Best Practices in Managing News Website Comments

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Abstract

As anyone who has managed a news website knows, reader comments posted on stories elicit offensive, racist, libelous, vitriolic and threatening speech. Editors can remove the most troublesome ones, but at scale it's a thankless, labor-intensive job, and one that doesn't benefit the readers who saw the offending posts before the takedown. So even the most well-researched, thoughtful content is poisoned with user-generated text that doesn't meet the same journalistic standards, prompting some sites to disable comments or make them less promient. Others, including the Gannett sites, have switched to requiring a Facebook ID to comment, while others have adopted Disqus or other comment platforms. This article collects best practices on how editors are dealing with comments in 2012. The questions include whether those who tried requiring registration or real identities via Facebook or other means were happy with the result, and whether offering badges or other rewards for good behavior was helpful. It concludes with a summary of ideas with immediate real-world application for newsrooms struggling to tame their comment areas.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the managing editor of a metro daily asked media critic Jay Rosen what could be done about the poisonous, libelous, racist and otherwise mean-spirited posts that commenters put on otherwise professional news stories. Rosen, the New York University professor and early champion of public journalism, was keynoting the 2008 Poynter Institute media ethics conference at Kent State University. The question from the Akron Beacon Journal's Doug Oplinger was simple: How can we get people to be civil?

Rosen gave him an unsatisfying answer: ``You're not a god," Rosen said. "You're not the gods of discourse." Comments, like blogs, are part of an open system, Rosen said, not like the closed system where the "means of production" were in a newspaper publisher's hands. These are no longer one-way conversations with "the people formerly known as the audience," he said. The relationship is different. (``Whose Rules?" 2008)

Oplinger didn't find the answer he was looking for, but like many editors remains interested in finding a solution to one of the biggest newsroom nuisances of the last half-decade or so. Because they are appended to "professional" news sites, comments posted to news stories damage the site's credibility and create a daily dilemma for news organizations of how much offensive content to tolerate. The challenge isn't deciding what's fair and what's foul as much as allocating enough resources to prevent or remove inappropriate content from appearing on previously published stories when the site needs new content. Still, publishers recognize the danger of commenters run amok and need to consider approaches to story comment management that make the site attractive to readers without costing a lot of money. What follows is a roundup

of current issues and strategies, elicited from media news coverage and interviews with a dozen editors and managers responsible for story commenting.

BACKGROUND

Hot topic

The issue isn't confined to media critics and editors -- or even news sites. Talk show host and comedian Jimmy Kimmel, on the July 25, 2012, episode of his ABC late-night show ``Jimmy Kimmel Live,'' described a change with YouTube's commenting policy:

> YouTube is trying to get their users to start using their real names. And when you post a comment on a video, YouTube now gives you the option to post under your screen name or your real name. And if you don't use your real name you have to tell them why. I told them I can't give them my real name because I'm Spider-Man, but let's keep that quiet. (laughter)
>
> Theoretically, this would cut down on the number of vicious comments. But I don't know -- our Internet was built on a foundation of unnecessarily cruel and vicious attacks from hateful, nameless bearded former Blockbuster clerks. (laughter) I mean, what kind of a world is this is if you can't anonymously attack a mother who posted a video of her laughing baby? What happened to OUR privacy, you know? (laughter) I don't think this will work. I think they would have better luck getting strippers to use their real names, than people on the Internet.

In another recent newsworthy example, the RottenTomatoes site temporarily disabled commenting on reviews of "The Dark Night Rises," after, as the Associated Press described it, ``commenters reacted harshly to negative reviews of the film and made profane and threatening remarks about the critics who wrote them.'' (Lang, 2012) Editor-in-Chief Matt Atchity (2012) explained in a blog post that the site was ``probably going to move to a Facebook-based commenting system that doesn't allow for anonymity,'' though he later amended his post to say that's just one of several options he was considering, including turning off comments until the

movie is released, or moderating comments before they post. The result of taking such steps, he

said, would be to keep ``some level of respectable debate'' on the site:

> You'll have to stand by your comments, just like a critic does. So you'll still be
> able to argue about a movie you haven't seen, but people will know it was you. (I
> know that won't make a difference for some people, but at least there may be
> some measure of responsibility).

