

Is Comment Free?

Ethical, editorial and political problems of moderating online news

Sanna Trygg

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Preface

Why is the moderation of comment on news websites such an interesting problem? This paper by Polis visiting research fellow Sanna Trygg explores why we moderate public comment and the effects of different moderation policies. This matters because many people had high hopes that opening up debate around online news would create a better forum for public discussion. We thought that public participation would be entertaining and informative, but above all, that it would create a conversation that would enhance the way we run our lives. In practice, any debate is as likely to end up as a shouting match as it is to turn into some kind of Socratic dialogue.

So what can journalists do to make their comment fields more fertile? Of course, it is perfectly possible not to moderate at all. There are highly successful websites such as Guido Fawkes' ['Order Order' blog](#) where intervention is kept to a bare minimum. The website gets a lot of traffic and some of the comments are funny and insightful.¹ Most are rude, random and predictable. Yet, some would argue that the Guardian's more highly-moderated [Comment Is Free](#) website can also be dominated by the Angry Mob.² The point of this paper is not to judge what is the best way of moderating but simply to point out that there is a choice. As with all journalism, you can set your own rules based on your own business model, editorial policy or ethical code.

This paper mainly compares two newspapers that have taken a serious and imaginative approach to reader participation in general, and public comments in particular. The author is Swedish and Polis is based in London so, not surprisingly, the newspapers are from those two countries: the [Svenska Dagbladet](#) and [The Guardian](#).^{3 4} Again, the purpose is not to judge those papers' policies or to advocate a particular degree or style of moderation. Instead, this paper seeks to understand some of the problems faced by the moderators and set them in a wider context that considers the social and political role of online public comment.

We want anyone reading this to get some insight into how moderation works but we also hope that it will stimulate further developments and innovation. As [Polis has shown](#) in its numerous events, [books](#), reports and articles, journalism is now networked.^{5 6 7} The public routinely participate in the creation of journalism online, which is now open, interactive and connected. Moderation is a vital part of that process. However, it is still a relatively new relationship and it continues to change as the technologies evolve. We hope this paper contributes to that positive process and exchange of views, so we welcome feedback and, of course, comments.

¹ <http://order-order.com/>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree>

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.svd.se/>

⁵ <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/POLIS/home.aspx>

⁶ Beckett, C 2008 *SuperMedia* (Blackwell)

⁷ Beckett, C 2010 The Value of Networked Journalism (Polis) <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/08/19/new-report-on-networked-journalism-2/>

This paper is the first product of a new visiting research fellowship scheme at Polis, kindly supported by the Swedish media foundation, [Jornalistfonden](#).⁸ It allows a working Swedish journalist to spend a month with Polis at the London School of Economics researching a topic. It has been a highly enjoyable and rewarding experience for all involved. We look forward to hosting next year's fellow and would welcome interest from anyone in creating similar fellowships or in working with Polis in other ways.

Charlie Beckett

Director, Polis, London School of Economics and Political Science

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Contact us at polis@lse.ac.uk

⁸ Journalistfonden för vidareutbildning (The Journalist Fund for Further Training)
<http://www.journalistfonden.se/pages/?ID=124>

Executive Summary:

1. Comment fields on newspapers websites are an opportunity for improving reader participation in journalism and so add value
2. Reader participation can increase traffic and commercial revenue for the newspapers
3. Comment can contribute to healthy public debate in general and open the news media up to a more diverse and even democratic discourse
4. High expectations of the benefits of comment fields are often unfulfilled. Readers feel controlled, journalists are nervous of public opinion and overall standards are highly variable
5. In practice, much debate is divisive, abusive and negative with readers often staying in opinion 'silos'.
6. Moderation can be inconsistent and the quality of moderation is limited by available resources
7. Moderation is determined partly by legal concerns but mainly by the newspaper's editorial policy and to a degree by its desire to control the debate agenda
8. The increased involvement of newsroom journalists in moderation is good for improving the standards of debate and may have benefits for the journalism and the newspaper overall
9. There is a need for greater openness about moderation and further research on the effects of particular moderation policies and their relationship to improving public debate and journalism

1. Introduction

The opening of online news websites to public comments allows the readers into a space traditionally controlled by journalists. It contributes to the erosion of traditional distinctions between producers and consumers of news.⁹ It is seen as a way of adding value to the reader's experience as well as creating material that can attract more traffic to the website. So it is usually thought of as a 'democratic' process as well as a potentially profitable one. Judging by the high volume of comments on news websites it is a popular activity, even if only a small percentage of readers are active at any given time.

Yet, despite the apparent success of encouraging comments on online news, there is still uncertainty over how to moderate them and how much resource should be invested in handling the interaction. Overall, journalists welcome and encourage reader's participation but there are criticisms on both sides of the quality and nature of some comments, as well as a debate about the degree of control or freedom that can be allowed. Moderation is highly problematic for news media websites.

This paper examines why the high expectations of readers' participation are often unfulfilled. At the core of the issue is the fact that the Internet works in a marketplace where information is seen as a product. At the same time, the informed citizen and her access to information is seen as a vital precondition for a functioning modern democracy. This opposition is fundamental to the debate about moderation.¹⁰

In the past, 'traditional' or 'mainstream' media have been considered as the main public forum for free speech, critique and discussion. Today, readers are also invited to participate in the debate directly online. The main platform for this is the comment field attached to news articles published online. Readers are invited and encouraged to participate in a forum that until recently have been largely exclusive to journalists. Highly edited letters pages were just about the only space allowed for direct reader comments in print newspapers. However, online comment is also edited. A wide range of factors has led news organizations to enforce restrictions on reader contributions.

Most national and international newspapers deal with user-generated content (UGC) such as video-clips, mobile photos, linking blogs and live chats on a daily basis. Some media companies hire external employees to do the work, others get journalists and specialist web-editors to moderate comments. The restrictions are shaped by the policies and guidelines set up by each newspaper. These vary from country to country and from newspaper to newspaper, as does the scrutiny of how the policies are followed.

