

# Online comment moderation: emerging best practices

A guide to promoting robust and civil online conversation



# Online comment moderation: emerging best practices

by Emma Goodman

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# Introduction

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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

consequence-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 article<sup>1</sup>, "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.

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1 Making readers a part of the story – the New York Times experiments with highlighting comments, GigaOm, 30 July 2013 <http://gigaom.com/2013/07/30/making-readers-a-part-of-the-story-the-new-york-times-experiments-with-highlighting-comments/>



## Overview of findings

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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:

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- 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.
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# The importance of moderation

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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. Vitriolic hate speech, abusive attacks directed at commenters or even just irrelevant, off-topic remarks are seen as potentially very damaging, as the following quotes explain:

“The comments are associated with your brand. It's absolutely up to you as a newsroom to control what sort of comments you want to have. Sitting back and saying ‘those comments are stupid but what can we do about it’ is definitely not the way to go, I would say”

📍 **Die Zeit, Germany**

“If we got to a point where a lot of comments that were not suitable were being published it would be potentially damaging to the news website: if you've got a properly branded BBC news article and then all these weird and wonderful comments at the bottom that shouldn't be there, then it's potentially damaging to our journalism.”

📍 **BBC, UK**

“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**

What's more, as a study<sup>1</sup> from the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed in early 2013, uncivil comments can affect a reader's news perception (in this specific case the risk factor of a new technology such as nanotechnology). This suggests that comments can in fact impact the way that a news outlet's journalism is interpreted by readers, making it all the more important to monitor them.

Moderation also often involves protecting readers from abuse and creating an environment in which they feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Jerémie Mani, CEO of French moderation agency Netino, believes “for real free-

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1 The “Nasty Effect:” Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcc4.12009/abstract>

dom of speech, moderation is necessary”, citing Godwin’s Law, which predicts that the longer an online discussion continues, the more likely the conversation will degenerate into irrelevant insults involving comparisons to Hitler and the Nazis. He added that if you don’t protect minority opinions, they can be overwhelmed by insults from the majority and feel forced to leave the conversation.

“I think it’s the obligation of the news organization to create an environment where the type of reader that they have feels comfortable having a conversation and discussion. We want to have conversations with our readers. Our moderation system is in no way meant to silence them, it’s meant to create a safe environment where people can have intelligent conversation and can feel comfortable voicing strong opinions. I think moderation is important for everyone but you need to have that balance – you can’t just have a free-for-all.”

🗨️ **Gawker, US**

“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**

Some news outlets deliberately resist moderating, and regret the need to get involved.

“Because we have a company policy based on a light touch, we tend to leave the conversation to the readers.”

🗨️ **The Straits Times, Singapore**

“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 benefits of commenting

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Editors from many types of publications across the world expressed noteworthy enthusiasm and passion for maintaining robust comment threads. Several view comments as an integral part of their publication and see reader contributions and dialogue becoming ever more important in the future.

One of the main benefits that editors perceived from comments was that conversation and exchanges with readers helps news publications to stay relevant.

“It’s really what online is about. There is a generational gap from the paper. The paper talks to readers, while online is so much more: it talks with readers. We allow the conversation happen. That is essentially what sets us apart from the printed press - we have that to and fro of dialogue. It’s one of the pillars of online journalism.”

📍 **Mail & Guardian, South Africa**

“It’s vital to keeping a newsroom relevant. If you don’t have that your newsroom cannot be relevant. You have to know what your readers are thinking and what affects them. If you don’t have that information how can you be an effective newspaper?”

📍 **Gulf News, UAE**

“I think it adds a whole other dimension to the news and to how people engage and participate. We have about half a million Facebook fans. It’s amazing how involved people are with the process of news.”

📍 **Animal Politico, Mexico**

“There is no better way to get a feeling about what people think about you without inviting them into your environment. Readers have to feel they can contribute to the public conversation.”

📍 **Reuters, UK**

“Without comments we would be a product failure. I wouldn’t live without comments: I want to hear what they are saying... Comments make you think more. I cannot live without them.”

📍 **The Irrawady, Myanmar**

Readers aren’t journalists, but they can also help fill in the gaps in a newsroom. They can provide an extra pair of eyes to bolster fact-checking or can contribute new information and viewpoints. Some journalists even get story ideas from reading comments.

“For every article there is at least one reader who will ask the right questions and find something that the article doesn’t answer but it should. Journalists are more on their toes when there are comments. I would say it’s good thing, even if not every journalist likes it... You just get a better sense of what your readers are thinking about current topics. Imagine a world without any comments – we wouldn’t know what was going on out there.”