Atchity's post said while he expected the views of critics with minority opinions would continue

to be ``vehemently refuted,'' he gave readers a paraphrased version of the site's terms of service.

``We'll ban you for threats and hate speech -- we're trying to have fun here, so (to quote Wil

Wheaton) don't be a dick,'' he wrote. ``And don't try and argue about your right to free speech --

this is a business, and we have the right to refuse service to anyone we feel like.'' Atchity's post

drew praise from many commenters, who at that point were still permitted to use screen names.

But several discouraged him from specifically requiring Facebook:

> TROLLOC: I agree with everything but linking to Facebook. Some of us don't
> like the world to know our perspectives on religion/politics that we post on a
> message board.
>
> NATHAN F: Then don't post them. If you're going to post provocative opinions,
> you should be able to own them.
>
> JANSON J: But Facebook is too centralized. Postings among a film community
> shouldn't have to be scrutinized by family or employers.
>
> TROLLOC: We're in a time when employers are snooping on people's Facebooks
> or asking for their passwords. I don't want to be penalized for something I wrote
> ten years ago taken out of context or a Catholic employer offended by my
> atheism. There should be a certain respect for privacy. It has nothing to do about
> owning beliefs. …

Atchity's post concludes by asking users preparing a nasty comment -- whether signed or not --

to ``just take a deep breath, step away from the computer, and maybe go for a walk. Have a

smoke if you need one. There are plenty of other things to get angry about, like war, famine,

poverty and crime. But not movie reviews."

Twitter's dilemma

Twitter is also considering its options in managing tweets that cross the line, though being too heavy-handed about it raises issues. As the Financial Times wrote in June, ``One technical approach Twitter is considering would hide from users' page of replies any tweets directed at them by individuals who are not seen as `authoritative,' because they have no followers, no biographical information and no profile picture." (Bradshaw, 2012) The story quotes Twitter CEO Dick Costolo on what he called ``horrifying" abuse by some users:

> The reason we want to allow pseudonyms is there are lots of places in the world
> where it's the only way you'd be able to speak freely. The flipside of that is it also
> emboldens these trolls ... how do you make sure you are both emboldening people
> to speak politically but making it OK to be on the platform and not endure all this
> hate speech? It's very frustrating.

But even when banning people who violate the terms of service, a service handling billions of tweets a week risks the appearance of engaging in selective enforcement. As the London Olympics began in late July, Twitter disabled a journalist's account after he criticized NBC's Olympics coverage and shared a network executive's email address, prompting criticism about Twitter's conflict of interest, in that it has partnerships with both NBCUniversal and the International Olympic Committee. (Ovide and Stewart, 2012) The controversy prompted pages of complaints with the #NBCFail hashtag.

Days later Twitter apologized and reinstated the account of the correspondent for The Independent, Guy Adams, with Twitter's general counsel explaining in a blog post that the reporter had broken a rule when he tweeted the corporate email address of the NBC Olympics

president. But he said it was wrong for a Twitter employee working with NBC to encourage the network to flag it for removal. In his apology post, Twitter official Alex Macgillivray (2012) said ``we should not and cannot be in the business of proactively monitoring and flagging content, no matter who the user is --whether a business partner, celebrity or friend.''

THE STRATEGIES

Gannett's Facebook Decision

The big headline for the past year in story commenting has been Gannett's chainwide adoption of the Facebook Social Plugin. Starting in August 2011 in Indianapolis, Des Moines, Fort Myers, Macon and St. Louis, the company road-tested the change, then expanded it to the rest of the company's broadcast and community sites by the end of the year. Users aren't permitted to comment if they don't provide a Facebook ID. As Cincinnati Enquirer editor Carolyn Washburn told readers in a column (2011), ``the cover of anonymity has encouraged a few readers to engage in some pretty ugly behavior.''