This research report investigates how mainstream media handle the voice of the reader as it is manifested in comments posted on their websites. It focuses on policies in newspapers in Sweden and in the UK. The main aim of this report is not to decide how to moderate, but to

⁹ Wardle, C. and Williams, A. Media, Culture and Society 'UGC @ the BBC', Media Culture and Society, 2010. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/cardiffone.pdf>

¹⁰ Ilshammar, Lars. "Demokr@i. Det elektroniska folkstyrets möjligheter och problem". Expertuppsats skriven på uppdrag av 1996 års folkomröstningsutredning. Bilaga 2 till SOU 1997:56., Perelman, Michael. "Class Warfare in the Information Age". St. Martin's Press, 1998, Bellamy, Christine/Taylor, John A. "Governing in the Information Age". Open University Press, 1998, Moore, Nick. "Confucius or capitalism? Policies for an information society". I Loader, Brian D. (ed) "Cyberspace Divide. Equality, Agency and Policy in the Information Society". Routledge, 1998.

investigate why the media moderates in a certain way and what the possible effects of that might be. By examining the moderation of comment fields we can also analyze the relation between traditional media and its consumers. Our intention is to develop a wider perspective on how we moderate and the effects it has on the journalism and its relationship with the reader.

The key questions for this report are:

1. What do the moderation policy and the way it has been followed say about the relationship between the news organisation and its consumer?
2. Do media frame the news agenda by forming policy and moderating in a certain way?

This paper argues that UGC and reader participation make it possible to have a more equal relationship between the media and its consumers. However, in reality, this does not go very far, and the news organisation retains control. It also suggests that although the comment fields make it possible to publish a wide range of opinions, perspectives and views, the traditional media in effect limit the diversity of views expressed. The traditional media still control the agenda. The main reasons for this are the question of resources as well as the influence of a particular newspaper's editorial tradition and of the online strategy that it has chosen.

This report is by Swedish journalist Sanna Trygg for the journalism think-tank Polis in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It is a collaboration between Polis and [Journalistfonden](http://www.journalistfonden.se/).^{11 12} The study includes a comparison between the UK newspaper The Guardian and the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet.^{13 14} Both have been awarded numerous times for their work in digital media and are considered as pioneers of reader participation.^{15 16}

[See the Appendix on page 26 of this report for a statistical comparison of the two newspapers]

¹¹ <http://www.journalistfonden.se/pages/?ID=124>

¹² <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/POLIS/home.aspx>

¹³ <http://www.svd.se/>

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

¹⁵ http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/svdse-arets-dagstidning-digitala-medier_6569571.svd

¹⁶ <http://www.mediaweek.co.uk/news/1064248/>

2. What is at stake? The issues behind the moderation debate

Freedom of speech is both an opportunity and a challenge on the Internet. On the one hand, we see high expectations concerning free access of information for anyone. The Internet user expects freedom of speech everywhere, at any time. Has it the potential to deliver what political scientist Cass Sunstein describes as the core of liberal democracy?:

“Unanticipated encounters, involving topics and points of view that people have not sought out and perhaps find irritating, are central to democracy and even to freedom itself”

Sunstein C, Republic.com, Princeton, 2001.

However, the reality of the enormous amount of opinion published through blogs, Twitter-feeds and beneath articles on newspaper websites is that it is not always a happy exchange of differing viewpoints. It is not always polite, intelligent or open-minded. This tsunami of online debate does not always fit the ideal of the Internet as a sphere for engaging interesting discussions, flourishing debates and intellectual creativity.

The language used is often ill informed, obscene and violent. Discussion can be irrational, unordered and reactive with little factual content. Vulnerable social groups, such as religious minorities are often subject to majority attacks online. Bigotry against women, ethnic groups and homosexuals is displayed. Sometimes they are plain mean. Simply put, they reveal unpleasant thoughts.

When comment fields in newspapers online were being introduced about a decade ago the media orthodoxy was that public debate and citizen criticism was a welcome part of the public realm. The press should, therefore, offer spaces for civic thoughts and discussion. But traditional media found themselves in a difficult new editorial area. To invite readers and encourage discussion on the same platform as journalists resulted in a range of problems.

The press advocated free debate, yet there was inadequate preparation for the reader's pent-up eagerness to be part of the conversation. It soon became apparent that these forums would not moderate themselves, but dealing with the incredible amount of comments demanded significant resources from newspapers with tight budgets. However, it was the content – especially the more extreme views that pushed the boundaries on sexism, racism and libel - that accelerated the trend towards more thorough moderation.

In Scandinavia this ethical conflict between freedom of expression and extremism reached its most dramatic intensity when the right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik attacked the Labour Party youth camp at Utöya after bombing a government building in Oslo on July 22nd 2011.¹⁷ The comment fields in the region's papers were swamped by citizen contributions. However, they were not only used to express support for victims and their families but also to cheer the attack and the ultra nationalist opinions held by the mass murderer. A wide range of Norwegian and Swedish newspapers decided to deactivate their comment fields. Others refused anonymous comments, arguing that being identified would

¹⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14261716>

make it harder to express hate and create a debate with fewer lies. The Managing Editor of the Dagens Nyheter website (DN.se) Björn Hedensjö explained the decision as follows:

“Obviously we are disappointed at having to take this step; the ideal is, of course, a free and open debate that does not even require moderation. The reality is unfortunately that comment boxes with us and others have come to be exploited by a small group of people including the expression of racist views. This is something that we can clearly say no to in our comment policy.”¹⁸

It was felt that the public were simply not to be trusted to have a ‘reasonable’ conversation about this painful subject, according to Thomas Mattson, Chief Editor of Expressen:

“The web is ready for the audience, but audiences are not ready for the web.”¹⁹

The main argument used by traditional media for banning anonymous comment was to raise the level of the debate. “Stand up for your opinion,” was the main message while arguing for the change. Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet and Dagens Nyheter argued that the discussion would lead to a less harsh tone and more reasonable conversations when the commenter is identified. Critics of this restriction argued that expressing opinion anonymously is important for allowing full and frank expression.

