as qualitative content analysis (QCA) as a supporting method.

Thorne (2016) states, "Because interpretive description locates itself outside the social science theoretical tradition, it does not hold with the conventional requirement that all studies must be explicitly positioned within one or another formal theory" (p. 70). You will no doubt notice, if you have not already, that I have not explicitly positioned my study within any given formal theory. Instead, my work is guided by the multiple perspectives and insights I explored within my literature review. Regarding my second question, the flexibility in which interpretive description affords allowed me to move past the minutia of strict adherence to a given methodology or theory.

According to Thorne (2016), "the object of an interpretive description study will typically be in the range of a thematic summary or a conceptual description" (p. 182). For my study, I employed thematic summaries as a means to convey the opinions commenters expressed within the online comment forums. To arrive at my themes I first coded all retrievable comments from my selected comment forums. Thorne, Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes (1997) believe "complex coding systems, such as those that encourage multiple codings for all pieces of raw data, often overwhelm the researcher with detail to the point that inductive interpretation becomes almost inconceivable" (p. 174). As someone relatively new to conducting research, I admit I became overwhelmed with coding at the beginning of my work. It was as if I was approaching my analysis from the belief that every single detail in the comments was fascinating and important and needed to make it into my findings. I took Thorne's (2016) advice "to consider some of the formal coding techniques that have been generated in relation to other

forms of qualitative research, and in some instances to draw inspiration (if not direct authority) from them" (p. 159), and turned to qualitative content analysis for guidance.

A key characteristic of qualitative content analysis is its ability to reduce data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012, 2014). This characteristic of the method made it particularly suitable for taking hundreds of comments representing potentially hundreds of opinions and reducing them into a more manageable number of opinion themes. In following with interpretive description guidance, I utilized an inductive approach to my analysis (Thorne, 2016; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). That is, I let the opinion themes emerge from the data. It was not until after coding, re-coding, interpreting, and reinterpreting the comments, as well as forcing myself to view things from a higher level, rather than too granular of one, was I able to arrive at a set of opinion themes for each of my cases. Within each theme I share vignettes from the comments as a means of providing texture to the theme and to highlight certain content, which is typical of qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012).

R3: Methods

My third research question is as follows: (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments? The method I employed in addressing this question was sentiment analysis via. Sentiment analysis is a new research area resulting from the proliferation of recorded opinion made possible by the internet and various forms of social media (Liu, 2016). Liu (2016) defines sentiment analysis as "the field of study that analyzes people's opinions, sentiments, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions toward entities and their attributes expressed in written text" (p. 1). The analysis of emotions, which falls within the realm of sentiment analysis (Liu, 2016), is the focused use within my research study. The terms "sentiment analysis" and

"opinion mining" are often used interchangeably, leading to some confusion among researchers (Liu, 2016). While the words "sentiment" and "opinion" have similar definitions, sentiment is more closely associated with a feeling, whereas opinion is more of a concrete view (Liu, 2016). For the purpose of this research, I used sentiment analysis to identify feelings (i.e., emotions) conveyed in online comments, and qualitative content analysis to identify and describe broad opinion themes within the online conversation.

Social Psychologist and Distinguished Professor James Pennebaker (2011) asserts "the words people generate in their lifetimes are like fingerprints" (p. x). He believes there is "a revolution under way in the analysis of language that will have a profound effect on the social sciences and humanities" (p. x). Pennebaker, whose work focuses on natural language use and the psychology revealed through one's words, believes words "can be thought of as powerful tools to excavate people's thoughts, feelings, motivations, and connections with others" (p. xi). Research has shown that basic word count analysis can provide much greater insight into the psychological realities participants exist within than what multiple-choice questionnaires typically reveal (Mehl, 2006).

The reliance on judges to rate people's writing based on a set of dimensions results in frequent disagreements on ratings, increased expenses in both time and money, and can even negatively affect the judges' emotional states (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). To address these challenges, James Pennebaker and Martha Francis developed the pioneering text analysis program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, or LIWC (pronounced "Luke") for short (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). LIWC is a simplistic and yet powerful tool for understanding the emotional states people convey in the words they use. Mehl (2006) contends LIWC is "an extensively validated solution" for researchers interested in "low-level psychological constructs"

(p. 152), such as emotions, and considers it to be one of the most influential quantitative text analysis approaches in psychological research. The program utilizes a predetermined dictionary resulting from a rigorous multi-step, multi-year development process. Please see Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, and Blackburn (2015) for a thorough explanation of the process, as well as corresponding reliability statistics. Within the dictionary, words fall under one or more categories and subcategories, such as *negative emotion*. By comparing each individual word within a text against a predetermined dictionary, the program is able to produce word counts for various dimensions, such as words conveying positive or negative emotions (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015).

The original purpose of the program was to determine percentages of positive and negative emotion words and basic cognitive dimensions within a given text (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), but the number of dimensions capable of being analyzed by the program quickly grew. Now in its fourth edition called LIWC2015, the program's dictionary consists of "almost 6,400 words, word stems, and select emoticons" (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015, p. 2), and produces almost ninety output variables per data file. New to the 2015 version are four summary variables, including one for emotional tone (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). Apart from the summary variables and the total word count and word count per sentence variables, LIWC calculates all variables as a percentage of total words (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015). Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, and Blackburn (2015) emphasize "the summary variables are the only non-transparent dimensions in the LIWC2015 output" (p. 6).

The use of LIWC is more reliable than the use of human experts in the analysis of text, in that experts may disagree in their analysis, whereas LIWC produces the same results regardless

of who runs the analysis (Pennebaker, 2011). This does not mean the software program is perfect in its analysis. LIWC, like other word count programs, does not consider context and is unable to detect sarcasm or irony (Mehl, 2006; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). And while LIWC has been found to accurately identify emotions in writing (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), Tausczik and Pennebaker urge caution on relying "too heavily on accurately detecting people's true selves through their use of words" given "the study of word use as a reflection of psychological state is in its earliest stages" (p.30). Despite these limitations, Mehl (2006) contends over the past fifty years "word-count approaches have repeatedly demonstrated their potentials in virtually all domains of psychology" (p. 154).

For my study I utilized the aptly named summary variable *emotional tone*. Pennebaker Lab developed an algorithm derived from extensive prior research, which calculates the emotional tone of a given text (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). The precise algorithm is not available "due to prior commercial agreements" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015). Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, and Francis (2015) describe the emotional tone summary variable as follows:

> Emotional tone -- a high number is associated with a more positive, upbeat style; a low number reveals greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility. A number around 50 suggests either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence. (p. 22)

I used the emotional tone variable in LIWC to assess the emotional intensity within the online comments.

The scores I calculated via LIWC do not represent negative or positive emotions within any particular theme I identified while addressing my second research question. Such an allocation of scores would involve a level of complexity outside the scope of this study. This is because of the data reduction inherent to qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016;

Schreier, 2012, 2014). Regarding my research, I distilled the numerous opinions expressed within the comments down to set of salient themes. A level of detail and nuance within the comments was, of course, lost during this process. This lost detail and nuance, which is inherent to QCA, makes applying LIWC scores to particular themes within my research potentially problematic. This is because the lost nuance could affect the LIWC scores in not readily apparent ways if applied at the opinion theme level, which could result in misleading findings.

My emotional tone findings also do not reveal the focus of the sentiment within a given comment. In other words, the way I applied LIWC to address my third research question do not indicate whether one's emotions, positive or negative, are directed at another commenter, a particular point made within the forum, the author(s) of the article, the news outlet, or some other aspect one might express feelings on. While such an analysis is within the realm of possibility, it was outside the scope of my study. My use of LIWC was simply to determine the basic prevalence and intensity of emotions within the online comment forums I investigated, which Bernays (1928a) argued is a crucial step if one wants to proactively sway public opinion.

Limitations

With any study come limitations. I have already alluded to some of the limitations to my research within the descriptions of my methods I provided. For example, regarding the deliberation index I use to address my first research question I indicated I made no attempt to verify the legitimacy of evidence commenters provided. My decision not to do so is in line with similar work done by Chen (2017). This means commenters may be providing false evidence, which is still included in my deliberation index calculations. Future research might differentiate legitimate from illegitimate evidence, as well as to try to determine if commenters intentionally gave false information.

Regarding my second question, my interpretive description inspired approach also has limitations. Thorne, Kirkham, and O'Flynn-Magee (2004) assert, "By virtue of its reliance on interpretation, interpretive description cannot yield 'facts' but rather 'constructed truths'" (p. 6). In other words, another person may very well arrive at a different interpretation or *constructed truth* than mine. According to Thorne, Kirkham, and O'Flynn-Magee (2004), "The degree to which those constructions are viable and defensible for their intended purpose (that of offering the practice disciplines an extended or alternative understanding) will depend on the researcher's capacity to present them in a manner that transforms raw data into a structure that makes aspects of the phenomenon meaningful in some new and useful way" (p. 6). As such, I have strived to provide meaningful thematic summarizations of the data, supported by quotes from the comments, to enhance the viability and defensibility of my interpretations.

My use of automated sentiment analysis to address my third question also comes with limitations. Sentiment analysis is not perfect. While I am using one of the most influential quantitative text analysis approaches in psychological research, LIWC, as well as sentiment analysis in general, is not perfect (Mehl, 2006). As I indicated earlier, the program is unable to consider context and is unable to detect sarcasm or irony (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Additionally, Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010) urge caution against reading too much into LIWC's results, given "the study of word use as a reflection of psychological state is in its earliest stages" (p.30). My use of LIWC in my research is in the most basic sense. I am using it to provide a general indication as to the overall emotional tone within the comments.

As with any public, there are of course people who are members, as well as those who are not. For example, the digital audience of *The Times* consists of forty-seven percent male and fifty-three percent female, with a median age of 48 and median household income of $96,000

(The New York Times media kit, 2019). Whereas the *WSJ* consists of sixty-two percent male and thirty-eight percent female, with a median age of 43 and average household income of $242,007 (The Wall Street Journal, 2017). The gender, age, and income metrics alone provide us a glimpse as to who is part of, as well as excluded from these particular publics. Not to mention, to be part of these digital publics one needs an internet connection and there remains a persistent digital divide.

The lack of generalizability of my findings is a limitation. My work is informed by public opinion scholarship, as well as by other scholarly disciplines. However, nowhere within my dissertation do I make the claim that the opinions expressed within the comments are representative of public opinion in the grandest sense of the word "public." Instead, I have gone to great lengths to demonstrate via the literature that society is made up of a multitude of publics. Readers, or in my case, commenters, of a particular news organization represent a kind of public. Even still, I make no claim of my results being generalizable to commenters as a whole for *The Times* or the *WSJ*. A more extensive study of commenters within both news venues might be able to make legitimate generalizations as to their tendencies, whether from a deliberation, opinion, or emotional perspective. Such generalizations might add value to our understanding of opinion, sentiment, and conversation within *The Times's* and *WSJ's* digital public spheres. Generalizability was never the intent of my study. However, that does not mean we cannot glean valuable insight from such publics, which may assist us when engaging with the broader public in general.

CHAPTER 6:

THE EVOLUTION OF A DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF THE NY TIMES ONLINE COMMENTS

The print edition of *The New York Times* began in 1851 and in 1996 the company launched its website (The New York Times Company, 2019). Last year its website had a monthly average of 94 million unique visitors within the U.S. and 134 million globally (including the U.S.) (The New York Times Company, 2019). Annual revenues decreased from 3.29 billion dollars in 2006 to 1.55 billion in 2011 (New York Times Revenue, 2019). The company reported increases in revenues over the past two years, reporting 1.74 billion dollars for 2018 (New York Times Revenue, 2019). Today, the newspaper has approximately 4.3 million print and digital subscriptions, spanning 217 countries and territories (The New York Times Company, 2019). Digital-only subscriptions increased by 716,000 last year, and are now at roughly 3,360,000 (The New York Times Company, 2019). As one of the most acclaimed newspapers, *The New York Times* has amassed more Pulitzer Prizes and citations than any other news organization, with 127 as of 2019 (Awards and recognition, 2019).

As of April 2018, 39% of people find *The Times* to be either very trustworthy or trustworthy, while 30% find it to be untrustworthy or very untrustworthy (YouGov, 2018b). *The Times* is the fifth most popular news website, based on unique monthly visitors (eBizMBA, 2018). Only *Yahoo News*, *Google News*, *The Huffington Post*, and *CNN* rank higher (eBizMBA, 2018). It is the most popular news brand in the U.S., reaching 26% of consumers (Verto Analytics, 2018). In comparison, *CNN*, *Fox News*, and *The Washington Post* reach 25%, 22%, and 21% respectively (Verto Analytics, 2018). When asked if *The Times* is a friend or an enemy of America, 19% of people said “ally”, 25% said “friendly”, 19% said “unfriendly”, 16% said

"enemy", with the rest indicating they were "not sure" (YouGov, 2018a). *The Times* is by far the most popular daily newspaper on Facebook, having received 14.8 million likes as of October 2017 (Cision, 2018). *USA Today* is the second most popular, with 8.61 million likes (Cision, 2018). 77% of Democrats and 45% of Republicans consider *The Times* to be very/somewhat credible (Richter, 2017). In a public opinion poll conducted by Gallup and the Knight Foundation (2018), when asked to identify an objective source of news, 3% of people mentioned *The Times*, whereas 24% mentioned *Fox News*.

The digital audience of *The Times*, which is the population of interest in this study, consists of forty-seven percent male and fifty-three percent female, with a median age of 48 and median household income of $96,000 (The New York Times media kit, 2019). Seventy-five percent of *The Times* digital audience consumes content exclusively on mobile devices (The New York Times media kit, 2019). Millennials represent one third of the digital readership (The New York Times media kit, 2019). *The Times* offers discounted subscription rates for students, faculty, and entire educational institutions. Even if one is not a reader of *The Times*, it is difficult to escape its influence as their journalists and other contributors are frequent guests on twenty-four hour news networks and talk shows, and its content is widely shared via various forms of social media.

The Times has established a strong and robust digital foothold on the internet, both in terms of website popularity, digital community, and social media reach. It is an accomplishment that was not free of growing pains. Online commenting at *The Times* began in late 2007 (Long, 2017a). The organization only allows commenting on certain articles, typically for no longer than twenty-four hours on any given article, and up until 2017 a team of twelve to fourteen staff manually reviewed the majority of comments (Etim, 2017a; Long, 2017a; The NY Times Co.,

2016). They do so to help foster and ensure civil discussions (Comments, 2019; Etim, 2017a). And while today the global news industry considers *The Times* to be an organization that has reaped benefits from proactively maintaining its online conversations, such as reader loyalty and revenues (Huang, 2016), it too is a digital feat that took time and concerted effort throughout the organization. One scholar's ethnographic study provides us with insight into *The Times* as it sought to begin online conversations and build relationships with its digital audience.

A detailed account of the inner workings of *The Times* and the challenges it faced during the beginning of its digital transformation comes from Nikki Usher, Associate Professor of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. For five months at the beginning of 2010, she embedded herself in *The Times* newsroom, spending over seven hundred hours observing, interviewing management, journalists, and support staff, and attending meetings (Usher, 2014). Through her ethnographic research, Usher (2014) explored how the new values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation were orienting the work of journalists in an online world. Immediacy being the pressure to get fresh content online fast and often, interactivity being user-computer interaction, and participation being "user-to-user communication and actual content creation" (Usher, 2014, p. 16). And while Usher's account of the emergence and struggle with all three values within the newsroom is fascinating, it is her account of the value of participation that is most pertinent within the context of online commenting.

Back in 2010, participation with its audience was a contentious matter at *The Times*. Usher described the situation as follows:

> Inside the newsroom, participation was contested in a variety of ways. Many journalists acknowledged this supposedly new relationship with the audience but did not deem it worth their time. I want to stress that inside *The Times*, participation was almost entirely understood as engagement on social media platforms, not as commenting, not as blogging, not as live-chats, not as emails, and not as user-generated content. But perhaps more significantly, the actual implementation of participation as a value *at work* in the

> newsroom suggested that journalists did have far more power than the ordinary person to contribute to creating and shaping the conversation. Journalists at *The Times*, at least, weren't too sold on this two-way conversation. The conversation was for *them*, not for us. (Usher, 2014, p. 20)

Usher (2014) went so far as to say, "Journalists, for the most part, seemed fairly ignorant that audiences could quite possibly be citizen contributors to the news-making process" (p. 214). For the most part, journalists viewed participation simply as a means to raise their profile within the news world, and not to actually engage in dialogue with their readers (Usher, 2014).

Usher shares a story about journalist Graham Bowley, a financial news reporter at *The Times*, as he frantically worked on a 2010 online piece about Goldman Sachs. Bowley requested commenting be turned on for his article because he knew it would mean his piece would remain on the homepage longer than if it did not allow commenting (Usher, 2014). One of the reasons being the amount of work *The Times* puts into moderating its comment forums (Usher, 2014). The following vignette from Usher illustrates Bowley's conception and struggle with participation as a new value within the organization:

> Bowley knew that people wanted to talk about the Goldman story and that *The Times* could be the place for them to air their views. But part of his reason for requesting that comments be turned on had more to do with knowing that the story would then stay up longer on the home page. It didn't seem to me as though Bowley had much interest in what the comments might say (though they weren't turned on, so I couldn't actually be sure), just so long as they were there. Thus, Bowley seemed to understand the idea of the active reader, but to him, participation didn't include actually talking back. Participation was messy, too: Should he answer all those emails? When should comments be turned on? What was his role in all of this? (Usher, 2014, p. 64)

Part of what made participation messy and prevented two-way participation at *The Times* from happening was a lack of messaging "from the top of the editorial food chain" (Usher, 2014, p. 196). Usher (2014) shares, "As community editor Vanessa Schneider explained to me, journalists could go all day without engaging in any kind of interaction with readers (even just

the basics, from comments to emails or newer tools like Twitter), in part because the institutional buy-in at the top hadn't been made clear" (p. 196).

Usher's (2014) stay at *The Times* made her concerned that the journalists were missing "an excellent opportunity to get to know their audience better" (p. 204). She was critical of the organization for doing very little regarding "bringing the audience into the newsroom as participants, learning what they might have to say about the news, or taking advantage of this new forum to improve coverage" (p. 204). Usher clearly sees the value and insight the public has to offer on topics of concern. Upon completing her ethnographic study, she offered her following vision for the newsroom:

> In my ideal world, this newsroom would be one where more than just one editor would be assigned the job of community editing, with the role of aggregating and creating community conversation. Instead of pushing out questions and articles on Facebook, someone would actually answer questions and guide conversation on these platforms—and respond to comments, as well. (Usher, 2014, p. 235)

Usher went so far as to issue a forceful recommendation to *The Times* as to how it views and treats its audience:

> *The Times* is going to have to rethink its relationship with this audience. The newspaper is going to have to balance its desire for control over the brand with the need to have genuine, personal relationships with readers. And somehow, this has to be scalable for an audience of thirty million, so this relationship can feel authentic to each member. This is a tricky proposition. (Usher, 2014, p. 239)

She saw the value of participation as critical to *The Times's*, or any news organization for that matter, success in a digital world.

Usher's description of *The Times* is of how things were nine years ago. At that time online commenting on a small number of articles had only been present on *The Times* website for a little over 2 years (Long, 2017a). Things change and in the digital age they often change rapidly. Usher (2014) said it herself that when she would speak to people at *The Times* about her

ethnographic work after she departed the newsroom "at least half would pause and then say, 'But wait, everything has changed'" (p. 216), while the rest would point out "small but still noticeable differences" (p. 216). *The Times* communicated one such marked change in a statement released in 2015.

In a document titled *Our Path Forward* (2015), *The Times* made clear the value of participation, as described by Usher, is front and center to the company's immediate and long-term success. Recognizing its digital readers as the primary force behind most of its "advertising revenue through their deep engagement", the company declared "These deep reader relationships are our most valuable asset" (Our Path Forward, 2015, p. 4). The company also announced the priority of hiring journalists with new skills, such as technology and audience engagement (Our Path Forward, 2015). Whereas in 2010 the messaging from the top on the importance of participation was lacking (Usher, 2014), *The Times* made its importance clear in its 2015 *Our Path Forward* statement.

Fast forward a year later. By 2016, online commenting was occurring on a select number of articles at *The Times* for over eight years. During April of 2016, *The Times* had a sort of virtual debate on the topic of the success or failure of online news comment sections. The debate consisted of four opinion pieces by the following guest authors: senior editor at *Ebony Magazine* Jamilah Lemieux, chair of the Anti-Cyberhate Committee of the Anti-Defamation League Christopher Wolf, editorial director at *Mic* Samhita Mukhopadhyay, and professor of communication and editor-in-chief of the journal *Human Communication Research* Eun-Ju Lee. Lemieux (2016) made her argument clear in the title of her piece, *Get Rid of Comment Sections*. Referring to comment spaces as "once a fantastic space for a meeting of the minds scattered across the globe", Lemieux (2016) contends they have devolved into "rest havens for racists,

sexists and homophobes". Also critical of online comments, Wolf (2016) points to a lack of accountability as the culprit in online incivility. He believes "the benefits of anonymity online are greatly outweighed by the abuse", and suggests "a reboot of online comment sections" (Wolf, 2016) making personal identification central to the forums. Mukhopadhyay (2016) and Lee (2016), while acknowledging the negative aspects of online commenting, believe comments to be beneficial to reader engagement and public discourse. Lee (2016) contends online comments can "shape how a reader interprets public opinion more broadly" resulting in distortions in how people perceive reality. And yet, in most situations she does not advocate for shutting comments down because she believes they "can showcase competing viewpoints, arouse the public's interest in important issues and facilitate arguments around them".

It appears *The Times* do not view its comment sections to be a failure. A year after the newspaper hosted the virtual debate, *The Times* not only continued to allow online comments, it announced a significant expansion of commenting on its website (Etim, 2017a). With the implementation of machine learning program Moderator, created in partnership with Google's parent company Alphabet, the newspaper leveraged the power of artificial intelligence (AI) to achieve massive efficiencies in what had previously been a labor-intensive comment moderation process (Adams, 2018; Etim, 2017a; Moderator, 2019). Utilizing powerful algorithms, Moderator utilizes and learns from the over sixteen million comments *The Times* had moderated since 2007 in order to be able to predict the kinds of decisions the human staff would make in the future (Etim, 2017a; Moderator, 2019). It then scores each comment on the likelihood a human moderator would approve or reject it, plotting the scores on a histogram (Etim, 2017a). Staff at *The Times* can then make decisions on comments by reviewing a relatively small sample of comments within a given scoring range produced by Moderator (Etim, 2017a). Moderator can

also automatically approve comments if it deems them to be overwhelmingly likely to be acceptable by staff (Etim, 2017a). The underlying software behind Moderator is available for use by other organizations, and its creators hope it will lead to more civil and constructive conversations across the internet (Adams, 2018; Marvin, 2019).

