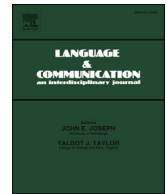


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# Acts of positioning in online reader comments on Jordanian news websites

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Jordanian readers accomplish positioning of self and other in online comments on the news and the strategies they deploy to accomplish this positioning. The data come from 500 reader comments posted on two active Jordanian news websites during 2014 and 2015 in response to various local political, social, and economic events during that period. The analysis shows that readers seek to accomplish self and other positioning through three main strategies: impoliteness and face attack, invoking of national identity, and invoking of religious identity. Acts of positioning include positioning of self as burdened citizen vs. positioning of government as corrupt and self-seeking, and positioning of self as a loyal community member vs. positioning of other as disloyal.

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## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this study is to explore reader comments and responses on local online news sites in Jordan and how readers respond to, comment on, or challenge the news source, specifically regarding much debated issues pertaining to the political, economic and social landscape of the country. Lack of research on this form of online discourse in Jordan is surprising given that online reader responses and comments on news items and stories have become a prominent forum of public discourse and a format for ordinary people to make their private voices heard in public through engagement and interaction with a news source and/or other readers (Borton, 2013). Providing readers' comments section at the end of news articles allows rapid reactions, and the messages that readers post may be moderated before publication (Johansson, 2015, p. 84). Seen as a development of and a successor to traditional letters to the editor (Baron, 2008; Landert and Jucker, 2011), online reader comments are given immediate publishing, allowed larger space, and are subject to minimal censorship. Readers can react both to the news article itself and to the reactions by other readers already published. Readers do not need to summarize the text in order to contextualize the comment since online comments and responses appear directly below the text they reply to; furthermore, interactions between readers occur rapidly since the time lag between writing a comment and its publication is minimal in the online setting (Landert and Jucker, 2011, p. 1429). These communicative exchanges by means of technology, whether between readers and the editor/writer or between readers themselves, are "anonymous" (faceless, bodiless)" forms of interaction (Herring, 2001, p. 621). This anonymity is one way of attracting users by making it as easy as possible for readers to participate and allowing them to feel less inhibited when they comment, thus increasing opportunity for reader participation. Although this anonymity has been thought to encourage readers to "engage in more unrestrained forms of communication in CMC than they would, say, in face-to-face interaction" (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011, p. 198), readers are willing and do make inappropriate comments even in their own names.

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In the digital medium where reader comments and responses take place, the majority of the contextual features of face-to-face conversation, especially prosodic, visual and social-context information, disappear, in addition to the presence of different temporal and material constraints which has brought about a change in reader's role (Deuze, 2006). Thus, while participation was originally studied by Goffman (1981) in the context of spoken interaction, contemporary online reader participation represents a mediated communicative event in a digital context where language use is a situated practice that combines discourse, technology, multimodality, and ideology, thus forming what is referred to as digital discourse (Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011, p. xix). In contrast with social encounters that take place in sociocultural contexts, the interactions in online reader comments represent mediated encounters (Wertsch, 1998) in what Gere (2002) calls a "digital culture" that has come to be an essential part of our lives.

As technological affordances (Hutchby, 2001) allow participants to engage in mediated social encounters in a digital context, the technological and the social aspects have become intertwined (Lievrouw, 2009, p. 317). Given the constant change of the digital context, societies and cultures are affected (Bauman, 2011). This article is situated in the study of interaction in this type of discourse, as it aims to examine the participation of readers as social actors in terms of commenting on and interacting with news or other readers on online news sites.

## 2. The present study

The online comments investigated in this study were posted on two main news websites in response to topics of local interest and/or importance in Jordan. Through these comments, readers express their opinion toward the news item or commented on other readers, which involves negotiation of meaning in the ongoing context, stance taking, and expressing agreement or disagreement with previous actors (Johansson, 2015, p. 83). In terms of broader sociopolitical context, Jordan is a Middle Eastern country that has a "rather difficult political geography" and is categorized as a "resource-poor" kingdom that has "managed to survive" through all its many political, economic and military challenges in its rather short history (Ryan, 2013, p. 342). The most visible challenge has been the influx of refugees into the country as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, two Gulf wars, and an ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria. In addition to burdening the economy, this influx of refugees over more than seven decades has led to what Ryan (2013) calls "ethnic identity politics" in Jordan.

All these challenges, along with major concomitant issues like corruption, reform and security, have since been debated. One major arena where conversations on these issues have started to take place is the reader comment platform provided by local online news sites. News websites have been reported to be the biggest draw for Jordanian Internet users, with around 70% of them accessing these sites (Ghazal, 2012). Furthermore, Sweis and Baslan (2013, p. 20) report that Jordanians surfing the web choose pure-player news sites, that is, news sites that operate only online, to read about current events, rather than print newspapers that are online. One reason is that these "online news sites have become popular sources of news on local, social, and taboo subjects that the traditional media have long not dealt with" (2013, p. 40). Another reason is that online news sites have increasingly started to "uncover scandals, expose corruption and challenge public policy directives" in Jordan (Martin, 2011, p. 708). When dealing with these public issues, Jordanian online news sites offer their readers the opportunity to comment, ask questions, express their opinion, and communicate with other readers.

It is this engagement with online news items and events that the present study is concerned with. The focus of this paper is examining the discursive strategies that Jordanian readers employ and exploit when posting their online comments and responses. Specifically, the aim is the description and analysis of how online readers comment on or respond to news or other readers' comments, drawing on data from user comments across two top local online news media sites. The study is concerned with readers' positioning of themselves and others when engaging with local news, or regional news that directly involves Jordan.

There is a relatively small body of research investigating online reader comments on Arabic news sites. One line of this research has focused on specific Arab political, sociocultural and religious issues or events that have had global relevance and the way Arab online readers framed and responded to these issues (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Abdulla, 2007; Douai and Nofal, 2012). These studies show how online reader comments act as a public space that circumvents and challenges traditional authoritarian discourse. Others have explored the role of online comments in enabling Muslim Arabs to manage or save their collective face online by examining their online responses to articles that attack their identity as Muslims (Al-Zidjali, 2012). Focusing on the negative role of online reader comments in Arab society, Dashti et al. (2015) analyzed "sectarian and tribal discourse" in online comments in Kuwait, comparable to racist discourse found on Western online news sites (Loke, 2012; Hughey, 2013; Harlow, 2015), identifying readers belonging to a minority religious sect and a lower ranked social group in the country as displaying "backwardness", "uncivility" and "disloyalty" to the state in their comments. The reader comments examined in this study cover a variety of topics that show conversations on different political, social, and economic issues in Jordan.

This study is organized as follows. Section 3 provides the theoretical framework of the study; Section 4 presents the data and methodology adopted for the study; Section 5 presents the analysis; and finally, section 6 presents the conclusions of the study.

## 3. Theoretical framework

### 3.1. Positioning theory

Positioning in discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and van Langenhove, 1991; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) is the discursive process "whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly

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