> We determined awhile ago that ending anonymity was the way to go, but we spent time studying the best way to go about it. ... Facebook is the most transparent and commonly used system at this time. We watched as a couple of news organizations in the industry experimented with it and had good results.

Now that the required Facebook registration has been around for a few months, some Gannett editors are hearing from peers at non-Gannett properties who want to know how they like it. Julia Thompson (2012), senior news director for digital and multimedia at Gannett's Des Moines Register, said although some readers complained about the switch, ``the level of conversation has gone way up.'' The Register now can manage comments with just a couple of on-site moderators -- replacing the company's third-party moderation -- though she said Facebook's tools ``aren't as robust'' for moderators. Facebook gets the complaint when someone clicks on the X to

report an abusive user, and it's up to Facebook to ban a chronic abuser, though the Register's moderators also can ban someone if necessary. Facebook also awards the Top Commenter badges to users, based on fellow users liking their comments. ``Facebook is not the cure-all,'' she said, but ``I think we've seen the level of discussion increase dramatically.''

Editors considering the switch will have to weigh whether they want quality or quantity of comments, Thompson said. While some users may not comment anymore, some ``people who I'm sure didn't comment in our old system'' are now visible there, such as public officials who didn't want to mix it up with trolls but now don't mind wading in if everyone else has to be identified. ``You want to be a conduit for conversation,'' she said, ``and fostering that discussion is an important part of it.''

But is going to Facebook kind of like putting up a paywall, where you immediately limit the experience? Jim Hopkins, a former USA Today reporter and editor who blogs about Gannett, said while he understands the move saves money, counting on a Facebook ID ``considerably reduced the size of the audience. And maybe that was OK, because the comments weren't providing the designated outcomes anyway'' in terms of marketable audience. (2012) He noted that ever since they introduced comments to newspaper websites around 2005 and 2006, editors have been trying to bring the comments to heel. The challenge, he said, is ``I think you've got to decide if even a Facebook-like system is good enough,'' because in essence ``it seems to be surrendering to a company that really is a competitor.''

All that's Fit to Post

About the time Gannett was completing its conversion to required Facebook registration, The New York Times introduced a new system that rewards ``trusted commenters'' by letting their comments post immediately, without prior review by a moderator. As Poynter's Jeff Sonderman (2011) explained at its unveiling, those in the program verify their name and hometown and agree to connect via their Facebook account:

> In exchange they get instant commenting, as well as a higher profile on the site. With a special "trusted" logo attached to their color photo and full name, they stand out visually from the other commenters who usually have an anonymous username and no profile photo.

The elite status has since been renamed ``verified commenter,'' and is available by invitation only to those ``who have a track record of high-quality comments.'' (Using NYTimes.com, 2012) The new system has grown to include top-rated stories from readers and editors, as well as those with replies from a Times reporter or editor, on the selected stories where commenting is enabled. In defending the requirement for a Facebook identity, editorial page editor Andrew Rosenthal explained in March that the Times hoped to verify through more sites than just Facebook, including Google+, LinkedIn or another system, ``but it turns out to be more complicated legally and technically than we suspected,'' and it doesn't make sense to have site moderators doing the verifications by hand. (Rosenthal, 2012) As of Aug. 1, the site still required verified commenters to provide a Facebook ID.

Huffington Post, Gawker and badges

The Huffington Post in 2010 began awarding multiple tiers of badges for those who post good comments, flag bad ones or share stories on social media. (Tenore, 2010) Flagging 20 comments that are ultimately removed will get you Level 1 Networker status. Keep at it and login with your

Facebook or Twitter account and you could reach Level 2 Superuser. The point, the site's FAQ

notes, is to empower well-behaved users to prune out the bad stuff themselves. (Comments &

Moderation, 2012)

> Every member of this community has the power and responsibility to help elevate
> the level of conversation and remove the trolls who would degrade it. On every
> comment, you can "Fan and Favorite" (F&F) users who are posting great content,
> or flag a comment for review by a moderator. Taking these simple actions helps
> bring great content to the top and removes bad content quickly. Community
> members who consistently and reliably flag comments that are removed by our
> moderators may be given additional tools that will allow them to hide or remove
> comments entirely.

