

Article

SEO Practices: A Study about the Way News Websites Allow the Users to Comment on Their News Articles

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Abstract: In the current media world, there is a huge debate about the importance of the visibility of a news website in order to secure its existence. Thus, search engine optimization (SEO) practices have emerged in the news media systems around the world. This study aimed to expand the current literature about the SEO practices by focusing on examining, via the walkthrough method, the ways that news companies allow the users to comment on their online news articles. The comments on the news websites are related to the notions of social influence, information diffusion, and play an essential role as a SEO practice, for instance, by providing content and engagement. The examined sample was collected by the most visited news websites' rankings of alexa.com for a global scale and for the countries Greece and Cyprus. The findings reveal that the news websites throughout the globe use similar features and ways to support the comments of the users. In the meantime, though, a high number of the news websites did not allow the users to use their social media accounts in order to comment the provided news articles, or provided multiple comment platforms. This trend goes against the SEO practices. It is believed that this finding is associated with the difficulty of the news organizations to regulate and protect themselves by the users' comments that promote, in some case harmful rhetoric and polarization.

Keywords: SEO; news websites; Greece; Cyprus; comments

1. Social Media Platforms, Social Influence, and Information Diffusion

The developments of technology, one of which is the Internet, have made a plethora of scholars focus their research on these transformations. From the 1980s there have existed, important changes in the information systems (IS) field alongside society. The daily use of these technological advancements is linked not only with sociological but also with psychological factors. Consequently, new models have emerged in order to provide a clearer picture of the way citizens consume and choose information [1].

Additionally, from the beginning of the related research, there was interest in the way social influence can affect the information distribution and impact [1]. Some studies proved that social influence could be more essential for women at the beginning of the information process. In addition, it may be essential in mandatory settings and it seemed to be more influential on old-aged workers. However, it was clear from the early stages of the research that social influences can change beliefs, ideas, behaviors, etc. towards other people [1].

Nevertheless, there are different forms of social influence and a vast literature that closely studies this theoretical concept [2–8]. According to Kelman [9], there are cases where the individuals accept or adopt an action or behavior despite not believing in it, as it is thought that there will be benefits or no consequences for him/her. In these cases, there is no distinct social effect or alteration in the behavior. In the meantime, social influence is related to information diffusion. Many studies in the

field have revealed the connections between the social influence and the information diffusion [10–14]. Information diffusion and social influence have become of great importance due to the daily use of social media platforms and the operation of search engines.

Additionally, previous studies of social media platforms, such as YouTube, have demonstrated that users with similar cultural and political ideas tend to like or dislike the same cultural products [15]. For instance, Japan was one of the most characteristic examples of a country that became successful in the spread of its culture on a global scale. The anime and the manga cultural products have turned into global products. According to Otmazgin [16], this development allows Japan to have a greater influence on different state and non-state actors throughout the world. The aforementioned description regarding the influence of a country has led Nye [17] to create the theory of “soft power.” According to him, “soft power” is the capability of causing individuals to adopt beliefs, results, opinions, etc., without getting paid. For a country, its “soft power” can be its policies and culture.

Nowadays, social influence and information diffusion are strongly linked with the World Wide Web, social media platforms, and social participation. For more than twenty years, scholars have tried to explain the role of the new technologies in the participation of the public in crucial events, such as demonstrations and collective actions [18]. The use of the Internet became the main research topic of several studies, as there was a need to explore in depth, its capabilities, and to try to predict what changes it would bring in the future for the fields of information, communication, and the social capital in a broader sense. One piece of landmark research proved an actually positive connection between the information distributed by the Internet and the construction of social capital. More specifically, the more people obtain information regarding political affairs via online networks, application, tools, etc., the more their participation in relation to political and social issues is increased [18].

