

WORLD EDITORS FORUM

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Online comment moderation: emerging best practices

A guide to promoting robust and civil online conversation



Introduction

In many parts of the globe, online comments have become an essential ingredient of a thriving news publication: readers feel that they have a right to make their contribution in an online environment that is becoming increasingly more dialogue-based than one-way broadcasting. The ability to comment on news articles or in discussion forums offers readers the chance to indulge in debate on hot topics hosted by their favourite news organisations with other readers from all over the world.

For news organisations, online comments can be an extremely valuable resource. They provide additional detail and insight to articles from informed readers who are passionate about the subject, offer a wide range of supplementary opinions and give newsrooms a window into how their readers see both their journalism and the world around them. Their feedback and perspectives can also broaden the publication's coverage from their vantage point, inspire new stories and provide possible sources or ways to address an issue.

But it's not all a happy tale of considerate readers offering wisdom and useful information during a democratic debate on the top issues of the day. It is impossible to limit commenting to those who do have something constructive to say and discussions frequently descend into torrents of insults that are utterly irrelevant to the original article. Maybe it's the fact that anonymity and distance often allow conse-

quence-free behaviour and a chance to defy social norms, or maybe it's a factor of the structure of online conversations, but comment threads on websites can frequently shock due to abusive, uninformed, not to mention badly-written contributions.

How to moderate these comment threads is a significant challenge for news organisations as they seek to strike a balance between providing a place for free expression and robust debate while ensuring a civil and constructive dialogue, and ideally finding value from reader input. As Mathew Ingram, senior writer with GigaOm, said in a recent article¹, "Comments from readers are probably one of the thorniest problems for online publishers of all kinds... and the methods for dealing with them are all over the map."

The issue is further complicated by the fact that news organisations are seeing input from their readers not just on their own sites but on social network pages also. The social networks themselves are being forced time and time again to rethink their own policies for dealing with problematic user content and question whether they are publishers or platforms.

We spoke to online editors and community managers at 104 news organisations from 63 countries across the globe, plus a selection of experts from the corporate and academic worlds to identify key trends, opportunities and best practices.



Overview of findings

The news organisations that we spoke to could be broadly divided into two camps with regards to their attitudes to online comments: there are those who embrace comments from users, often as part of a wider strategy of involving their readers in their publication, and there are those who see them as essentially, a necessary evil.

Very few organisations (seven) didn't allow comments at all, but in times of financial difficulties, a costly initiative such as comment moderation, without any immediate and obvious financial benefit,

is not always a priority.

However, there are many organisations which see them as an essential element in fostering a real community around their publication or a niche topic. Comments are believed to increase reader engagement, both in terms of time spent on site, and in terms of loyalty.

Summary of key points:

- There was a relatively even split between those that moderate pre- and post-publication: 38 and 42 respectively, with 16 adopting a mixed approach
- Organisations are deleting an average of 11% of comments, primarily because the content is generally offensive, containing hate speech or bad language, or because it's spam. The subjects that attract the most comments (according to the editors) are (predictably) politics, followed by societal issues, religion, sports and opinion.
- There was general consensus that by moderating comments, publications were not limiting their readers' freedom of speech. Most editors believe that there are an infinite number of places online for the public to express their points of view, it doesn't have to be on a specific news site, so it is up to the publication to determine the kind of conversation it wants to host.
- There was a notable lack of awareness about the precise legal situation surrounding online commenting: who is responsible for what is being said where, what exactly is illegal, and the best way to deal with this. "It's a grey area," was a comment made on several occasions in interviews across a range of countries.
- Real name registration vs. allowing anonymity is a divisive issue, with no consensus of which was preferable. There is a general feeling that requiring real names leads to a better quality of conversation, though smaller in terms of numbers. However, many organisations believe it is important to offer anonymity as an option to those who might not be able to speak freely under their real names.
- Although many agree that when journalists participate, the discussion is of a higher quality, few organisations see their journalists frequently entering into conversation with readers. Some don't believe it's appropriate for journalists to be involved in an area which belongs to the readers.
- The majority of publications don't moderate their Facebook pages and other social networks as heavily as their own sites, because the networks are not their territory and because the real identity policies are seen to make the discussion less controversial.
- Some news organisations are highlighting the 'best' comments or most active commenters in some way, although many have some way to go in this area in terms of how useful they actually make these functions to readers.

The importance of moderation

Moderation of comments, meaning, at its most basic level, deleting or blocking those deemed offensive or unsuitable, is widely considered to be essential. A key motivation of active moderation we noted was the perceived need to protect the news organisation's brand by ensuring a high quality of discussion.