The new more restrictive policy was widely criticized in social media networks. Bloggers claimed that newspapers were trying to hide their real motive, which was to impose their own agenda on the issue. They said that the papers used online hate-speech as a false justification to limit discussions. Others argued that a more restricted debate would lead to a closed society. Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, declared that terror had to be fought with “an even more open society and even more democracy”. During his speech in Oslo’s largest mosque on Friday July 29th he made a clear statement:

“We are Norway. Our basic values are of democracy, humanity and openness. With these values as a base we shall respect differences.. And each other. We must accept the debates. Welcome them. Even the unpleasant.”²⁰

In Sweden similar arguments were presented. Anna Troberg, the leader of the Pirate Party, that campaigns against corporate and government control of the Internet, argued that restricted comment fields would pave the way for new attacks:

“We have to stand up for openness and democracy and let everyone speak, even those who expresses opinions we do not share. It is when we shut people out from debates that the problem starts.”²¹

The Swedish author and journalist Dilsa Demirbag Sten argued that the more people who participate in public debate, the better it reflects the world we live in:

¹⁸Hedensjö, Björn, “Därför stänger vi kommentarsfälten tillfälligt” on August 29 in 2011.<http://www.dn.se/blogg/redaktionsbloggen/2011/08/29/darfor-stanger-vi-kommentarsfalten-tillfalligt/>

¹⁹Thomas Mattson, Expressen.se “Debatten om artikelkommentarerna”, on 30 of August 2011. <http://bloggar.expressen.se/thomasmattson/2011/08/debatten-om-artikelkommentarerna/>

²⁰http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/smk/aktuelt/taler_og_artikler/statsministeren/statsminister_jens_stoltenberg/2011/jens-stoltenbergs-tale-i-central-jamaat-.html?id=651933

“A growing participation in public discourse has its downside, but it can never be an overwhelming problem that people use their right to free speech.”²²

Opponents also claimed that the action could be interpreted as a wish to go back to former power relationship where the political and journalistic elites were the gatekeepers to public debate.

As a result of the Breivik attack, combined with the intense debate around online hate-speech and extremism, the Swedish government initiated a report to investigate extremism on Swedish websites. The report will be a part of an upcoming governmental action against violent extremism.

The debate in the UK has been much less high profile, although the issues are certainly comparable. The question of who controls communication and the relationship between politicians, professional media and the public was brought into focus by the riots in England in August 2011.²³ In the immediate aftermath Prime Minister David Cameron mentioned the need for controlling communications that encouraged violence. He argued that the way social media was used during the riots risked undermining law and order.

In his opening statement in a Commons debate on 11 August, Cameron stated that social media can be “used for ill” especially when concerned with “plotting violence, disorder and criminality”.²⁴ Even the idea that the authorities in the UK were considering possible restrictions on social media during periods of disorder was labelled as an assault on the freedom of speech. The freedom of expression lobby group Index on Censorship said that the police should be allowed access to messages related to specific investigations, but should not be permitted to monitor or suspend general communications.²⁵ Index’s news editor Padraig Reidy was concerned that David Cameron would allow legitimate anger over the riots to be used in an attack on free expression and free information:

“Too often, channels of communication, whether Twitter, Facebook or BlackBerry Messenger, are seen as the culprits in acts of violence and anti-social behavior, rather than merely the conduit. While police in investigations should be able to investigate relevant communications, there should be no power to pre-emptively monitor or suspend communications for ordinary social media users.”²⁶

Jim Killock, director of the Open Rights Group, was also critical of Cameron’s proposed action claiming that riots were being used as an excuse to attack civil liberties. In an interview in BBC he said that any government policy to shut down networks deprived citizens of a right to secure communication and undermined the privacy required by a society that valued free speech:

²² <http://www.journalisten.se/kronika/28783/trakig-debatt-utan-elaka-antagonister>

²³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8687177/London-riots-live.html>

²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/europe/12iht-social12.html>

²⁵ Index on Censorship is a British organization promoting freedom of expression. Its news editor Padraig Reidy said: “David Cameron must not allow legitimate anger over the recent riots and looting in the UK to be used in an attack on free expression and free information. Too often, channels of communication, whether Twitter, Facebook or BlackBerry Messenger are seen as the culprits in acts of violence and anti-social behavior, rather than merely the conduit. While police in investigations should be able to investigate relevant communications, there should be no power to pre-emptively monitor or suspend communications for ordinary social media users.”

<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/tag/uk-riots/>

²⁶ <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/08/index-on-censorship-reaction-to-david-cameron-comments-on-social-media/>

"David Cameron must be careful not to attack these fundamental needs because of concerns about the actions of a small minority."²⁷

At the heart of the problem around online newspaper moderation is the issue of the media's role in society. On July 6th 2011 David Cameron initiated a public inquiry to be led by Lord Leveson that will look into the ethics and culture of the British media as a direct effect of articles in The Guardian exposing the alleged criminality of the News of the World.²⁸ It seems likely that the outcome will be an increase in the independent regulation of the UK press. Traditionally, it has always been less regulated than most of its European counterparts so not surprisingly the idea of new guidelines for the UK media was widely criticized by journalists and editors.²⁹ At present it does not seem likely that Leveson will deal with news website moderation directly, but surely it should be considered in any investigation into newspaper editorial practices and their contribution to British public life?

Newspapers in the UK are characterized by political views. Put crudely, if you are, for example, a left liberal, then you read The Guardian. In Sweden, the political views of newspapers are not supposed to be reflected in the reporting, which is still considered neutral and fairly objective. However, despite this difference both these countries' newspapers consider freedom of expression and flourishing debate as extremely important.

In its own publicity the The Guardian says that it is "Owned by no one. Free to say anything"³⁰

While the other subject for this report, Svenska Dagbladet, says that: "SvD aims to initiate and provide an open arena for free debate."³¹

The main part of this report will now ask whether these journalistic ideals also apply to the voice of the reader?

²⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-14493497>

²⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/phone-hacking/8634757/Phone-hacking-David-Cameron-announces-terms-of-phone-hacking-inquiry.html>

²⁹ Article sourced from The Economist online entitled "How to fix the press" on July 21 2011. (There is no author mentioned in this article.)

³⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/mar/30/guardian-independent-ads>

³¹ http://www.svd.se/special/svd_info/sjalvstandig-och-oberoende-av-politiska-religiosa-kommersiella-eller-enskilda-intressen_91683.svd

3.0 The Moderation Framework

The Policy

This section will look at moderation in practice by comparing the moderation policies and guidelines of the Svenska Dagbladet and the Guardian. (See the Appendix of this report for a statistical comparison of the two newspapers)

With Svenska Dagbladet the moderation policy is more or less a replication of the applicable law (Act on Bulletin Board System SFS 1998:112) but also consists of more freely expressed guidelines that are not included within the law.³² Svenska Dagbladet has stipulated a rule not included in the law that restricts comments including links.

The policy also consists of more freely expressed guidelines that are not included within the law such as that writers should have a 'friendly and civilized tone'. Commenters are also asked to sign in with their real identity since the "use of a pseudonym will reduce the weight of your opinion."

With the Guardian context is a key issue so one comment that is published in one part of the website might not be allowed in another. The policy is formed to encourage an intelligent debate.³³ The policy is far more detailed than that of Svenska Dagbladets.

There are ten key points in its community standards charter that deal with a wide range of issues such as racism and libel but also more subjective concerns such as relevance and abuse.

The Law

With Svenska Dagbladet the commentator is responsible for her comments. However, there are according to Swedish law restrictions on the authorities' possibilities to investigate the commentators:

"Since it is hard to track the person responsible for the commentaries, the comments are ultimately the editor's responsibility." – David Dryselius, (Swedish lawyer and Phd candidate at the University of Lund)

Since all comments are moderated after being published comments are restricted by The Act on Bulletin Board System. It is regulated as followed:

- Agitation against a national or ethnic group
- Illicit purveyance of a technical recording
- Child pornography
- Unlawful depiction of violence
- Infringement of a copyright.

The law also says that it is only comments that obviously break these five issues that the

³² <http://www.notisum.se/rnp/sls/lag/19980112.HTM>

³³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards>

publisher might be judged for.³⁴

With the Guardian the UK law as it stands stems from the ruling in *Godfrey v Demon Internet* - namely that those providing this sort of service can rely on the defense of innocent dissemination, so long as they are not aware of the defamatory content of the messages posted.³⁵

“If you are providing a reader comment section then it is best if you do not pre-moderate, but provide a flagging system for readers to make you aware of content they have an objection to. So long as you remove the content once you become aware of its content, then you retain the defense of innocent dissemination. : “Anyone who repeats the libel is responsible for it, but most newspapers indemnify their staff against libel - so the poster would be liable, and the newspaper. For other legal problems - such as contempt of court and racial hatred - the newspaper would bear main liability, but the original poster would also have liability.” David Banks (co-author of *McNae's Essential Law for Journalists*).

Since the comments are under the system of self-regulation, it is ultimately the editor's responsibility:

“The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) holds editors responsible, rather than individual journalists.”

Catherine Speller (Communications and Research Manager, Press Complaints Commission).³⁶

The legal liabilities of a UK online publisher and who is responsible for the material published online has been criticized for not being clearly defined according to online moderator Tia Fisher:³⁷

“This has been historically a grey area, with the few legal cases not yet indicating a clear view one way or the other. The result of this has been a natural inclination for publishers to err on the side of caution and remove material 'just to be on the safe side' - or to risk reputational damage by restricting moderation to reactive moderation only.”

Tia Fisher (Social Media Management Agency eModeration).³⁸

³⁴ Legal advice by David Dryselius, Swedish lawyer and Phd at University of Lund.

³⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/695596.stm>

³⁶ <http://www.pcc.org.uk/>

³⁷ <http://blog.emoderation.com/2011/10/proposed-changes-to-defamation-law-will.html>

³⁸ <http://www.emoderation.com/>

3.1 Possible effects of the moderation framework

When surrounded by huge amounts of information and many competing sources, media consumers tend to search for platforms that offer recognisable identities and familiar editorial brands. Consumers look for likeminded communities:

“Newspapers offer a debate for a certain group of people who want to gather around their stories and their brand. You look all around the web and see different communities and different groups of people gathering in different Facebook groups, blogs twitter lists. So what happens on newspaper websites is not particularly unusual.”

Paul Bradshaw, (Visiting Professor at [City University](#)'s School of Journalism in [London](#))

In Britain, in the pre-digital era conservatives bought the Daily Telegraph and liberals bought The Guardian. So in the UK, unlike Sweden, this flocking trend is nothing new but rather a matter of tradition. It has even been seen as a strength, as it highlights the relative diversity of overt political commentary in the press. So it is perhaps less surprising for the UK news organizations that this ‘echo chamber’ effect is replicated online.

It seems that the main motive on the part of readers to participate in debates and to comment online is not to share opinions or meet different thinkers but to minimize self-doubts and feel a sense of community:

“The social function assists consumers in seeking out activities that are perceived as favorable by important others and gives them the opportunity to associate with friends. In relation to the creation of user generated content, consumers engage in such actions to connect with others and feel important.”³⁹

Likewise, the drive to participate is not motivated by a desire to act as active, responsible citizens, but rather to be entertained and for personal gratification:

“The minority who are actually commenting on news articles, or otherwise participating in the journalistic process through blog-writing, seem to consider these activities as part of a creative leisure-time, rather than as taking part in democratic activities.”⁴⁰

The wish of the reader to appear in an “intelligent” forum fits well with the consumer’s desire to use the platforms to mirror her values. But more closed communities also risk cutting the citizen off from information and opinions that might challenge beliefs, a process commonly known as “cyber balkanization” that creates “information cocoons” and “echo chambers.”⁴¹ A more cell-like society might fragment interaction and divide groups since the

³⁹ <http://jjad.org/article101>

⁴⁰ Bergström, A, The reluctant audience: Online participation in the Swedish journalistic context. Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 5(2), s.60-80, 2008.