The Time's implementation of AI to expand and accelerate its comment moderation coincided with the release of its strategic report titled *Journalism That Stands Apart: The Report of the 2020 Group* (2017). Executive editor, Dean Baquet, and managing editor, Joe Kahn of *The Times* announced in January of 2017 the release of the report. The 2020 group, which produced the report, included journalist, David Leonhardt, newsroom strategy director, Jon Galinsky, associate managing editors, Jodi Rudoren and Karron Skog, national editor, Marc Lacey, assistant graphics editor, Tom Giratikanon, and senior editor, Tyson Evans (Baquet & Kahn, 2017). The team spent much of 2016 examining *The Times's* "digital and print report, talking with people throughout the newsroom, the company and the wider industry", and consulting with Baquet and Kahn (2017) to determine a strategy for the next three years of digital transformation of its journalism. The group declared several imperatives for the organizations, including one it stated as "Our readers must become a bigger part of our report" (Journalism that stands apart, 2017). They described the value and critical importance of providing their readers with opportunities to engage in conversation as follows:

> Perhaps nothing builds reader loyalty as much as engagement — the feeling of being part of a community. And the readers of The New York Times are very much a community. They want to talk with each other and learn from each other, not only about food, books, travel, technology and crossword puzzles but about politics and foreign affairs, too.
>
> We have developed one of the most civil and successful comment sections in the news business, but we still don't do nearly enough to allow our readers to have these interactions.

> Our richest community engagement right now is mainly in nooks and crannies of the site: the robust discussion of philosophers on Opinion's "The Stone" series; the crossword fanatics on the Wordplay column; the stories of cancer survivors on Well; or the helpful notes on Cooking's best recipe for chocolate chip cookies.
>
> We know from research and anecdotes that readers value the limited opportunities we provide to engage in discussion. (Journalism that stands apart, 2017)

The Time's implementation of AI to expand its capability for digital conversation with its audience fits within its strategic imperative to make its readers *a bigger part* of its journalism. For example, associate managing editor, Clifford Levy (2017) described the expansion of online commenting as "a sea change in our ability to serve our readers, to hear from them, and to respond to them". He went on to proclaim that *The Times* "will work hard to curate and respond to thousands of daily comments" (Levy, 2017). Along with the 2017 expansion of online commenting, *The Times* announced the creation of its Reader Center (Hiltner, 2017). Its mission is to "build deeper ties with our audience" and "to amplify reader voices and to build trust through transparency" (Hiltner, 2017). The center began as a group of eight journalists (Hiltner, 2017), but has since grown to a staff of twenty-two people (Willens, 2018).

Prior to the utilization of artificial intelligence, *The Times* enabled commenting on approximately ten percent of its articles (Adams, 2018; Long, 2017a; Moderator, 2019; The NY Times Co., 2016). Now, the company allows commenting on eighty percent of articles and approves about eighty-five percent of comments submitted (Long, 2017a). Perhaps at some point *The Times* will make available all comments, including the rejected ones, for social science research or simply for readers to view the conversation in its entirety, civil and uncivil remarks, if they so choose. In 2019 *The Times* won a Webby Award for its use of AI to improve the quality of its online conversations (New York Times: Using AI to host better conversations, 2019). Even with AI, commenting is still only available on certain articles, and the comment

forums typically remain open for twenty-four hours (Comments, 2019). Readers regularly complain about not being able to comment on articles (Etim, 2017b; Sullivan, 2015). *The Times* acknowledges that "it is unfortunate that some of these discussions do not have the chance to further evolve" (Comments, 2019). However, they believe the benefit of closing conversations is that they can focus their moderation efforts on discussions pertaining to more current news (Comments, 2019).

Even with the help of AI, the moderating of comments still involves human moderators who invest considerable time and energy to help foster civil and constructive conversation spaces. Online commenters at *The Times* express strong feelings via their digital conversations (Etim, 2015b; Williams, 2014). Etim (2015b) describes the forums as "a sea of emotions, insights, and opinions". It is therefore not a surprise that moderating takes an emotional toll on staff (Long, 2017a). However, *The Times* and its staff believe it is worth it, as made evident by their continuing moderating efforts of twelve plus years. Why? Well as community desk staff member at *The Times* Rachel Harris puts it, "We want people to be heard" (as cited in Long, 2017a). According to their website, the kinds of comments the newspaper is looking for are as follows:

> We are interested in articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article. We welcome your advice, your criticism and your unique insights into the issues of the day. To be approved for publication, your comments should be civil and avoid name-calling.
>
> Our standards for taste are reflected in the articles we publish in the newspaper and on NYTimes.com; we expect your comments to follow that example. A few things we won't tolerate: personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes), commercial promotion, impersonations, incoherence and SHOUTING. (Comments, 2019)

Its approach to comment threads and moderation appears to be working. The World Editors Forum (Huang, 2016) recognizes *The Times* as an example of an organization effectively managing its online discussions.

Online commenters and their commenting are clearly impacting journalism at *The Times*. To think otherwise is nonsensical. In its most basic sense, any resources *The Times* allocates to online commenting are resources they are not allocating to journalism. For example, the salaries spent on comment moderators is money not spent on hiring more or retaining existing journalists. This simple fact is not lost on commenter Dan Stackhouse of New York City. In response to a fellow commenter asking, "why cannot we comment on all articles and pieces?" Dan replied, "If they opened up everything to comments they'd have to about quadruple that staff and salaries cost companies a great deal" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). *The Times* is a business. More precisely, it is part of a publicly traded corporation. One can speculate, *The Times* believes there is value to the company and its shareholders to invest in opening up and maintaining online comment threads within its news website. As Usher (2014) contends, a news organization's participation with its audience "addresses underlying concerns with how to raise revenue and increase brand loyalty" (p. 20). She argues "Engagement was money, whether *The Times* said so directly or not" (p. 191).

Top management at *The Times* knows this and are constantly working to make its website sticky, spreadable, and thereby a revenue generating machine (Usher, 2014). By "sticky" Usher (2014) is referring to "the principle of getting people to stay on a site for as long as possible—as opposed to conducive for bouncing from site to site" (p. 153). And by "spreadable" she means a website "that takes advantage of social content that people can share, comment on, spread across their social networks, augment by adding user-generated content, and even remix—though

maybe not all of those things at once" (p. 189). The most valuable website, or that is the one with the highest revenue generating potential, is a site that is both sticky and spreadable (Usher, 2014). Online commenting, if done right, can keep users on the website longer and allows them to generate and spread content from *The Times* across the web. By all accounts, *The Times* online commenting appears to be a success, in terms of making its website both sticky and spreadable. Nearly 7,000 people per day post comments to its website (Long, 2017b), and close to two million comment recommendations are made per month (Etim, 2015b). So, another way to look at the financial impact of commenting on journalism at *The Times* is that whatever revenue stemming from sticky and spreadable characteristics of its online forums is money that helps keep the company solvent and it can use to strengthen its journalism in various ways (e.g., hiring additional journalists).

There is evidence that allows us to dive deeper into the impact commenting is having on *The Times* and its work beyond just a financial perspective. For example, at *The Times*, comments have become source material for its articles. Etim (2017a) argues, "If *The Times* has innovated in the comments space, it is by treating reader submissions like content". As the company makes clear, *The Times* reserves "the right to display comments in a variety of ways, including within the text of articles or in advertisements" (Comments, 2019). From articles that review the most commented stories of the year (McDermott, 2015b & 2017b), to profiles of some of its most prolific commenters (Etim, 2015a & 2015b; Long, 2017b; Wartik, 2018), *The Times* has put its commenters front and center. One of *The Times* most well-known commenters, Richard Luettgen, wrote close to 30,000 comments (Wartik, 2018). Luettgen died on December 1, 2018. A fellow commenter at *The Times* announced his passing in a comment on an article about Elizabeth Warren (Wartik, 2018). The comment, characterized as "the comment version

of an obituary", linked to Luettgen's actual obituary notice at the funeral home where he was described as "an avid commenter to The New York Times" (Wartik, 2018). In response to the comment announcing the death of Luettgen, another fellow commenter posted the following:

> I almost never agreed with him, but appreciated his contribution to the discussion. He provided a lot of grist for the mill. (as cited in Wartik, 2018)

Commenter Memi von Gaza from Canada also expressed sorrow in the following comment she posted on January 10, 2019:

> I just found out that Richard has died. I am heartbroken. I will miss him deeply. Although I only knew him from the commentariat in the New York Times, he showed a side of himself to me and many others that transcended the bitter politics he commented on. It was there in his humor, YES his HUMOR. It was there in his replies to his detractors and his fans of which I was one. He told me once or twice that he would meet me on the other side, his bourbon and my Canadian Club. Rest in peace Richard. I'll meet you on the other side, your bourbon, my Canadian marijuana, cause I don't drink. Hope that's OK. (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a)

She posted here comment on an article published on November 23, 2015, which featured Richard as one of *The Times's* top commenters. The article titled *Meet Some of Our Top Commenters* (Etim, 2015a) received 1,431 comments spanning over three years. In a somewhat eerie demonstration of the potentially limitless temporal nature of online conversations, Richard Luettgen participated numerous times in the very same digital conversation where Memi von Gaza mourned his passing.

The staff at *The Times* also felt the loss of their frequent contributor, as made clear by Wartik's (2018) following remark and fellow colleague Etim's reflection:

> The ripples also spread through our department. "One of the things I really respected about Richard," said Bassey Etim, our Community Editor, "is that he would email me when we took down some rude replies to his comments and say, 'Hey, what are you doing, put that back up.' He was not afraid of mixing it up." (Wartik, 2018)

Luettgen was just one of many commenters in an online community "that has its own luminaries" (Etim, 2015a), and in which over 60,000 unique contributors participate each month (Etim, 2015b).

The Times's commenters and comments as content goes well beyond profiles of commenters and listings of most commented on stories. The actual digital conversations taking place within the comments also become content. For example, McDermott has written articles about online commenters' discussions about the workplace environment at Amazon (McDermott, 2015a) and the indictment of Paul Manafort (McDermott, 2017a). The following excerpt from her article about commenters' reaction shows how online sentiment via comments can take on a life of its own:

> While current and former employees of Amazon weighed in on the depictions in the article, many New York Times readers identified as regular Amazon customers. Appalled by the treatment of workers, many went on to say they would cancel their Amazon Prime subscriptions. Others vowed to never patronize the online retailer again.
>
> Halfway into reading the article, Katie in Georgia had already canceled her Audible membership, deleted her Kindle application and decided to boycott Amazon. "I cannot support a company that so purposefully creates a negative environment for its employees," she wrote. "It's disgusting, it's immoral, and I hope others feel the same after reading this article." Her comment — the most popular one in the story by far — was recommended by over 4,000 readers. (McDermott, 2015a)

McDermott's article about the Amazon discussion not only highlighted aspects of the online conversation, but it also linked back to the original comments and online conversation in the corresponding article. Similar to McDermott's articles, Moore, Baruchman, and Patel (2016) wrote an article that focused exclusively on the comments made in response to another article at *The Times* about Trump calling upon Russia to find Clinton's emails. At the time, the article was "the most-commented on in The Times's history" (Moore, Baruchman, & Patel). Moore, Baruchman, and Patel's article brought attention to the dynamic conversation occurring within

the comments regarding Trump's controversial remarks. Like McDermott's articles, their article also linked back to the original comments in the corresponding article.

All the writers I just mentioned are professionals who specialize in engaging with the audience. According to their byline pages at *The Times*, "Marie Tae McDermott writes about reader reactions to issues covered in The New York Times" (Marie Tae McDermott, 2019) and "Leela Moore is an audience writer for the New York Times Reader Center" (Lela Moore, 2019). Baruchman (2019) was an Audience Engagement Intern at *The Times*, who described her internship experience as having "Increased and drove reader engagement by creating opportunities for comments, expression and discussion, contributing to the company's goal of improving audience relations". Patel (2019) is the Senior Social Strategy and UGC Editor at *The Times*. She describes her role at the company as follows:

> I lead The Times's efforts around reader-sourced reporting, crowdsourcing and audience engagement. I work with various desks across the newsroom, training journalists in New York and abroad on the latest tactics for developing long-term and lasting relationships with our readers. (Patel, 2019)

A recent job posting for a social media strategy editor at *The Times* shows it is looking to add to its audience engagement team. The position description states, "engaging our readers, monitoring on-site and off-platform conversations for story ideas and integrating readers' contributions into our daily and enterprise report is essential" (New York Times, 2019). It appears Usher's (2014) vision for *The Times*—"one where more than just one editor would be assigned the job of community editing, with the role of aggregating and creating community conversation" (p. 235)—has, to at least an extent, come to fruition.

Nine years ago, Usher called into question the public sphere like qualities of *The Times'* online communities. While reporting on her 2010 ethnographic research conducted at the newsroom, she claimed "Significantly, though, participation inside *The Times* certainly did not

embody the idea espoused by many Internet theorists about the nature of journalism in the networked public sphere" (Usher, 2014, p. 187). At that time, top management's views on participation implied "a limited vision of the user as anything other than a way to make money", whereas "top editors failed to consider what participation might add to the conversation" (Usher, 2014, p. 188). Since that time, the online comment threads at *The Times* have taken on public sphere like characteristics. They have become online communities with virtual relationships spanning the country and the world (Etim, 2015a & 2015b; Long, 2017b; McDermott, 2019; Wartik, 2018). In one of his comments, commenter Mike from San Diego, California proclaimed "The comments are what makes the NYT a community" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). He went on to say, "When I read the thoughtful responses, I tell myself that is a $15/month well spent". Mary T of Orleans expressed similar sentiment, asserting "This new world community, where each of us has access to speak/write our opinion, is utterly fabulous" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). Reader from Chicago, Illinois admits he has "always been surprised by how difficult it can be to openly express an opinion" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a) and expose oneself, even if anonymously, to support and criticism from the digital world. While asking himself "why do I keep doing this?", he realized "it's nice to have a community of others to discuss these issues with, even if in this kind of weird way" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). Yet another commenter, JoAnne from Georgia, thanked her fellow commenters for making her feel "less alone in this crazy world" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a).

A group of *The Times's* most active commenters have earned titles, such as "super-commenters" (Long, 2017b) and "celebrity class of commenters" (Sullivan, 2015). Some commenters see commenting as a "civic duty" and as a means to help "make sense of their own

thoughts and reactions to the political climate" (Long, 2017b). For example, alfdkf contends the reason he or she comments is "To participate in democracy, exercise my free speech rights, & compete in the marketplace of ideas" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). Meanwhile Capt. Penny of Silicon Valley is appreciative of comment spaces for helping him "maintain a bit of sanity when confronting the daily cognitive dissonance that is the US news media" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). According to him, "The thoughtful comments from all viewpoints are invaluable to understanding issues and finding possible solutions" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). Sterling of New York sees the value in multiple viewpoints and admits that "Sometimes commenters can change my reaction to a story, sometimes even my opinion" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). "What I like in many ways best about the comment section are the surprising number of people who have all these opinions that keep surprising me for being so unantiicipated which experience then keeps disabusing my of the sense of living in a uniform world", proclaims michael roloff of Seattle. While not devoid of typos, michael's comment conveys a deep appreciation for the diversity of views present in the online conversations.

Of course, there are detractors over the quality of conversation and level of community within the online comments, even from commenters themselves. For example, Susan Brooks of Ohio argues that "Comment sections are click bait that give the illusion of dialogue", offer nothing more than "entrenched views", and are filled with people seeking "validation" and "commenting 'fame'" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). Interestingly, she participated and made her opinions known in the very same forum in which she apparently does not hold in very high regard. A fellow commenter replied to Susan challenging her assertions. Josh Hill of New London, Connecticut said "Susan, I can't speak for others, but I'm not seeking

commenting fame!" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). He went onto say, "I generally comment because I think I have something useful to say, often about something I feel passionately about, like we shouldn't melt our planet or export all of our jobs to China" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a).

People can be quick to dismiss or completely ignore online comments and the power and opportunity they represent. As commenter Alice of North Dakota states, "one of the first rules of the internet: Never read the comments" (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a). And yet, she recognizes *The Times* comment forums "is usually an exception" to that rule. Walter Rhett of Charleston, South Carolina recognizes the power of online commenting, as he eloquently defends the digital building block to online conversation—the online comment—in his following post:

> What is called a "comment" is really a blank canvas! A limited digital and visual space that opens up quickly to become an unlimited range of imaginative possibilities. The comment space reflects its writers and readers, but it is not a "lesser" space, as some imply. It is mighty space of unbounded responsibilities, a freedom whose only obligation is to be busy, just, and quick--and marvel at its high freedom and the many ways that it becomes manifest! (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a)

For those people who might imply, or perhaps directly assert, as Walter suggests, that online comments are a lesser space, I have a question for you. Of the millions, likely billions, of online comments made across the world via a whole host of news outlets and other venues, across a wide array of topics, how many have you read? And even if you have read hundreds or thousands of comments across a variety of dimensions, is that a large enough sample size to imply or directly assert that online comments are a lesser space? Of course, these are rhetorical questions at this point, but nevertheless, worth pondering.

Regardless of what the skeptics and critics might say, communities are forming and conversations are occurring within the online comment sections of *The Times*. Some of these

conversations are huge! For example, there were 13,138 comments posted to the article *I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration* (2018). And while conversations with a high volume of comments or recommendations might receive the most attention, commenter MTF Tobin reminds us in her following comment that even the smallest of online conversations, that is, ones consisting of a small number of comments, can be of value:

> …Many people choose to Comment on pieces that get low readership. If a piece gets low readership, few will read the Comments; if few read the Comments, the number of "Recommends" will be low, even if every reader of the piece clicks Recommend. But those Comments may well be worthy. (By way of analogy: In mid-September 2013, I posted a Comment on a Public Editor Sunday Column under my old screen name, "Maura T. Fan". It was one of 16 Comments posted for that column in the first 72 hours, and 2 people clicked "Recommend". Yet, the Public Editor considered it worthy of written reply both in email and in a blog post, in which she also replied to the best of of the 16 Comments. http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/20/responding-to-reader-co... That blog post received 7 Comments.) So raw numbers of "Recommends" do not always define the most worthy Comments… (comment made in response to Etim, 2015a)

Taking MTF Tobin's point a bit further, the rippling and cumulative effect of small online conversations, and seemingly overlooked comments, while perhaps not easily measureable, might be grand in scale.

The public sphere like nature of the online comment forums extends beyond just the readers. At times, journalists and staff at *The Times* participate in the commenting (Etim, 2015b; McDermott, 2019), the following being one example:

> Elizabeth Dias, our National religion correspondent, joined a conversation on her article about gay Catholic priests after readers wondered why the priests in the story joined the church in the first place. She wrote a comment that provided additional insight into their lives: "Many were barely at the age of puberty, and were not able to understand their sexuality for years, or how the church would structurally restrict it." (McDermott, 2019)

Yet another example comes from op-ed columnist Joe Quinn. Quinn, who is an Army veteran, released a piece on September 10, 2018 titled *The Real Lesson of Sept. 11*. It received 1,006 comments (Quinn, 2018b). Less than a month later, with the encouraging of senior editorial

assistants Harris and Tarchak, Quinn (2018a) released a follow-up piece titled *'I'd Trade It All In to Be With My Brother and Friends Again'*. In it he addressed a number of ideas and questions commenters raised in response to his September piece. His second piece received 100 comments (Quinn, 2018a). Whereas Usher (2014) once described the journalists at *The Times* as being "fairly ignorant" (p. 214) of the fact that everyday citizens had something valuable to contribute to journalism, it appears as though now, at least to an extent, things have changed. It appears more staff recognize what Etim (2015a) asserted, that when it comes to online commenters, "Their voices have enhanced our journalism, offering new information, insight and analysis on many of the day's most pressing issues".

Perhaps the most interesting attempt by *The Times* to foster an online public sphere is its *Learning Network*. According to McDermott (2019), "The New York Times Learning Network gives middle and high school students the space to respond to news articles, participate in contests and engage in a dialogue that extends beyond the classroom". A recent piece in the Learning Network titled *What Is Your Reaction to the College Admission's Cheating Scandal?* by Natalie Proulx (2019) received 527 comments. Her piece begins with the following note:

> *Note: Students 13 and older are invited to comment here. Adults should post their comments elsewhere on NYTimes.com.* (Proulx, 2019)

In the article Proulx encourages readers to watch a brief video about the indictment, provides them with excerpts from supporting articles, while also linking them to the original pieces. One of the articles she provides an excerpt from—*Actresses, Business Leaders and Other Wealthy Parents Charged in U.S. College Entry Fraud* (Medina, Benner, & Taylor, 2019)—received 4,524 comments! Proulx encourages her readers to read the full article and then respond to various questions, such as the following:

> The authors write: “The charges also underscored how college admissions have become so cutthroat and competitive that some have sought to break the rules.” Do you agree? What do you think this case tells us about the college admissions process today? (Proulx, 2019)

She then links her readers to a second article—*Bribes to Get Into Yale and Stanford? What Else Is New?* (Bruni, 2019), which received 1,918 comments. Proulx (2019) encourages them to read it as well and respond to additional questions, such as “Do you think the college admissions process is rigged to favor the wealthy?”. A cursory look through the comments made in response to Proulx’s *Learning Network* piece reveals commenters are not only posting stand-alone comments, but are at times also replying to each other.

With *The Learning Network*, *The Times* is in a sense fostering a culture of online news commenting among teenagers. Perhaps this is a type of pedagogy that is needed to help foster constructive and critical online conversations, ones that embody the ideals of a public sphere. Take for example, the following way a teacher describes how she utilizes *The Times* in her teaching:

> Susan Carney, a teacher in New Jersey, says she uses The Learning Network in her classroom by having her students respond to its writing prompts in The Times’s comment sections. “My students not only consider how their words might be received by a writer at The New York Times, but also by the wider audience of readers,” Ms. Carney wrote to Learning Network editors. “It makes them aware that their voice was heard and their words might resonate with someone.” (McDermott, 2019)

As it turns out, staff editor of *The Learning Network* Proulx herself used to be an English language arts teacher and curriculum writer (Natalie Proulx, 2019).