📍 **Die Zeit, Germany**



“People will point out a factual error and we’ll fix it. It happens quite often. Commenting in a way is a form of journalism. There are so many people who will give us so much information where there is no correspondent.”

📍 **The Times of India, India**

“They’re our number one fact checkers. Someone, somewhere else, might have something extraordinarily insightful to add and they’re all over the world – it’s really good to have that feedback.”

📍 **BuzzFeed, US**

“Each journalist reads the comments on his or her stories and replies. I read them all. And we use them to evaluate our stories, to think of new angles, to correct spelling mistakes, to think of new stories. Comments at La Silla Vacía are famous for being really smart, so we take them seriously most of the time. In general, I think users in the comments section act as the contemporary editors.”

📍 **La Silla Vacía, Colombia**

There are also ways in which reader comments can contribute to a better business, by keeping on the site for longer, and increasing their loyalty. For example, people who comment on an article will often revisit the page to see how the comment thread has evolved.

“It increases engagement and time spent on our website. It adds value and provides different points of view. Focus groups have told us that our site is viewed as a place to go for quality debate on the issues of the day.”

📍 **The New Zealand Herald, New Zealand**

“For us it does really drive engagement. If you are thinking about how we differentiate ourselves from other newspapers and websites, a healthy comments section under each article is a really big plus for us. If you are thinking about how you get people to subscribe, I think comments are a very big part of that. Having a space that people go to read, get involved if you want, is very important. Comments get people back to the site – they get an email notification if they have had a reply or a recommend – and there’s a feeling that it adds value to your subscription, more than if you bought the newspaper from the newsstand, for example.”

📍 **The Times of London, UK**

“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**

“We’re keeping people on the page longer. Commercially you have eyes lower on the page, we know more about our users. We cannot track users across domains but, with a little code work, we can start to see what people are reading. They do read comments, which is great for page views. Our mobile users take comments really seriously too.”

📍 **News24, South Africa**

## Key challenges that news organisations are facing

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As well as a great deal of enthusiasm about the value of online comments, we found waves of negativity, despondency, frustration and an overall lack of clarity about how to proceed.

“In the early days there were romantic tales about being this huge democratic experience where everyone could do whatever they wanted. I don’t think that’s really what happened. We have to do something about this debate - it’s not working democratically. I also think people don’t join in because of the temperature. Interaction is very important in making commenting work.”

📍 **Bergens Tidende, Norway**

This is exacerbated by the fact that the number of comments on news sites is increasing fast, particularly in countries that are seeing massive growth in the use of digital media.

“I was one of those who started the commenting but now I’m very disillusioned. It’s so difficult to create a constructive conversation. The quality was better when we had fewer comments. Now it’s mainly just people shouting at each other”

📍 **Kathimerini, Greece**

## Image problems as a result of offensive comments

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All publications receive offensive comments. As we explore in further detail later, news outlets delete or block an average of 11% of comments left on their sites, because the content is offensive, irrelevant or spam.

“We have problems, as all news organisations and anyone dealing with UGC do, with people becoming very focused on the person behind the comment rather than the argument.”

📍 **The Times, UK**

“The main reason is offensive language, sometimes they’re not comments at all. People should figure out the difference between writing whatever and the comment itself. When two political parties collide over anything it’s not commenting any more... offensive language, hate speech, you name it.”

📍 **Radio Television Serbia, Serbia**

The impact of hateful, aggressive comments on the publication’s image can be considerable:

“The biggest complaint that we have from readers is that they perceive a lack of active moderation to control the trolls, the people who storm into the threads. It’s valid. It’s impossible to have staff moderate every thread all the time. There is a reader expectation. There is a high expectation among editors and reporters that the commenting community be actively moderated and carefully weeded out the bad stuff. I don’t know any organization, perhaps except The New York Times, that can afford to do that.”

📍 **Seattle Times, US**

“[Readers] see that it’s the same people all the time commenting against each other and they get sick and tired of it.”

📍 **Norran, Sweden**

“Some people say they are too scared to be quoted in an article because they are afraid of what the commenters will say.”

🗞 **The Denver Post, US**

“You speak to most people in South Africa and the most negative thing about our brand is our comments. I always remind people that 1% of our audience submit a comment: it’s actually a small, but very

vocal, percentage. The content we publish is very wide, not a strong editorial voice, just the latest information. You have the fact of the internet and South Africa’s history, where people from different communities are not used to talking to each other, and you have this trolling behavior. We are the biggest platform and try and be as open as possible, so these issues do pop up.”

🗞 **News24, South Africa**

## Difficulties with stopping offenders

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It is not easy to stop those who are determined to comment, editors said. Many have filters in place to look for swearing and other key words but these aren’t always effective.