Research regarding social influence and information diffusion seems to have been increased rapidly within the last years, as social media platforms have had to keep on growing promptly in the last decade. According to Statista [19], YouTube has almost 1.5 billion active users; Facebook had more than 2.3 billion monthly active users at the end of 2018 [20], and Twitter had, at the same period of time, 321 million active users [21]. These astounding growths of users for the aforementioned companies have influenced the way information is being distributed throughout society on a global scale. Some years ago, the access and the diffusion of information was not so easy, as there were a lot of technical and economic barriers that needed to be overcome in order to achieve the spread and communication of information throughout such a large network [22]. The maintenance of this vast connected network allows citizens to share openly their ideas and opinions without relying on face to face communication. In some cases, this advancement plays a significant role in expressing easier political or ideological ideas [18].

Even in more restricted media landscapes, such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC), social media platforms seem to have an impact on the daily discussed topics of the public discourse. Schneider [23] argues that, in several cases, the online discussions bring on the government’s agenda issues that were not about to be discussed. Overall, social media platforms provide a very different form of participating in public discourse. However, it has been proven on Facebook that there exist similar connections between offline and online political participation [24].

A form of social influence and information diffusion are the comments that appear on websites and social media platforms. Studies have proved that comments can have a significant impact on society and alter even beliefs or opinions [25–27] and also play an essential role as a search engine optimization (SEO) practice. SEO practice affects the prominence of specific websites, which are gaining more visibility if they have some unique techniques or characteristics, such as allowing comments on their websites [28–31]. Thus, this study tries to shed light on and extend the relevant literature of SEO by examining 656 popular news websites of the globe and the way they allow users to express their opinions on these websites. Some characteristics of commenting are identical to the social media platforms and are associated with social influence and, especially, with the information diffusion of the news websites. It is one of the first studies focusing on the field of news information and

communication in relation to SEO practices. Meanwhile, it tries to raise awareness regarding the importance of comments in the field of SEO, as according to Dover and Dafforn [32], users' comments are one crucial parameter for improving the importance and the popularity of a website, due to the raw content and the engagement of the users. More specifically for the news websites [33] (p. 388–389), “Bounce rate is the percentage of single-page visits (visitors who enter the site and leave without viewing other pages or interacting within the same site). Do visitors spend time reading or “bounce” away quickly? If the bounce rate is very high, that indicates that the particular website as a whole is not very useful, does not engage the user and affects rankings negatively. In summary, reducing the bounce rate can result in more engaged visitors that continue deeper into the website.” Additionally, studies are proving the importance of the comments on news websites for the users' engagement [34,35]. Despite the users' time taken up reading the comments, the users value the option of commenting [34].

The quality of the comments plays a significant role in improving the visibility of the website. For instance, Slegg argued in 2016 [28] that many websites remove the comments on their pages due to the lack of quality. On the other hand, other websites have a firm reliance on user's comments. Another important factor regarding the comments on a website is the comment system that the website uses. If the comment system is not fast in loading, then Google will not include the provided comments of the website for ranking the website, despite that not being considered SEO practice [29]. Besides, according to Schwartz [30], Google provides a better ranking to the websites which offer comments on their websites. The interaction and the engagement of the users remain on the website and not on other third-parties platforms, such as social media (e.g., Facebook, etc.). In this way, each website also builds each own community, which is another SEO technique for improving the Google ranking of a website [31]. Therefore, the next section of the paper focuses on the importance of user's comments on websites in order to demonstrate the role that they play in promoting news websites [36,37]. It is worth mentioning that the influence of news media has been demonstrated in the scientific field of journalism and communication via several theories, such as Agenda-Setting, Cultivation, Gatekeeping, Framing, etc.

2. News Websites, Users' Comments, and SEO

In the contemporary world, a large number of news websites globally rely heavily on social media platforms in order to promote their news stories. The social media platforms, as was mentioned above, are crucial for the participation of the public and the social influence. Moreover, some social media platforms, such as Facebook, are embedded in the news websites at the end of the article, so the users can exploit their social media account and comment on the webpage of the published article. Thus, that has become the most common practice for the public to express its opinion regarding the examined issue. Therefore, it is no surprise that most news stories have been commented on by at least one user on a comment section. In this aspect of user participation, one study from the Pew Research Center arose, which proved that 25% of the grown-up population of the United States of America have commented at least one time in their lifetime on an online news story. Additionally, 37% of the study participants recognized the importance of the comments feature of a news website [38]. Furthermore, according to Ziegele and his colleagues [38], studies have shown that a large proportion of the comments section is associated with replies to other users' comments on the related section of the news article. These discussions have led to dynamic changes in the content published journalistic content and shaped a participatory culture.