The Learning Network appears to be a means to fulfill one of *The Time’s* key aspirations. In its 2015 *Our Path Forward* document, *The Times* made clear the importance of young readers to its business model:

> Our overarching aspiration is to cultivate another generation of readers who can’t imagine a day without The New York Times. Our first two million subscribers —

> including our more than one million newspaper subscribers — grew up with The New York Times spread out over their kitchen tables. The next million must be fought for and won over with The Times on their phones. (Our Path Forward, 2015)

Now consider for a moment that the students reading and participating in *The Learning Network* might not be growing up with a paper copy of *The Times* spread out over their kitchen tables at home. But they are growing up with it as part of their educational experience, and some are learning to actively participate in digital conversations about the news. Not only do they see other students participating in the comments, but if they are paying close enough attention to the comment counts on the corresponding articles they are reading, they see many more people are commenting. Perhaps some of the students will eventually become subscribers as adults and continue engaging in the online comments.

The public sphere like nature of *The Times's* comments will most likely continue to evolve. As a model example as to how to successfully foster civil online conversations, it should come as no surprise if other news organizations begin to follow suit. Advances in AI have the potential to make comment moderation a highly efficient and affordable process for organizations with less resources than *The Times* has at its disposal. *The Times* has clearly made audience engagement via online commenting a key pillar in its current and long-term success. It has come a long way since it first allowed commenting on just a small number of articles back in 2007. Today, it allows commenting on eighty percent of its articles and its commenters and their online conversations have become an integral part of its journalism. *The Times* went so far as to develop and make available an application programming interface (API), which allows users to data mine comments on its website (Gerst, 2008). Online comments represent a wealth of information on people's thoughts, opinions, and conversations.

The case of commenting at *The Times* shows us how one prestigious organization has operationalized this novel form of conversation to cultivate deeper relationships with and understandings of its publics. The evolution of its digital public sphere did not come without growing pains and resistance from within. However, with time and concerted effort from top-level management to the editors and journalists, *The Times* has shown it wants to hear what commenters think and have to say about the issues it covers in the news each day. Simply listening to, as well as at times conversing with its online commenters, has resulted in news stories stemming from the comments, tightknit online communities that mourn the passing of fellow members, as well as changes in perceptions. Rather than something to avoid, *The Times* values, cultivates, and learns from the conversations within the comments.

The Times already has a Learning Network that "gives middle and high school students the space to respond to news articles, participate in contests and engage in dialogue that extends beyond the classroom" (McDermott, 2019). Perhaps what we need in higher education is a sort of *learning network* to explore these virtual conversations, at *The Times* as well as other news outlets, as a means to listen and better understand some of academia's many publics beyond the ivory tower. To begin that process, in the next chapter I share what I discovered about how people are utilizing four such online conversation spaces accompanying articles about higher education, as well as about the opinions and emotions people convey within.

CHAPTER 7: CASES AND FINDINGS

In this chapter I present the findings for each of my four cases in the order of the following higher education themes: technological transformation, international students, and free college. For each case I first provide a summary of the article, followed by a presentation of descriptive statistics of the respective dataset. I then present my findings for each of my following three research questions:

- R1: (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?
- R2: (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?
- R3: (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments?

The order I present my findings for my research questions is in alignment with my framework. To recap, my framework begins with the idea that a public sphere is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 2006, p. 73) in which all citizens can access. My framework then moves to public opinion. The process of public opinion formation is social in nature (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Habermas, 1996; Herbst, 2011b), derived via dialogue within the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). From there I move to emotion, which public opinion scholars Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015) claim "is increasingly playing an important role in public opinion research" (p. 133).

Case 1: Technological Transformation

Article Summary

On March 5, 2015, *The New York Times* published an article by Kevin Carey titled "Here's What Will Truly Change Higher Education: Online Degrees That Are Seen As Official." Carey works for New America, a Washington, D.C. based public policy think tank, serving as its vice president for education policy and knowledge management. In addition to being a regular contributor to *The Upshot* section of *The New York Times*, he has also written articles for several other periodicals, such as *Wired*, *The New Republic*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Kevin Carey, n.d.). Carey based his 2015 article in *The Times* off his bestselling book *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere*, which came out two days earlier. His article and book are but a small part of a much larger and prominent narrative within higher education, one that continues to this day, regarding the technological disruption of colleges and universities.

Carey (2015a) begins his article by claiming "Three years ago, technology was going to transform higher education", followed by the question "What happened?" His argument in his essay, as well as in his book, rely heavily on the advent of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a potentially disruptive force within higher education. According to Carey (2015a), "The failure of MOOCs to disrupt higher education has nothing to do with the quality of the courses themselves, many of which are quite good and getting better." Instead, he blames MOOCs failure to disrupt on colleges, which he claims "are holding technology at bay because the only thing MOOCs provide is access to world-class professors at an unbeatable price" (2015a). Carey views higher education's near monopoly on conferring what society considers to be official degrees that lead to jobs as the ultimate barrier to overcome for disruption to take

place. He claims technological innovators are at work on delivering a new digital system of free or low-fee credentials, which will dismantle the higher education credentialing cartel.

Carey (2015a) points to the Mozilla Foundation's Open Badges project, as well as notable universities, such as Michigan State University, experimenting with issuing badges, as evidence of the looming digital credential revolution. Coursera's verified certificates are yet another example he cites (Carey, 2015a). These new digital credentials will provide "exponentially more information" as compared to the traditional college transcript, which Carey (2015a) contends have "roughly the same amount of information that prisoners of war are required to divulge under the Geneva Conventions." He believes an open digital credentialing system will be a boon for learners by allowing them to control their own information, as well as for employers once they develop effective and efficient means to sift through the new wealth data available to them. Carey (2015a) concludes his article by saying once the new system is in place, students will "be able to acquire skills and get jobs for a fraction of what colleges cost today."

Findings

Carey's article received 292 online comments, of which 282 were retrievable at the time of my data collection. 232 commenters participated in the forum, thirty-three of which posted multiple comments. The most posts by a single commenter was seven and the most words posted a single commenter across all their comments was 777. On average each commenter posted 134 words. 252 of the comments received recommendations. The following table provides additional descriptive statistics on the data set:

	Total	**Maximum**	**Minimum**	**Mean**
Recommendations	4,369	243	0	15.49
Comment Word Count	31,061	270	3	110.15

Table 1. Case 1 descriptive statistics.

R1: (Public Sphere)

I utilized Chen's (2017) deliberation index to address my first research question. I calculated the deliberation index for my dataset at the comment level, which is in line with prior research (Chen, 2017). Seventy-five comments asked legitimate questions and 152 provided evidence. Ninety-five comments did not ask any legitimate questions or provide evidence, 147 provided one or the other, and forty asked a legitimate question and provided evidence, resulting in a deliberation index of .805 for the entire dataset. Another way of stating it is sixty-six percent of comments had deliberative elements in the form of either a legitimate question, evidence, or both. The deliberation index provides us with a basic understanding of the extent to which commenters appear to be attempting to engage in conversation with one another. However, if we look closer at each deliberation attribute separately, we learn more.

Looking at the legitimate questions we see commenters inquiring about such things as cheating in online courses, quality of MOOCs, when and where to utilize technology in education, and the purpose of higher education, to name just a few. Some commenters even questioned Carey's motivations for writing such an article, such as MTDougC from Missoula, Montana who claims, "The NYT fills their op-ed pages with schemes for replacing college" and goes on to ask, "What did your professors ever do to make you so resentful?" At times, commenters directed their questions at specific fellow commenters. For example, in one comment Carol of Minneapolis indicates she is an adjunct instructor who teaches both in-person and online. Critical of online education, Carol claims "You can't replace that human interaction with a machine, no matter how much we pretend." Nancy of New Haven, CT replied to Carol asking, "Do you have online group interaction or is the online class only asynchronous?" Nancy then said, "I agree that personal interaction is crucial but it is also possible online." Other

commenters posed general questions, such as Amelia from Massachusetts who asked, “what if community colleges provided general education in a classroom setting, then students honed their specializations in online courses?” Broadly speaking, questions in the comments give us a sense of what people want to know more about and that they are willing to ask them in a public realm for other people to potentially respond to.

Examining the evidence, we see commenters are providing external sources, citing the source article, as well as sharing personal stories to bolster their points. Regarding external sources, we have ras from Chicago referring to the book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by Arum and Roska in three separate comments in support of his criticisms of higher education, the following being just one example:

> Nobody in these comments, not a single person, has refuted the carefully documented evidence, in "Academically Adrift" and many other places, that colleges currently do a lousy job in educating students and provide abysmal value for money. (So many commenters are so proud of their traditional educations, but none of them want to analyze the relevant data-what does that tell you ?).

In one of ras’s other comments he includes the book’s authors’ names, Arum and Roska. He also includes a link to a U.S. Department of Education report to support his claim that online and face-to-face education are “roughly comparable.” Contrary to ras’s evidence, devdas of MA provides a link to another article in *The New York Times* titled “After Setbacks, Online Courses Are Rethought”, which by the way, garnered 337 online comments. One more example of verifiable evidence comes from Mark Feldman of Kirkwood, CO. Mark cites his blog on InsideHigherEd.com as additional evidence to his claim that “Many traditional colleges, seeing students as ‘customers’, teach only what those customers ‘think they need to know’, not what ‘they need to know.’”

Additional evidence included referring to, as well as quoting the source article, and sharing personal stories. Citing Carey's article was not only a form of evidence commenters used, but it also provides evidence that commenters are reading the source article. Meanwhile personal stories provide a glimpse into commenters' experiences and were at times used to refute other commenters' arguments. Case in point, we have an exchange between Chris of Highland Park, NJ and Tamar of California. First, Chris states "I am certain that going to college and interacting with other students and with faculty members remains a valuable experience, one that cannot be replicated online." In reply, Tamar says "I just completed an online MOOC course with Coursera/Johns Hopkins and there was a tremendous amount of interaction. More so than I had in college in 1984."

R2: (Public Opinion)

After several rounds of coding, I arrived at the following salient opinion themes: Higher education is not simply job training!, Public Disinvestment, Greedy Higher Education, The True Higher Education Experience, Online is inferior, There is a place for online education, MOOCs: Failure, Nothing Special, or Potential?, and Challenging the opinions of others. The last theme—challenging the opinions of others—is not an opinion theme per se. However, it is a theme that goes further to the heart of public opinion and what the comments reveal that is not apparent via traditional polling. This theme is also a continuation of my findings from my first research question. This overlap of findings is not incidental, but instead is reflective of the idea that public opinion is derived via conversation within the public sphere.

In the following sections I share findings for each theme. What I provide within each respective opinion theme are vignettes from the online conversation that depict the given sentiment. Some are comments shared in full, whereas others are excerpts. My intent behind

doing so was to provide thick description (Thorne, 2016), as well as to depict some of the varying shades of sentiment and rationale for one's opinions.

Higher education is not simply job training!

In his article, Carey makes the assertion that college students are mostly paying for college degrees because they lead to jobs. Commenters within this theme appear to be of the opinion that Carey's assertion is wrongheaded. For example, Emile claims, "What never changes is Mr. Carey's chirpy, utilitarian vision that sees higher education as a vehicle for turning human beings into corporate cogs." She goes on to lament, "His vision is one of an egalitarian and atomistic education where each student, isolated from others, works at a computer terminal until ready for the job market." Likewise, Michael Lavin states, "Seldom have I seen so bald an assertion of the thesis that education is vocational training." And while for the most part commenters within this opinion theme focused their angst on Carey's apparent narrow vision of higher education's purpose, colleges and universities did not receive a complete pardon. For example, M. Gamel-McCormick believes "Many public universities have forsaken their mission to serve their states and to educate their citizens." He urges us to "return to the mission of public higher education: discover new knowledge, teach that knowledge to the citizens of the state (ALL citizens of the state as the 1890 Morrill Act requires), and ensure a populace that ready for the future."

Public Disinvestment

A small group of commenters are of the opinion that much of the higher education transformation talk is the result of declining public support for colleges and universities. For example, Concerned American argues, "The elephant in the room is states, counties and cities support over 80% of all higher education and they have been substantially cutting these

expenditures for about a generation." He went on to say "So, much of this 'tech solution' is about states bowing out of their traditional role in supporting higher education." Meanwhile, Carrie believes Carey should have discussed public disinvestment in his article. From her perspective, "Articles that casually mention rising tuition in passing without acknowledging the massive ongoing disinvestment in public universities in many states do readers a major disservice, even if this isn't the core argument of the piece." If we look at Carey's article, we see he did not even mention declines in public funding. Instead, he claims "The fact that colleges currently have a near-monopoly on degrees that lead to jobs goes a long way toward explaining how they can continue raising prices every year" (Carey, 2015a). One can see how some people might construe such a claim as misleading without at least some indication of trends in public funding.

Greedy Higher Education

Running opposite of the opinion that public disinvestment is a problem, another group of commenters are of the opinion that higher education being greedy is the real issue. Case in point, bk's following comment:

> I can't wait for the day when the greedy higher education bubble bursts. The time has come. The consumer has been bled dry, and gotten very little in return.

It does not sound as though bk would be supportive of more public funding for colleges and universities. And while we can speculate as to bk's likely opposition to public funding, Steve Singer goes so far as to argue that congress should cut more of higher education's funding in his following rather lengthy comment:

> I tried to start an online program at my alma mater twenty-two years ago, when the internet was still a lab rat and personal computers were still toys. I met with senior administrators and told them this was coming, they couldn't stop it and it was no threat but their salvation. But they had to pioneer the transition. They refused, balking at taking even the first tentative baby-steps in that direction; a decision so wrong-headed it

> reminded me of how the War Department recoiled at the idea of equipping the Union Army with repeating rifles in 1862.
>
> Looking from afar at the mess they've made of online education since, I must conclude that university administrators (most drawn from senior tenured faculty) still regard it as a threat to their institutions and especially to their privileged positions, which they intend to preserve at all cost. Thus degree-track online education remains verboten, regarded as "experimental" and in this experiment their thumbs are on the scale. As Henry Kissinger, Harvard professor and no stranger to the ways of academe, observed, "no idea is too good or pure that an academic committee cannot kill it".
>
> Part of the solution at public universities is for state legislatures and Congress to intervene. Mandate it, in part by cutting funds for traditional lecture hall methods we associate with "college". Private institutions should blaze the trail that their public competitors fear to tread; eat their lunch; leave them far behind eating their dust.

Steve paints a depressing picture of higher education, or at least of his alma mater. His proposed funding cuts might be a welcomed suggestion for fellow commenters Ras and JC, both of whom referred to higher education funding as a "gravy train."

The True Higher Education Experience

Some commenters seem to think they know what typifies a true college experience. What is most striking is that they appear to view their opinions as truth. For example, according to treabeton, "the true college experience is in meeting your peers in formal and informal settings (yes, pizza and bars and other social activities) and forming life-long friendships." In a similar vein, Matthew James provides his criteria for a "real college education" in the following comment:

> In the course of a real college education, you have the opportunity to emulate both your professors and your classmates. You have the chance to make relationships which last a lifetime with real people, a.k.a networks. You will feel the fear of standing up in front of a lecture hall and giving a presentation, and hopefully overcome it. You will work on teams with people from diverse backgrounds, and learn how to work together as adults. In the process, you may even find a mentor who will change the course of your life forever. You will be accountable to people face to face for your performance. Pretending that any of this can be done online is laughable.

Both treabeton and Mathew's opinions stated as truths imply that if your higher education experience does not fit within their criteria it is a false or bogus experience. Leading Edge Boomer makes this implication clear when he says, "I despair of online undergraduate degrees that could be thought of as equivalent to a true undergraduate experience." He goes on to claim, "There is no substitute for face-to-face argument followed by going out for pizza, collaborative work using a real whiteboard, pulling an all-nighter in a computer lab with your project teammates."

Not everyone agreed with commenters, such as treabeton, Matthew, and Leading Edge Boomer, who imposed definitions as to what constitutes a true higher education experience. Tired of hearing all the nostalgia, Harrison pushed back asserting, "To me some of the comments here smack of what I see as a mystique of the college class environment." Regarding commenters reminiscing about the irreplaceable and profound social aspects of brick-n-mortar experiences—at least in their view—HSN had the following rebuttal:

> One more addition to my earlier comment. A lot of folks who talk of socialization must have attended college in pre-smartphone era. Many classrooms today have the students just physically present but isolated with their attention split between their laptops and smartphones.

Comments, such as HSN and Harrison's, appear to convey the opinion that what constitutes a true higher education experience varies from person to person.

Online is inferior

Given Carey's article is about online degrees, it was not surprising to find commenters expressing opinions about online programs in comparison to traditional face-to-face education. What was surprising were the extremes to which people expressed their sentiment in opposition to online. Take Laura as an example. She claims, "The fact that online degrees aren't worth anything isn't an accident or a mistake", but is due to "the fact that the education is inferior."

Joe took the negative sentiment further. According to him, "To think one could get a 'degree' online is a sick joke." Joe was not alone in his thinking. Both PG and JC also claimed online education is a joke. Meanwhile, Ed used a more colorful descriptor for online education in his following comment:

> It's good that the legitimate schools are experimenting with the "badges" instead of issuing regular degrees for online students. Since I consider most online degrees to be crap, and wouldn't hire someone with an online-only degree, it's important to me that there be a distinction between online and traditional studies.

Sentiment like Ed, PG, JC, and Laura's leaves little room for recognizing any value in online offerings, value which other commenters clearly recognized.

There is a place for online education

What I found to be the more fruitful, middle-ground opinion on online education, is one that recognizes there is a place for it among the many higher education offerings. Perhaps the best example of a commenter recognizing the value of online degrees comes from a parent. Tired of hearing people label online education as inferior, DadOfTwoInCollege made the following comment:

> As a father with two already in college and one more about to be, it's somewhat amusing reading the comments disparaging online delivery for education. My two daughters are enrolled in fully accredited, large, state schools where at least two courses each semester are delivered online. Major colleges all over the US are beginning to offer 100% online education in a host of majors and the diploma says nothing about online. How are you going to know someone worked at Starbucks in your state while completing a degree from a state institution located in another ... and the degree says nothing about online?
>
> I completed an MBA from a major state university 100% online in two years while overseeing 23 stores in 8 states (hardest thing I ever did). Neither my diploma not my transcript says anything about online. I went to graduation and walked with the other students who attended traditional classes.
>
> As far as online education being considered inferior ... welcome to the 21st Century and realize that online students will eventually outnumber traditional brick and mortar students.

For DadOfTwoInCollege and his daughters, there is already a place for online education, one that is not worthless or a joke. Same is true for EG who announced she is "about to receive a Master in the Art of Teaching diploma and a California teaching credential" all online, which her employer deems both as valid. Meanwhile, PogoWasRight simply said, "Online will certainly never replace on-site academics, but room for it should be made at the table of college educations." Rather than dismissing online education wholesale, commenters within this opinion theme recognize its ability to serve various educational needs.

MOOCs: Failure, Nothing Special, or Potential?

Given much of Carey's article hinged on MOOCs, it was not surprising to find commenters expressing opinions about the massive open online courses. On the most negative end of the sentiment spectrum are commenters who believe MOOCs are a failure. For example, James Tobias noted, "As others have commented, the research to date shows MOOCs failing, not succeeding." One of the other people commenting was James Willis who argued, "MOOCs have had such abysmal completion rates that they have already become an afterthought among those actually engaged in trying to give a larger cross-section of the population access to the real benefits a traditional degree." Such sentiment might not bode well for Carey's thesis, which is greatly dependent on the success of MOOCs.

Another opinion commenters expressed was that MOOCs are nothing special. In an attempt to obtain evidence to the contrary Paul asked, "What can MOOCs do that correspondence courses, books on tape, etc. couldn't do?" In a similar fashion, Wanda claimed "The promise of MOOCs is overblown" and argued "People also expected correspondence courses to be a revolution a century ago." Meanwhile, other commenters, such as JW, Common Sense, and PhysicsProf equated MOOCs with textbooks. Rather than a transformational

innovation, these commenters see massive open online courses as just the latest incarnation of other technologies once believed to have the same potential.

Not all the commenters were of the opinion that MOOCs are a failure or are nothing new. Instead, some were of the opinion that MOOCs have potential, at least from their own experiences. Take Ron Amundson's following comment made in response to PhysicsProf, who equated MOOCs to textbooks, as an example:

> Reading and doing the problems in a good textbook in isolation doesn't always work out too well as its pretty difficult to find anyone to bounce ideas off of. Some MOOCs on the other hand create a community of learners, which if critical scale is reached not only run circles around the textbook and problems sets, but also put a number of face to face classes to shame. As far as professor interaction goes, some of the MOOCs I've participated in again have run circles around whats been available in a face to face class. Alas, not all MOOCs develop a community of learners, not all MOOCs have professors interact with students, or even TAs for that matter.

From Ron's perspective, MOOCs are not the sweeping failure that others believe them to be, nor are they simply a new kind of book. Tracymar appears to share Ron's sentiment having claimed "It may well be that many online courses involve little learning through interaction but I've participated actively in more than half a dozen Moocs (mostly related to literature, psychology and education) that were far more active and richer learning experiences that many classes I've taken or taught." Both Ron and Tracymar recognize not all MOOCs are great.

While MOOCs might not be the end of college, there exists potential for them to replace or enhance portions of traditional higher education. For example, Mike Smith claimed "During the course of my 2 degrees I'd say that 1/3 of the courses I took would easily be replaceable by online delivery of the kind I've taken on EdX while still delivering higher quality." Regarding enhancing education, Bejay said, "I can see a professor saying, 'Okay class, before our next session, watch Professor Harvard's lecture on Whatever, and when we get together we'll discuss

it.'" Meanwhile, Sandra, Viper Tongue, and AS see MOOCs as a powerful means to extend education to those whose schedules do not allow them to take more traditional offerings.

Commenters who see potential in MOOCs are not all blindly euphoric in their optimism. Many of them realize the courses are far from perfect and have many challenges to overcome. For example, while touting the potential of MOOCs, AS expressed reservations and said, "The high drop-out rates are discouraging." Meanwhile, Richard H. Serlin points to proctoring and Bruce points to course standardization as challenges to overcome.

Challenging the opinions of others

By far, what I found to be most interesting within the comment forum accompanying Carey's article came in the form of people challenging the opinions of others. To me, such challenges represent a level of critical thinking and deliberation I did not expect to find in such a short form textual conversational exchange. Beyond the various shades of opinion not captured by polls, they represent a crucial element missing from opinion survey results. I have already shared glimpses of people challenging the opinions of others within my findings for my first research question, as well as within some of the opinion themes just discussed. Here I bring specific attention to several examples of deliberation within the comments.