“Some people are very smart. We have profanity filters and they’ll write things that the filters will not look at because they change the letters or something. Even an idiot would understand what he’s saying so we keep looking at them. It’s virtually impossible for us to read all of the comments so that’s why we depend on readers.”

🗞 **The Times of India, India**

“We have a problem with those who come to the website to spread propaganda, especially political. It’s difficult to block them because they became very subtle and never really cross the line, despite trying to be provocative. Usually it’s extreme right propaganda on racist issues.”

🗞 **Le Monde, France**

“We already know most of our commentators. We know who we should block. Sometimes they make other email accounts and then comment again. You can’t stop someone from commenting if they really want to.”

🗞 **Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland**

## Lack of motivation from staff

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As we explore later, staff participation in comment threads is likely to significantly increase the quality of conversation and improve the commenter’s experience on a site. But persuading journalists to contribute can be very difficult.

“As a whole comments are not well regarded. Majority of the people in newsroom are not interested in comments or feel they’re a necessary evil.”

🗞 **Dallas Morning News, US**

“I wish that journalists could contribute more but often they don’t have time to do it. Moderators do see each post and they give the editor an alert – someone has a really interesting question on your article, are you sure that’s right, don’t you want to answer? ... We are trying to get [journalists] into the debate but not everyone wants to do that. So it’s not assured that every reader gets feedback even if he’s got something quite interesting to say. That’s not good, we’re working on it but it’s rather hard to get everyone in line on this.”

🗞 **Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany**



## Political propaganda

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A more specific but significant problem that emerged is political commentary written under false names: several editors believe that their comments sections are being used by disguised politicians and political activists to spread their views.

“I know there are certain entities in Serbia - both political parties and big companies - that are scamming comment sections with a whole army of commenters to alter the comment section. If we see a large number of comments in short time from the same IP address with different nicknames and all comments tend to have the same reasoning, we discuss and sometimes delete all but first comment. You don't need to distort the public opinion in that way. I don't think that is part of free speech. We wouldn't block that IP address, but block all the comments but the first one.”  
🐞 **Blic, Serbia**

“We have political activists posting 50 comments from the same IP address. Comments are not actually deleted from the database, but from the page so they are not visible to the public anymore.”  
🐞 **Juzne Vesti, Serbia**

“I mean I can't say it's the government, but during elections we often see some comments about political parties reported consistently and we can't really know if it's from someone from the opposite political party or if it's a crazy guy sitting in his room and having fun with it. But it always happens during elections.”  
🐞 **Público, Portugal**

“The quality of the comments is actually pretty low. Most of the comments, particularly in political stories, are from – we suspect – from people who are trying to push a partisan agenda. So if we for example have a story criticizing the local government, we would get a lot of comments from the mayor or the government's own party defending it and a lot of comments from the opposition criticizing it.”  
🐞 **El Siglo de Torrèon, Mexico**

“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**

## How to make the best use of them?

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Aside from stemming the flow of offensive abuse, peppered with propaganda, the main challenge for news organisations today is how to use, most effectively, the comments that remain: how to display them, how to incorporate them in reporting, how to respond to them, and more.

Jerémie Mani, CEO of comment moderation service Netino, explained that in the past, his clients were only concerned with

removing the problematic comments (usually about 10-20%). But the challenge he sees now is what should be done with the remaining 80% that are acceptable, only about 10% of which might be truly valuable. How can you identify and highlight those interesting comments to make sure that anybody in the community can profit from them, without losing the thread of the discussion?

Natalie Jomini Stroud, of the Engaging News Project, worries that effective community management is lacking at small, local news outlets and that they are missing out on potential conversations with their audiences. “The major news outlets – the ones with large budgets and more of a national reach, have the in-house staff and tools to do these kinds of things. But those more local outlets don’t, and to me that’s a little bit troublesome. If we don’t have local conversations happening because the tools aren’t there for local outlets to do it – that makes me nervous.”

Some news outlets worry that they don’t do enough for their loyal commenters, due to a lack of resources.

“Your most frequent commenters are your best customers. They know more about your site than anybody else. They know more about your reporters and how they write. And they’re constantly on your website giving you page views. And yet we do very little to acknowledge or commend these people. I think very few sites do - some give badges for most positive commenters but most don’t do anything and a lot of people wish commenters would go away. But in fact these are the people who live and breathe your site. They call it this ‘my college football blog’, ‘my photo area’, not *The Seattle Times* because they are so ingrained in it.”

🗞️ ***The Seattle Times, US***





# The status of comments

## When to accept comments

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Over half of the respondents (61 out of the 97 that allow comments at all) allowed comments on all or almost all articles. Some just exclude articles about ongoing court cases, or about accidents, or violence against minors, or other topics that they feel it would be either legally risky or particularly insensitive to allow comments on.

