

ONLINE COMMENT MODERATION

A Report of the Ethics Advisory Committee of The Canadian Association of Journalists

April 2, 2014

PANEL MEMBERS: ELLEN VAN WAGENINGEN (CHAIR), ESTHER ENKIN AND TIM CURRIE.

Journalists entered a new form of dialogue with their audiences when the doors were opened for readers and viewers to post comments on online stories. The feedback was immediate and sometimes overwhelming. Comment posters have added spirited debates, new insights and a sense of community involvement to stories. They have also engaged in name calling, meanspirited attacks, bullying and hijacking of conversations to focus on things that have nothing to do with the story. There is sometimes a sense in newsrooms with limited resources and time that the latter are drowning out the legitimate dialogue.

Most news organizations have responded by developing guidelines for allowing online comments and tools for moderating them. The practical dilemma is that it is often difficult to determine the true identities of commenters and monitor what they are saying in real time, as is illustrated by the following excerpt from National Public Radio's community discussion rules:

"You are solely responsible for the content you post. NPR is not responsible for the content posted by its users. We do not and cannot review all user content posted on NPR.org. However, we have the right (but not the obligation) to review, screen, delete, edit and/or move any content posted on NPR.org."

Is this enough? Do journalists have an ethical obligation to moderate and remain involved in the online conversations generated by their stories? Long before the advent of online comments, public reaction to stories came in the form of phone calls to newsrooms, face-to-face comments to journalists, letters to the editor and calls to open line shows – all of which were less demanding to monitor than online commentary that can come at any time and long after a story is published. Is it acceptable to allow online dialogue to cross boundaries that wouldn't be acceptable in these other forms of expression? From an ethical perspective, the answer is no.

From a legal perspective, there is no clear consensus about the potential liabilities of moderation versus a completely open forum.

As with other forms of public feedback to stories, there is a responsibility to ensure fairness to other commenters, the reporter and those mentioned in the story. Some may argue comment moderation limits freedom of speech, but preventing someone from expressing their views on the same site where a story is posted does not stop them from sharing their opinions elsewhere. If online commenting is to be a robust part of the public discussion that journalists and the media outlets we work for strive to encourage, we need to set ground rules and remain involved in the conversation. Here are some ways to do that:

- Special care should be taken before allowing comments on sensitive stories, such as those involving criminal cases, publication bans and children. If comments are allowed, they should be moderated before they are published.
- Guidelines for commenting on online stories and other content should be set out where they are easy for readers to find. These can include ways readers can report comments they feel are inappropriate or offensive, as well as explaining tools that may be available to them to rate other comments. It is best to post above the comment section of an item a concise summary with a link to more detailed guidelines and information.
- Audience members of all backgrounds should be encouraged to express a wide range of views. This, for example, is how it's done by the Huffington Post: "Everyone is welcome and encouraged to voice their opinion regardless of identity, politics, ideology, religion or agreement with other community members, the author of the post or staff members as long as those opinions are respectful and constructively add to the conversation."
- Commenters should be encouraged to be civil. American blogger John Scalzi puts it this way: "A good rule of thumb is to comment as if the person to whom you are commenting is standing in front of you, is built like a linebacker, and has both a short temper and excellent legal representation."
- Journalists can help set the tone for the conversation and keep it on topic by being involved. Readers are likely to be more engaged if they see other commenters and journalists responding constructively to what they have to say.
- It should be clearly stated what type of commenting is considered unacceptable and will be removed.
- The reasons for banning commenters should also be clearly set out.
- Readers should be told how comments are moderated, whether by automated tools, staff for the media outlet, other commenters or a combination of these methods.

- Readers should be informed whether or not they will be able to delete or edit their comment once it is posted.
- Readers should be informed if their comments could be edited and under what circumstances. If a comment is edited, readers should be clearly informed about how it has been altered from the original.

There is an ongoing debate about whether those who make online comments should be required to use their real names. There is no conclusive proof, but there is some evidence that requiring real names or registration to confirm someone's true identity can reduce the number of uncivil comments. On the other hand, it may prevent those who are in vulnerable situations from speaking freely and adding to the conversation.

Here are some concluding thoughts from American technology writer and columnist Dan Gillmor on the subject: "In the end, accountability is up to the site owner. Whether you are a lone blogger or a big news organization, comment threads are a platform you make available to others. The thread is your living room, where you're hosting a conversation. You invite people into your home, and you make the rules on how they should behave."

FOR FURTHER READING:

Kirkland, Sam: [Despite complaints, comments broadly allowed on many news sites.](#) *Poynter Institute*, November 6, 2013.

Konnikova, Maria: [The psychology of online comments.](#) *The New Yorker* [online], October 24, 2013

Goodman, Emma and Frederica Cherubini: [Online comment moderation emerging best practices.](#) World Editors Forum, 2013.

Erard, Michael: [Four ways to improve the culture of commenting.](#) *The New York Times* [online], September 23, 2013.

Wihbey, John: [What's new in digital scholarship: the research on making comments better and American media exceptionalism](#) -- Nieman Journalism Lab, September 30, 2013.

[Journalists' involvement in comment sections.](#) Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin.

Lee, Eun-Ju: [That's not the way it is: how user-generated comments on the news affect perceived media bias](#) . *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 18 (1), p. 32-45, October 2012.

Anderson, Ashley A., Dominique Brossard, Dietram A. Scheufele, Michael A. Xenos and Peter Ladwig: The nasty effect: online incivility and risk perceptions of emerging technologies. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 (3), p. 373-487, April 2014.

Nielsen, Carolyn E. Coproduction or cohabitation: are anonymous online comments on newspaper websites shaping news content? *New Media & Society* June 7, 2013, DOI: 10.1177/1461444813487958.