Nevertheless, the users' comments can be often misleading and irrelevant to the content of the article. Moreover, there are comments that use harmful rhetoric and aim towards promoting polarization. At this point, it should be mentioned that there are even more traditional ways, such as the letter to the Editor, for the readers to express their opinions in relation to a discussed issue of the news organization. However, this practice is not considered to be common in the contemporary media world, as new innovative technology-based functions are preferred, so that there is not so much of a workload for the professionals of the news outlets for editing the opinions of the readers, and the

interaction with the public is more diverse and dynamic. The users, via their participation, spend more time on the website and provide raw content, which sometimes can be characterized as “strong.” The engagement and the more prolonged presence of a user on a website are linked with the bounce rate, which in turn is an element associated with SEO [39]. Additionally, according to Veglis and Giomelakis [40] the “strong” content is supposed to be one of the most important SEO tactics.

Despite more freedom of expression via the online platforms or features, there is a debate about the regulation of the comments when they contain inappropriate sentences, promote harm or hate, etc. Thus, the trend for some of the news websites is to use social platforms, such as Facebook, as the only way for the users to comment on the news articles. In this way, the news websites are not forced to use employees for regulating the comment section. The social media platform is held responsible for the inappropriate content. In addition, there were public statements that supported the use of Facebook for commenting, as it is believed to support and promote more insightful comments for the discussed issues [41]. This argument is associated also with the recent findings by Kalogeropoulos and his colleagues [42] (p. 1) who proved that “people with high interest in hard news are more likely to comment on news on both news sites and social media and share stores via social media (and people with high interest in any kind of news (hard or soft) are more likely to share stories via email).”

The visibility of a website is crucial for its existence throughout time. Therefore, news websites try to find new ways of gaining visibility to promote their content. In order to do so, they have to exploit the SEO and the news aggregators, like the Google Search Engine, which in 2003 represented the 75% of all searches [43]. Giomelakis and Veglis [40] (p. 23) argued also that “the top listing in Google’s organic search results receives 32.5 percent of the traffic, compared to 17.6 percent for the second position and 11.4 for the third. In addition, sites listed on the first Google search results page generate 92 percent of all traffic from an average search.”

More specifically, the more SEO practices a website employs the more visitors it has, as it takes a higher place in the related search engines. The SEO practices, amongst others, are supposed to be the most important techniques for being more profitable in the field of online marketing [40,44]. In the last decade, news organizations started to pay more attention to the SEO practices by employing specialists, to help them in gaining more visibility. The relationship between the news websites and the search engines has created a lot of controversies. For instance, Rupert Murdoch decided around a decade ago to remove his newspapers’ websites from the related index of Google. Despite the importance of the SEO practices, the attractiveness of the content of the news websites still plays an important role in the visibility of the website. Actually, it seems to be the most crucial factor for the high visibility of a website [33]. Consequently, this is one of the main reasons why the current research paper studied, according to alexa.com ranking, the most prominent websites of the world, and from two countries (Greece and Cyprus), to see if the most popular news websites promote the commenting of the public via relevant commenting sections or features.

3. Methodology

The sample for this study was collected by the rankings of alexa.com for the most popular news websites in the globe ($n = 353$), Greece ($n = 175$), and Cyprus ($n = 128$). All the news websites were categorized into four different types of websites according to the methodology of Antonopoulos et al. (Figure 1) [36,45]. Subsequently, the categories were the following ones: (a) Television stations (the websites that are provided by television stations), (b) newspapers (the websites of traditional newspapers), (c) portal (the news companies that have only websites), and (d) mass media (when the news company has different platforms for distributing its news products). The evaluation of the websites was performed by the walkthrough method, which has been used in a lot of studies until today for revealing features and characteristics of websites and applications [46–49].