“Most articles do, but then again you have some stories that you wouldn’t want anyone to comment on. We do an assessment every time. For example stories about accidents are things that you wouldn’t want discussion on. It doesn’t happen too often. If it’s just controversial that’s good because we get lots of comments and debate. It’s more news that we wouldn’t want feedback on - like an accident or people.”

🗣️ **Fædrelandsensen, Norway**

“We have had to close conversations around some really interesting news stories just to be safe – we had to be very careful last year with all the coverage of the phone hacking scandal. So many people were being arrested, so cases became active... I think it’s fair to say that not all of our commenters are going to be as well versed in UK libel law as your average journalist. So we have to be really careful about where we go with conversations.”

🗣️ **The Guardian, UK**

“We do turn off comments on certain opinion pieces if there is a high probability that defamatory or legally problematic or racist comments will be posted”

🗣️ **The New Zealand Herald, New Zealand**

Others only allow comments on a small number of articles, or on specific verticals that they think will be particularly appropriate. Frequently this is because of resource issues, particularly at publications that moderate pre-publication. Many expressed keenness to ensure that the articles which could generate debate are open for comments, but at the same time fear opening those which might cause legal problems or which might be particularly controversial. Opinion articles were more likely to see comments opened.

For example, until three years ago, all articles at Belgian daily De Standaard were open to comments. Then feeling that the commenting was “impossible to control,” due to too many comments and the high workload, the paper limited the number of comments. Now comments are on fewer articles – just opinion pieces and a few of the news articles that would provoke debate, but there is more moderation for each one and the paper perceives that comments are now of a higher quality.

At The New York Times, stories are chosen based on the following criteria (in order of importance):

- news value of the story,
- the projected reader interest in the story,
- whether or not the comments will be interesting for a casual reader to the site, i.e. won’t inspire name-calling or petty fighting,
- whether or not we can moderate the projected number of comments in a timely fashion,
- whether we have had recent comments on this issue.

“If the news value of the story is high enough we will allow comments even if it’s going to be a struggle to moderate,” said The New York Times community manager Bassey Etim. “We want to hit as many audiences as possible with the topics we cover,” he added.

At Gulf News, stories are chosen because they are seen as talking points that will generate debate. This includes ‘people’ stories, for example. Another consideration is the stories on which editors are interested in getting community feedback and follow-up thoughts on.

## Where are the comments going?

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### The most

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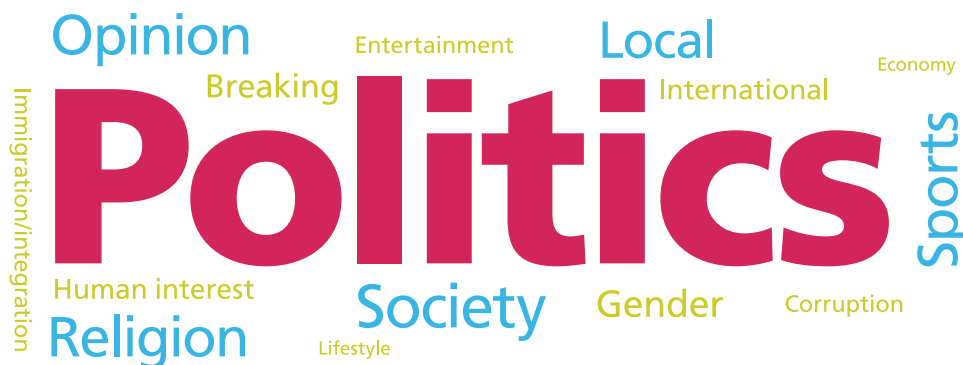
It was generally agreed that articles on politics attract far and away the most comments, with 53 editors and managers citing these as among those which receive the most comments.

Next came articles on society issues such as education or crime (13), followed by religion, opinion pieces and sports, which were all cited 12 times. Local news (11) and gender issues (8 - including gay rights) were also popular among commenters.

Some examples of articles that attract the most comments:

“The perspective that Groundviews bring to issues debated in the country is normally different. We see a spike in comments around items on gender-based violence, gay rights, transgender rights and HIV. They generate a lot of comments because you won’t find that or that debate around the issues in mainstream media. Also items on the end of the war: content that is fairly difficult to find generally results in debate.”