In contrast, Gawker Media in April 2012 abandoned the ``star" system it had been using in favor

of a revamped algorithm that considers such things as textual analysis and the commenter's

history and peer group, also handing contributors the power to accept or decline a reply.

(Daulerio, 2012) Noting that the new system lands only a few comments on the story page, rather

than a chronological list of whatever came in, an impressed Clay Shirky (2012) saw the purpose

as ``to serve the people reading the comments, rather than the people writing them."

> Gawker's default assumption is that most comments won't ever appear on the
> article page — like the Slashdot comment system, they are all there, but only
> accessible with extra work by the reader. This ensures that there is, by design, no
> way for regular participants … to use either volume or aggression to maximize
> attention. On Gawker (and, soon, on its seven sister sites), anyone can still say
> anything, but it's no longer the case that anyone can say anything to everyone.

Ultimately, Gawker seeks to generate revenue from advertisers wanting to engage their

customers there in the comment/conversations. (Salmon, 2012) Rather than simply buying

banner ads next to a string of comments on a news story, marketers of upstart brands could start

a sponsored post and interact with readers.

What Disqus is discussing

A year ago, observing the nascent Facebook-only strategy, Mandy Jenkins (2011), who formerly

moderated comments at The Huffington Post and The Cincinnati Enquirer, cautioned against

believing that unmasking the commenters will solve the problem:

> I've said many times before that I don't think anonymity is the problem. My campaign on that seems to be a lost cause so far. As a former comment moderator and current manager of social media accounts, I know for a fact that people have absolutely no problem spouting hateful views and violent rhetoric under their real name. I see it every day.

Now with Digital First Media (operator of MediaNews and Journal Register), Jenkins (2012)

laments that editors are more likely to pick up the Facebook plugin because it's easy. ``The

Facebook option came along at the right time," she said, and it's popular because ``it's an out-of-

the-box solution." Given a choice between that and Disqus, now available on 1.5 million sites

and boasting 82 million users, ``I would like to see more people picking up Disqus than

Facebook, but I don't know if I see that happening." Calling Facebook and Disqus ``the two

titans" of commenting -- though Echo, IntenseDebate and others have fans -- blogger Darnell

Clayton (2011) judged Disqus better because it allows moderators to edit posts and users to share

via Twitter.

Since its founding in 2007, Disqus has looked into just about everything, including ``bozo filters"

that ban people without their knowing it, said Ro Gupta, vice president of business development

for the San Francisco company. (2012) Now following its latest software launch in June, the site

is rolling out more tools for site managers to deal with their comment communities, he said:

``Some of the technology tools, while they're necessary, still leave you in this never ending game

of Whac-a-Mole."

Besides, moderation is not scalable, said Ernest Wong, a member of the Disqus business

development team. (2012) Down the road, Disqus envisions an algorithm that takes such things as who you follow, how much you post, how many responses you get and how often you offer a contrarian view to come up with a Pandora-like playlist of comments you might like. ``Imagine the comment sections being your dinner table: You don't have the right to go put duct tape on someone's mouth because you don't like them,'' Wong said. But if the software could simply keep the voices you won't like out of earshot, you'd be happy.

Down the road, more sites could start using comments could initiate a forum or Storify, allowing a well-crafted response to become article of its own, or where the post everyone responds to is a simple question. Some site managers are interested in adding context-specific commenting -- imagine your feedback being annotated like comments in a Word document, rather than at the bottom of the story. Readers could gripe about a fallacy or grammar error right next to the offending words.

Can you insist upon civility?

Oplinger, the Akron Beacon Journal managing editor, said when a local radio talk-show host died recently, an editor called on a Saturday to ask what he should do about a string of mean-spirited comments that he had been chasing for two hours. He noted that some sources have declined to be interviewed for stories because they don't want to subject themselves to slurs of the commenters.