The first example begins with a comment from Vincenzo. Vincenzo begins his comment by saying "Group learning --- where a group of students expends the time to meet with a professor is of tremendous benefit, especially in science, as a variety of student misconceptions emerge for all present to consider and query." He goes onto reveal he is or was a biology professor and that he has participated in MOOCs, which he found useful. However, according to Vincenzo, "they were no substitute for the kind of direct-exchange Socrattic dialogue groups that

I ran as a biology professor in the 90s." His comment prompted the following response from Hb Freddie:

> When I was in college, "group learning" was often hundreds of students in a lecture hall, mechanically and frantically copying down notes as the professor wrote them on a far away blackboard. What if I could have hit "pause" to have time to think about what was being taught?

Hb Freddie is not dismissing the value of Socratic dialogue groups that Vincenzo praises. However, he is bringing to attention the fact that not all face-to-face class environments easily lend themselves to such an approach. In those cases, a MOOC might be advantageous. Interestingly, HB Freddie brings in the perspective of a student into the conversation, which is helpful in exploring the sentiment in these two comments. It is helpful because in Vincenzo's comment there appears to be an absence of consideration that perhaps some of his students did not find his Socratic dialogue groups as helpful as he perceived them to be. Perhaps, some of his students would have preferred to be able to hit pause and take more time to think about the lesson at hand.

Another example began with a comment from Barbara McG where she expressed frustration regarding Carey's thesis, calling it "an absurd premise." In her three paragraph comment she questions his motivations and proclaimed, "In the interests of the people in this picture who matter most--the students--I think it would be a good idea for pundits who are not actually involved in education on a day-to-day basis to take a break from coming up with wacky new schemes that don't address the real issues at the heart of the problem: economic inequality and a lack of ordinary jobs due to outsourcing." Her argument prompted the following response from Steve Singer, worth sharing in full, in which he proceeded to dissect her contentions one by one:

> "Why is this man (... this man ...) getting so much publicity?"

> Perhaps because he speaks truth to power; always hazardous in academe, knowing that firsthand. But, as we both know, his true crime is challenging privilege, yours; and trespassing. He's an interloper who proposes change, of all things: change in institutionalized education, the greatest threat to it under the sun.
>
> "I don't know what motivates Carey".
>
> Maybe it's what motivates me: we're both appalled by waste. Wasted taxpayer money. Wasted time. Squandered talent; student talent especially. Einstein urged a graduate student he was advising: "Don't go back to school. They will try to crush every bit of originality out of you. Don't go back to graduate school." Albert Einstein. That Einstein.
>
> I can attest to that, too.
>
> "In the interests of the people ... who matter most--the students ...". Students matter most? Not at any college I know about. Students are adjuncts, distractions, especially at research-teaching universities. Note the word order: research-teaching. The priority is research and publication; teaching, secondary. It's regarded as a burden and a bore, why it's palmed off on graduate students and junior "adjunct" faculty hired by the tenured professoriate to relieve them of that burden -- especially lecturing introductory courses freshmen and junior-transfers are required to take.
>
> As for your take on politics, academic politics is the most corrupted by selfish self-interest of them all.

One by one, Steve pushes back on Barbara's opinions, using her own words as prompts for his response. And while we do not know exactly what role within higher education Steve may have had, it does sound as though he was a graduate student, given his "I can attest to that, too" remark.

Another commenter, Ras appears to share similar sentiment as Steve. In three different comments he references the book Academically Adrift by Arum and Roska to support his criticism of higher education. For example, in one comment Ras begins by claiming, "Nobody in these comments, not a single person, has refuted the carefully documented evidence, in 'Academically Adrift' and many other places, that colleges currently do a lousy job in educating students and provide abysmal value for money." He then suggests the government should create

"a free, comprehensive online university as a public good." Ras's comment prompted the following rebuttal by RDeanB:

> You are right that evidence needs to be taken seriously, and sentimentality should be eschewed. But you are hyperbolic in your conclusions. First you take evidence of failure as evidence of total failure (and by the way, the jury is still out on comparative studies), and then jump to the conclusion that any system that replaces the current one, and is cheaper, will be better. There is of course no guarantee in MOOC-land. If traditional schools are not doing a good-enough job of improving critical thinking skills, it is no more likely that MOOCs, which are little more than media-rich textbooks, will do any better. And believe me, a "vibrant industry" for tutors is not going to happen: they will likely be poorly paid and have little or no job security. Nor will they be required to produce any meaningful research or scholarship.

In similar fashion as Steve Singer in the prior example, RDeanB refutes Ras's opinion point by point, albeit in a less aggressive manner.

In her comment, RDeanB makes a sweeping generalization about MOOCs, equating them to "little more than media-rich textbooks." It is unclear from the two comments she posted if she has ever taken a MOOC or what role she may have within higher education. She does sound as though she might be a professor or a researcher, given that in both her postings she emphasizes the importance of research. On the other hand, fellow commenter Chris identifies himself as a professor, as well as indicating he has "no objection to students learning online or to 'badges' or other means of verifying that students possess particular skills or knowledge." However, he is "certain that going to college and interacting with other students and with faculty members remains a valuable experience, one that cannot be replicated online." Tamar took issue with Chris stating his opinion in the absolute, as if it were fact, and replied as follows:

> You're highly misinformed. I just completed an online MOOC course with Coursera/Johns Hopkins and there was a tremendous amount of interaction. More so than I had in college in 1984. Unless you have actually experienced it yourself, you have no idea what you're talking about.

Perhaps Chris has participated in a MOOC. We do not know from his one comment. But even if he took one or a thousand it would not be conclusive evidence that the interaction he describes cannot be replicated online. Tamar's experience, at least from her perspective, is evidence to the contrary.

Tamar was not alone in pushing back against the online education and MOOC naysayers. BlueHawk began his comment by saying, "Interesting the number of people commenting on online courses who seem to have never undertaken something at Coursera or edX." He then proceeds to point people to a scholarly article on lessons learned from a hybrid MOOC in *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, while arguing that the massive courses are not the failure or simply high-tech books many people claim them to be. Likewise, Ndasgupt observed, "It seems that most of the comments are from people who have never actually taken a MOOC Course." He went on to argue, "A MOOC Course can be as engaging, as difficult, as time consuming as any other course in an actual university." Neither BlueHawk nor Ndasgupt made their comments in reply to any specific commenter, but instead were pushing back against the critics in general.

R3: (Emotion)

I utilized the software program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to calculate the emotional tone for each comment made in response to Carey's article. I then used Microsoft Excel to generate the boxplot depicted in Figure 2. The value 52.60 marked by an "x" is the mean score. The scores do not represent negative or positive emotions within any particular theme I identified while addressing my second research question. Such an allocation of scores among themes would involve a level of complexity outside the scope of this study. This is because of the data reduction that inherently occurs during qualitative content analysis (Drisko &

Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012, 2014). Schreier (2012) contends, "QCA does not allow you to describe the full meaning of your material in each and every respect" (p. 3). In my research I distilled the numerous opinions expressed within the comments down to set of salient themes. A level of detail and nuance within the comments was, of course, lost during this process. This lost detail and nuance, which is inherent to QCA, makes applying LIWC scores to particular themes within my research potentially problematic. This is because the lost nuance could affect the LIWC scores in not readily apparent ways if applied at the opinion theme level, which could result in misleading findings.

The emotional tone scores and their distribution provide a high-level indication of the emotions conveyed within the comment forum accompanying Carey's article. As a reminder, an emotional tone score "around 50 suggests either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Numbers above 50 indicate more positivity, whereas numbers below 50 indicate "greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Based on the results, we see the tone of comments to be overall slightly more positive than negative, with half of the comments scoring 53.10 or higher.

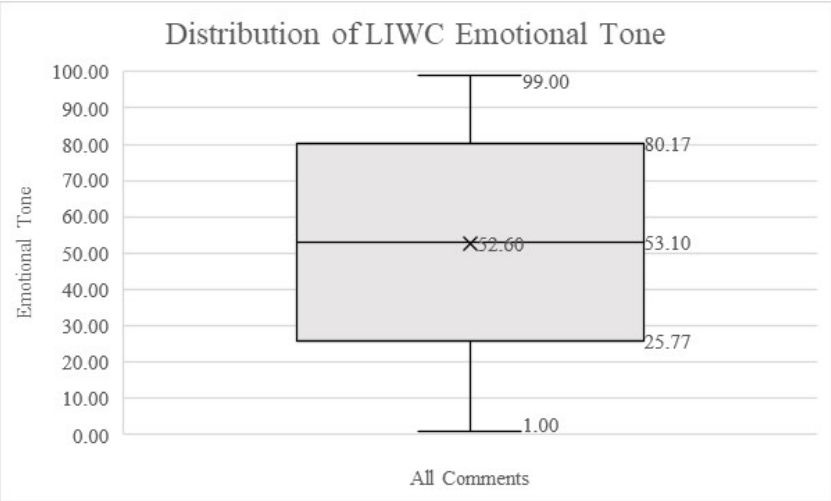

Figure 2. Case 1 distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores.

Case 2: International Students

Article Summary

On March 17, 2016, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published an article by Douglas Belkin and Miriam Jordan titled "Heavy Recruitment of Chinese Students Sows Discord on U.S. Campuses." Belkin covers higher education for *WSJ*. Jordan is a former senior special writer at *WSJ* and currently works as the national immigration correspondent for *The New York Times*. Their 2016 article focuses on Chinese International Students, a student population that has grown significantly over the past ten years. In the 2008/09 academic year there were 98,235 Chinese students at U.S. colleges and universities (Open Doors, 2019b). By the 2018/19 academic year, that number had grown to 369,548 (Open Doors, 2019b). While the annual growth in Chinese student enrollments in the U.S. has slowed (Open Doors, 2019a), they are still by far the largest international student population in the U.S., surpassing the next two largest cohorts from India and South Korea by 167,534 and 317,298 students respectively (Institute of International Education, 2019). Seen as a potent source of revenue by U.S. colleges and universities, International students pay upwards of two to three times as much as in-state students (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Belkin and Jordan's article are but a small part of a much larger and prominent narrative within higher education, one that continues to this day, regarding international students at U.S. colleges and universities, with a focus on Chinese students.

In their article, Belkin and Jordan depict struggles American campuses face as a result of the rapid growth of Chinese students. According to their reporting, "School administrators and teachers bluntly say a significant portion of international students are ill prepared for an American college education, and resent having to amend their lectures as a result" (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). One specific administrator, director of international students at the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Martin McFarlane, describes his university's efforts to integrate Chinese students as a "work in progress" (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Meanwhile, University of California, Irvine professor Catherine Liu admits "we're getting students here without thinking enough about the quality of their experience" (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). One university, Oregon State, "has decided to 'slow down' its intake of Chinese students and tap new markets, such as Africa, Europe and Latin America, to make the campus more diverse" (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Whereas the University of Pittsburgh raised its English-language requirement, resulting in a twenty-five percent drop in international student enrollments (Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

U.S. faculty, administrators, and staff are not the only ones struggling. Chinese students are struggling as well. While colleges and universities market the idea of cultural exchange, the on the ground reality is quite different (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). For example, Belkin and Jordan (2016) contend that with such large numbers on campuses it is likely for Chinese students "to have a fairly insular campus experience, compared with students from countries with fewer numbers." Differences in language and culture prove to be difficult barriers to overcome (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Making matters worse, some "wealthy Chinese students stand out for their opulence—and fuel resentment in the process" (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Universities, such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, have made concerted efforts to improve campus socializing for international students, but there remains much room for improvement (Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

Findings

Belkin and Jordan's article received 669 comments, of which 612 were retrievable at the time of my data collection. 308 commenters participated in the forum, 109 of which posted multiple comments. The most posts by a single commenter was twenty-three and the most words

posted a single commenter across all their comments was 1,674. On average each commenter posted 133 words. The WSJ's comments have an option for commenters to "like" a comment. However, none of the comments for this article received any likes. One potential reason for the absence of likes is that the "like" functionality was added to the WSJ's commenting forums after this particular forum closed. The following table provides additional descriptive statistics on the data set:

	Total	**Maximum**	**Minimum**	**Average**
Comment Word Count	41,109	275	2	67.1716

Table 2. Case 2 descriptive statistics.

R1: (Public Sphere)

I utilized Chen's (2017) deliberation index to address my first research question. I calculated the deliberation index for my dataset at the comment level, which is in line with prior research (Chen, 2017). 150 comments asked legitimate questions and 218 provided evidence. 295 comments did not ask any legitimate questions or provide evidence, 266 provided one or the other, and fifty-one asked a legitimate question and provided evidence, resulting in a deliberation index of .601 for the entire dataset. Another way of stating it is fifty-two percent of comments had deliberative elements in the form of either a legitimate question, evidence, or both. The deliberation index provides us with a basic understanding of the extent to which commenters appear to be attempting to engage in conversation with one another. However, if we look closer at each deliberation attribute separately, we learn more.

Looking at the legitimate questions we see commenters inquiring about such things as higher education's real motivation in recruiting international students, whether it is a good idea to be educating students from a country who some people view as an economic competitor and even as an enemy, and displacement of domestic students, to name just a few. Some

commenters used their questions to push back on educators cited in the article that complained about having to adjust their teaching approach to accommodate Chinese students. One such example comes from Aron Corbett who bluntly asks, "If the school wants to take tuition dollars to educate Chinese students don't you think they have an obligation to educate them?" Some commenters directed their questions at fellow commenters, as well as used their questions to offer suggestions. Case in point, David Nour's reply to Charles Palson. The exchange began with a comment from David where he shared that he was an international student. He then expressed concern about universities eager to accept foreign student money, but seemingly do little to ensure the success of such students. Charles replied offering the suggestion that "Some of the extra $ universities gain should be reserved for financing FULL TIME ESL tailored for Chinese for a year." To which David replied with the following litany of questions containing suggestions:

> **So why not create a "pre-program" back in China before they come or say their first semester here, where it's all focused on ESL, but also the cultural nuances of living, studying, and working here? Why not bring successful international alums to speak with first year students to help them really understand the challenges ahead? Why not better educate the professors and other students into the nuances of here is what to expect from a Chinese student vs. a Korean one vs. one from Nigeria? [emphasis added]** I refuse to abdicate the "total" education of these students from the university. **Otherwise, why are they paying 2-3x the same fee as the student sitting next to them who cares a great deal less about that education? [emphasis added]** We also seem to forget that education is a privilege and not a right and not every American student is a right fit for a four-year university!

Other commenters posed general questions, such as Dan Chambers who asked, "Why should anyone be surprised that to sustain the current disgustingly overpriced system colleges have expanded the numbers of foreign students willing and able to pay 'out of state' tuition rates?" Broadly speaking, questions in the comments give us a sense of what people want to know more

about and that they are willing to ask them in a public realm for other people to potentially respond to or ponder.

Examining the evidence, we see commenters are providing external sources, citing the source article, as well as sharing personal stories to bolster their points. Regarding external sources, we have rita Silver encouraging higher education administrators to read Michael Pillsbury's book *The 100-Year Marathon*. She goes on to contend "It would be far better for America and its security for the colleges and universities to cut their excessive costs before chasing foreign countries for their students." Meanwhile, commenter Lance Johnson pointed people to the book *What Foreigners Need to Know About America From A to Z: How to Understand Crazy American Culture, People, Government, Business, Language and More* as a useful resource to international students. As it turns out, the author of the book is also named Lance Johnson, but it is not clear from the comment if the commenter and book author are one in the same. Additional external sources of evidence include links to news articles from other outlets, such as *Forbes, Bloomberg, CBS 60 Minutes, Los Angeles Times,* and *Minnesota Public Radio,* as well as various figures and percentages, one example being average SAT and GPA by race.

Additional evidence included referring to, as well as quoting the source article, and sharing personal stories. Citing Belkin and Jordan's article was not only a form of evidence commenters used, but it also provides evidence that commenters are reading the source article. Meanwhile personal stories provide a glimpse into commenters' experiences and were at times used to support other commenters' arguments. Case in point, an exchange between commenters CHRISTOPHER PRYSTALSKI and Cindy Rondino. The exchange began with

CHRISTOPHER's following initial comment where he offers personal evidence followed by a series of questions for people to consider:

> Funny you mention the University of Illinois -- Champaign in this article. I returned there last spring for the first time in over 20 years. The Engineering campus was gorgeous -- totally brand new and state of the art and a radically different place from when I graduated in the early 80's. It amazed me that easily over half of the students I passed and heard on the Engineering Quad and in the Grainger Library were speaking a language other than English. **We have to ask, are the children (and their tax-paying parents) of Illinois being well served when they are crowded out from admission to the Engineering College by foreign students? [emphasis added]** Are we training our future economic and military rivals in the technologies of the future? **How much does this contribute to the shortage of American STEM graduates about which corporations so often complain. [emphasis added]** Some things to think about.....

Cindy replied to Christopher, posting the following comment where she shared her own personal evidence to answer two of his questions:

> Having just sent an electrical engineering major to college, it is extremely difficult to get accepted to the state schools for engineering. I tell friends NOT to declare an engineering major on their application, but to remain "undecided" until accepted. On the flip side, my son was easily accepted to the out of state schools with excellent engineering programs where his tuition would be triple the amount of the in state school. He was accepted to one top notch competitive program without having completed the application. It's all about the money. And, yes, as you mentioned, the STEM shortage among American grads is created by the above!

Granted, Cindy's story is anecdotal evidence, but evidently from her comment she not only shared it with Christopher, but with her friends as well.

R2: (Public Opinion)

After several rounds of coding, I arrived at the following salient opinion themes: Welcome to the U.S.!, America First!, Chinese are rich, a distraction, and are cheaters, Why are we teaching our enemy?, U.S. students are lazy, It's all about the Benjamins, and Challenging the opinions of others. The last theme—challenging the opinions of others—is not an opinion theme per se. However, it is a theme that goes further to the heart of public opinion and what the comments reveal that is not apparent via traditional polling. This theme is also a continuation of

my findings from my first research question. This overlap of findings is not incidental, but instead is reflective of the idea that public opinion is derived via conversation within the public sphere.

In the following sections I share findings for each theme. What I provide within each respective opinion theme are vignettes from the online conversation that depict the given sentiment. Some are comments shared in full, whereas others are excerpts. My intent behind doing so was to provide thick description (Thorne, 2016), as well as to depict some of the varying shades of sentiment and rationale for one's opinions.

Welcome to the U.S.!

Unfortunately, most of the opinion themes within the comments were negative, whether commenters aimed their sentiment at students, universities, faculty, or some other aspect of higher education. However, there were some commenters who welcome Chinese international students with open arms. For example, Kalpesh Kapadia shouted "I believe the US universities are the new Ellis Island, attracting the best and the brightest from around the world" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Rather than seeing the rise of international students as a source of discord, they see them as a great learning opportunity. From a student perspective, Bill Fotsch believes "Chinese students are a huge positive, both in building understanding and enabling our sons and daughters what the real world of competition is all about" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). From a faculty standpoint, Aron Corbett believes the increased numbers of Chinese students presents "a great opportunity to improve instruction" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Self-identified university professor, Ed Bukszar agrees with Aron claiming, "You become a better instructor when you reflect on how

you can convey your course material to different cultural groups, possessing different language competencies" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

America First!

Whereas a small group of commenters welcome the large numbers of Chinese students on American campuses, many more commenters think U.S. colleges and universities should be putting American students first. Commenters like Greg Staton wondered "How many spots are International students taking from domestic students for the sake of diversity or tuition - i.e., the standard is no longer merit based" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Robert LaPorta shared similar sentiment when he said, "It seems to me that for every foreign student, an American citizen fails to get into college" and asked, "Where does this end?" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Other commenters focused their frustration at specific institutions, such as Joyce Cordi did in her following comment:

> $500 million of Oregon tax payer's money and outrageous tuition for Oregon students spent to attract Chinese students! Heads at U of O should roll. At University of California -- instate students have been turned away in favor of foreign students. The explanation has nothing to do with culture. It is simple, the administrator's tell us -- foreign students pay higher tuition. Before we talk about free tuition for American students at our public universities -- state governments and the federal government should insure that land grant state universities are spending every dollar of taxes and tuition on educating American students -- undergraduate and graduate alike! (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Joyce made her comment during 2016, the year U.S. Presidential primary candidate Bernie Sanders made tuition-free public universities a prominent part of his campaign platform and has done so again in his 2020 run.

The America first opinion theme is particularly interesting, given people commented on Belkin and Jordan's article a little less than eight months prior the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. It was an election where the eventual winner, Donald Trump, made his campaign all

about putting America first, or as he put it, make America great again. And while Belkin and Jordan's article was not about the election, commenters linked the discord on U.S. campuses to Trump's appeal, as did Laird Wilcox in his following statement:

> This sounds like a kind of cultural imperialism on campuses around the country as they accommodate more and more to the needs of students with vastly different cultures and systematically ignore the culture, traditions and needs of the American citizens with generations of roots in our country who created the institutions in the first place. What they are experiencing is theft of culture and a way of life that was theirs to enjoy, all to make money for universities in order to fund their grandiose campuses and pay the inflated salaries of staff -- many of whom are hired to deal with the problems mentioned in the article. The cult of "diversity" -- and it does have a profoundly cultish nature along with a raft of ideological baggage inflicted upon American students -- is undermining our heritage, culture, traditions and sense of identity. A little is a good thing and goes a long way. What we are experiencing is an alien invasion. It makes Donald Trump easy to explain.

Whereas Laird used his comment as an explanation to Trump appeal, Gary Best ended his comment with "TRUMP 2016", which received a reply from Billy Bean who started his comment with "Gary Best ....Trump, yes :-)" (comments made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Billy went on to say, "I'd be more concerned about illegal immigrants, or children thereof, who are not qualified but are getting into universities at the expense and cost of Americans" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Granted, Belkin and Jordan's article, as well as the corresponding comments are from 2016. However, catch a glimpse of any Trump rally on the news today and it does not appear as though the America first sentiment has disappeared.

Chinese are rich, a distraction, and are cheaters

Generalizations about Chinese students being rich, ungrateful, and cheaters was another opinion theme within the comments. Belkin and Jordan's (2016) article did touch on how "On some campuses, wealthy Chinese students stand out for their extraordinary opulence—and fuel resentment in the process", so it was not surprising to see commenters share in this sentiment.