Based on what is known about SEO and the news websites [33,40,44], this study tries to expand the relevant literature by finding if the most important news websites of the world, Greece, and Cyprus allow their users to comment on the news articles of the websites. Through that method, it should be apparent whether they allow dynamic interaction between the users and the professionals of the field. It is noteworthy that according to Giomelakis and Veglis [33], the most important factor for the visibility of a website is the content of the news websites. Comments produce raw content on the websites, resulting in the users staying more on the websites and being more active than the users that do not comment. Further, the interactions, such as likes and shares, play a role in SEO and the popularity of a website [32,33,40]. However, there is not systematic research until today in the field of journalism and communication that focuses on investigating if the news websites of the globe follow these practices. Such research could expand the relevant literature of SEO and help the news websites to improve their SEO practices.



Figure 1. The summary of the methodology.

Subsequently, the following research questions were asked:

Research Question 1(RQ1): Will the majority of the news websites allow users to leave comments through social media tools and plug-ins? (Figure 2).

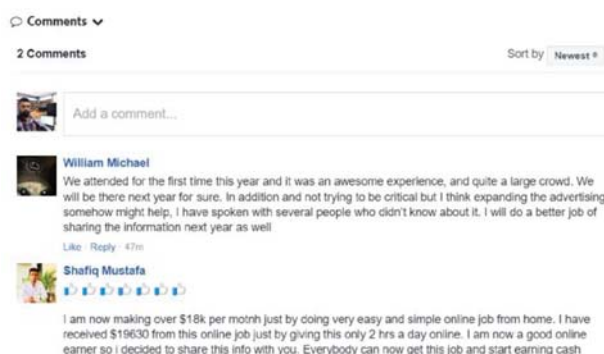


Figure 2. Example acquired from www.islandpacket.com.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Will most of the news websites use multiple comment platforms, along with social media to receive users' comments? (Figure 3).

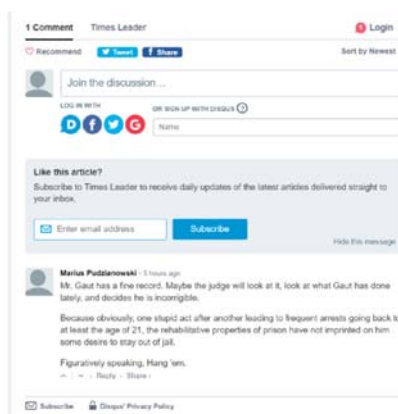


Figure 3. Example acquired from www.timesleader.com.

4. Results

During the walkthrough on the websites, there were a lot of controversies regarding the number of news websites for this study. As a result, there were a lot of changes in order to secure the sample. Throughout the search of the top international news websites, the news aggregators and social media websites were removed from the sample. Additionally, many websites could not be accessed (many of them were from the United States of America) due to the new regulation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Consequently, from the 500 most visited news websites of the globe, the final sample was 353. From the overall 353 websites, only 130 allowed users to comment on news articles via their social media accounts (36.82%). In addition, the percentage of news websites that use multiple comment platforms for accepting users' comments was 16.43% (58). Additionally, 64 (18.13%) were using Facebook and 3 (0.84%) were using the commenting platform Disqus (Figure 4) [46].

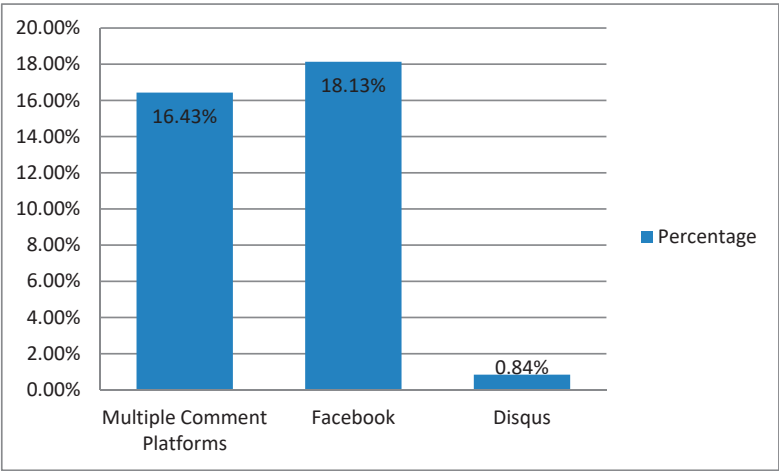


Figure 4. The Results of the Study for the International News Websites for the Commenting Platforms (n = 353).