Reminded of his 2008 exchange with Rosen, Oplinger said he's long believed that news organizations need to engage their readers and listen to them, but he said the culture of unsigned comments doesn't contribute to that experience: ``We are not the gods of discourse,'' he said,

``but we ARE the gods of discourse on our property. They still have the right to abuse one another, but they have to do that somewhere else.''

Oplinger is directing his newspaper's multi-part public journalism series asking what it would take to bring civility back to the public conversation in Akron. When the newspaper wrote about its own commenters, it offered two ways to respond on Ohio.com: a guided Civic Commons discussion with real names and the site's usual Disqus comment area where users have screen names. (Scott, 2012) Within a week, readers had posted 301 comments, nearly all of them (292) in the screen-name zone.

The effort is part of the Ohio Civility Project, a three-university collaboration that initially sought to identify the causes and remedies for incivility in society. In a 2010 study students coded comments on political stories in The Columbus Dispatch and The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, and found that ``negative comments create negative comments, but positive comments can turn the thread around,'' said John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

Not that it's easy to turn a conversation around. In 2009, Cleveland.com removed a series of comments insisting a Kent State student's beating death was racially motivated. Site editor John Kroll explained to readers that he did so because the Kent police chief had made no reference to race. (2009) His explanation to readers generated seven pages of comments, where commenters were either grateful or accusatory; some complained Cleveland.com was bowing to political correctness, squelching dissent or clipping the very free-speech rights it claimed to uphold.

Green, whose institute studied Cleveland.com commenters in 2011, notes that ``public discourse has never been completely civil… we spend of lot of time being angry with each other.''

How much should editors want this audience, anyway, if so much of their contact with it is not about adding value, but dealing with angry reactions? Mallary Jean Tenore, who often covers commenting issues for Poynter.org, said while spending time dealing with a story that has already been reported, written and edited may seem like a nuisance, increasingly the initial story posting is just the opening act: ``In some ways I like to think of publishing as the START of it. It's the beginning of a conversation.''

THE BEST PRACTICES

Ideas for what to do in 2012

Those who deal with commenting seemed to be united in their belief that comment-moderation tools have room for improvement and expect them to continue morphing every couple of years. With that in mind, this summary collects what people in the story comment management say is working for them now. For the editor, the first decision, presuming you don't eliminate reader input entirely, is how to foster a conversation that helps the newsroom meet its goals. ``Don't act like the comments can't be controlled,'' Kroll said (2012). If you're frustrated by them, it's probably because ``you treat it like swatting flies.'' The first decision is whether you'll insist on real identities or if you'll permit a veil, but after that come more options:

1. **Consider Facebook if you're OK with the tradeoffs.**
    You'll have a less-active comment area, but places that switched are generally getting less to moderate and more story referrals on Facebook.
    But: It will frustrate a vocal segment of your current commenters -- including nice ones who simply don't like Facebook -- and your tools are limited. And you might be surprised at how

many jerks keep posting junk under their real names or even fake a Facebook ID.

Also: You also will be giving up the perspective of off-the-record insiders, though ``those were a lot of the comments that had to come down anyway,'' said the Des Moines Register's Thompson. Still, removing the veil will cost you some of the inside baseball that your comment-page audience enjoyed.

2. **Bring in Disqus or something similar if you're not.**

This gives editors at least some measure of accountability, as commenters have to register with a valid email address for a screen name that works on many news and blog sites.

But: You will still have to ping flagged comments and ban people (who then might reappear under a new screen name), though Disqus is introducing higher-order tools to discourage trolls.

And: Upgraded versions come with a cost, though they could pay for themselves if they free up time for those handling your moderation now.

3. **Get the best comments to rise to the top.**

Gatekeeping is hip again. Time-starved readers seem to appreciate being at least offered a ``best of'' list.

But: It will be a time drain if you want editors evaluating comments on every story.