However, the degree to which some commenters expressed their opinion was rather alarming. Case in point, DAVID RAMSEY who asserted, “My position is not that all Chinese students who have been in my Psychiatry courses are worthless .. my position is that there is a disproportionate % of them that are shipped here by wealthy families that have no intention of learning anything or melding into our culture .. it is what it is and its getting more pronounced rapidly” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). By the way, in an earlier comment DAVID identified himself as a “Prof in Psychiatry in Tennessee” and regarding Chinese students claimed “many many times it appears to me they are on a high dollar paid vacation with unlimited financial backing .. just my personal opinion” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Rather sad to think he considers some students to be worthless, whether international or domestic. Unfortunately, David is not alone in his sentiment, as Dan Laroque claimed he “never saw an instance where Chinese students benefited a class room experience” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). In another one of his eight comments, Dan made the following rant:

> Oregon State University went in over its head with Chinese students starting many years ago. What it got was a ton of money. The problem with Chinese students is that they come as only children, they are spoiled, they keep entirely to their own group, they buy very expensive cars in some cases, they see America as a place to exploit, and they don't want to integrate. They also rob in-state students of a chance to go to college because OSU wants the Chinese money. Their parents also use the local banks to stash cash outside of China...and I mean lots of cash! OSU has also been taking in a number of sabbatical professors from China. They, too, keep pretty much to their own groups. Coming to the US is a “big face” move for which they get credit when they go home. As for being “brilliant”, no! Their system of learning in China is memorization. Many of them spend hours in the library looking for answers to copy. Some want to jump their visa. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Based on another comment of his, it sounds as though Dan may have worked at a university, as to in what role is unclear.

Meanwhile, from the student perspective we have Lara Price offering the following opinion:

> As a 2015 grad of one of the universities mentioned in this article, I can comment fully on how much these international students have affected my and my fellow students' academic experiences. The issue is not with high level classes or grad programs, it is with the introductory weed-out classes like Accounting 101 where the international students are a distraction in the classroom (on their phones, talking in Chinese), they do not participate in group work, and they blatantly cheat on tests. Teachers and they administration do not take measures to stop this behavior because they are paying more, putting other students behind and limiting opportunities for those who are actually putting effort in.

Another student, this time self-identified graduate student Jim Anderson asserted "One problem they didn't mention in the article is that the Chinese students bring their Chinese ethical framework with them" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). He then went on to claim "they all cheat like crazy" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). And while Belkin and Jordan's article did not mention cheating, commenter Mark Johnson pointed people to an article in Forbes titled "How Chinese Students Are 'Cheating' To Get Into U.S. Universities." He provided a link to a second article apparently about cheating as well, but the link is no longer valid. Whether they are cheating or not, some commenters question whether we should be teaching Chinese students at all, as we will see in the next opinion theme.

Why are we teaching our enemy?

Perhaps the most disturbing opinion theme pertains to commenters who view China as an enemy and were questioning why the U.S. is educating them. For example, MITCHEL GALISHOFF simply asked "Why are we educating people from a country who is an enemy?" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). While not condoning the opinion, it is not difficult to understand such sentiment, given various tensions between the U.S. and China, whether economic, military, or some other facet. Tensions are in fact what appear to have

prompted some to comment, such as Ravi Kumar who said, “I find it ironic (or foolish?) that when there are military tensions between China and the US over the South China sea and other issues in East Asia, US universities are educating thousands of Chinese in science and engineering” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

The opinion that we might be educating enemies was not limited to just Chinese students. Case in point, Hope Trimarco’s following comment where she focuses on a different international student population:

> In the 1970s at Uof I Champaign it was Iranian engineering students huddling in corners, leering at girls with uncomfortable stares, smoking cigarettes, and murmuring under their breath betweeen classes. Were they saying “death to the infidels” in Farsi? Did they go back home and work on the centrifuges for the nuclear weapons project? Maybe. Just saying.There is virtually a 100% probability that an enemy will attack us with an advanced technology that they learned while attending a University on U.S. soil. Who wants to bet? (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Comments, such as Mitchel, Ravi, and Hope’s make me wonder how some people might view international students from other countries, let’s say from Russia.

While the comments to this article are several years old, consider them for a moment from the perspective of today where the U.S. finds itself in a trade war with China. While enemy might not be the appropriate word to use in a trade war, China as a fierce economic competitor was another concern among some commenters. For example, Richard Modecki pointed out the article had “not one mention about if it’s in our national interest to be educating our current and future competitors” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Meanwhile, Martin Morfeld lamented the thinking of U.S. leaders, claiming “Those at the top seem to be making short-sighted, ‘how can we shoot our citizens, states and country in the foot today’ decisions by taking money to train the citizens of the US' international competitors instead of our own citizens” (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Martin was not alone in his

sentiment. Carl Levinson had the then upcoming 2016 presidential election on his mind, when he shared the following similar viewpoint:

> I know China as both a businessman and tourist. Generalizing these people are out to conquer the world - at their pace since "time" is irrelevant. The stupidity of our country to sell them technology, fill our schools with their students, and covert their goodwill, all in the name of getting them to finance our deficit is a national disgrace. I may not be a Trump fan, but his level playing field comments are right. How many people, industries, governments and countries want fairness in their dealings with others. Except for politicos who enrich themselves through bribes, payoffs and off the record gratuities, we ordinary American citizens get screwed through Chinese smiling and then underhanded deals and broken promises. We are at economic war and are losing because our people are too timid to stick up for our rights. Lesson: until you stand up to a bully you will always be fearful of what they will do to you. We need to act before it is too late - if it isn't already. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Carl's comment, as well as the others I just shared within this theme, echo tenets of the America first sentiment shared earlier.

U.S. students are lazy

A surprising opinion theme within the comments came from commenters who view U.S. students as being lazy. Rather than seeing the large numbers of Chinese students being a problem, they see U.S. students and their work ethic as the issue. For example, Fred Higgenbottom claimed "Although Chinese and oriental students sometimes struggle with the language and culture in this country they're generally far more proficient in Math and Science than their spoiled and ambitionally challenged American counterparts" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Clint Tarkoe asked the rhetorical question "the Chinese students a burden?" and answered "the burden is the ill-prepared American public high school" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Clint's comment prompted Haighar Baeuerle to reply saying "you should also add that very few parents care to get involved in the PTA and/or run for school ed. boards" followed by "Most parents show very little interest in their children's education and do not push teachers to do better/more" (comment made in

response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Meanwhile, Judith Grayson said "we are in decline and so deeply in denial that just reading most of these comments gives one the shivers" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). She went on to make the following observation about domestic students:

> Matthew Ondre Steve Ross yes. it's sad and tragic and hilarious all at the same time. imagine how american students would fare having to learn and communicate in chinese when they can't even speak or write american english. I am amused at how having real students has put our system of higher education into a tailspin. we can look forward to the frenzied protests of those who are outraged at the unfairness of admitting those who do their homework. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

One can wonder, just how supportive people would be of free college proposals if they consider U.S. students to be lazy.

It's all about the Benjamins

A prominent opinion theme was that colleges and universities are admitting large numbers of Chinese students simply for their money. They see higher education touting benefits of diversity and global learning as just a façade. Take Thomas Delaney's following comment as an example:

> I think the comments for this article are quite interesting. There is no doubt in my mind that this is a classic example of people, in this case very educated people, presenting to society one socially acceptable motive when in reality the real motive is something else entirely. These universities are increasing "diversity" because they covet the money, plain and simple. A motive as old as history itself. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

The hypocrisy of higher education's motives, at least as Thomas Delaney describes it, could be costing universities credibility with the public. It appears to be doing just that for Albert Gelsthorpe, as evident by his following remarks:

> Oh, there is some bloviation about international understanding and academic freedom, etc. But what is it really? "When somebody says it's not about the money, it's about the money."— H.L. Mencken From U of IL, Urbana's web site: Tuition for in-state under grad, IL resident students: $15.6K-$20.6KTuition for international under grad students:

> $32K-$42K Int'l students generate more than 2x the revenue of in-state students. Cut out the Trumpster talk and "Man up" University of Illinois and other colleges and universities. Why hide behind some dysfunctional rationalization that misrepresents reality and misleads the taxpayers and benefactors of the school. It costs you credibility and prostitutes the standards of "higher education." Aren't you supposed to set the standard for truth and honesty? (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Albert compares what higher education is doing to prostitution! And he is not the only one. Kevin Merritt argued, "Maybe, just maybe, Universities wouldn't feel the need to prostitute themselves to foreign money if the cost of a college degree hadn't skyrocketed due to a 'bubble' of federal student loans" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Meanwhile, John Galt called academic elites "academic hookers", whereas Barry Borella labeled what universities are doing as "academic prostitution" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016).

Some of the commenters believe this so-called academic prostitution center around administrative bloat and poor fiscal management. For example, Andrew Thompson contends "this campus revenue problem wouldn't exist if schools could stop having 100 deans/associate deans and bureaucrats" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Andrew's comment prompted five replies, including one by C Cook who claimed, "One major California UC has 18 people on staff, each making $100K+ a year, with the word 'Diversity' in the job title" and concluded, "There in lies the funding problem" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). In another comment C Cook made the following suggestion to university presidents: "Cut back on useless degree programs, and you might find there is plenty of money" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Speaking as a higher education insider, Mahomet Library conveys frustration within her university regarding administration's actions in her following comment:

> Having grown up in and around Champaign, IL, graduated from the U of I, worked there as an undergraduate and as a professional in the University Counsel Office, I can attest to the uneasiness of staff and faculty with the University Administration's course recruiting Chinese students. Even to the point where Illinois' Land Grant Institution turns away the top students from Illinois for more money from abroad. I don't think that was Morrill's idea back in the day. Of course, Illinois is in a precarious position with no pension funding or a budget. Decades of neglect to Illinois taxpayers by those in charge for 30 plus years are clearly to blame. Learning & Labor? I haven't seen that cooperation out of the state capitol in my lifetime. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

One can begin to understand why some people might be opposed to publicly supporting higher education, especially if they view colleges and universities as wasting money. Or if an institution's actions do not support its words.

Challenging the opinions of others

The online comments provide people with a venue to not only agree with others, but to challenge their opinions as well. One such example of this occurring came in multiple exchanges between Sidhant Dash and Marc Jones. The exchange began with Sidhant claiming universities are not doing enough to support international students and that "these students are paying more than their U.S. counterparts, and so deserve a little more help than their domestic counterparts" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Marc took issue with Sidhant's claim and argued domestic students should be the focus, while urging Sidhant to read the U.S. Land Grant Act. Marc said to Sidhant, "You will find that those institutions were created to serve the people of their states and the Land Grant, a vital piece of federal legislations, was clearly passed to serve the US taxpayers" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Sidhant countered by arguing that "universities are always free to go back to the altruistic ideals behind their establishment and stop admitting international students all together" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). He then asked Marc, "They aren't going

to do that, are they?" (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016). Marc answered Sidhant's question as follows:

> My point is universities like many American institutions, have lost sight of what they were created to accomplish. In doing so, they have put themselves at risk. The current approach to admitting foreign students just to raise revenue is already backfiring. Online universities have entered the training-for-pay market and through simple economics, will eventually overwhelm brick and mortar institutions with more customer oriented products. To answer your question, since in large part, the public universities have already alienated their original supporters, the taxpayers, and as a result are desperately seeking new sources of revenue in a very limited market, they have a choice to make. They can return to the missions mandated by their charters and reestablish a productive relationship with the states that produced and funded them or they can starve to death in the new, digital world. So, in short, they had better refocus or they will die. (comment made in response to Belkin & Jordan, 2016)

Sidhant did not reply to Marc's answer. However, in this exchange both were able to challenge the other's opinion and further explain each of theirs position.

R3: (Emotion)

I utilized the software program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to calculate the emotional tone for each comment made in response to Belkin and Jordan's article. I then used Microsoft Excel to generate the boxplot depicted in Figure 3. The value 45.54 marked by an "x" is the mean score. The median and twenty-fifth percentile for the dataset is 25.77. The scores do not represent negative or positive emotions within any particular theme I identified while addressing my second research question. Such an allocation of scores among themes would involve a level of complexity outside the scope of this study. This is because of the data reduction that inherently occurs during qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012, 2014). Schreier (2012) contends, "QCA does not allow you to describe the full meaning of your material in each and every respect" (p. 3). In my research I distilled the numerous opinions expressed within the comments down to set of salient themes. A level of detail and nuance within the comments was, of course, lost during this process. This lost detail

and nuance, which is inherent to QCA, makes applying LIWC scores to particular themes within my research potentially problematic. This is because the lost nuance could affect the LIWC scores in not readily apparent ways if applied at the opinion theme level, which could result in misleading findings.

The emotional tone scores and their distribution provide a high-level indication of the emotions conveyed within the comment forum accompanying Belkin and Jordan's article. As a reminder, an emotional tone score "around 50 suggests either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Numbers above 50 indicate more positivity, whereas numbers below 50 indicate "greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Based on the results, we see the tone of comments to be overall more negative than positive, with half of the comments scoring 25.77 or lower. Even the mean emotional tone score for the dataset is on the negative end of the emotion spectrum.

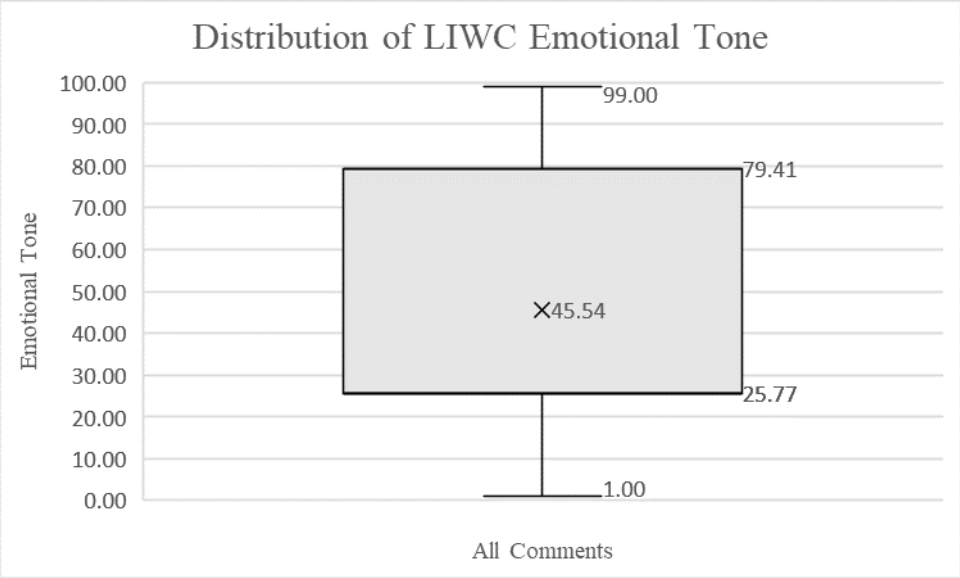

Figure 3. Case 2 distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores.

Case 3: Free College

Article Summaries

On Wednesday, September 18, 2019 the governor of New Mexico announced a plan for free college to all state residents. That same day *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by Talal Ansari titled "New Mexico Unveils Plan to Offer Free College Tuition." *The New York Times* also published an article by Simon Romero and Dana Goldstein titled "New Mexico Announces Plan for Free College for State Residents." Ansari covers U.S. News at large at the *WSJ*. Romero covers immigration, as well as other topics, and Goldstein writes about education policies and their impact on society. While their articles focus on plans within the state of New Mexico, the topic of "free" college is of national attention, even making it into U.S. Presidential debates. Ansari's and Romero and Goldstein's articles are but a small part of a much larger and prominent narrative within higher education, regarding who should pay for higher education.

Ansari's (2019) article is a brief piece reporting on New Mexico's Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's "ambitious new plan that would provide free college tuition to all in-state students", regardless of one's income level. According to his reporting, "New Mexico's plan would apply to students at two and four-year colleges regardless of their immigration status" (Ansari, 2019). While the State Governor is a Democrat and both houses of the state government are under democratic control, it is not a guarantee the plan called New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship will pass (Ansari, 2019). However, Ansari (2019) states, "If the legislature passes the plan, New Mexico would join 20 states that have similar programs, including New York's Excelsior Scholarship, which provides free tuition to students attending state colleges for families making up to $125,000."

Romero and Goldstein's article is a markedly more in-depth piece of reporting than Ansari's. They too report on the Governor's announcement and are quick to note "The move comes as many American families grapple with the rising cost of higher education and as discussions about free public college gain momentum in state legislatures and on the presidential debate stage" (Romero & Goldstein, 2019). Whereas Ansari's article did not provide any details as to how New Mexico will fund the plan, Romero and Goldstein indicate the state will largely fund it via "climbing revenues from oil production." They also provide data to support their reporting, such as the tuition costs at the University of New Mexico and Central New Mexico Community College, as well as median household income and student debt for the state and for the country. Additionally, they note the state's $135 million increase from the prior year in "State and federal spending on early childhood programs, including prekindergarten" (Romero & Goldstein, 2019). Like Ansari, Romero and Goldstein also offer New York's Excelsior Scholarship as comparable program.

Beyond just providing more detail than Ansari, Romero and Goldstein also place New Mexico's plan within the much larger national debate over the costs of higher education. According to their reporting, "Some education experts, presidential candidates and policymakers consider universal free college to be a squandering of scarce public dollars, which might be better spent offering more support to the neediest students" (Romero & Goldstein, 2019). On the other end of the debate there are other people who "say college costs have become too overwhelming and hail the many drives toward free tuition" (Romero & Goldstein, 2019). Not only do Romero and Goldstein refer to democratic presidential primary candidates Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Joe Biden, they also link their text to corresponding articles in *The Times* reporting on their respective positions on higher education. In total they hyperlink

their article to six articles in *The Times*, three from both 2017 and 2019, as well as to eight external sites detailing additional information on higher education costs and accessibility. Ansari's article text did not include any hyperlinks.

Findings

Ansari's article received 143 online comments, of which 139 were retrievable at the time of my data collection. Eighty-eight commenters participated in the forum, twenty-eight of which posted multiple comments. The most posts by a single commenter was nine and the most words posted a single commenter across all their comments was 426. On average each commenter posted seventy-nine words. 114 of the comments received likes. The following table provides additional descriptive statistics on the data set:

	Total	**Maximum**	**Minimum**	**Average**
Likes	680	45	0	4
Comment Word Count	6,983	186	0	50.2374

Table 3. Case 3 (Ansari – WSJ) descriptive statistics.

Romero and Goldstein's article received 428 online comments, all of which were retrievable at the time of my data collection. 262 commenters participated in the forum, sixty-five of which posted multiple comments. The most posts by a single commenter was eighteen and the most words posted a single commenter across all their comments was 1,623. On average each commenter posted 110 words. 348 of the comments received recommendations. The following table provides additional descriptive statistics on the data set:

	Total	**Maximum**	**Minimum**	**Average**
Recommendations	3,131	168	0	7
Comment Word Count	28,932	290	1	67.5981

Table 4. Case 3 (Romero & Goldstein – NYT) descriptive statistics.

R1: (Public Sphere)

I utilized Chen's (2017) deliberation index to address my first research question. I calculated the deliberation index for my dataset at the comment level, which is in line with prior research (Chen, 2017). In the following two sections I share my findings for both articles starting with Ansari's:

Ansari's article in *The Wall Street Journal*

Fifty-nine comments asked legitimate questions and forty provided evidence. Fifty-three comments did not ask any legitimate questions or provide evidence, seventy-three provided one or the other, and thirteen asked a legitimate question and provided evidence, resulting in a deliberation index of .712 for the entire dataset. Another way of stating it is sixty-two percent of comments had deliberative elements in the form of either a legitimate question, evidence, or both. The deliberation index provides us with a basic understanding of the extent to which commenters appear to be attempting to engage in conversation with one another. However, if we look closer at each deliberation attribute separately, we learn more.

Looking at the legitimate questions we see commenters inquiring about such things as who will pay for the plan, whether it will be retroactive, and student motivation, to name just a few. At times, commenters directed their questions at specific fellow commenters. For example, when Paul Kaplan said, "You know you are a Trump supporter if you believe education is a threat to your political agenda", fellow commenter Lyn Robins replied with the following series of questions:

> Paul...**after students graduate, what is the next step of the plan? What happens if the students can't find a job in their chosen field of study? What if they attend college, but don't find a job or are underemployed for a lifetime? Is there any oversight built into this plan to minimize the number of students who start college, but don't graduate [emphasis added].** Fyi....just passing everyone to boost graduation metrics is a REALLY bad idea. **What metrics will be in place to allow the TAXPAYERS to**

> **determine if their money has been allocated to a program that is value added? What will happen to the salary structures for the processors? [emphasis added]**

Paul did not reply to Lyn, having only posted the one comment to the forum. However, based on Lyn's questions she appears to be pushing back on the simplistic assertion that if one is not for the free college plan one is automatically a Trump Supporter. Other commenters posed general questions, such as Barbara B Mazzarella who asked "Are the taxpayers of New Mexico all on board with this plan? Especially those who have already paid for their own college education?" Broadly speaking, questions in the comments give us a sense of what people want to know more about and that they are willing to ask them in a public realm for other people to potentially respond to.

Examining the evidence, we see commenters are providing external sources, citing the source article, as well as sharing personal stories to bolster their points. Regarding external sources, we have steven seeger who provided a link to the College Tuition Compare website, along with an excerpt stating, "At Central New Mexico Community College, the graduation rate is 24% within 150% normal time." In the same comment Steven questioned just how long the state will provide students with free college and to push back on fellow commenter Erick Staedicke's claims about free college and time to degree completion. A couple more examples of external evidence come from Fred Vincent and Steven Chen. Fred pointed to Kalamazoo, Michigan as an example of a city that has tried a free tuition plan, while Steven pointed to New York's Excelsior Scholarship.

Additional evidence included referring to, as well as quoting the source article, and sharing personal stories. Citing Ansari's article was not only a form of evidence commenters used, but it also provides evidence that commenters are reading the source article. Meanwhile personal stories provide a glimpse into commenters' experiences and were at times used to refute

other commenters' arguments. Case in point, we have an exchange between Eric Clark and David Mcmahon. First, Eric posted a comment that began as follows:

> "How are we going to pay for it" is the easiest rally cry for all those opposed to doing anything positive that moves the human race forward in thinking and mindset. Let's just continue to reinforce fear, greed and ignorance? That is working so well for everyone and the planet at large…

Eric's comment seems to have struck a nerve with David who replied as follows:

> "How are we going to pay for it" is the easiest rally cry for all those opposed to doing anything positive that moves the human race forward in thinking and mindset.
>
> Yeah why worry about costs?
>
> Funny, I paid my own tuition - and I got multiple degrees! I wasn't in a place of fear, greed, and ignorance!

