

## **WikiLeaks Comments: A Qualitative Investigation - A study of responses to three articles**

Internet comments are part of User Generated Content (UGC), where users expand on, critique, and express their ideas about various topics in news and non-news contexts.

The current study focuses on WikiLeaks—a non-profit media organization that seeks to deliver important news and information to the public—and aims to explore WikiLeaks' worldwide impact amongst readers of three online newspapers, as expressed through reader comments. Each of the newspapers—*The New York Times* in the United States, *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom and *Ynet* in Israel—is a major, popular channel of communication in its country. This study aims to characterize and analyze the main themes as expressed through reader comments.

The two primary research questions are:

1. What are the main themes that are expressed in the comments?
2. Is there a difference among the three online newspapers concerning the themes expressed through the comments?

The research findings may facilitate improved understanding, for both the layman and for media or information researchers, of the power and impact of the media and information on our daily lives.

This paper presents an analysis of comments which were collected on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2010, three days after the WikiLeaks editors began releasing huge amounts of leaks from all over the world. The researcher conducted a content analysis on a sample of the comments. The author entered the word "WikiLeaks" in the search engine of each newspaper on 1 December, 2010.

Various answers were retrieved, but the author decided to focus on articles that did not concentrate on a specific event, but rather on those relating to the WikiLeaks phenomenon from a wide, general perspective, as expressed in some cases in the editorial columns or the opinion pages. The researcher chose one article from *Ynet* with 197 comments, one article from *The New York Times* with 376 comments, and one article from *The Guardian* with 358 comments. A sample of 597 comments was selected: 200 from *The New York Times*, 200 from *The Guardian*, and 197 from *Ynet*. The comments from *The New York Times* and from *The Guardian* were randomly selected by drawing every third comment from each newspaper. All *Ynet* comments were selected. The descriptive statistical analysis and the content analysis were conducted on these 597 comments. The second phase of the research involved a statistical descriptive analysis and the third phase involved a content analysis. In order to classify the comments, the author divided each comment into units of meaning, which comprise the units of analysis. A unit of meaning can be a phrase, a sentence, or several sentences that convey one message. The term was coined by Henri (1992), who argued that computer-mediated communication messages had more than one unit of meaning, and that one should define its own relevant unit of meaning. The 597 comments consisted of 1200 units of analysis. Each classification was assessed by a single classifier and then cross-checked by a second classifier. The final percentage of agreement for all coding decisions was 92%, suggesting that the coding classification used was reliable.

The next sections present the main findings. The content analysis reveals differences between *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* on one hand and *Ynet*

on the other. In both *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* the Wikileaks issue is of major interest, attracting much commenter attention. In *The New York Times* the Wikileaks topic comprises about 27.70% of total units of analysis and includes various aspects such as: for and against Wikileaks, for and against Assange, Wikileaks' value, impact and policy. In *The Guardian* the Wikileaks issue is larger and accounts for 42.72% of total units of analysis and includes the same aspects. This broad category: Wikileaks that was found in both *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, reflects readers' interest in the pure phenomenon of Wikileaks, as readers try to convey their support or protest against this phenomenon, discussing its value, policy, and impact. These findings may be associated with those of Kisilevich, Rohrdantz, and Keim (2010), who examined user comments on Flickr, claiming that comments may relate to the photo quality; in our case, comments relate to Wikileaks' quality. It is interesting to note, however, that in *Ynet*, the situation is quite different: only 7.66% of total units of analysis can be categorized as general comments about Wikileaks.

The second large theme in *The New York Times* and in *The Guardian* is transparency. Actually, in *The New York Times* this issue is equivalent to the previous issue of Wikileaks (27.70% of total units of analysis). The transparency issue accounts for 15.47% within *The Guardian* and does not appear at all in *Ynet*. There is no doubt that openness and transparency are important to *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* readers, who, through their comments, assert their desire to see more transparency, honesty, and truth both in politics and journalism, characteristics, some claim, that may be found in Wikileaks. These two large categories within *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, can

be associated with the IPI model (Gunther and Storey, 2003), which posits that when people perceive some effects of a message on others, they react accordingly. In our case, readers of the two newspapers saw the major themes attracting the attention of commenters, and thus continued the discussion thread in those two main directions: Wikileaks and transparency.

The next issue within these two newspapers is miscellaneous: 18.54% of total units of analysis within *The New York Times* and 15.89% within *The Guardian*. This category is built up of very small categories which reflect the notion that readers use the comments as a free channel of communication to make their voices heard on various subjects related and unrelated to the articles' content. The miscellaneous category strengthens Lee's (2010) assumption that reader comments on Internet news sites enable people to publish their personal opinions that would have never been considered as newsworthy, but can now be considered a common element of online journalism.

A further examination into *The New York Times* categories shows the next category to be politics (14.37% of total units of analysis), in which most of the comments (8.33%) relate to politics and democracy. The following major category is for and against the article author and *The New York Times* (11.66% of total units of analysis). This category reveals commenters' voices and attitudes towards the journalist and the newspaper itself, and mainly negative attitudes towards both (7.70%) are expressed.

The next two issues presented in *The Guardian* are quite similar in size: for and against the article author and *The Guardian* (10.16% of total units of analysis), and politics (9.69% of total units of analysis). There appear to be more comments against the journalist and the newspaper (6.23%) than

comments that support both (3.92%). These two last findings echo the findings found in *The New York Times*.

It is intriguing to observe the various main themes appearing in *Ynet*. The largest issue focuses on opinions for and against the article author (24.39% of total units of analysis), while the second focuses on opinions for and against the Israeli prime minister (22.99% of total units of analysis). These two issues may be similar in size, but in the first category readers protest against the article's author (18.46%) while the second (that supports the prime minister) reflects commenters' tendency to comment and express their ideas on themes not directly related to articles' content, but on those that presumably bother and occupy them. The first part of findings reiterates previous findings within the two other newspapers, where commenters used comments to oppose the journalist and the newspaper.

That a large section of comments focused on an unrelated theme may be associated with the SIDE model, introduced by Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, and Anthony (2010). Certain studies have claimed that when CMC includes visual anonymity, the SIDE model predicts greater conformity to the apparent consensus of the group (Lee, 2006, 2007; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001). In our case, commenters showed conformity to other commenters, as readers began to write about an unrelated theme—the Israeli prime minister. Other readers were attracted to this subject and continued the discussion, although unrelated to the Wikileaks phenomenon.

Relying on these three articles, we can speculate and say that although some of the main themes expressed in reader comments were repeated in the three newspapers, there are differences between *The New York Times*, and

*The Guardian* on one hand and *Ynet* on the other. This difference may represent another culture of discourse or argument in Israel in contrast with America or the United Kingdom. In Israel, commenters seem not to comment on issues expressed in articles, but rather exploit this channel to lash out at the article author or to support the present prime minister. One reader begins and others continue conducting the discussion in this direction. On the contrary, in America and in the United Kingdom, where there is a different culture of discourse or argument, commenters express their ideas, mostly on topics related to the article itself.

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