⁴¹ Cybercanalization: Even if the Information technology can link geographically separated people together and have the potential to bridge gaps and unite communities, they also have the potential to fragment interaction and divide groups by leading people to spend more time on special interests and by screening out less preferred contact. The term was first used by Marshall Van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson in the paper Electronic Communities: Global Village or Cyberbalkans? MIT Sloan School, from 1996. “Information cocoon, wherein people avoid the news and opinions that they don't want to hear.” is used by Sunstein, Cass in his book Republic.com 2.0, 2009.

public avoids the news and opinions that they don't want to hear.

The Guardian is considered as a serious intelligent newspaper. Why should this not be reflected in the comment fields as well? Having a serious discussion benefits their trademark. It is a win-win situation. When the reader posts a comment, she will also be associated with being smart and clever. But the main question is – what is intelligent? Is it restricted to the kind of academics, experts and the powerful who were given a platform by journalists in the pre-digital era?

Asking for an 'intelligent' online discussion may shut out readers with, for example, a poorer vocabulary or inadequate academic or rhetorical skills but whose arguments may still be enlightening or relevant.

Research by the Swedish survey Institute Sifo in 2011, showed that workers, unemployed and less educated people think that reader comments in themselves are more important than civil servants, self-employed, private employees and highly skilled:

“A qualified guess is that people with higher education and status in society feel that they already have the opportunity to be heard. For people with lower status are comment fields however, an important platform to make their voices heard.”⁴²

Sofia Mirjamsdotter (Swedish journalist, blogger and social media expert)

So newspapers websites are potentially a platform where anyone, no matter what class, background or gender, can have access. But in practice they restrict, not just by law but by the way they conceptualise the debate and, therefore, the audience.

⁴² http://www.svd.se/kultur/lasare-vill-kunna-kommentera_6444146.svd

3.2 Editorial Moderation Policies

This section will now look at the moderation practice of the two newspapers and the possible effects this might have on the audience and its relationship to the news organization.

From 2004 onwards, it has been possible to comment upon articles and blog posts published online in Svenska Dagbladet. Since 2005 moderation has been performed by an external company, Interaktiv Säkerhet. It is used by most national newspapers in Sweden. The moderation is done by 40 employees who get a two-day education in press laws and media ethics. According to Interaktiv Säkerhet's Managing Director Klas Karlsson they handle 5-10,000 comments each day.

To leave a post, visitors have to log in through their Google, Yahoo, Disqus, Facebook or Twitter accounts. The digital platform for comments is an external digital platform called Disqus, used by 750,000 websites around the world.⁴³

Svenska Dagbladet moderates the way the discussion is going and deletes comment that does not stick to the theme of the article. It is possible to comment upon and question the moderation. It is normally possible to comment on articles for three days. Not all articles are opened to comments. About 5-10% of the comments are deleted. Svenska Dagbladet does not keep any official data regarding which comments are being removed or why. The reason for this is that it would be time consuming:

“The speed of moderation is crucial. In many cases, it is easy, but then a lot of borderline cases in which doubt and there is no time. To consider why a single comment need to be removed takes extra time and costs extra. It is not justified to add that extra work and money.”

Johan Möller, Head of the Development-team at SvD.se.⁴⁴

With The Guardian online it has been possible to comment on blogs on the website since 2001. In 2007 comment fields were activated for articles. The moderation carried out by an in-house team (the exact number is not official) that generally has some kind of undergraduate degree and are 'experienced' in journalism, social media or moderating. They get legal training and are also educated continuously in areas such as hate-speech and other issues that are in focus at a particular time.

To comment, you create an account on The Guardian website. It is not possible to comment on all articles. The newspaper moderates the way the discussion is going and deletes comment that does not stick to the theme of the article. It is not possible to comment and question the moderation in all discussions. Around 1-2% of comments are deleted. The Guardian does not keep any official data regarding which comments are deleted or why.

At the Guardian and Svenska Dagbladet's websites, readers are encouraged to report comments that break the moderation policy or are otherwise questionable. They do so by

⁴³ <http://venturebeat.com/2011/05/04/disqus-funding/>

⁴⁴ Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011

flagging or reporting the comment. It is not possible to rate comments, which is an alternative offered by the BBC. It allows other readers to like or unlike a certain comment, a similar action to the 'like' button on Facebook.⁴⁵

3.3 Effects of moderation policies: Reflections and Discussion

There are various concerns among advocates of traditional journalism values about the effects of online moderation. For example, a worry that editorial standards are diluted:

"It's absurd to think that a two day training session can replace the knowledge garnered through experience in a newsroom. Formally, the power is still in the hands of the editor, but in reality they have abdicated their responsibility. Press ethics should be the media's responsibility, not on a person that has sat on the school bench for only a day"
Nils Funcke (Swedish journalist and expert on freedom of expression - interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011)

In 2006 the former head of SvD.se Martin Jönsson described their relationship with the external moderators Interaktiv Säkerhet:

"We will have a regular dialogue with them (Interaktiv Säkerhet) about where the boundaries are for what can be published. Our general line is that we want a lively, but cared discussion, with as many votes as possible. What we will clear away include those that may be offensive to the persons concerned, obscenity, nonsense posts and spam."⁴⁶

But exactly how this relationship works is not clear. In an interview, Interaktiv Säkerhet managing director Klas Karlsson was asked how often he calls the publisher of the newspapers to discuss a particular decision concerning a comment and if he could give examples of such a comment?