In similar fashion to David, John Loesch reflected on his experience paying for a Ph.D. at the University of New Mexico while raising a family to also push back on Eric's assertions.

Romero and Goldstein's article in *The New York Times*

102 comments asked legitimate questions and 182 provided evidence. 177 comments did not ask any legitimate questions or provide evidence, 218 provided one or the other, and thirty-three asked a legitimate question and provided evidence, resulting in a deliberation index of .664 for the entire dataset. Another way of stating it is fifty-nine percent of comments had deliberative elements in the form of either a legitimate question, evidence, or both. The deliberation index provides us with a basic understanding of the extent to which commenters appear to be attempting to engage in conversation with one another. However, if we look closer at each deliberation attribute separately, we learn more.

Looking at the legitimate questions we see commenters inquiring about such things as the employment prospects of certain degrees, rising tuition, climate change, and the sustainability of the plan, to name just a few. At times, commenters directed their questions at specific fellow

commenters. For example, when Joe of Jackson suggested the plan be means tested "otherwise, this scheme will drive income inequality, not fix it", Alex of Albuquerque, NM replied with the following counter-argument and series of questions:

> @Joe-Means tested public goods are perhaps the worst way to run a society. Imagine if those who made over $100k had to pay a toll on the freeway, while those who made below that were exempt. **Do you think this would stimulate class resentment? What about firefighters charging upper middle class citizens and above money for their services? Do you think this would lead to the election of social safety net slashing politicians by the upper class out of spite? [emphasis added]** I sure think so. **Why should education be different than these public goods? [emphasis added]**...

Alex was not alone in his questioning of Joe's mean's testing suggestion. Ken from California joined in by asking "What if the parents are not willing to help? Do we say too bad to the child?" Other commenters posed general questions, such as HLP from Chicago, IL who asked "After reading an article yesterday that addresses the paltry pay adjunct professors receive and lack of benefits, I'm wondering how the current system is sustainable?" Broadly speaking, questions in the comments give us a sense of what people want to know more about and that they are willing to ask them in a public realm for other people to potentially respond to.

Examining the evidence, we see commenters are providing external sources, citing the source article, as well as sharing personal stories to bolster their points. Regarding external sources, we have Kalith Smith from Roswell, NM pointing people to a dissertation in support of his following argument:

> This is awesome news, but as is noted in the attached dissertation, we have to support them once they arrive. If the money colleges save is diverted to effective student success programs this could be a win, win! Several colleges and universities in the state have already made improving graduation rates a priority.
>
> https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1311&context=cehsedaddiss

As it turns out, the name of the author of the doctoral dissertation is also Kalith Smith. The title of his dissertation is *Responding to the College Completion Crisis in New Mexico: A Case Study*

of the University of New Mexico, which he completed as part of a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Nebraska. Additional examples of external evidence include referencing sources, such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *CBS News*, and even the New Mexico State Constitution, as well as citing various metrics.

Additional evidence included referring to, as well as quoting the source article, and sharing personal stories. Citing Romero and Goldstein's article was not only a form of evidence commenters used, but it also provides evidence that commenters are reading the source article. Meanwhile personal stories provide a glimpse into commenters' experiences. For example, in the following comment Imohf of Albuquerque shares his experience at the University of New Mexico as a means to convey his frustration with the free college tuition plan, or at least with how it was communicated:

> I'm a faculty member at the University of New Mexico and I hadn't heard ANYTHING about this! You'd think they'd consult us or inform us before they announce plans! ALL that we hear is budget shortages, classes not making, inability to support travel and research! Where are they getting the money, when daily they tell us there isn't enough to pay us or hire new faculty or renovate aging bathrooms??? This has got to be totally absurd!

Other commenters, such as Bob of Easton, MD and Alex of Albuquerque, NM, shared their experiences of benefiting from tuition-free higher education. Meanwhile, Jim of Pennsylvania claimed "A solid number of students in my college classes simply don't belong there, but have been accepted simply to keep tuition dollars (not from the state) rolling in." He went onto assert, "It has gotten to the point where I now feel that I am merely teaching AT a college, but not at college level."

R2: (Public Opinion)

After several rounds of coding, I arrived at the following salient opinion themes: Hell yes to free college!, Yes, but not funded via fossil fuels, No such thing as free, Higher Education's

Unnecessary and Irresponsible Expenses, Useful and Useless Degrees, Fix K-12 first!, and Challenging the opinions of others. All the themes except for one were present within both forums that accompanying the two articles. The theme Yes, but not funded via fossil fuels was present within Romero and Goldstein's article, but not within Ansari's.

The last theme—challenging the opinions of others—is not an opinion theme per se. However, it is a theme that goes further to the heart of public opinion and what the comments reveal that is not apparent via traditional polling. This theme is also a continuation of my findings from my first research question. This overlap of findings is not incidental, but instead is reflective of the idea that public opinion is derived via conversation within the public sphere.

In the following sections I share findings for each theme from both articles. What I provide within each respective opinion theme are vignettes from the online conversation that depict the given sentiment. Some are comments shared in full, whereas others are excerpts. My intent behind doing so was to provide thick description (Thorne, 2016), as well as to depict some of the varying shades of sentiment and rationale for one's opinions.

Hell yes to free college!

In both the *WSJ* and *NYT* comment forums there were people who appear to be all for New Mexico's free college plan. The support ranged from commenters viewing the plan as a step in the right direction, pride in the state's actions, and all the way to calls to take free college national. As for the plan being a step in the right direction, we have BRUCE GALE who believes "it makes sense to try it at a state level and see if it succeeds or fails" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). Pride came in the form of comments like that of Jonathan Rossman of New York, NY who said, "So proud to see my home state making this bold move to expand access to higher education for all" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020).

Taking the excitement even further, DYLAN CIRALDO insists "now we just need this at a national level" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020).

Yes, but not funded via fossil fuels

A notable difference between the two forums was a group of commenters within *NYT* who appear to be for free college, but not if it is funded by fossil fuel revenues. They see it as counterintuitive to try to solve one problem, costs of going to college, by adding to another, climate change. Case in point, the following comment from Alycee Lane of Oakland:

> No mention of climate change?
>
> I am all in for free college, but what a cynical ploy to bind people to fossil fuels. Free education? Sure. But only if you commit to life-killing greenhouse gas emissions.
>
> The reporter notes that the oil revenues are rolling in from the Permian Basin, but fails to point out that it has enough oil reserves to lock us into catastrophic climate changes. The continued efforts to exploit the reserves will guarantee that the world into which the debt-free graduates will enter will be radically diminished. Food scarcity, extreme weather, massive infrastructure destruction, water scarcity - you name it.
>
> I have a better idea: tax the wealthy to fund education and leave the fossil fuels in the ground. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Sharing similar sentiment, Bella from The City Different sees free college via fossil fuel profits as a "double edged sword" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020).

As indicated earlier, Romero and Goldstein's is a considerably more in-depth article than Ansari's. Their article indicates "New Mexico plans to use climbing revenues from oil production to pay for much of the costs" (Romero & Goldstein, 2020). Ansari's article makes no mention of how the state plans to fund the program, nor does it mention any type of fossil fuel. Whether or not this difference of detail in reporting attributed to the absence of this opinion theme within the comments accompanying Ansari's article is unknown, but it is an important point to keep in mind.

No such thing as free

The opinion that there is *no such thing as free* was a theme among people pushing back against the New Mexico plan within both forums. For example, claiming "there is no such thing as free", John Crocker goes on to "wonder why anyone still uses the word 'free'" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). In a similar vein, Blackmamba from Illinois contends "calling this 'free' is deceptive and misleading" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). He believes "New Mexico taxpayers will pay for these college educations whether or not they or their family members benefit" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). One of the more vocal opinions, metaphorically speaking, came from Imohf of Albuquerque who made the following rant:

> I'm a faculty member at the University of New Mexico and I hadn't heard ANYTHING about this! You'd think they'd consult us or inform us before they announce plans! ALL that we hear is budget shortages, classes not making, inability to support travel and research! Where are they getting the money, when daily they tell us there isn't enough to pay us or hire new faculty or renovate aging bathrooms??? This has got to be totally absurd! (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Additionally, in a later comment Imohf proclaimed, "The most egregious part of this is the total ignoring of Faculty Governance!" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020).

Fellow commenter Harvey Green replied to Imohf informing him the money will come from "oil and gas revenues from the Permian Basin" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). Granted, Romero and Goldstein (2020) also indicated "New Mexico plans to use climbing revenues from oil production to pay for much of the costs." However, commenters in both forums pointed out fossil fuel revenues are not inexhaustible. Case in point, Eric Stanfield's following comment:

> This is the real head-scratching part of it to me. They are planning to fund this based on oil/gas revenue which is weighing in at historic highs (for NM). That's great for right

> now, but anyone who can read has to realize that oil/gas monies come and go with the wind and feast now will inevitably be famine later.
>
> What happens then? Roll it all back? Doubt that. Fill the gap with tax increases more likely. Same short-sighted, vote pandering idiocy that's been filling the debate podiums all summer. (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020)

Meanwhile, fellow *WSJ* commenters Catherine Dempsey and Kathleen Mccarty, as well as fellow *Times* commenters samten171, Jay, and Sausca wonder what will happen if a new administration, whether at the state or federal level, enacts policies that severely limit fossil fuel revenues (Ansari, 2020; Romero & Goldstein, 2020).

Higher Education's Unnecessary and Irresponsible Expenses

Consider for a moment, you are of the opinion colleges and universities waste money. Then, suddenly you hear people calling for higher education to be free. The idea of making it free might not sit well with you if you think its spending is already out of control. As it turns out, another theme within both forums was aimed at what JSD of New York labeled as "unnecessary and irresponsible expenses" at state-funded universities, such as on "sports programs, obscenely opulent campuses and athletic facilities, luxurious dorms, concierge-level services for students" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). Peter I Berman of Norwalk, CT went so far as to proclaim, "This program will provide further income boosts for already highly paid college Profs and Administrators - among the nations most privileged entitlements - at the expense of providing education where its truly needed - our impoverished cities" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020).

What some commenters deem as irresponsible spending by colleges and universities, they also view as having nothing to do with education. Irresponsible spending does not sound good in general, but one might view it in a different light if it were done in attempt to improve student

learning (i.e., noble intent, just not fiscally responsible). However, that is not the case from Steve Regal's perspective, which he makes clear in his following comment:

> However, universities have to get their spending under control - they spend money without a care in the world and know that they can basically raise tuition as much as they want, so they spend and spend and spend. They say they have to in order to provide a high quality education, but that is not true - substantial numbers of lower level classes are taught by adjuncts or grad students, all the while tenured faculty teach 2 classes a term. (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020)

Rochelle Flynn shares in Steve's sentiment, while also pointing to administrative bloat and needless amenities:

> College isn't expensive because of the cost of one's education. It is expensive because there is an administrator for one or two dozen different diversity initiatives that all do the same thing; a rock-climbing wall at most colleges; luxury dorm rooms; food courts that cater to every fad diet; 3,470 student activities, clubs, and events at NMSU alone; a half dozen hundred dollar textbooks for every class (many of which should be electives for those who do not need to work for a living); academic research; and a wealth of other "amenities" that do not necessarily correlate with a good education. (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020)

One can imagine the idea of free college being a tough pill to swallow for people who, like JSD, Peter, Steve, and Rochelle, think colleges and universities are wasting money.

Useful and Useless Degrees

It is no secret that many people view higher education degrees as a pathway to gainful employment. When free college enters the conversation, we have people picking and choosing which degrees they view as useful as compared to useless. For example, in the following comment by Loren Walch she provides a list of degrees she deems worthwhile:

> From those who live in the real world, to the elites in state government: New Mexico does not need more liberal arts and social science graduates. Those degrees are now obsolete. The state needs more electricians, heavy equipment operators, skilled woodworkers, electricians, mechanics, and those in the STEM colleges. So many college graduates go on to fulfilling careers as baristas, bartenders and wait staff. (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020)

Loren was not alone in her thinking that certain degrees are a direct pathway to employment as a barista. Fellow *WSJ* commenter Dean Wichchester and *NYT* commenter ehillesum also think we have too many baristas, with Dean complaining that "many people choose to go into less rigorous, and mostly useless, majors like 'xyz studies'" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). Regarding New Mexico providing free college, ehillesum of Michigan said, "It's great if they spend the money on STEM students and not the liberal arts programs that prepare many college students for under- or unemployment" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). Within the same conversation thread as ehillesum, Jerry from Colorado chimed in with the following comment:

> @JLT My guess is there will be pretty strict residency requirements, if not, I say good luck NM taxpayers. I suggest they eliminate certain degrees from the program. I have no issue with Liberal Arts Degrees as long as the degree is real and provides an opportunity to earn a living after school. A lot of the new Liberal Arts Degrees being offered are the issue. Why take on thousands in debt for a Women's Studies Degree? May as well take basket weaving. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Jerry was replying to JLT who posted the initial comment in the thread and garnered ten replies by nine fellow commenters.

Fix K-12 first!

Perhaps the most interesting theme among people pushing back against the free college plan within both forums was that we should focus on fixing K-12 education first. They believe many colleges and universities are providing education students should be receiving in high school or are watering down their curriculums for less prepared students. For example, Richard Lueders asserts, "the first courses NM colleges teach incoming students are high school level" and went on to say "the Gov should focus on the public K-12 schools!" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). Meanwhile, Nominae from Santa Fe, NM claims "K-12 in many places is *not doing their job, and colleges are *forced to 'dumb down' their classes

accordingly" (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020). Steve Tebbets went so far as to say "it's just plain irresponsible to be considering free college at this time" without first fixing "the abhorrent K-12 education system" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020).

Simply being of the opinion that we should focus on fixing K-12 education first does not necessarily mean one is completely opposed to the idea of free college. Perhaps Steve Tebbets would be open to the idea after K-12 is *fixed*, given he qualified his current opposition with the words "at this time." A clearer example of wanting to focus on K-12 education first, while remaining open to the possibility of free college or some version of it comes from Lionrock48 from Wayne, PA in her following comment:

> On one hand I applaud the sentiment of the Governor of NM but on the other I decry the emphasis, over emphasis on a college education. Lets be frank, we are NOT talking about education but a credential - in this case a college diploma. We need to edcuate our kids from K-12 so that they can do math needed for most jobs other than a rocket scientist, so they can read a book or article to be informed citizens. We have so devalued "university education" that we allow diploma mills to proliferate. We let folks into university who cannot read, write, spell or even speak claiming we are providing opportunity. Then they show up at our workplaces and still have that same set of deficiencies. We are not providing opportunity, we are rewarding failure. It should be damn hard to get into university and be free if you maintain say a B-minus GPA. Below that you have to pay, all students, athletes, part timers, etc. all alike. We need to restablish excellence in our HS not AP classes but tough classes for all kids and not let kids skate through. Europe has a pretty tough bar - the BAC before one gets to go to university and only about 25% do. Would it be asking our kids to much to do the same as long as we really did provide excellance in every single school system in the country.? Take the dollars for free collge and put it back into education where it belongs in K-12 , please for all of us. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Lionrock48 reveals a whole host of opinions within her comment, including the belief people place too much emphasis on college educations, we are devaluing higher education, and graduates are unprepared for the workplace, to name just a few. And while it is clear she wants the focus and the money to go to improving K-12, Lionrock48 appears to remain open to the idea of a merit-based form of free college.

Challenging the opinions of others

The online comments provide people with a venue to not only agree with others, but to challenge their opinions as well. A clear example of this happening is in the conversation that ensued after JLT's following initial post:

> That is great! With college costing $65,000 +, I'll bet a lot of people move there to avoid a lifetime of debt.
>
> By the way, my cousin in Denmark gets paid about $900/month to go to college. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

JLT's comment made no mention of certain degrees being of more value than others. However, ehillesum did just that in his following reply:

> @JLT. It's great if they spend the money on STEM students and not the liberal arts programs that prepare many college students for under- or unemployment. But they won't and millions will be wasted. New Mexico will still have too few doctors and engineers and too many baristas. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Ehillesum's reply was one of ten replies sparked by JLT's initial remarks, which all but one debated whether certain degrees—namely liberal arts—were of no value. For example, Alex of Albuquerque, NM chimed in with the following thoughtful and constructive counter-argument:

> @ehillesum-I am a practicing Doctor in NM with a STEM undergraduate degree from the University of New Mexico (my undergrad tuition was paid for by the Lottery Scholarship which funded my full tuition). Though I may not have a liberal arts degree, I understand the value in one. My NM peers from a decade ago with a liberal arts education have gone on to become lawyers, business men and women, teachers, and yes, even doctors. Even if someone is underemployed after college, higher education has a protective effect against crime, drug use and unplanned pregnancy. This in itself should be a major reason for funding our Universities, as it prevents the American public from having to pay for the costs of later incarceration, unwanted pregnancies, and the ills of drug crime. Finally, the liberal arts attempts to describe and contemplate the world around us. Though I too have criticisms with some of the methodology, this is invaluable in our educated world. We need individuals to push the boundaries, research what constitutes our society, and create critical thinkers in the global economy. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Alex was not alone in his sentiment. Ellen from San Diego clearly agrees with him, as made clear by her following reply where she also offers an opinion about adjunct pay:

> @Alex
> Great comment! My daughter chose an "impractical" bachelor's - Peace and Global Studies. She went on to get a Master's degree in Deaf Education, and a doctorate in Education. She teaches deaf students and American Sign Language to hearing students and has a great career (though adjunct pay at the college level is a national disgrace). (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

One more example from the discussion, this time on the side of JLT, comes from Jerry of Colorado. After Jay of Ohio sided with Alex and Ellen as to the value of liberal arts, Jerry pushed back as follows:

> @Jay A number of Liberal Art courses already need to be taken by BS majors. I suggest that a minor in a Liberal Art is ok, majors? Unless the degree has a purpose I see no reason to subsidize it. Sorry, but a major in Dead Poets of the 19th Century is not a degree worth paying for. (comment made in response to Romero & Goldstein, 2020)

Within this one example discussion thread we see people sharing their opinions while challenging the sentiment of others.

Meanwhile, within the comments accompanying Ansari's article an example of commenters challenging one another's opinions was kicked off by Eric Clark's comment where he argued, "'How are we going to pay for it' is the easiest rally cry for all those opposed to doing anything positive that moves the human race forward in thinking and mindset" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). He went on to claim anyone who believes things like tuition free education and universal health care are not good things has "a mindset that is far outdated and narrow in scope to the understanding of a much bigger picture: an intrinsic relationship between all things" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). Eric was not finished, as he went on to indicate the real problem as being "the narcissistic and greed culture", which he believes is reinforced by the current curriculum (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). His comment

resulted in ten replies. The first came from David Mcmahon who made it clear the question as to who we are going to pay for it is not an inconsequential question, while revealing he paid his own tuition and received multiple degrees (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). Eric replied to David letting him know that he too paid for his own higher education and that his point still holds (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). David countered by asking Eric "What point could that possibly be?" (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020). He then stated the following:

> Fiscal reality means that things have to be paid for. There are real buildings on college campuses, classes are taught be real professors that need salaries. The buildings have to be heated in the winter. These are real expenses. (comment made in response to Ansari, 2020)

Eric did not reply to David second rebuttal. However, seven more commenters chimed in making similar counter arguments as did David. The online comments within both forums provided commenters a venue to converse with other people, some sharing in sentiment and others that do not.

R3: (Emotion)

I utilized the software program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to calculate the emotional tone for each comment made in response to Ansari's and Romero and Goldstein's articles. I then used Microsoft Excel to generate the boxplots depicted in Figures 4 and 5. The values marked by an "x" in both boxplots are the mean scores for the respective datasets. The median and twenty-fifth percentile for the Ansari dataset is 25.77. The scores do not represent negative or positive emotions within any particular theme I identified while addressing my second research question. Such an allocation of scores among themes would involve a level of complexity outside the scope of this study. This is because of the data reduction that inherently occurs during qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012, 2014).

Schreier (2012) contends, “QCA does not allow you to describe the full meaning of your material in each and every respect” (p. 3). In my research I distilled the numerous opinions expressed within the comments down to set of salient themes. A level of detail and nuance within the comments was, of course, lost during this process. This lost detail and nuance, which is inherent to QCA, makes applying LIWC scores to particular themes within my research potentially problematic. This is because the lost nuance could affect the LIWC scores in not readily apparent ways if applied at the opinion theme level, which could result in misleading findings.

The emotional tone scores and their distribution provide a high-level indication of the emotions conveyed within the comment forums accompanying Ansari’s and Romero and Goldstein’s articles. As a reminder, an emotional tone score “around 50 suggests either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence” (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Numbers above 50 indicate more positivity, whereas numbers below 50 indicate “greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility” (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis , 2015, p. 22). Based on the results, we see the tone of comments accompanying Ansari’s article to be overall more negative than positive, with half of the comments scoring 25.77 or lower. Regarding the comments accompanying Romero and Goldstein’s article, we see the tone to be overall more positive than negative, with half of the comments scoring 65.12 or higher.

While the emotional tone for the two forums is quite different, there are a couple important points to keep in mind. First, the dataset for Romero and Goldstein’s article was more than three times the size of the dataset for Ansari’s article in terms of total number of comments, and over four times in size in terms of total word count. Second, Romero and Goldstein’s article is a markedly more in-depth piece of reporting than Ansari’s. While I did not design my study to

account for the effect such differences in dataset size and reporting depth of article might have on resulting comments, they are still important considerations to keep in mind when interpreting the results.

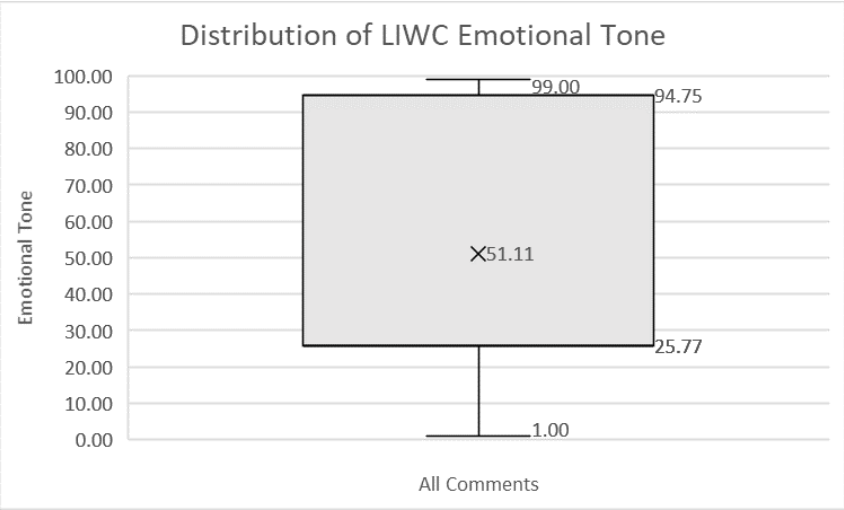

Figure 4. Case 3 (Ansari – WSJ) distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores.

