

Sports Journalists Have Love/Hate Relationship with Comment Boxes

Nicole Osolin

In this article, Osolin explores the ever-blurring roles of 'author' and 'reader' in online spaces thanks, in part, to genres such as comment boxes that allow readers the opportunity to give their opinions about works published on websites. Looking at one online sports editorial piece typed up after an emotional Chicago Bears football game, and interviewing the *Daily Vidette* journalist who took to the keyboard following that contest, as an example, she examines how those small comment boxes can have big impacts on the initial author.



Figure 1: Comment to Schrader's Article

When twenty-two-year-old Ashley Schrader pulled up a sports column that she had written last winter for the Illinois State newspaper *The Daily Vidette*¹ a few days after the article had been posted online, comments by readers such as the one above were waiting for her. Other comments included “This is why we can’t let personal opinion get in the way. It just makes you sound stupid” and “I usually never comment on the articles, but I just had to when I read this. This was as misinformed as the rest of the national reporting on the situation.”

And the ones telling her that she should get a new career weren't even the bad ones. "I wrote this column thinking, people are totally going to hate it. They really did," Ashley said, rereading the comments as she spoke. "Ten months later, people are still commenting on it."²

Granted, Ashley's article was an opinion piece, so she was at liberty to give her *opinion*. But this particular article was about a fiery topic, particularly amongst Chicago Bears fans and particularly in the state of Illinois. In the piece entitled, "EDITOR'S CORNER: Bears QB Jay Cutler Reveals True, Ugly Colors," Ashley "typed out her anger" after the Bears lost to the Packers in the NFC title game in January 2011:

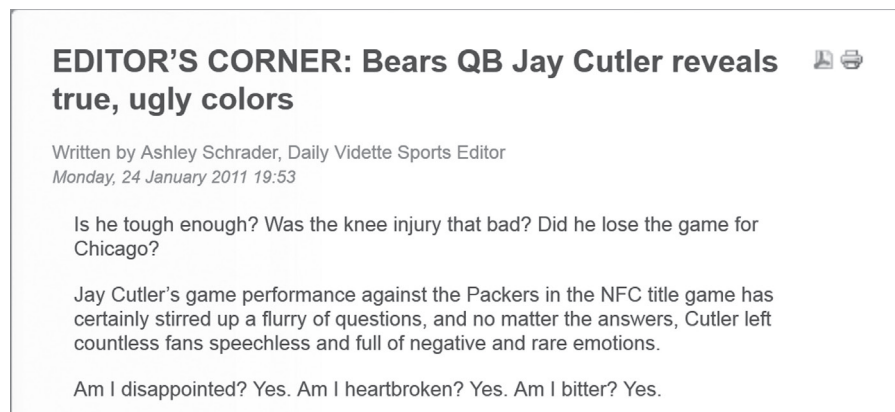


Figure 2: Schrader's Article

Additional comments that Ashley wrote in the article include: "Like many Bears fans in Chicago, I put up with Jay's antics, I shrugged off his mistakes and I even stuck up for him when people so easily bad-mouthed him. But not anymore. Plain and simple, Jay quit Chicago." But Ashley's anger and the words that it produced left many angry with *her*; some people get pretty passionate about sports, especially when a season was on the line and their team was on the losing end. In that game, Cutler went out with an MCL sprain; the Packers went on to win the Super Bowl. The Bears' season ended with the loss; Ashley's piece, however, lives on thanks to the potent mix of the internet, that comment section, and those lines that keep people talking. Whereas the print version of her editorial piece has long since found its final resting place in the recycling bin, the online version can still be located—months later—on The Daily Vidette website with just a quick "key word" search. And those comment boxes? Not only are they available as well, but they continue to allow for new comments to add to the existing dialogue.

The diehard Bears fan—and current ISU senior—decided to become a sports writer because that's what her dad does: "It was natural going into

sports I guess. Writing about sports is something that I grew up with.” Yet Ashley, or any other college writer considering journalism, is not going into her “daddy’s journalism,” so-to-speak. When her father started out as a sports writer, he knew that, when he wrote an article to be printed in the newspaper, it would get fan reaction. But he likely never knew most of the comments that people said about his writing. Today, readers can immediately react to what a news outlet has released thanks to the internet—and that box at the bottom of each article calling for fans to comment. With a few clicks of the keyboard, any person can do so, knowing that the original author can respond back to the readers if they so choose. “I wrote back once to a person’s comment that directly questioned my character—not what the article was about. People say things that they never would in person or over the telephone,” Ashley agreed. “Most never comment on good stories. They will never tell you that they liked the way you wrote this.” Still, some readers/commenters did agree with her:

#8 **Timberwolf** 📅 2011-01-25 16:52
 It's nice to see Jay Cutler showed his true colors in a game that really matters. I have been waiting for this to happen. I was disappointed it did not come early, but he delivered when it mattered the most. It just shows a leopard never change his stripes I thought what he did was a cowardly acy.