“ We never experienced direct government interference. What happens these days is that there are a lot of people acting on behalf of somebody, but not really openly.”
The Nation, Kenya

“ It's about the image and the brand you're trying to portray. I'm for absolute freedom but it gets out of control. You can get a comment section that is unusable if you have things that are bad language and just spam. These things can hurt.”
Al-Akhbar English, Lebanon

“ We should be able give the space to readers to discuss. Some people inside the company think we should leave the discussion to the readers and not moderate at all, but then the quality gets worse.”
The Nation, Kenya

“ The fact that we provided an open space for comment and still are very tolerant of different opinions has brought in a number of people to have a conversation... People who come to the site and talk about it promote us as the place to go for conversation. It has boosted the brand of the paper.”
The Star, Kenya

“ If you have comments up that show unethical journalism it damages the brand much more. It balances out hiring good, trained people with editor level skills so they are equipped to make decisions. If it violates ethics, it damages the brand even if you have a disclaimer. The average reader is going to presume that the comment is there because you as a newspaper allowed it to be. So that intangible damage is far more costly because to build up credibility takes much longer.”
Gulf News, UAE

The moderation process

When to moderate?

Pre- or post-publication?

What kind of moderation system to choose and how to execute it can be mind-aching for editors – especially as online participation increases and staffing often declines. A pre-publication moderation system relies on staff members reading and approving all comments before publication, whereas in a post-publication moderation system, comments are flagged by readers or combed through after a user self-publishes. Whichever route is chosen, it is a key decision for publications to make, with many factors to consider.

“We pre-moderate because we felt it was a more responsible approach,” said Gulf News, UAE. “The environment compels you to make sure there is not offensive content because we are in the Middle East. We don’t want content that is offensive or inflammable.”

The Star, Kenya, usually moderates post-publication. But during the 2013 elections, people were absorbed by politics and “all they wanted was a platform to air out their opinions,” said the web administrator/journalist. “This wasn’t going anywhere - hate speech after hate speech. So we decided to do pre-moderation. Suddenly they couldn’t see their comments because we had to decide when it would go on the site. It was kind of unfair but it worked during that period.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to get people to post whatever they want and then deal with it later,” said the editor at Egypt’s Al-Ahram English. “People keep replying to each other if you leave that door open.”

An-Nahar in Lebanon said pre-moderation was too difficult to implement and in its place has rotating shifts where people read the comments every several hours. Initially, the paper sent a list of banned swear words to the company that built its website so that if someone included the words in a comment, it would be deleted or blacked out immediately. “But people can always create new bad words so there was no process to do this,” said the editor. “We are using post-moderation because we can see the bad words, not the negative comments. They can be negative, just not with bad words.”

Community guidelines

A major concern for many editors is that a laissez-faire approach to comment sections could quickly enable them to become a hate-filled, free-for-all beneath the content. However, coupled with moderation, community guidelines can help improve comments from the start and bring out the best in a news outlet’s audience.

“You may not submit any defamatory or illegal material of any nature to any of Monitor Online’s communities/e-zines. This includes text, graphics, video, programs or audio. You agree to only submit materials which are your own original work. You must not violate, plagiarise, or infringe the rights of third parties including copyright, trade mark, trade secrets, privacy, publicity, personal or proprietary rights.”
Daily Monitor, Uganda

“Comments that openly support terrorism, sectarianism, secession, and/or are offensive to religious sensibilities”
The Express Tribune, Pakistan

“Contributors should show each other mutual respect. Vigorous personal criticism remains acceptable so long as it is justified by facts, arguments or discussion of the key issue.”
The Star, Kenya

“Keep it relevant. We know that some conversations can be wide-ranging, but if you post something which is unrelated to the original topic (‘off-topic’) then it may be removed, in order to keep the thread on track. This also applies to queries or comments about moderation, which should not be posted as comments.”
The Guardian, UK

“Tribune.com.pk aims to nurture a vibrant online community by giving our readers maximum flexibility and freedom in expressing their thoughts and ideas. Our goal is to encourage debate and make our site an engaging and informative web space, rich with discussion and user-led dialogue about news and issues explored by The Express Tribune. We believe that our community of readers adds tremendous value to the site and are appreciative of their involvement.”
The Express Tribune, Pakistan.

What is involved in the moderation process?

One of commenting's greatest strengths is that it allows for a multitude of voices to be heard. But what happens when a comment just constitutes undesired noise or contains vile language or illegal material? "Just delete it" was the main response we heard.

The Nation, Kenya has a team of four moderators who report to the social media editor.

“At a certain point we close the discussion when it's only one way traffic and only bashing and when it's no longer relevant to the article we close the thread. Mostly because of hate speech and derogatory language,”
Dawn, Pakistan.

The Daily Monitor, Uganda, said that the number of commenters had increased since implementing Disqus, most probably because signing in is now easier.