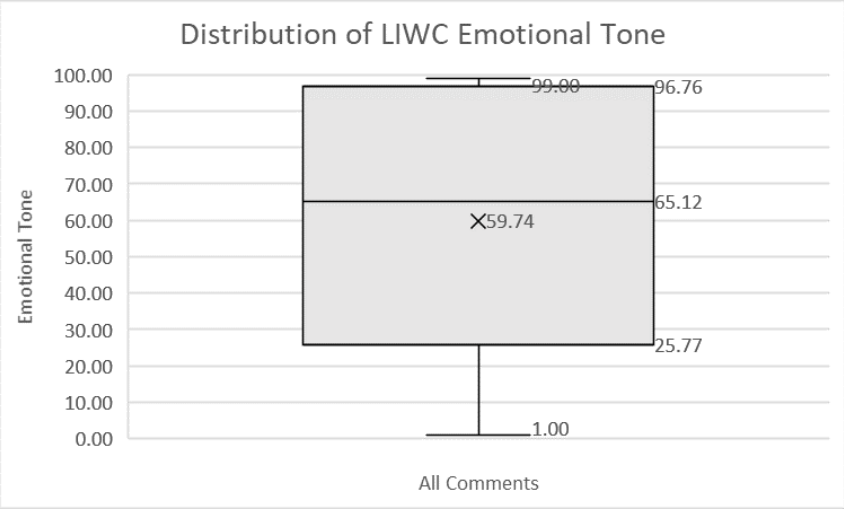

Figure 5. Case 3 (Romero & Goldstein – NYT) distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION, SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of my dissertation was to investigate online news comments to learn what they might tell us about the conversations people are having and what they think about higher education. My conceptual framework for my study consisted of the following components: public sphere, public opinion, emotion, influence, and online comments. The logic behind my framework for my dissertation begins with the public sphere. The public sphere being "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 2006, p. 73). For my research I took the perspective that public opinion is something richer than common poll results. Instead, conversation within the public sphere is at the root of public opinion. Emotion is a part of my framework because emotion is an integral part of opinion. My following research questions address the first three parts of my framework:

- R1: (Public Sphere) To what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?
- R2: (Public Opinion) What opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?
- R3: (Emotion) What emotions do people convey via online news comments?

The influence component of my framework was not under investigation per se within my study. However, it gets at the importance of my research and implications for higher education, which I weave into my discussion. In the following sections I first discuss my findings and what they

mean for higher education. I then offer suggestions for future research followed by concluding remarks.

Discussion

In chapter 6 I shared an in-depth exploration of the evolution of online commenting at *The New York Times*. Comments have what Reagle (2015) describes as a "tarnished reputation as something best avoided" (p. 2). My examination of commenting at *The Times* serves as a means to begin rehabilitating commenting's character by showing its importance at one of the most prestigious news organizations in the world. While the priority *The Times* places on its commenting and quality of its forums is not representative of online news outlets as a whole, its commitment certainly runs counter to the adage of online comments as something best avoided. For an organization that reported a financial loss of $543.44 million the year before it launched its online commenting (New York Times, 2020), *The Times* has made a substantial financial investment in its online conversations, employing a dedicated staff for moderation and having its journalists participate in the ongoing dialogue. In 2017, ten years after it first launched online commenting on its website, *The Times* announced a significant expansion of its online conversations (Etim, 2017a). Rather than something to be avoided, my exploration of commenting at *The Times* shows commenting as a form of dialogue to be valued, cultivated and learned from.

In chapter 7 I shared my findings for each of my four cases from the following higher education themes: technological transformation, international students, and free college. In my research I analyzed online news comments accompanying four popular press articles, two from *The Times* and two from the *WSJ*. I did so to determine the extent people are utilizing these digital forums as a means to engage in conversation and to explore what online comments might

reveal about the opinions and emotions people express while talking about higher education. I realize the term "higher education" is a general one. Whereas scholarly conversations and research may home in on a specific finite aspect of a much larger and complicated phenomenon, ordinary day-to-day conversations are often general in nature covering diverse aspects. I utilized the articles and accompanying online comments as four occasions to examine the online deliberations of different publics. In the following sections I discuss my findings as they pertain to the public sphere, public opinion, and emotion components of my framework, as well implications for higher education.

Public Sphere

Researchers of the internet and online discourse regularly invoke Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere (see Chen, 2017; Dahlberg, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007, 2013; Debatin, 2008; Durham & Kellner, 2006; Harlow, 2015; Jackson & Valentine, 2014; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; McDermott, 2016; Papacharissi, 2002; Shanahan, 2018; Trice, 2011). Habermas (2006) defines the public sphere as follows:

> By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. (p. 73)

Whenever people join in unrestricted conversation on matters of general interest a part of the public sphere is realized (Habermas, 2006). In this sense, there is not a size requirement for the public sphere to begin to be realized, other than it must include more than just an individual. The people convening in this type of conversation constitute what Habermas (2006) refers to as a public body. The public sphere is more so an ideal to be strived for than something attainable in its purest sense (Dahlberg, 2005, 2014; Finlayson, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). The purpose of my first research question—to what extent do people appear to engage in conversation with one another in online news comment forums?—was to determine the extent in which public sphere

like characteristics manifested within the online comment forums I investigated. By public sphere like characteristics I mean evidence of deliberation.

Gastil (2008) contends "people deliberate when they carefully examine a problem and a range of solutions through an open, inclusive exchange that incorporates and respects diverse points of view" (p. xi). He claims, "Conversations and discussions are the simplest and most familiar forms of deliberation" (Gastil, 2008, p. xii). In a similar vein, Dutwin (2003) asserts "conversation is an integral aspect in the formation of public opinion and underscores the importance of facilitating its prevalence in the polity through deliberation and other means" (p. 260). Recognizing online news comments as a potential place for conversation, Chen (2017) developed an index to measure deliberation within online forums. She derived her index on what she refers to as deliberative moments. Chen (2017) defines a deliberative moment as "brief forms of public deliberation, small bites, if you will, that offer some support for the ideals of free debate, inclusiveness of viewpoints, and discussions across difference encompassed by democratic deliberation" (Chen, 2017, p. 176). Deliberative moments are instances of the ideals of the public sphere manifesting, if only momentarily. I utilized a version of Chen's deliberation index, as detailed in chapter 5, to assess the level of deliberation within the forums I investigated. I coded the presence of evidence in a comment as a one, and the presence of a legitimate question(s) also as a one, for a total possible deliberation index of two per comment. The deliberation indexes I calculated for each article's comment forum I analyzed are listed in Table 5.

Theme	Newspaper	Article	Author	Year	Number of Retrievable Comments	Deliberation Index
Technological Transformation of Higher Education	*The New York Times*	Here's What Will Truly Change Higher Education: Online Degrees That Are Seen As Official	Kevin Carey	2015	282	.805
International Students	*The Wall Street Journal*	Heavy Recruitment of Chinese Students Sows Discord on U.S. Campuses	Douglas Belkin and Miriam Jordan	2016	612	.601
Free College	*The Wall Street Journal*	New Mexico Unveils Plan to Offer Free College Tuition	Talal Ansari	2019	139	.712
Free College	*The New York Times*	New Mexico Announces Plan for Free College for State Residents	Simon Romero and Dana Goldstein	2019	428	.664

Table 5. Deliberation indexes – All cases.

The deliberation index for each forum provides a basic understanding of the extent to which commenters appear to be attempting to engage in conversation with one another. Within the previous chapter, I further explored the deliberation occurring within each forum by sharing examples of legitimate questions commenters asked, as well as evidence they entered into the conversation. In all four cases we see commenters using the conversation space to ask for more information, question each other, and in some cases, question the author and the respective news

venue. At times, fellow commenters engaged in back-and-forth exchanges with one another answering inquiries, to express their agreement, or to convey their opposition. To bolster their sentiment, commenters shared personal experiences and additional sources, such as related news articles and statistics.

Granted, not all comments contained elements of deliberation, as measured by Chen's deliberation index as I utilized it. However, there is evidence of deliberative moments from all four of the forums I investigated where commenters are attempting to engage in conversation with one another. Having spent considerable time immersed within the comments and analyzing the presence of deliberation, I cannot help but agree with Chen's following assertion about the importance of such moments:

> The value of these moments is that they open the door at least a crack to true discussion, even if that door shuts rather quickly if things escalate. Is opening the door a crack to true discussion worth it? I say, yes. A partially open door is better than one that is perpetually shut. Speech, even if imperfect, is better than silence. (Chen, 2017, p. 177)

My findings support the idea of online comments as a space for conversation, albeit an imperfect one.

Taking the findings even further, it is important to not forget the expansive spatial and temporal nature of online conversations. Even the partially opened doors to conversation within the comments may later be opened wider. As Bohman (2004) reminds us, "the other's response can be understood in a quite expansive spatial and temporal sense, in that someone in the indefinite future could give a response, without the speaker even conceivably having intended to address that hearer" (p. 133 - 144). In other words, we can view online comments as part of a *long conversation* that unfolds over time and space (Maybin, 2006; North, 2007). The extent of the online conversations within the comments may extend well beyond the respective online forums. While difficult, if not impossible to accurately measure, we should not ignore this point

when considering the impact of digital public spheres and the conversations occurring within. It could be much more far-reaching than what is apparent by a count of the number of commenters and reading of their conversations.

From the perspective of higher education my public sphere findings are important in that they show people are using the online comments as a place to converse and deliberate about topics pertaining to colleges and universities. Unlike spoken conversations which we are accustomed to that are relatively ephemeral and typically privy to only those directly participating, online conversations in the form of online comments are within earshot of anyone with an internet connection. Listening is critical. Based on the literature I reviewed, there is a perception among some within higher education leadership that we must do a better job at listening. While recognizing higher education's problematic relationship with its publics, President of Yale University, Peter Salovey (2018) proclaims, "Leaders in higher education, including myself, must work to regain the public's trust." He asserts, "This begins with empathy - listening to people's concerns and trying to understand them." If we so choose, we can use online comments as a means to listen to people deliberate over challenges facing higher education to gain a better sense of publics' sentiment.

Yes, listening. It sounds simple and obvious. But, how often do we truly listen to people outside the proverbial ivory tower on matters pertaining to higher education or on anything else we claim so-called expertise? Sure, there are likely some who are actively in tune with their publics, listening and learning. However, it appears as though we are not listening to people outside of higher education anywhere near as much as we might assume. Rooted in an air of superiority, higher education's idea of public engagement is that of something the academy bestows upon the public (Hoffman et al., 2015). This misguided notion of a one-way dialogue

"has helped engender the growing estrangement between the academy and the world outside it" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 22). Finn (1984; 1988) and Smith (2010) shined a spotlight on higher education's self-righteousness while pleading with leadership to genuinely listen to its publics. When higher education leaders from across the country gathered at the University of Michigan "driven by a deep concern that the academy is facing a crisis of relevance" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 1), Wright and Lubchenco reminded them of the crucial importance of listening. Wright asserted, "We know it feels good when people listen to us. Now turn that around and think of people who want us to listen" (as quoted in Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 22). Meanwhile, Lubchenco stressed "Engagement implies a two-way interaction. It means listening, not just talking" (as quoted in Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 23).

Listening could be as simple as occasionally pulling up a news article on *The Times* or *WSJ* or some other news outlet and perusing the conversations within the accompanying comments, while sitting at one's desk eating their lunch. Paying attention to online conversations can yield valuable insights, such as identifying emerging issues, as well as engagement opportunities (Jones, 2018). Lubchenco recognizes the power in listening to everyday common folk claiming, "I've witnessed some fascinating shifts in the problems that scholars are tackling because they are listening to the concerns and questions of laypeople and have been motivated to seek answers that they were not previously researching" (as quoted in Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 76-77). Consider Lubchenco's observation in light of my dissertation findings. Commenters are asking questions. The questions within the cases I explored might not result in new research, but at the very least they do point to items people want to know more about.

We can even automate our listening. As you may recall from Chapter 6, *The Times* developed and made available an application programming interface (API), which allows users to data mine comments on its website (Gerst, 2008). With a little programming ingenuity, one could devise software that automatically crawls and mines the comments looking for particular key words, such as *student debt*, *academic freedom*, or the name of a specific institution. Social listening, that is the software aided monitoring and mining of the multitude of online conversations occurring every day, can yield robust and valuable insights as to what people are thinking (Gross, 2018; Jones, 2018). According to Jones (2018), "Social listening tools provide the ability to capture conversations over time and across channels to provide analysis and a vast array of data around the 'whole' conversation, offering a comprehensive look at a brand's digital representation." And yet, most higher education institutions underutilize the dialogues occurring in cyberspace as a means to understanding their publics (Gross, 2018).

Listening does not mean we must or even should act on everything we hear. To do so could be harmful. For example, pillars of higher education, such as academic freedom and tenure to name just two, routinely face a barrage of assaults. No doubt, one will find these same assaults, as well as others within the online comments. While the merits of such higher education constructs are debatable, people outside of higher education may very well not have the intimate knowledge and understanding as to the importance of specific features of academia to levy informed opinions or credible suggestions. Lippmann (1993) warned that the members of a public "will not know the antecedent events, will not have seen the issue as it developed, will not have thought out or willed a program, and will not be able to predict the consequences of acting on that program" (p. 54). And yet, "The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the

hero and who the villain of the piece" (Lippmann, 1993, p. 55). Higher education leadership needs to be careful not to bend or yield to the publics' sentiment when doing so would result in more overall harm than good. Instead, leadership should seek to proactively influence its publics' opinions to more closely align with their own, just as Bernays (1928b) urged higher education leadership to do so long ago.

Listening is a great first step, but online comments present us with more than just an opportunity to hear what people are saying. We can also use them to engage with our publics. While urging higher education leaders to reclaim their critical role in fostering and sustaining a robust public sphere, Smith (2010) points to the internet as affording "the opportunity to participate actively in the conversations of the public sphere much more widely than ever before" (p. 179). In her book *The Public Professor*, Badgett (2015) identifies online comments as a promising means of engaging more people. Perhaps active involvement by higher education in online news comments could be the "bold and imaginative engagement with the public" Price (2002) has called for. However, while only an internet connection away, such engagement—whether simply authentically listening or actively commenting online—will likely not be easy. Badgett (2015) shares the following challenging experience of her colleague Nancy Folbre who wrote for the *New York Times* Economix blog:

> Her engagingly written and well-documented posts typically attracted 10,000 hits each week, giving her a great platform to comment on a wide range of economic issues. The first weeks were rough, though. The harsh and hostile comments posted in response to her pieces shocked her. She enlisted some friends to try to keep the comment conversation more civil and on point, but without much success. Eventually, she decided that she was just a sheltered college professor who needed to "get in the game," as she put it. (Badgett, 2015, p. 182)

Even just listening to the online conversations within the comments is likely a difficult task, one requiring thick skin, so to speak. Posting comments, even if anonymously, will probably require

a person to possess an even higher level of emotional resilience. A potential steppingstone to engaging within the comments would be to simply answer some of the questions fellow commenters have. Or, one might just point fellow commenters to additional resources that might be useful to better understanding a particular topic. We already find commenters doing both. Such steps might be less emotionally taxing than outright voicing one's own opinion or directly trying to influence fellow commenters. Engaging within the comments might not be easy, but in the long run it may prove to be worth it. Chen (2017) believes "The more positive, thoughtful, intelligent voices we have in comment streams, the more likely it is that a conversation will not digress" (p. 183). Perhaps higher education leaders could be some of those thoughtful intelligent voices within the comments.

As broader public sphere media goes, Higher education leaders admit "The *New York Times* is the gold standard, but even insiders have little idea how to get onto the op-ed page" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 90). We learned in Chapter 6, online comments at *The Times* have evolved into an active conversation that not only includes the newspaper's readers, but its journalists as well. Here is an idea for people within higher education who have little idea how to get onto the op-eds: try participating in the news comments that accompany the articles. Whereas it might be very difficult to reach author status on an article within such an acclaimed news organization, the ease at which one can contribute to the online comments is as easy for a Nobel Prize winning economist and professor, such as Paul Krugman, as it for Joe or Jane Anybody. Online comments, whether posted to *The Times* or some other news site, might seem small as compared to that of a headline article, but it would be unwise to marginalize such contributions to much larger ongoing conversations and their potential impact on people's emotional opinions and ways of thinking. Herbst (1996) warns us not to ignore communications

occurring on the margins of the public sphere because although the effects of such conversations might not work quickly, in time they can affect the highest aspects of society.

I realize the idea of using online news comments as a mechanism for listening and engaging with our publics is a tough sell. After all, genuine and reciprocal engagement with people outside of higher education in any shape or form is a formidable challenge for a variety of reasons. As Hoffman et al. (2015) point out, "academic scholars are often not trained or given the proper incentives to engage with the public" (p. 4). They went on to assert, "Indeed, many of us are culturally biased away from this kind of activity, which is often viewed as a waste of time at best and anti-intellectual at worst" (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 4). Now imagine trying to convince people within higher education to engage within public spheres that have the unfortunate label *don't read the comments* stamped across them. Indeed, a tough sell and not something most people think of doing. But as President of Arizona State University Michael Crow asserts, "We need to communicate in ways we've never even thought about before" (as quoted in Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 44). My public sphere findings show that rather than viewing online news comments with indifference or disgust, these online conversations deserve our attention as a mechanism to listen and engage with our publics.

Public Opinion

Even though public opinion is a term most people are familiar with, it has no universally agreed upon definition (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Herbst, 2011b). Opinion polls are likely the first thing that comes to mind when someone says "public opinion", as they have become synonymous with the term (Ginsberg, 1986; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Goidel, 2011; Herbst, 2011a). However, as I explored in my literature review, polls are not the only form of public opinion, nor

are they necessarily the best means to gain a sense of it. Habermas (1996) claims public opinion is "not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons", and therefore "must not be confused with survey results" (p. 362). The process of public opinion formation is social in nature (Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2015; Habermas, 1996; Herbst, 2011b). Herbst (2011b) insists "that textured talk, dialogue, exchange, and conversation—not numbers—are the content of public opinion" (p. 95). And while it might be tempting to focus on mainstream conversations, Herbst (1996) warns us not to ignore communications that occur "on the margins of the public sphere" (p. 120). She believes such mechanisms for public expression "can create communication back channels" (p. 124), which "enable common citizens to voice opinions that might not ordinarily be heard" (p. 125). Online comments have a tarnished reputation, with websites often relegating them to the bottom of the web (Reagle, 2015). They are at the margins of the public sphere. The purpose of my second research question—what opinions do people express about higher education in online news comment forums and what do such opinions reveal about public views of higher education that are not apparent via traditional opinion polling?—was to investigate these digital conversations as a source of opinions.

To answer my second research question, I utilized qualitative content analysis. A key characteristic of qualitative content analysis is its ability to reduce data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2012, 2014). This characteristic of the method made it particularly suitable for taking hundreds of comments representing potentially hundreds of opinions and reducing them into a more manageable number of opinion themes. In following with interpretive description guidance, I utilized an inductive approach to my analysis (Thorne, 2016; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). That is, I let the opinion

themes emerge from the data. Table 6 shows the opinion themes from each of the forums I investigated.

Topic	Technological Transformation of Higher Education	International Students	Free College	
Article	Here's What Will Truly Change Higher Education: Online Degrees That Are Seen As Official by Kevin Carey in *The Times*	Heavy Recruitment of Chinese Students Sows Discord on U.S. Campuses by Douglas Belkin and Miriam Jordan in the *WSJ*	New Mexico Unveils Plan to Offer Free College Tuition by Talal Ansari in the *WSJ*	New Mexico Announces Plan for Free College for State Residents by Simon Romero and Dana Goldstein in *The Times*
Opinion Themes	- Higher education is not simply job training! - Public Disinvestment - Greedy Higher Education - The True Higher Education Experience - Online is inferior - There is a place for online education - MOOCs: Failure, Nothing Special, or Potential? - Challenging the opinions of others	- Welcome to the U.S.! - America First! - Chinese are rich, a distraction, and are cheaters - Why are we teaching our enemy? - U.S. students are lazy - It's all about the Benjamins - Challenging the opinions of others	Note: All of the themes except for one were present within both forums that accompanying the two articles. The theme Yes, but not funded via fossil fuels was present within Romero and Goldstein's article, but not within Ansari's - Hell yes to free college! - Yes, but not funded via fossil fuels - No such thing as free - Higher Education's Unnecessary and Irresponsible Expenses - Useful and Useless Degrees - Fix K-12 first! - Challenging the opinions of others	

Table 6. Opinion themes – All cases.

It is important to note, not all opinions that commenters expressed rose to level of an opinion theme. As I indicated within my methods chapter and again within my findings chapter, Schreier (2012) contends, qualitative content analysis "does not allow you to describe the full meaning of your material in each and every respect" (p. 3). In my research I distilled the numerous opinions expressed within the comments down to set of salient themes. A level of detail and nuance within the comments was, of course, lost during this process. However, just because certain opinions within the forums did not rise to level of a theme during my analysis does not mean they are not important. Consider for a moment, the following assertion by Gastil:

> Even if one person in the minority is reluctant to speak, so long as another speaks up, the view is brought into the discussion; in an online discussion, it is not always easy to see how many people are present, so it is even more ambiguous whether one view or another is being underrepresented in the discussion. Moreover, members of the majority, more so than those in the minority, may choose not to speak up simply because they have already had their view articulated by others. (Gastil, 2008, p. 31)

The Times and the *WSJ* do not leave their online comment forums open indefinitely. The curtailing of forums may very well be preventing the prevalence of certain opinions within the conversations from increasing or the introducing of more varied sentiment. Not to mention the effect it might have on the level of deliberation within the forums. Even if an opinion is in the minority, it is important not to ignore such sentiment. Bernays (1945) warned that doing so "may lead to explosions later on when minority opinions become articulate, active and overt and come suddenly into open conflict with majority opinion" (p. 266a). By listening to the public sphere and the opinions conveyed within, higher education leadership can be in a better position to effectively address its publics' sentiments, whether positive, negative, minority, or majority.