🗣️ **Groundviews, Sri Lanka**

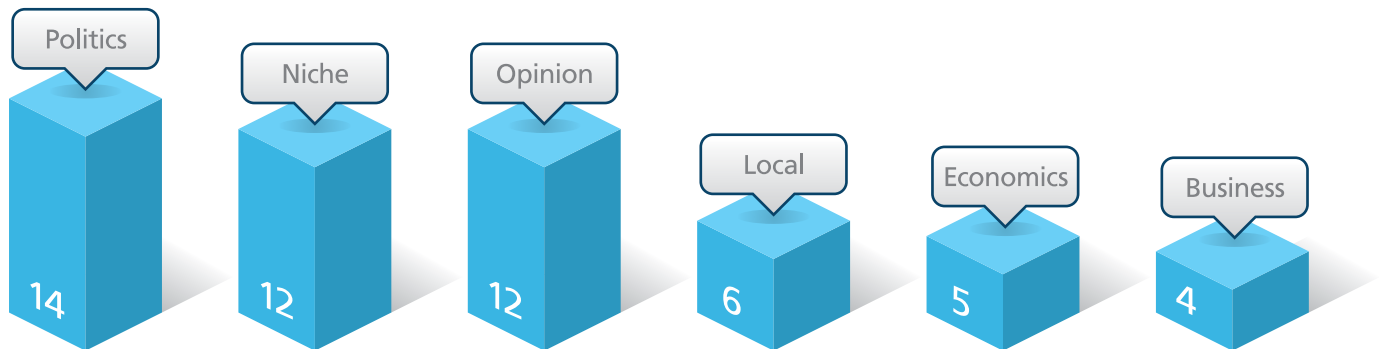


“It tends to be articles whose topic has been in the news for a long time as opposed to breaking news. For example, an article about conflicting evidence regarding climate change: it has been in the news for about 20 years and yet it got hundreds and hundreds of comments.”

🗣️ **Reuters, UK**

## The best

Among those who felt able to give an idea of the type of articles that attract the highest quality of comments, a wide range of topics were cited, but articles on politics also stood out, mentioned 14 times. However, they were also brought up by several respondents as the type of articles that attract the worst comments. Next best were niche lifestyle areas such as travel, women-specific content, cars, technology, science and history, with 12 mentions.



Graph showing subjects that attract the highest quality of comments

Some examples of the articles that attract the highest quality comments:

“Anything that is technical in nature gets very good comments... about energy efficiency etc. Anything that doesn’t have a strong political or ideological background where people would argue more about technical things.”

🗞 **Die Zeit, Germany**

“Stories that are published about common people and their problems. When we’re trying to solve some kind of problem we get a lot of quality comments because people share their views.”

🗞 **24sata, Croatia**

“Quite often the best quality are on niche stories: people who would be motivated enough to read the article would be able to leave a good comment. They tend to have a higher threshold of quality.”

🗞 **BBC, UK**

“You get both great comments and terrible comments on the controversial topics. Quality eventually follows quantity.”

🗞 **El Espectador, Colombia**

Delete



# The moderation process

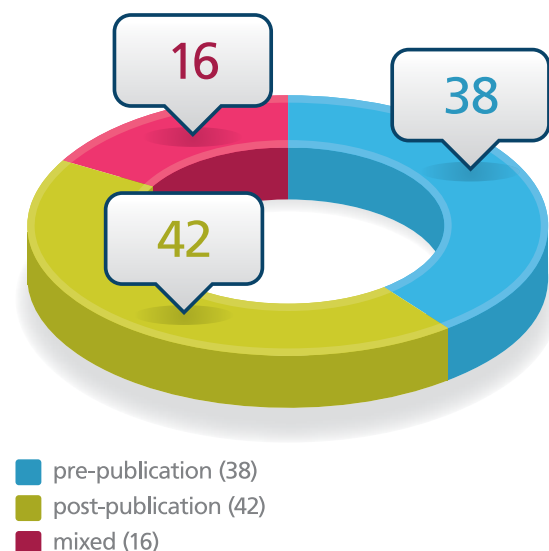
## When to moderate? Pre- or post-publication?

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. There was a fairly even split among the organisations we spoke to, with 42 opting to moderate after publication, 38 before, and 16 operating a mixed strategy. (This takes only human moderation into account; many organisations have spam filters that comments must pass through before a human sees them.)

Pre-publication moderation has a clear advantage as the best way to ensure that offensive or unwanted content does not appear online. However, in some countries this comes with increased legal liability because the publication is aware of all comments being posted. Pre-moderation is also the most labour-intensive method, which can be particularly difficult to manage for sites with a high volume or growing number of comments. The other disadvantage is that it slows down the conversation between readers as there will inevitably be a delay between when comments are submitted and when they are published. This delay varies significantly between publications depending on their resources.