Regarding the most popular news websites in Greece, the list of 500 top visited news websites of alexa.com was used. Again, the social media platforms and the news aggregators were removed. However, in this case, there were not so many websites excluded due to the GDPR regulations. The main problem with this sample was that the provided list did not include only the news websites of the examined country, but also commercial, marketing, e-shops, and other websites. Consequently, the final number of the examined websites was 175. From the overall 175 websites, only 76 (43.42%) gave to the user, the option of login via their social media accounts and to comment on news articles. On the other hand, the Greek news websites who accepted comments from multiple platforms was 33 (18.85%). The number of news websites that used Facebook was 39 (22.28%), and 2 (1.14%) were those that used the commenting platform Disqus (Figure 5).

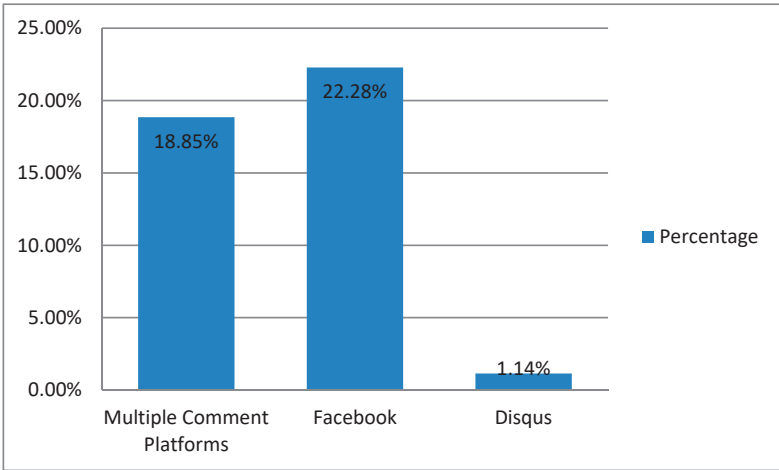


Figure 5. The Results of the Study for the Greek News Websites for the Commenting Platforms (n = 175).

The sample with the news websites of Cyprus had the same problems or characteristics as the previous one. However, there was no problem with the GDPR regulations and no one news website was removed due to this reason. Additionally, an important characteristic emerged from this sample for the Cypriot media system. In the list of the most visited news websites provided by alexa.com, there was a large number of Turkish news websites, which were offering content in both the Turkish and English language. The overall number of the examined news websites was 128. From this number only 51 (39.84%) allowed the users to use their social media accounts in order to comment the provided news articles. The number of news websites with multiple comment platforms was 22 (17.18%). In addition, 26 (20.31%) of the news websites were using Facebook, and only 2 (1.56%) the commenting platforms used Disqus (Figure 6).