In my study I selected articles from three different higher education topics: technological transformation of higher education, international students, and free college. It would be unwise to view these topics or the issues and challenges higher education faces, as well as the ensuing

conversations, as neatly walled off discrete phenomenon. Consider for a moment, Edelman's (1993) following warning:

> The media, regimes, and academic studies all typically focus on particular public issues, ignoring their close connections to other issues and policies. The treatment of closely connected issues as though they were autonomous is itself a major category mistake. (Edelman, 1993, p. 236)

Edelman (1993) went on to assert, "The close ties among these public issues are apparent to anyone with even a modest understanding of public affairs and social science; but neither the media, the government, nor the universities typically present them in a context in which the focus is on the analysis of their connections" (p. 236). A quick look at table 2 and we can a connection among all four of the forums. A portion of the conversation in each case conveyed the sentiment that higher education is not so innocent when it comes to its financial challenges. That is, the opinion themes of *Greedy Higher Education, It's all about the Benjamins*, and *Higher Education's Unnecessary and Irresponsible Expenses*, while named differently, appear to show a connection in sentiment across the three topics explored. It seems prudent for higher education leaders to heed Edelman's warning and realize that while from an academic standpoint we might have the tendency to look at issues in a compartmentalized manner, our publics may very well see them as interconnected and having similar if not the same causes.

My public opinion findings are important in that they begin to show the "textured talk, dialogue, exchange, and conversation" that Herbst (2011b) insists "are the content of public opinion" (p. 95). Such textured talk is absent from or at least is not readily apparent via opinion polls. Take as an example a hypothetical opinion poll measuring people for or against free higher education. A person indicating "no" in a poll may very well be doing so because they think higher education wastes money. Or, they might indicate "no" because they think fixing K-12 should be the focus of any additional public funding. Yet another reason they might indicate

"no" in a poll might be rooted in the proposed source of the funding, such as fossil fuels. This texture in sentiment representing quite varied rationale for opposition to free college proposals is all but lost in the polling process. But, within the comments we begin to see the various shades in sentiment as commenters reveal and challenge one another's opinions in the arena of the online conversation.

This textured talk within the online comments provides us insight into the varying social realities people live within. As you will recall, for my research I adopted a social construction perspective for reasons I explained in detail within chapter 2. Within my explanation I shared that public opinion scholars Eveland and Glynn (2008) contend how people perceive reality "has been, and likely will continue to be, a central component of the study of public opinion" (p. 161). I also shared the following quote from world renowned theoretical physicist and philosopher David Bohm, who spent much of his career contemplating and offering profound insights on the construction of reality:

> Opinions thus tend to be experienced as "truths," even though they may only be your own assumptions and your own background. You got them from your teacher, your family, or by reading, or in yet some other way. Then for one reason or another you are identified with them, and you defend them. (Bohm, 2004, p. 10)

Within the opinion themes we see the power of social construction at work. Take the opinion theme *The True Higher Education Experience*. Is there really a true higher education experience and if so, who gets to decide what constitutes one? Is the fully online college student's higher education experience less of a true experience than a traditional residential student's? Is the community college student's experience less true than the prestigious liberal arts college student's? These are, of course, rhetorical questions. Some of the commenters within the forum accompanying Carey's article appear to believe there is a true higher education experience, making all others something else. They seem to be experiencing their opinions as truths.

Yet another example is the opinion that we should welcome Chinese international students with open arms versus the opinion that they are our enemy and we should not be training them. Or, how about the idea of free college? Some people within the comments are of the belief there is no such thing as free, whereas others believe there is. Who is right and who is wrong? In reality, are there free things or does everything have a cost? Consider for a moment how frustrating it might be for you to hear politicians or higher education advocates tout the idea of free college when in your social reality there is no such thing as free. Such messaging might come across as deceptive or an outright lie in the minds of some people. Is the idea of free college deceptive or a lie? It depends on one's social reality, as Childs reminds us as follows:

> We live in a world of conflicting ideologies and philosophical systems. All of them start with certain assumptions, certain premises incapable of absolute proof. The only certainty is that every listing of human values takes us back ultimately to a premise, an assumption, a mere opinion. (Childs, 1940, p. 80)

The online comments provide us a glimpse into this world of conflicting ideologies and philosophical systems of the commenters.

Bernays (1928b) recognized the critical importance for higher education leadership to be in tune with the social realities of its publics as he made clear in his following assertion:

> It may be a new idea that the president of a university will concern himself with the kind of mental picture his institution produces on the public mind. Yet it is part of the president's work to see that his university takes its proper place in the community and therefore also in the community mind, and produces the results desired, both in a cultural and in a financial sense. (Bernays, 1928b, p. 131).

Does leadership want its publics to view higher education as greedy or its recruitment of international students to be all about the Benjamins? Consider the effect such opinions are likely to have on public support in terms of just dollars for institutions. Those are just a couple examples of mental pictures Bernays would most definitely implore leadership to alter. Bernays also recognized that it might be those within higher education whose mental pictures need

altering. He argued the public might be "getting a *correct* impression, in which case, very possibly, the work of the university itself should be modified" (Bernays, 1928b, p. 132). The sentiment expressed within the online comments provide us with a readily accessible means to assess some of the mental pictures our publics have pertaining to higher education, as well as an opportunity to reflect on and adjust our own socially constructed realities.

Emotion

The number one reason people post online comments on news stories is to express an emotion or an opinion (Stroud, Van Duyn, Alizor, Alibhai, & Lang, 2017; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). We could instead say the number one reason is to post emotional opinions, given how interrelated emotion and opinion are. Bernays knew opinion is interwoven with emotion, as he made clear in his following assertion in how to influence public opinion:

> Here the specialist in swaying public opinion avails himself of the, findings of introspective psychology. He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity. (Bernays, 1928a, p. 961)

Given Bernays assertion, it is not surprising to see public opinion scholars Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (2015) claiming the study of emotion "is increasingly playing an important role in public opinion research" (p. 133). The purpose of my third research question—what emotions do people convey via online news comments?—was to determine the basic prevalence and intensity of emotions within the online comment forums I investigated.

For my third question, I used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program to conduct quantitative sentiment analysis. LIWC is a simplistic and yet powerful tool for understanding the emotional states people convey in the words they use. Mehl (2006) contends LIWC is "an extensively validated solution" for researchers interested in "low-level psychological constructs" (p. 152), such as emotions, and considers it to be one of the most influential quantitative text

analysis approaches in psychological research. For my study I utilized the aptly named summary variable *emotional tone*. Pennebaker Lab developed an algorithm derived from extensive prior research, which calculates the emotional tone of a given text (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). The precise algorithm is not available "due to prior commercial agreements" (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015). Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, and Francis (2015) describe the emotional tone summary variable as follows:

> Emotional tone -- a high number is associated with a more positive, upbeat style; a low number reveals greater anxiety, sadness, or hostility. A number around 50 suggests either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence. (p. 22)

I used the emotional tone variable in LIWC to assess the emotional intensity within the online comments. The boxplots in Figure 6 show the distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores for all comments from each article.

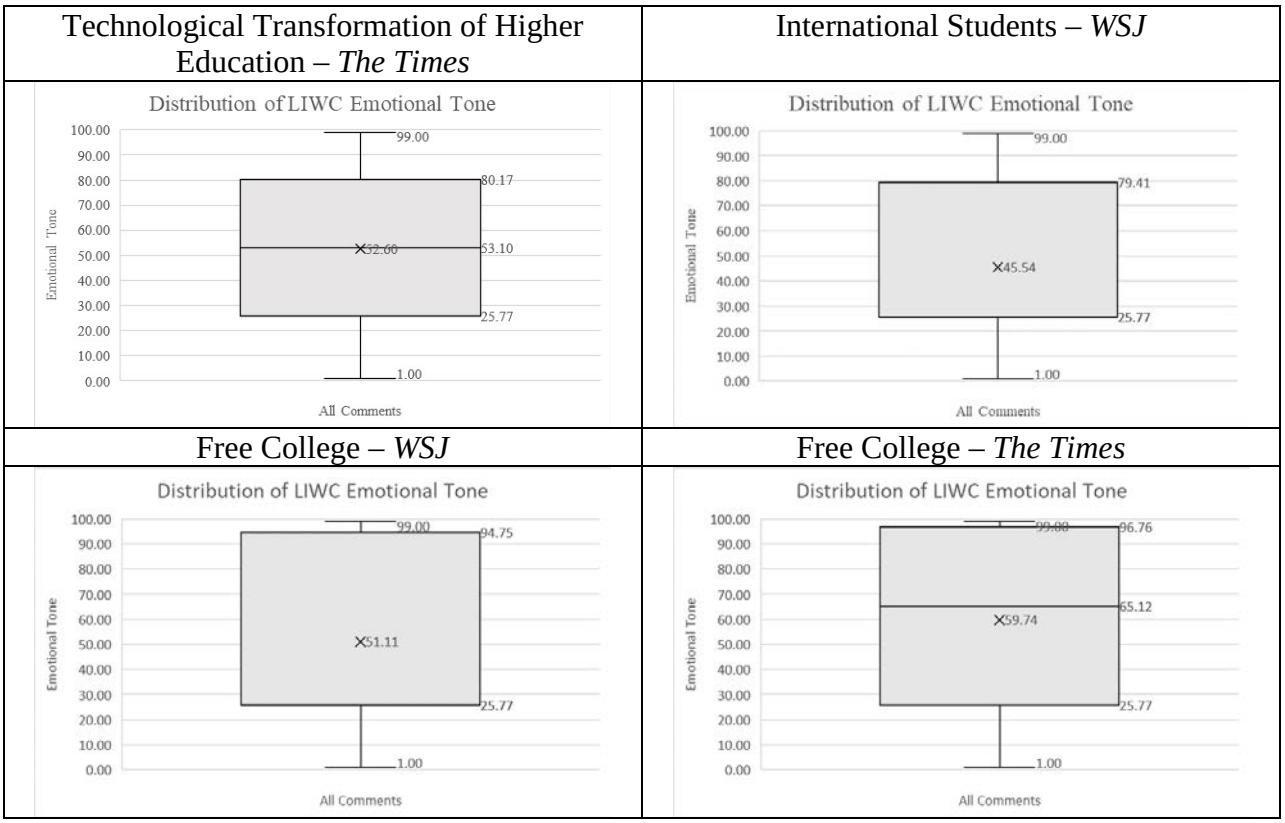

Figure 6. Distribution of LIWC emotional tone scores – All cases.

As they pertain to higher education, people's conversations are not devoid of emotion. While this observation is perhaps obvious, the implications for colleges and universities are likely less apparent. The traditional view of emotion is one in which it is in opposition to reason (Barrett, 2017; Cavanagh, 2016; Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 2008; Haidt, 2013; Isen, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Prinz, 2012; Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, & Mayer, 2008; Solomon, 2008; Westen, 2008). However, as I explored in my literature review, a growing body of work spanning multiple disciplines is beginning to recognize and support what Hume (1958) proclaimed long ago: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume, 1958, p. 313). More recently, Barrett echoed Hume's sentiment in her following assertion:

> Affect is in the driver's seat and rationality is a passenger. It doesn't matter whether you're choosing between two snacks, two job offers, two investments, or two heart surgeons— your everyday decisions are driven by a loudmouthed, mostly deaf scientist who views the world through affect-colored glasses. (Barrett, 2017, p. 79-80)

Meanwhile, Haidt uses the metaphor of a rider on an elephant to make the same point as Hume and Barrett. In a nutshell, the rider is reason and the elephant is automatic processes, such as emotion (Haidt, 2013). And while the elephant (i.e., emotions and other automatic processes) "is not an absolute dictator", Haidt contends, it "is far more powerful than the rider" (p. 79). In line with Hume, Barrett, and Haidt's assertion, Westen (2008) blames recent Democrat campaign failures on what he calls "an irrational emotional commitment to rationality—one that renders them ironically impervious to both scientific evidence on how the political mind and brain work and to an accurate diagnosis of why their campaigns repeatedly fail" (p. 15). For higher education to be able to proactively and effectively influence its publics' opinions it seems prudent for it to take into account the emotions such opinions and corresponding conversations evoke.

Take as one example, the emotional tone of the comment forum accompanying Belkin and Jordan's article about Chinese international students on U.S. campuses. Of the four forums I investigated, it had the most negative overall emotional tone. That forum included the opinion theme I referred to as *why are we training our enemy*. While I did not assess emotional tone at the opinion theme for reasons I discussed within my findings chapter, one can reasonably assume people expressing such an opinion are not doing so with positive emotion. At the very least we do know that most of the comments had a negative emotional tone. If we want to work to change people's opinions it might not be the best approach to purely counter their sentiment with facts and figures, such as the economic value international students bring to local communities. This is because emotions can override one's ability in certain situations to consider evidence contrary to one's beliefs (Barrett, 2017; Damasio, 1994; Marcus, 2002). Haidt (2013) makes this point by saying "you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments" (p. 57). Instead, "if you want to change people's minds, you've got to talk to their elephants" (p. 57). Or, as Clark and Zhang (2019) put it, "We have information, but without some degree of emotional appeal, reasonable arguments supported by facts do not persuade or move us" (p. 3).

Research shows negative emotions tend to narrow one's thinking whereas positive emotions tend to open one's thinking (Haidt, 2013; Heath & Heath, 2010; Isen, 2008; Konijn & ten Holt, 2010; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Prinz, 2012). Konijn and ten Holt (2010) claim "The attention-narrowing effects of negative emotions such as fear, appear to lead people to become less open minded, less accepting of dissenting opinions, and less accepting of out-group members" (p. 52). Those are just a few examples of the ways in which are emotions might be affecting our thinking and opinion formation. The research on emotion is extensive. And while I included research on emotion within my review, my understanding and command of the topic is

at a beginning level at best. However, based on the literature it is clear that if we want to effectively influence the opinions our publics have about higher education, we need to leverage the role of emotion.

Badgett (2015) appears to agree on the important role of emotion in influencing people. She claims, "Some debates involve big issues that seem a long way from facts and ideas" (p. 42). I will admit some of the opinions expressed within the forums I investigated seemed a long way from facts and ideas. In difficult conversations with "visceral arguments", Badgett (2015) believes "scholars' contributions might lie in their ability to clarify and understand the emotional or moral basis for those opinions so that other participants in the debate are better informed in their efforts to change or muster the opinions of those individuals" (p. 42). She goes on to assert, "You can use a personal story, someone else's story that you have read about (lawsuits and newspaper articles are a great source of detailed and compelling stories), or any other anecdotes that help to make your point in vivid detail and trigger emotions that will increase your audience's receptiveness to your argument" (p. 121). The online comments are also a source of personal stories and emotions higher education leadership can leverage to make more compelling arguments. A more nuanced analysis of emotions could very well provide more actionable insight into negative of positive direction of specific opinions, as well as how deliberation among commenters might alter the tone of sentiment. I suggest such a detailed analysis in the next section as a future direction for research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Of course, an obvious suggestion for future research is simply to investigate additional online comment forums within *The Times* and *WSJ*, as well as within other online news outlets at local, national, and international levels. It might even be possible to investigate the online

comments of news organizations that have shut them down, such as *The Atlantic* or a more local example, mLive. Just because an organization gets rid of their online comment sections does not necessarily mean they deleted the underlying data (i.e., online comments). The data may very well still exist within the news organizations' servers or within the servers of the organizations that hosted the comment forums. Regardless of whether they are active or shutdown, the inclusion of additional online forums could reveal further insight into the online conversations occurring on the topic of higher education, as well as the sentiment commenters express. Such insight could yield a stronger understanding of the publics (local, national, and international) higher education leaders are trying to reach and improve their ability to proactively and effectively shape opinions. In the following sections I provide additional suggestions specific to each component of my framework: public sphere, public opinion, emotion, and influence.

Public Sphere

In my research I utilized Chen's (2017) deliberation index to assess the level of public sphere like nature of the comment forums I investigated. Future research could employ other means to further enhance our understanding of online comments as a place of conversation regarding the topic of higher education. For example, in his considerable body of work on the possibilities and barriers to public sphere like conditions on the internet, Dahlberg (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b) has developed a set of evolving detailed criteria to assess the Habermas based public sphere characteristics present online. Likewise, Hauser (1999) established five rhetorical norms "by which the defining conditions of any specific public sphere may be gauged and criticized" (p. 77). Future research could apply their criteria to online comment forums pertaining to higher education. The use of additional criteria could provide a more robust understanding of online comments as a public sphere.

Public Opinion

In my research I focused specifically on articles about higher education and the online comments accompanying them. However, comments about higher education are not solely the province of articles specifically about higher education. We all probably can think of times we have been engaged in conversation where someone goes off on a tangent or begins talking about an entirely different topic, even if just for a moment. Tangents happen in online conversations as well, with some scholars noting online commenters' tendency to go off topic (Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Samuels, 2016; Shanahan, 2018). These moments might be telling of what is on a person's mind and offer potential insights into their opinions. Future research could investigate comments accompanying articles that are not specifically about higher education to see if, when, where, and in what ways people voice opinions about it. Data mining capabilities make such research a real possibility, in particular if one can easily access the underlying mechanism (e.g., database) used to store comments. A researcher could run queries on keywords, such as college, university, higher education, student debt, or professor, against an enormous dataset spanning numerous articles on unlimited topics to identify comment forums where the topic of higher education is part of the online conversation. Such research could reveal in what contexts people introduce the topic of higher education, even if just for a moment, into online conversations. It might also reveal insights into commenters' sentiment regarding higher education who might not be participating within forums accompanying higher education specific articles.

Another line of inquiry could explore the consistency of online commenters' opinions, as well as how they change over time. According to Price and Roberts (1987), "Perhaps the most interesting feature of expressed opinions is that they may not for any single person demonstrate

much consistency across occasions" (p. 790). They claim people may very well express an opinion simply as a means to "'try it on for size'" (Price & Roberts, 1987, p. 790). Online comments provide us an opportunity to explore the consistency or perhaps evolution of the opinions people convey. Consider that Pinker (2008) points to the internet as providing "a gigantic corpus of real language used by real people" (p. 20). This giant corpus opens the door to potentially potent longitudinal research of commenters' sentiment. Just because a commenter expresses a particular sentiment regarding higher education in one comment or in one comment forum does not mean they express the same sentiment elsewhere. For example, Marty of Pacific Northwest described the comments at *The Times* as "a dinner party with fine food & wine and a group of acquaintances who appreciate a lively and intelligent conversation" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). In comparison, he described the comments at *The Washington Post* a "dive bar that some of us retire to afterward to speak a little more freely, drink a little more than we should, and laugh at decidedly non-PC and probably more than a little juvenile humor" (comment made in response to Harris & Tarchak, 2019). Perhaps Marty, as well as other commenters, offer contradictory sentiment within different contexts and environments. Or, instead of a contradiction, their additional comments might provide nuance to their expressed opinions. Over time, people's sentiment might change, perhaps via the online conversations they are partaking in. The immense volume of news comments offers an opportunity to investigate and track sentiment as it evolves over time and space and across contexts.

Another exciting possibility for future research would be to look a given higher education topic at different levels of the news, such as local, national, and perhaps even international. Take New Mexico's free college proposal as an example. In my research I included articles from *The*

Times and WSJ, which are national/international news outlets. Future research might investigate online news comments made in response to the same topic, but to an article from a New Mexico news outlet, thereby potentially adding more local sentiment into the analysis. Perhaps an article and corresponding online comments from a student newspaper from one of New Mexico's higher education institutions could serve as a source. Other topics might be school specific, such as the horrific sexual abuse scandal at Michigan State University or an admissions scandal at an institution, such as at the University of Southern California. Looking at a given higher education topic and ensuing comments at different levels of news might reveal comparative insights to public opinion useful to higher education leaders as they look to tailor their messaging and engagement to different publics.

Emotion

Within my research I applied the LIWC emotional tone analysis at the level of the entire respective forums I investigated and not at the opinion theme level. Future research could look to isolate the emotions commenters express specifically at aspects of higher education from the sentiment they might be directing elsewhere. For example, perhaps a given commenter's is not directing their positive or negative tone at an aspect of higher education, but is instead aiming it at another commenter, the author of the article, news outlets, or the forum in general. Or, a commenter might respond differently to the same point made within the forum simply because of how a given commenter phrases it. Isolating emotions within the comments along with their apparent triggers would require a much more sophisticated coding approach than what I utilized. However, such research could yield deeper insight into what is triggering commenters' emotions, whether it is specific aspects of higher education or something unrelated.

LIWC is a robust sentiment analysis program. In my research, I only utilized the emotional tone variable, but LIWC produces numerous other output variables, including "41 word categories tapping psychological constructs" (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015, p. 2). It has the capability of producing percentage of words signifying positive emotions, as well as negative emotions. In addition to the emotional tone summary variable, LIWC also produces summary variables measuring analytical thinking, clout, and authenticity (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). Future research could utilize more of LIWC's capabilities to provide a more in-depth sentiment analysis.

Conclusion

Father of Public Relations Edward Bernays (1928b) believed "an educator should, in addition to his academic duties, bear a definite and wholesome relation to the general public" (p. 122). I began my dissertation with this point and I return to it now as I conclude. Today, we find higher education having a problematic relationship with its publics. Salovey (2018) believes higher education "must work to regain the public's trust" and calls for us to empathetically listen to people in order to better understand them. My research utilized a novel approach to listen to people. Our ability to listen to everyday conversations has grown exponentially with the advent of the internet and the birth of the digital public sphere. And yet, the near ubiquitous form of online discourse that is the online comment has largely gone uninvestigated (Henrich & Holmes, 2013; Li, Mueen, Faloutsos, & Hang, 2016; McDermott, 2016; Reagle, 2015; Santana, 2011; Taylor, Al-Hiyari, Lee, Priebe, Guerrero, & Bales, 2016; Trice, 2011). "Dip into the comments", says *New York Times* columnist Michael Erard (2013), "and you can sense the currents that move American life" (para. 1). I did just that within the course of my research. By investigating the comment forums accompanying two articles from *The Times* and two from the *WSJ*, I was able

to show online comments as a place where people come to deliberate on topics of higher education. The comments are a realm of social life where participants not only share their opinions and emotions, but also ask questions, offer evidence, and push back on the sentiment of others. At the very least, these online conversations present us with an opportunity to listen to some of the concerns of the people within our publics. Taken further, they present us with an avenue to engage with and influence our publics.

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