Post-publication moderation occurs in two different ways: either all comments are read by a staff member, or the staff only read those that are flagged to their attention by their readers. The latter is preferred by many as a least labour-intensive method, and in several countries it comes with the lowest level of legal liability. Some publications have also designed multilayered commenting systems that combine staff moderation with help from readers. An overall advantage is that the comments appear quickly and readers can effectively have a real time conversation on the site. The big risk, however, is that offensive content could remain on your site for some time before somebody spots it.

The news organisations we spoke to had a variety of reasons for making their choice.



How news organisations  
moderate comments

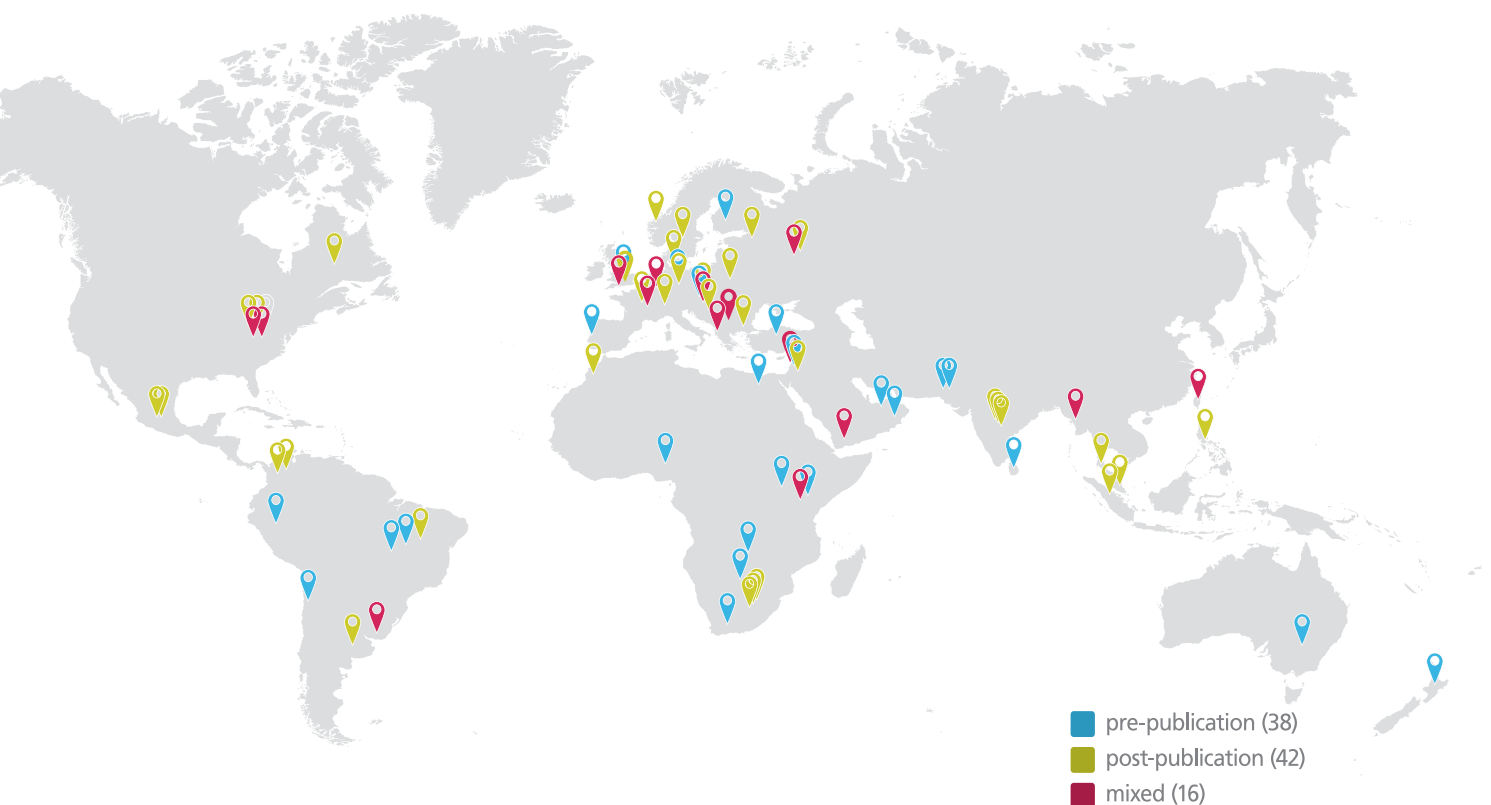
## Why pre-moderation?

"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."

"Pre-moderation definitely has its benefits," said The Times, UK. "I agree with the decision in principle – the ability to guide a conversation and work with users to pro-

duce a comment thread that is most beneficial to go alongside the article and which contributes something in the same way as a graphic or multimedia – that's what pre-moderation offers you."