Figure 3: Comment to Schrader’s Article

Darren Kinnard, sports anchor at WSIL-TV in Southern Illinois for nearly twenty years, agrees that journalism is becoming more interactive, and he often takes advantage of this to converse with readers. He says, “I really like when people post comments to our articles on Facebook because people’s names and faces are with their comments. So the explosion of interaction with viewers also comes with comments on the Facebook and Twitter forums, as well as the actual article comment sections. There’s opportunity for immediate reaction and interaction with these social media platforms. Sports provided ‘reality shows’ before that was even a term,” Darren continued. “Sports show us so much about people’s character...who can handle the pressure, who can’t, how do people handle winning and losing.”³

And, it turns out, sports can show how people handle reading a piece that they *really* don’t agree with. Should you say exactly what you think because that writer will never know your name? Or maybe think about that writer sitting at another computer who will soon read what you write and maybe even decide to comment back, then creating a sort of reversal of roles? The readers have these things to consider before they decide to hit the “post” button. But among the choices that those readers make in regards to writing a comment, one thing is certain: Those comments—even the good ones—will have some sort of impact on the author of that piece being commented on.

Ashley remembers opening up her computer to first read the comments that she knew would come after the Cutler article last January: “It’s really hard on a writer’s self-esteem, but it’s good that we know that people are reading it. And I do take what they say into consideration—even if those changes are just implicitly made in my next pieces.” These considerations are different for every sports writing genre found online and even for every particular piece. The writer of a sports article focusing on news, on those facts about one specific game, for example, will probably want to consider individual’s comments more carefully, especially if many such remarks are claiming that the article breaks a cardinal rule in journalism—getting the facts wrong. An opinion piece like Ashley’s, however, falls into a gray area regarding those comment boxes. Consider these two potential scenarios:

Scenario One	Scenario Two
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An online newspaper wants to attract viewers to its pages. 2. A sports journalist wants to attract comments about his opinion piece written about the big game yesterday, where he openly trashes the big name head coach and calls for multiple front office moves in the off-season. 3. Most readers hate it, not agreeing with the suggestions made by the writer at all, and they say this in their comments. 4. Repeat 1-3 a few more times. 5. Page views begin to <u>decrease</u>. 6. Advertisers are <u>not</u> pleased. 7. The online newspaper bosses are <u>not</u> pleased. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An online newspaper wants to attract viewers to its pages. 2. A sports journalist wants to attract comments about his opinion piece written about the big game yesterday, where he openly trashes the big name head coach and calls for multiple front office moves in the off-season. 3. Most readers hate it, not agreeing with the suggestions made by the writer at all, and they say this in their comments. 4. Repeat 1-3 a few more times. 5. Page views begin to <u>increase</u>. 6. Advertisers are pleased. 7. The online newspaper bosses are pleased.

While these two scenarios simplify what, in actuality, represents a very complicated interaction between authors of the online articles and the writers of the comments (as well as those readers who choose to not leave a remark), the most conspicuous difference between the two is represented by the decrease or increase in page views—a difference that can be attributed to, at least partly,

the individual readers who decided to comment, transforming themselves into authors in the process. Ashley’s opinion piece about Cutler’s “poor performance” in the “big game” could be placed on ten different websites and garner ten different overall reactions from readers; then again, it could also be placed on the same website at ten different times and garner ten different overall reactions.

So, breaking this point down a bit further: Essentially, some readers will love the authors with opinions diverging from their own, continuing to read and comment on their work because of that—even if they show this love in strings of negative feedback. Others will hate authors whose opinion never intersects with theirs—perhaps commenting a few times as they type in anger then ultimately deciding to take their viewing eyes to another web page, a web page where they can stare at words that echo what they would have written...had they written the article, of course. Thus, the actual content that the online sports article’s author chooses to write, then, equates to only one aspect when considering how that article will be received. Of equal, or perhaps more, importance in the genre of online sports articles, and opinion pieces more specifically: Who the commenters are, what they are looking for in sports articles, and what they finally choose to put down “in print” within those comment boxes is another major component—and a minor genre directly affected by the online sports article but also housing the potential to affect that “parent” genre—that should be taken into consideration.