"I have no examples, but of course it happens that discussions take place with the contact person at the newspaper. But it is not necessarily the publisher."
Klas Karlsson (Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011)

Making commentators log in has raised concerns about privacy from people like Marcin di Kaminski, an Internet researcher at Lund University:

"For each letter we write...for every click and every item we choose to read, we load the already gigantic statistical database of Facebook even more. Facebook already has a better eye on us than we have on ourselves. Now, they are also in partnership with our news aggregators that have the opportunity to gain insight into what we really think is exciting, and also what we think about it" Marcin di Kaminski (Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011)

Newspapers do not always feel obliged to justify their moderation actions in public:

"The discussion has to stay on topic as much as possible. The moderators may remove

⁴⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15934685>

⁴⁶ <http://www.mediavarlden.se/arbete-a-metoder/2-arbete-a-metoder/3447-morgonkollen-de-modererar-mediarhusens-kommentarer>

comments that detract from a constructive conversation, though we don't edit the content of comments. The overall aim is that opinions are expressed in an appropriate way that moves the conversation forward. Sometimes, users want to know why a certain comment was removed, but we don't enter into discussion about individual actions in public.”

Meg Pickard, Head of Digital Engagement at the Guardian. (Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011)

Research by social media expert, Mariam Cook from 2010 shows that users tend to get frustrated when they are unable to publicly challenge moderation decisions. This perception of being unheard can lead to a vicious cycle where commentators become more belligerent, making writers wary of interacting with them. This leads to frustration with the reader that might negatively affect the trademark in the long run:

“I have considered users’ frustrations, such as the inability to publicly challenge moderation decisions, the difficulty of getting into long, linear conversations, and the feeling of being ignored above the line. This perception of being unheard cultivates a particular type of ‘othering’ by commentators of those above them - creating different norms for how they behave towards article authors in comparison to other commentators. It also leads to an ever-perpetuating cycle whereby users are belligerent, making writers wary of interacting with them, leading to further frustration below the line. This ‘long-term malaise’ might be compared to Mouffe’s analysis of the rise of the far right under liberal democracies, where she says a “lack of ‘agonistic channels’ for the expression of grievances tends to create the conditions for the emergence of antagonisms which can take extreme forms”.

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Both SvD and The Guardian argue that the main reasons for not allowing comments on all articles are, firstly, a matter of resources, moderation is not free and can be a drain on already stretched newsroom budgets. Secondly, not all articles are suitable for comments:

“Our experience shows that comments on some hot topics needs to be avoided. Simply put, the discussion gets out of our hand quickly. Also, we have to read and review all the comments which unfortunately cost us a lot of money. Limited resources are one of the reasons that not all articles are open to comment.”

Johan Möller, Head of the Development-team at SvD.se

Both of the newspapers claim that they do not keep any official data on what sort of comments are being deleted. It would certainly be interesting to know what kind of comments are being deleted. Do they violate legal limits or are they simply too extreme or even just banal or incoherent? Since no data exists, it is hard to examine what sorts of comments are being deleted and to reflect upon what the effects of these absent opinions

⁴⁷ Mariam Cooks dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2010. www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/.../MScDissertationSeries/2010/Cook.pdf

are. What is known is that both SvD and The Guardian have a problem with ultra-xenophobic comments:

“Like all newspapers we have had problems with hate speech, which includes racism.”
Meg Pickard, Head of Digital Engagement at the Guardian.

“Since we do not keep any data of the comments being deleted I am not sure but my feeling is that there is a lot racism, threats and hate speech. We also have problems with comments that does not stick to the subject and are therefore being deleted.”
Fredric Karén, Digital editor SvD.

To investigate this further I conducted a small unrepresentative survey. I placed 15 different comments which were published on Svenska Dagbladet’s website. They were sorted in three different categories:

- 1: Clearly corresponding with the policy and law.
- 2: Ambiguous: between corresponding with the policy and law.
- 3: Clearly not corresponding with the policy and law.

Different aliases (female and male) and Yahoo-accounts were created to make the comments. The amount of articles tested was too small to make any wider conclusions but the research did manage to reveal certain patterns and inconsistencies. Comments corresponding with the policy and law were deleted (2 out of 5). Not all comments that failed to correspond with the policy and law were removed (3 out of 5 are deleted). Comments which fell between corresponding with the policy and law are always published (5 of 5). This tiny experiment suggests, at least, that there is a degree of inconsistency in moderation.

Possible Effects

So, to sum up this section, it is clear that opening up to comments has created a large space for public discussion. Thousands of comments are made on these two newspaper websites daily. At times the journalists describe themselves as having to cope with a deluge of interactivity that they fear they cannot control. This is why moderation policies have been implemented. The effect is that there has not been a decisive change in power relations between the media and its consumers. The media still frames the discussion in the following ways:

It dictates what is a worthwhile subject by letting readers comment only on certain articles
It deletes what it considers inappropriate comments as well as those that raise legal concerns

The Guardian does not allow people to question and comment the moderation itself in discussions

Mainstream media may have aspirations to be a platform for free speech online but in practice freedom of expression is actively controlled.

4. Press and Power: Moderation as control? Reflections and Discussion

So what might the moderation policies and the way they have been followed, say about the relationship between the traditional media and its consumer? Do the media create a certain agenda by forming its moderation policy in a certain way? Is it inevitable that the high expectations readers may have for participation will always be unfulfilled?

Comment fields on newspaper websites offer great potential for participation in democratic dialogue. It is easy to take part and the potential number of participants is large and from different classes, races, backgrounds and genders with different political views. Posting in comment fields is free of charge at the point of use and relatively easy. But it does not appear that comment fields have changed journalism radically. It could be argued that they have not expanded the editorial diversity of content significantly. Nor have they dramatically changed the balance of power between the traditional media and its consumers to a more 'equal' one.

This might be entirely appropriate for the mainstream media business model. The choice of how to moderate is made to maximize the strength of the brand and to enhance efficient content production as well as to promote interaction with the reader. These goals may not be compatible with openness or with ceding control to the consumer.