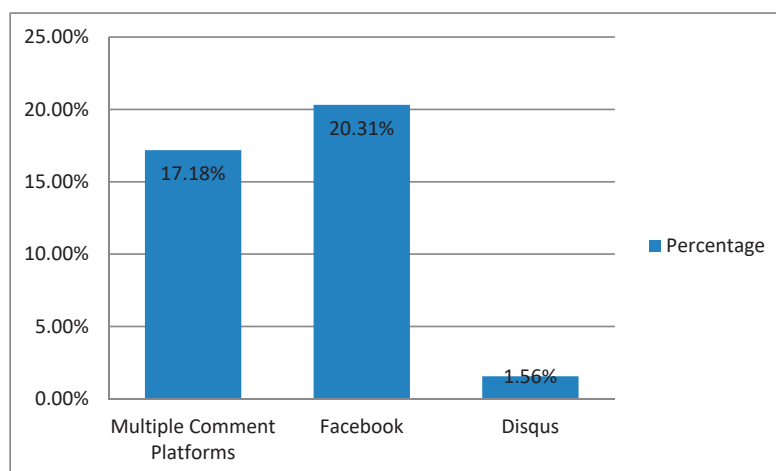


Figure 6. The Results of the Study for the Cypriot News Websites for the Commenting Platforms (n = 128).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study prove that around the world, there seems to be a similar pattern regarding the number of news companies that use multiple comment platforms and social media accounts in order to allow users to comment on their provided content (Figures 7 and 8). Those results revealed, support the arguments of Giomelakis and Veglis [33,40] regarding the practices of news media organizations. The news companies around the world are employing, in some cases, similar techniques to promote their content via commenting. This development seems to be related to the SEO practices that the last decade have become crucial for the financial survival of the news websites. Comments have an important impact in social influence, and information diffusion in relation to users and society. Moreover, the raw and strong content along with the participation of the users via likes, shares, and similar interactions can influence the SEO metrics and improve the popularity of a website [25–27,32].

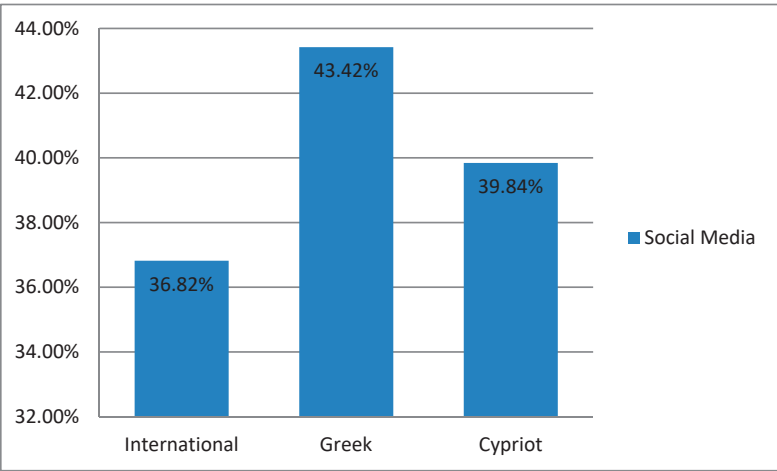


Figure 7. The Results of the Study for the First Research Question.

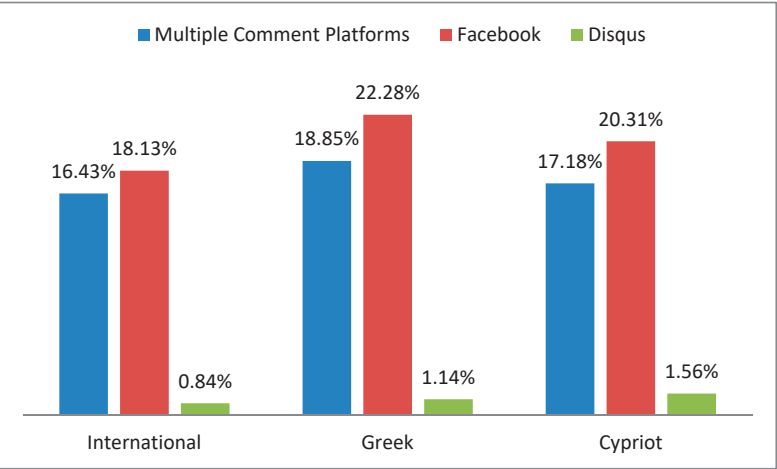


Figure 8. The Results of the Study for the Second Research Question.

Additionally, the current study raises questions about the overall operation of news websites throughout the globe. The majority of the news websites were not using social media accounts or multiple commenting platforms for allowing the users to comment on their news articles (RQ1 and RQ2). These findings are considered significant in the sense that there is no other systematic research until today in the field of journalism and communication that focuses on investigating if the news websites of the globe follow the SEO practices in relation to users’ comments.