And: Few places give readers this by default, instead giving "most recent" first and offering the highest-rated comments as a tab. It's like entering a thrift store through the donation area rather than the front door: You might be first to spot a real gem, but you'll have to wade through some junk to find it.

4. **Brace for impact on high-interest stories**

For example, Kroll said when the Freeh Report on Penn State came out in July 2012, his moderators stayed ahead of the flurry because they saw it coming.

But: If you have one web editor who is also responsible for freshening the site, he or she won't get much else done for awhile.

And: Fortunately, Kroll noted, ``for most stories, comments come on in the first half hour to hour they're up.''

5. **Plan to shut them off for certain stories.**

If crime briefs are troll bait in your town, join the sites that already leave commenting disabled on those stories.

But: Watch for those who hijack another story's comments to discuss the race of a bank robber.

And: Don't overuse it. A quirky brief could yield the day's best comments.

6. **Reach out to those make your comments sections better -- or worse.**

Individually thank them to show you value their useful or clever additions to the site. ``It's like you're training dogs or something,'' said Jenkins of Digital First Media. ``I've seen bloggers do that, but it's not something journalists do very well.''

But: Some may find it creepy that you fished out the email from when they registered.

And: Kroll said it can pay dividends to contact troublemakers, too: ``Sometimes they're happy to hear that someone's listening.''

7. **Encourage reporters to take part, or even moderate their own stories.**

   This strategy isn't for everyone, but Jenkins (2012) believes reporters who are visible in their story's comments see less vitriol directed their way. Plus they can get good suggestions there.

   But: If your comment area allows pseudonyms, some with political or other grudges against specific reporters will beat up on them.

   And: You may have technical barriers to giving everyone the keys to the site.

8. **Reward good commenters with things they want**.

   The gold standard in gold stars is The Huffington Post's multilevel badge system, which elevates users whose input meets certain conditions.

   But: Gawker just dropped its peer-awarded badge system, with founder Nick Denton calling it childish and insulting.

   And: Some people truly value their screen-name's reputation. For an active commenter, Jenkins said, ``this handle, it means more to them than their actual name.''

CONCLUSION

When The Denver Post's online editors experimented with making Jan. 3, 2008, ``Ray of Sunshine Day,'' with moderators proactively "spit-shining/white-washing all the mean and mean-spirited comments'' after the boards had gotten ``pretty flammable'' over the previous month, several readers accused the moderators of being too heavy-handed, denying the freedom of speech that U.S. news organizations cherish. But at least one reader, screen name ``idoubtit,'' was able to have fun with them: (Murphy, 2008)

> For the sunshine gods, please recognize the tongue in cheek nature of this post, for I am fearful of your power, and do not want to disturb you. Direct your ray of light on all the transgressors, and in your infinite wisdom delete those posts which violate your law. But I urge you to not let such power corrupt, for the human will is weak, and takes delight in smiting down opinions, especially when no one really knows thou who hast smited one down. Do not revel in it, and be as fair as humanly possible, for there will be times in the future when you wish such power had not been fleeting. But don't look back, harken forward to next January the third, when again you will assume the throne, and all will be well for a day once again.

If only the trolls had so much respect. The author made a coherent, timely, good-natured and on-point post with humor -- the sort of most likely to be prominent in the better-designed comment

areas of the future. When readers are treated to responses that add to the conversation or bring a smile -- without either the reader or a moderator having to wade through a swamp -- the comments may finally be tamed.

Suggestions for further study

From here, as we approach the end of the first decade of hosting story comments, it would make sense to pursue a number of new questions, perhaps taking the form of a survey. Among the specific questions:

1) How do the demographics of the ``active" commenting community change when real identities are required?

2) Have any organizations been able to quantify the financial benefit of having high readership in the comments?

3) Conversely, has anyone been able to measure a loss when the site's comments area was diminished or discontinued?

4) In communities where a large news provider switches to requiring Facebook registration, is traffic increasing on competitor sites that accept pseudonyms?

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