The web 2.0 in itself has no particular direction or impact. There is no technological determinism that makes more democracy a result of increased public comment. It is a tool whose effects are determined by who is using it and how. News media are free to shape the impact of the use of their websites can have. Comment fields could be used to enhance democratic processes. A more serious approach to comment fields and readers' participation could be used to maintain the traditional idea of media as a Fourth Estate, but reformed as part of the participatory Fifth Estate:

"There's a new kid on the block. A third wing to the fourth estate, if that's not too mixed a metaphor. You could even argue there are two new kids on the block – the original world wide web (essentially another form of transmission) and web 2.0, the advent and rapid maturing of so-called social, or open, media. No one owns the digital space and it is barely regulated. It brings with it an entirely new idea of what journalism is... This double revolution within just over 20 years is having a dramatic effect on the accepted norms and categorizations of information. We are seeing the splintering of the fourth estate."

Alan Rusbridger, Editor, The Guardian⁴⁸

So we can see how moderation fits into a wider set of dilemmas for networked mainstream journalism when it takes its institutional processes onto the open Internet.

Mainstream media is walking a tightrope today, dealing with the aftermath of the financial crises, a changed media landscape with diminishing income and declining newspaper editions. Free material is easy to use in order to boost traffic. As shown in the BBC-study from 2010 UGC is only valued when it benefits the traditional media.⁴⁹ The democratic mission is much lower on the scale:

⁴⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/19/open-collaborative-future-journalism>

⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/cardiffone.pdf>

“The main reason for the media to use comment fields is to make readers stay for a longer period on their websites, so that they can sell more advertising space. Also, traditional journalists are nervous. They feel threatened that readers are intruding upon the area that traditionally has belonged to them.”

Claire Wardle (Social media expert)⁵⁰

Traditional media today does its best to manage the fine balance between inviting the reader to be a part of what has been considered the journalistic platform (encouraging the consumer to share and participate), at the same time maintaining traditional power (as in, not giving reader-participation too much importance):

“The ideal is a totally free debate where everyone can write what they want so that all opinions can be let out, even uncomfortable or insulting opinions. The alternative, to hide opinions that exist in a democratic society, is too dangerous. For example, today we see that there is an obvious skepticism against immigration in Europe. These opinions exist whether we want it or not. But these thoughts might flourish even more if we do not discuss them. Today there are a number of questions that are “unmentionable”. We should take them back. Not until then can we have a constructive debate.”

Nils Funcke (Swedish journalist and expert on freedom of expression in interview with Sanna Trygg October 2010)

‘Taking back’ difficult debates and airing awkward views does not necessarily mean abandoning moderation on mainstream media forums, but there is a limit to openness according to the Guardian:

“Commenting online is not a right, it is a privilege, albeit one which people have come to expect on publisher sites. We have a responsibility to care for the overall community. If people want to express perspectives that are inappropriate to appear on the Guardian site, according to our community standards, they are free to use other platforms such as private blogs. But on publisher sites, there needs to be structure and rules. While moderation can sometimes be controversial, non-moderated environments aren't places where people want to spend a lot of time.”

Meg Pickard, Head of Digital Engagement at the Guardian.⁵¹

Framing policy in a certain way or deleting comments cannot be considered censorship. The web offers plenty of other forums to express one's views. The chief concern is rather that as the traditional media deliberately excludes critical issues such as right-wing extremism, it will not reflect certain conflicts or debates that necessitate greater moderation resources than non-controversial issues. The effect might be that the consumer searches for platforms with more libertarian attitudes to moderation.

The Swedish website Flashback is one example that supports this conclusion.⁵² It is an underground forum known for its hostile atmosphere and is a public space where people

⁵⁰ Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011

⁵¹ Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011

⁵² <https://www.flashback.org/>

discuss controversial issues that are not usually covered by mainstream media. The debate is not always constructive, orderly or pleasant. By looking at the amount of people using it, it is indeed popular. The forum has almost 600,000 members, a vast number taking into consideration that there are only 9.4 million citizens in Sweden. Another highly successful example is the UK blog 'Order, Order, run by Guido Fawkes, aka the political blogger Paul Staines, which is also minimally moderated.⁵³

This does not mean that there are no good reasons for traditional media to moderate their comment fields, but if the media does not show its eagerness to be a centre for discussion, the functions will be taken over by others. Self-moderation through social network peer referral is also growing. Facebook, for example, is already the third biggest referrer of traffic to newsrooms, according to a study of Nielsen audience stats by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.⁵⁴ People are increasingly doing their commenting in those semi-private spaces.

"Each newspaper must think very hard about what will set its online community apart from the many other forum spaces on the web. Maintaining discussions that are distinctive may require papers to enforce far stricter moderation policies than those found elsewhere, or to consider rules that might seem eccentric in a different context. Readers won't thank you for moderating inconsistently, unfairly, or obscurely. But they will appreciate the chance to participate in discussions that couldn't happen anywhere else."

Mark Johnson (Online Editor at the Economist.)⁵⁵

News organisations have a lot at stake. They desperately want the traffic. Scale, reach and reader attention-retention is vital if they are to garner the meagre marginal advertising revenues online. However, either a too negligent or too restrictive moderation policy can have a negative effect on a newspaper's reputation. If traditional media still want to be considered the main forum for free speech then it is hard to argue for a stronger moderation policy than that which is restricted by the law. However, if the main purpose of the newspaper has less to do with offering a platform for free debate, than protecting the newspaper's reputation, then it is easier to justify a more interventionist moderation strategy.

Increasingly, news organisations are dividing into those who want to maximise hits and those that want to create a more controlled conversational space. As one online editor for a news magazine put it, "I am not concerned about free speech overall; there are enough places online where people can go to be heard. The paper is a brand like any other brand." For some that means building the reader relationship but not chasing reader comment for its own sake. The Mail newspaper has taken a different approach seeking to become a global leader in traffic, even if it means less control over moderation. How well either strategy works will depend in the end on resources and whether the transaction costs of

⁵³ <http://order-order.com/>

⁵⁴ http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/navigating_news_online

⁵⁵ Interview with Sanna Trygg October 2011

moderation are covered by the improved quality or quantity of reader engagement translated into advertising or other revenues.