The aforementioned results for the research questions of this study are probably related to the difficulty of managing the comments of the websites. More specifically, in the few last years there has been a huge debate about the regulation of the comments, as there are cases in which the users promote hate speech, racism, and stereotypes. Social media platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, were used in the past as a tool from promoting hate against minorities [50]. In this new reality, there is a high chance that the news organizations are afraid of taking the blame for such extreme polarization and for promoting hate. Another important reason for deleting the comments might be the low quality content

provided by the users, which is considered to affect, in a negative way, the ranking of a website [28]. The usage of Facebook as a commenting platform is an expected finding because it is supposed to be one of the most popular social media platforms of the world [20].

However, this finding comes against the importance of users' comments as an SEO practice in the sense that the use of a different platform for comments, such as Facebook does not help with improving the relevant Google ranking. On the contrary, it has the opposite effect, as the engagement and interaction are not happening on the website [30]. Moreover, it does not help in building an active community on the website, which would otherwise result again in improving the visibility of the website, as it is considered to be an SEO practice [31]. In addition, the commenting platforms, such as Disqus, can affect, in a good or bad way, the ranking of the website. Because the platform takes time to load the comments, there is a high chance that Google will not index the comments of the website. If the quality is strong, then the website loses visibility, as the high engagement of the users is not evaluated despite it being an SEO practice [29].

Another noteworthy finding of this research is the expansion of the relevant literature for the Greek and Cypriot online media system. One would have thought that there would be major differences between the news websites of the international news organizations and those of Greek and Cypriot news outlets. However, this study argues that all of them share the same features and characteristics, proving that the news websites are being developed based on the same technological knowledge. Perhaps, this finding is also related to the prominence of specific social media platforms, which cannot be easily ignored by the news organizations if they want to attract more unique users, supporting the key roles of social media, social influence, and information diffusion in the contemporary media world.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

This study provides findings for a topic that has not been researched extensively in the field of communication. The SEO practices of the news websites regarding the comments on the websites are supposed to be an essential factor for the popularity of the websites. By commenting, the users provide free of charge, fresh and robust content, which, in some cases, provokes interactions, further engagement, and the users spend more time on the website. Besides, commenting is a form of social influence and information diffusion. Despite improving the visibility of news websites, the comments can even result in changing the opinions of the users.

However, this research shows also that the news websites do not seem to invest a lot of time in improving their visibility via users' comments. By using social media platforms and slow comment systems, they seem to lose the strong content of the users, which is considered to be an important SEO practice. Via the regulation of the comments, the news websites would have been able to maintain strong discussions on their websites and even build communities. Therefore, they would have been ranked higher in the relevant rankings.

Additionally, this study reveals that there are standard practices concerning commenting throughout the world, Greece, and Cyprus. Until today there was no systematic research in the field of journalism and communication that has evaluated the way that users comment on news websites. It seems that a significant number of news websites do not choose to use social media accounts or multiple comment platforms for allowing the users to comment on their news articles. This finding is probably linked with the crucial problem of been blamed for not regulating the harmful content of the website and the low-quality content created by the users. Further, it seems that they are not willing to take the risk of regulating the content in a more efficient way, such as not using slow comment systems and popular social media, such as Facebook. These concerns have to be addressed for increasing the visibility of the news websites, thus the information diffusion and the social influence of the news. Regarding the limitations of this study, it can be argued that the list provided from alexa.com restricted the examined sample and results. The results seem significant in the sense that this research is one of the first studies focusing on the field of news information and communication, but a different list may offer different results from this study. Furthermore, Greece and Cyprus seem to support the way

the most popular news websites function, in relation to the comments of the users. However, other countries, for example, those from Asia, may provide different results. Thus, the researchers of this study will try to replicate the same study in Asian countries to further expand, the existing literature. The relationship between SEO and comments on news media websites is a new research topic, and, as a result, there is a lack of research for this specific topic in the field. We believe that for the future, there is a need for a more thorough investigation, via different research methods such as surveys, content analysis, and examining even the traffic of the news media websites.

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