"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."



Map showing geographical spread of pre- and post-publication moderation

## Why post-moderation?

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Die Zeit, Germany, opted for post-moderation mainly because of the delay that comes along with pre-moderation. "We found that the conversations are much more lively when people can see their comments appear immediately. Ninety five percent of comments are OK, and I don't want to punish those people just because 5% can't behave. I like to trust the user that they can write OK comments."

Fædrelandsvennen in Norway had similar reasoning. "If someone tries to participate on our site and they have to sit and wait, we think a lot of people would lose interest in that process."

"The community moderation is a nice option to solve capacity issues because we can still handle everything that's reported," said City Press, South Africa. "It's not because of liability, more because of capacity."

"We have pretty good tools in place with filters and other sorts of devices of encouragement so that we find that our readers can be relied on to behave," said the Wall Street Journal, USA. "If we find a problem we take pretty quick action. We do pro-actively moderate stories especially high profile stories, usually ones that are a political or cultural flashpoint story."

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."

The community moderation approach isn't always effective, however, as the Winnipeg Free Press, Canada, pointed out: "If we have a story where we know we get a lot of bad ones that readers might not flag we'll spend more time. For example, if there's a story about someone convicted of a crime, and someone comments, 'I hope that guy gets what he deserves in jail,' we'd delete that because it doesn't agree with our terms and conditions, but other readers might not flag it because they were thinking the same thing. In that case, I'll ask staff to have a quick run through the comments if I think readers won't flag them... It works pretty well except if everyone agrees - then the system kind of fails."

## A mixed approach

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Some publications (16) operate a mixed approach to the when they moderate.

Some do this depending on the subject of the article or the comment: using pre-moderation if an article is on a particularly sensitive topic, but letting comments on other topics go straight up.

At La Nación, Argentina, post-publication moderation on comments reported by other users is standard. But all comments are passed through a keyword filter and if they contain something particularly controversial, such as 'Palestine' or 'Cristina Kirchner' they will be sent straight to the moderators.

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."

The Seattle Times, US, has built a moderation system around both internal and external channels. Its long-time commenters are also in tune insofar as who the trolls are and are quick to notify the editors. "I'll get an email or someone else will get an email and they have the ability to go in and remove a bad comment. Second, and more common, is that there is a threshold on the 'report abuse' button where you hit a certain number of public reports on a certain comment. If it hits a high enough number it automatically goes away. Also, if there is just one report, it goes into a queue with the rest of comments that have been reported and someone on our staff will moderate the queue and decide if it is fine or not."

Others change their approach based on how well they know the user. The New York Times, US, has 200 "trusted commenters" whose comments go straight up, while others are pre-moderated. At Project Syndicate, Czech Republic, "a first time commenter's input won't go online until somebody approves it. From then on, they comment in real time."

MOE!, Russia, allows registered users to comment directly while comments from others are moderated pre-publication. The Denver Post, US, buries comments from lesser-known users until they've posted fifteen comments on the site. Juzne Vesti, Serbia, allows users who log in through Facebook or Google to post directly, while those who use a website profile are pre-moderated.

# 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.

Out of the 97 news organisations we spoke to that accept online comments, 78 had some kind of guidelines that are made available to their readers online and several of those that did not have them, were planning to implement them in the near future.

"We think it's essential for content

guidelines to be clearly shown so that people know what the expectations are as they post content on the site," said Andrew McDiarmid, senior policy analyst at the Center for Democracy and Technology.

For most editors and managers, the guidelines are useful not only to advise the readers but also to guide and defend the moderation process. If a reader complains that one of their comments has been blocked or deleted, the easiest way for the news outlet to justify this is by pointing out that it defied the community guidelines. Most guidelines state that the reader is responsible for the content that they post.

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## Comments Guidelines

### Comments Guidelines

**SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?**

We welcome as much interaction and vibrant discussion between our readers as possible – but we do want the website to be a mature and thought-provoking environment, so some guidelines apply for posting comments.