Paying attention to the comment fields benefits news production in additional ways. If journalists become involved in the process then they may reap additional benefits. Journalists told us how it can offer new leads or angles on stories or help correct false information. But even though newspapers are aware of its potential this opportunity is not prioritized and often the moderation process is not integrated into the news production systems. As one online editor told us:

“We use an external company for moderating our material. Its only a matter of resources, we do not have the capacity to read all the comments. It is simply not a part of the every day work or implemented in the organisation which mean we miss important information.”

Some journalists do read the comments fields but choose not to officially credit the reader even if it might impact the news production and agenda, as one online community editor explained:

“We quite often read a comment and also it is then discussed among the journalists in quite a serious way but this is not something that we communicate back to our readers.”

Even though the web offers an opportunity for media to communicate with its readers, it is clear that journalist participation is often absent in the comment fields. Some participants in the research seminar for this report argued that newsroom journalists becoming more active in moderation would benefit their work and the newspaper. The reader would not get the feeling that ‘they scream unheard out in an empty space’ and that might even reduce the need for moderation. Journalist involvement in comment fields seems to generate self-moderation.

5. Conclusion

Both Svenska Dagbladet and The Guardian attach great importance to freedom of expression, and critical debate. Like much of traditional media they claim to do society and democracy a favour by offering free debate and public expression. But readers are, in a sense, being misled. Mainstream media still has the monopoly over conversation and that debate is not entirely free. Traditional media still define what is worth discussing and what is not. The idealistic purpose of the traditional media is compromised by the mission to survive as a business in a highly competitive economic environment.

Some newspapers will see this as a realistic compromise that preserves their brand and editorial mission. However, we would argue that in the long run it is worth newspapers continuing to push for more transparent moderation and a more reflective approach to the process. For example, would it be worthwhile making records of deleted comments public? Since no publicly available records exists, all we know is that comments are being deleted, but not which ones and why.

It is important to continue to strive for real engagement between people with different viewpoints, even when those views are marginal. The danger remains that people will not learn by having their views challenged. In this context the comment fields are important for healthy democracy.

Much politically relevant information is still produced in conditions ultimately determined by the market. It is, therefore, vital to foster public service media, and not just in the formal public service broadcasting sector. Information is supposed to be more accessible, more easily than ever before. But if open government is to mean anything then we also need easy access to useful forums for open and challenging debate. This is vital to enable every citizen, including those with weaker educational or financial resources, to claim their rights in the democratic process.⁵⁶

This report has shown that online moderation is driven by resources, tradition and editorial strategy.

Online comment is important to drive traffic and to make visitors stay longer on the website. It also has the capacity to change the relationship between the reader and the journalist to a more dynamic one since comment fields offer a platform for immediate and transparent two-way communication between reader and the news organization.

Comment fields offer a forum for debate and expression but people's motives are usually about entertainment and community rather than a desire to act as democratic, active, responsible citizen. Newspapers claim to want a changed relationship with the reader but at the same time fear the volume and the nature of public participation. The main reason for this is that coherent and meaningful interactivity demands attention and resources.

⁵⁶ Ilshammar, Lars. "Demokr@i. Det elektroniska folkstyrets möjligheter och problem". Expertuppsats skriven på uppdrag av 1996 års folkomröstningsutredning. Bilaga 2 till SOU 1997:56., Perelman, Michael. "Class Warfare in the Information Age". St. Martin's Press, 1998, Bellamy, Christine/Taylor, John A. "Governing in the Information Age". Open University Press, 1998, Moore, Nick. "Confucius or capitalism? Policies for an information society". I Loader, Brian D. (ed) "Cyberspace Divide. Equality, Agency and Policy in the Information Society". Routledge, 1998.

Readers' participation is still not a priority in the newspapers organization. Moderation is being performed on the terms of the newspaper and is a product of a relatively narrow policy. This issue matters if it drives people away from 'reasonable' moderated discourse. It is also crucial if an important, significant public opinion is not heard. It is a central problem for the creation of a truly networked journalism or Fifth Estate.

There is a need for further research focusing on the effects of moderation as well as more data on reader's participation and their contribution of user-generated content. There is also a need for more investment in creative moderation such as live web chats and other alternatives to conventional comment fields. This study shows that there is a need for more involvement of the journalists in the moderation process. For this to happen it is vital to revalue the comment fields and to continue to integrate the dialogue between journalists and readers into the daily work of a news organization.

Appendix

The Svenska Dagbladet

Daily circulation in 2010: 192 800.

Editor in chief: Lena K. Samuelsson.

Founded: 18th December 1884.

Website was launched: 1995.

Unique browsers/month: 4.8 million.

Comments each month: 48,000.

Ownership: SvD is owned by the Norwegian media conglomerate Schibsted.

SvD is the second largest national daily newspaper in Sweden.

The stated position of the editorial page is independently moderate, which means it is independent but adheres to the liberal conservatism of the Moderate Party.

SvD was named newspaper of the year in the category digital media at the Tidnings Utgivarna and Medievärldens' competition 2011 Newspaper of the Year.

The Guardian

Daily circulation in 2010: 230,541 (October 2011).

Editor in chief: Alan Rusbridger.

Founded: 5th May 1821

Website was launched: 1995.

Unique browsers/month: 50 million

Comments each month: 500 000

Ownership: The Guardian is part of Guardian News & Media, a division of the Guardian Media Group Ltd, which is owned by the Scott Trust.

The Guardian is the third largest daily newspaper in the UK.

The paper identifies with centre left-liberalism.

The Guardian was named newspaper of the year at the 2011 Press Awards.

Credits

This report was edited by Polis Director Charlie Beckett

The research interns on this report were:
Ria Sen and Emily Chapper

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Contact details:

You can contact Polis at Polis@lse.ac.uk

You can follow the Polis Director on Twitter: @charliebeckett

The Polis blog is: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis>

You can contact the author, Sanna Trygg at Sanna.Trygg@skd.se

You can contact Journalistfonden för vidareutbildning (The Journalist Fund for Further Training):

carsten.nilsson@journalistfonden.se

www.journalistfonden.se