Darren has seen this same idea constantly affect his work—knowing who his audience is and attempting to predict what type of comments a piece will garner: “Once I gather all the facts and interviews, it’s time to get to work [writing the story]. If I’m writing for serious sports fans, I know that I can go more in-depth. If I think my readers are more casual fans, then I try to construct a story that’s going to have a broader appeal.” A quick glance at the WSIL’s Facebook page elicits some pretty tame comments compared with those of Ashley’s opinion piece—some unrelated to the topic but still wishing to carry on a dialogue with the journalists and fans:⁴

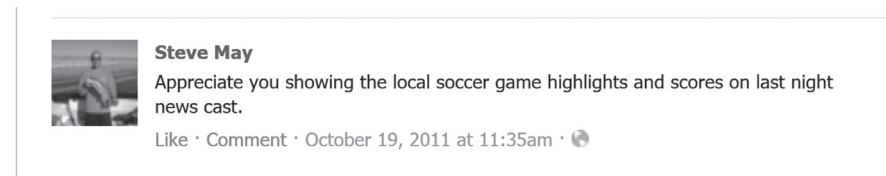


Figure 4: Random Comment on WSIL’s Facebook Page

But even if it is just fans seeking a score of a local high school football game, Darren contends that writers have to at least try to give the readers what they want—or have a good reason not to, believing that there’s only so many times an author can leave a reader angry without that reader heading to a different sports

site. No matter how long Darren stays a sports reporter, he knows that his writing is only as good, at least partly, as how well he understands his readers' wants—even if those wants are to be able to openly disagree with him in the comments.

Just as this fluid relationship of journalist/author to comment reader/article reader to commenter/author continues for someone like Darren who has been at working in sports journalism for more than twenty years, it also remains present at “the top,” where the “best” sports writers—or at least those who achieved positions at the most prestigious newspapers—interact daily with readers via that comment section, and not all of the interactions are pleasant for the most decorated sports writers. A recent opinion piece called “10 Thoughts on Bears’ Loss to Chiefs” posted by Chicago Tribune writer Brad Biggs, about some key injuries to the Chicago Bears lineup during the latter half of the 2011 season, reveals that no writer is immune to the reader critics. Comments include “If you have 10 thoughts on this, you have too much time on your hands” and “The media blame game is back on. It is tiring as it is predictable. Biggs is no different than any of the other writers in Chicago. The Bears lose, throw them under the bus.”⁵

Taking these comments into account, someone just learning the art of creating an online sports article and that balancing act of moving readers enough to comment on the content of a particular piece while also getting them to continue to read future articles should never become discouraged when some reader, taking advantage of his or her ability to become a writer of comments, chooses to negatively invoke those opportunities presented in the comment boxes.

Ashley considers a particular comment as well as the online article that caused people to post such comments once again:

#6 **Pete** 🗨️ 2011-01-25 13:27

Quoting Journalism Student:

"I'm guessing not, given that the average "journalism" student can't even pass Bio 101 without cheating."

Interesting, I'm wondering where you got this information. I would love to be enlightened with the database that reveals how many journalism students pass Bio 101 by cheating.

See, the intelligent kids who can read AND write AND understand the scientific method don't trifle with a degree meant for a dying industry.

Moreover, the imbecile that wrote this editorial could have merely looked up "MCL Sprain" in any search engine, and became more informed. But since this clown didn't, she reflects poorly on the major and on her work ethic.

Thanks for playing, journalism student. And once you graduate, no, I don't have any spare change for you.

Quote

Figure 5: Comment to Schrader's Article

She’s had ten months to think about its implications and the generally less-than-enthusiastic reactions to it, utilizing suggestions from those comments for later work. Yet, despite knowing now how the piece would come to be received by readers, she states, “I don’t regret writing it. It was super, super opinionated, but I’d write it again.”

Sometimes, writers have to take chances, knowing that not everyone will love them. And despite the commenters that may even say that they should give up that craft, they have to keep playing the game.

Just ask those guys at the Tribune.

A screenshot of a comment box interface. At the top left, it says "Add your voice to the mix!". At the top right, there are links for "Sign In" and "Register". Below the header is a toolbar with icons for list, list with numbers, undo, redo, and a dropdown arrow. The main area is a large empty text input field. At the bottom left, there are two buttons: "Post" and "Preview". At the bottom right, the number "1400" is displayed.

Endnotes

1. Ashley Shrader’s opinion piece, “EDITOR’S CORNER: Bear’s QB Jay Cutler Reveals True, Ugly Colors,” can be found with a quick search of www.videtteonline.com.
2. Interview with Ashley Schrader, sports editor at The Daily Vidette.
3. Interview with Darren Kinnard, sports director, WSIL-TV.
4. WSIL Sports Facebook page can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/wsilsportsextra>.
5. Barry Biggs’ sports piece, “10 Thoughts on Bears Loss to Chiefs,” can be found by searching www.chicagotribune.com. The comment box at the end of this article is also compliments of the Tribune.



Nicole Osolin recently graduated from ISU with her master's degree in English, specializing in Teaching English as a Second Language and Applied Linguistics. She used to work as a journalist and has had a few people "yell" at her via comment boxes. Now she just comments on articles written by other journalists—but only nice things, of course. And yes, she's a Packers fan (but you probably already guessed that).