“If there are persistent breaches of community standards we can ban people entirely from posting or we can place them into a pre-moderated environment so we'll review their individual comments.”
The Guardian, UK

“We only block people for spam, we don't block people altogether - maybe once or twice in our history but generally our policy is not to ban people.”
The New York Times, US

Lakome, Morocco, has a very small team so there is nobody dedicated to comment moderation. If in doubt about a comment the editorial staff will vote on whether to keep or delete it.

“No, because we believe in reform. They have a right to have their comment approved or not on a comment by comment basis, not user basis.”
The Post, Zambia

Issues and challenges

Legal accountability: awareness and repercussions

As mentioned previously, a key consideration for news organisations in determining their moderation strategy, is how legally liable they are for the comments made by users on their site.

The Nation, Kenya was sued by the president for a comment but the case was settled out of court.

“I don't believe that there has been a landmark case where something has been truly decided on this. Based on current precedents we are under the belief that we are not legally responsible for the content of these due to the safe-harbour clause. As long as we don't make it a policy to pro-actively edit comments before they are published then we are not taking responsibility for the comments and we are not legally liable. Again, I think this is more in legal theory than proven.”
The New York Times, US

“The truth is it's unclear – there is a significant grey area over what the law is. But I guess the understanding is that if we remove a comment swiftly when we receive a complaint about it, then we are not responsible for having published it in the first place.”
The Economist, UK

“Yes, we are legally accountable, we are responsible for anything that lands on our site. As far as I understand, from the lawyers, if we didn't moderate comments at all, we would actually be better off: we wouldn't be liable. It doesn't deter us though. We are about building a community and encouraging debate so we help it be responsible rather than allow people to throw out nasty comments.”
The Star, Kenya

“It depends. Rather, the law is not clear in that: there haven't been any legal issues in this area yet.”
Haaretz, Israel

Freedom of expression: moderation promotes rather than limits

Editors and managers around the world largely agreed that although freedom of expression was a valuable right and they were pleased to offer a space where their readers could express themselves, they were not limiting their readers' freedom by deleting or blocking comments because there is now an abundance of places where people can express themselves online. A common feeling was

“The Star website is our space so we set the rules. The rules are very clear. We allow vigorous debate and comments but we don't want to propagate lies, hate speech, propaganda because at the end of it we are the medium in which people read that comment. The person reading that comment won't just be looking at who left it but they'll be looking at The Star. So we think we have pushed the limits in terms of encouraging freedom of speech.”

The Star, Kenya

“Most of the time of it's clear. The people who attack are very obvious. Usually it's just outright profane language. If there's any smart criticism or attack it will pass. But when it's blunt profanity it never passes. It's very clear.”

Al-Akhbar English, Lebanon

“We are concerned about the abuse of freedom of expression and we think the way to protect everyone's freedom of expression is not allowing any abuse”

The Nation, Kenya

“From our point of view as a news organisation, the priority isn't freedom of expression, our priority is that there is a good editorially balanced debate. A series of comments that we think can help add value to the audience's understanding of a story and their experience of a story, and help maybe give greater diversity in terms of the way the story is discussed. They're not necessarily mutually exclusive things but if we had a choice between the two we'd definitely go down the editorial route.”

BBC, UK

Tackling hate speech

Hate speech was frequently listed as one of the reasons for deleting comments -directly by 29 publications – but few seemed to consider it to be an insurmountable problem. Many editors seemed unclear about any legal definitions of hate speech in their countries, and in fact about its overall definition.

The Star, Kenya, has had significant problems with hate speech. Usually the site operates post-publication moderation (using Disqus), but during the 2013 election campaign the paper started to pre-moderate because of the volume of hate speech it received in comment areas. “During the elections, it was such a tense moment, people were so into their political camps: all they wanted was a platform to air out their opinions. This wasn't going anywhere - hate speech after hate speech,” the web administrator/journalist said. “So we decided to do pre-moderation... Suddenly they couldn't see their comments immediately on the site. It was kind of unfair but it worked during that period.”

“In the lead up to the election, the government tried to ensure that there was no hate speech online and social media. “This could be interpreted, the paper said, as “subtle intimidation of media houses and journalists.”

“We've told people very clearly to be responsible and not use bad language nor disrespect people. You can have an argument, a valid one, and you will be allowed to present your voice on that issue. I think we've succeeded in getting a lot of our readers to understand that. They might come back and comment but in a much more valid manner so it's more like educating your readers. It takes a long time and you have to be patient. We'll write to them sometimes and explain why their comment can't go up and then they'll redo it sometimes and we'll post it. We try and retrain our readers. We've seen our comments improve over time.”

Gulf News, UAE

- Start a readers club, like Gulf News, UAE: “For people who like to interact a lot with the paper, we have something called Gulf News Readers Club. Highly interactive people are urged to join. They feel more of a buy-in and do a lot of responsible commenting.”