1. All comments first have to be approved by the editorial team before they appear on the website. This may take anything from one minute to 24 hours.
2. Stick to debating the issues and respect other people's views and beliefs. Comments launching personal attacks or that are hurtful and insulting will not be accepted.
3. Keep your comment as brief as possible: up to 250 words maximum. If you want to refer to an article on another website, place a link to that article in your comment; do not paste the whole article into your comment.
4. When you have finished crafting your comment, read it again before posting it. Consider whether others will understand your arguments. Something that you meant to be satirical or humorous might not be clear to another reader. Also, take into consideration that your words will remain on the internet for a very, very long time, if not forever.
5. A swearword in the right spot can work well, but gratuitous profanity won't do. If you really have to swear, make sure it's justified.
6. Don't write your whole comment in capital letters only.
7. Comments that contain racist, sexist or homophobic remarks – or that may be interpreted as such – won't make it on to the Mail & Guardian Online.
8. There is a difference between criticising a political party, a religion, an organisation, a cultural group or a community and unreasonably attacking such bodies. Try to motivate your comments and explain your arguments as much as you can. Above all, make sure your words represent fair comment.
9. A comment that is obviously off topic – that is, unrelated to the article or contribution in question and the comments that precede it – or that clearly doesn't contribute to the ongoing debate may be deleted by the editorial team.
10. The editorial team keeps a close watch on legal matters too: defamatory comments, for example, will be deleted.
11. Unacceptable comments will be deleted without notification.



The New Zealand Herald

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## Rules for Your Views and Blog Comments

4:00 PM Wednesday Feb 14, 2007

We invite all readers to contribute as we encourage wide debate. For more information and guidelines on how to submit your comments, see below.

Please note - comments are moderated and must be on-topic and not abusive. They may be edited for length and clarity.

1. Who can submit comments?
2. What are the main rules?
3. Why do the comments I submit not appear immediately?
4. How can I report a comment I think breaks your rules?
5. Why do I have to give personal details with my comments?
6. Can I make suggestions or submit a complaint?
7. What is the nzherald.co.nz's privacy policy?
8. How do I contact the person in charge?

your news

Be part of the news. Send pics, video and tips to nzherald.

Send »

Many of the guidelines are, understandably, about what not to do. There are common themes that dominate, some are:

1

Don't post content that is offensive or abusive. Here, most specifically refer to racism, homophobia and sexism, as well as mentioning hate speech.

For example:

“You may not... Post, link to or otherwise publish any messages containing material that is obscene, racist, homophobic or sexist or that contains any form of hate speech.”

📍 **The Economist, UK**

“Most importantly, racist, sexist, offensive and abusive comments will not be tolerated.”

📍 **News24, South Africa**

“You agree that you will not use threatening or abusive language, or anything that discriminates on the basis on race, religion, age, nationality, gender, sexual preference, etc. While expressing opinions, do not enter into personal attacks or publish any material that constitutes hate speech. Baseless, unproven accusations will not be tolerated.”

📍 **Winnipeg Free Press, Canada**

“Keep it clean and respect others — don't use language you wouldn't use with your parents.”

📍 **The Denver Post, US**

2

Don't post content that is illegal: most refer here to defamation, libel, and pornography.

“Your comments must not contain, defamatory, obscene, pornographic, or otherwise illegal material.”  
🗞️ **The New Zealand Herald, New Zealand.**

“We will remove any content that may put us in legal jeopardy, such as potentially libelous or defamatory postings, or material posted in potential breach of copyright.”  
🗞️ **The Guardian, UK**

“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**

3

Don't post irrelevant, off-topic content

“A comment that is obviously off topic -- that is, unrelated to the article or contribution in question and the comments that precede it -- or that clearly doesn't contribute to the ongoing debate may be deleted by the editorial team.”  
🗞️ **Mail & Guardian, South Africa**

“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**

4

Don't swear.

Some publications ban swearing entirely, such as The Age and its other Fairfax siblings, whose guidelines also specify no 'leetspeak,' referring to an online tendency to replace letters with numbers to make a word less immediately readable by human

or machine. The web editor at the weekly Sloboda LLC in Russia said the publication doesn't have community guidelines but that swearing was prohibited in mass media, and also in commenting.

5

Don't post content that is badly-written, in all caps, abbreviations or misspelled to such a degree that it is illegible.

“Use the first person format and do not use abbreviations (e.g. B4U, CUL8R, BRB)”

📍 **Groundviews, Sri Lanka**

A Reuters article states that the news outlet is likely to moderate comments that contain “semi-literate spelling; we’re not looking for perfection, but people shouldn’t have to struggle to determine the meaning”

6

Don't write excessively long comments.

Some limit comment length to 150 words, 250 or 350 words, for example.

Some news publications had more specific bans based on specific sensibilities in their respective countries:

“Mon Figaro’s moderation team reserves the right to delete any comments that cite extracts from religious texts, whether authentic or not. Equally, comments that encourage religious conversion will be rejected.”

📍 **Le Figaro, France**

“You shall not host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, update or share any information on the site, that ... threatens the unity, integrity, defence, security or sovereignty of India, friendly relations with foreign states, or public order or causes incitement to the commission of any cognisable offence or prevents investigation of any offence or is insulting any other nation.”

📍 **The Times of India, India**

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

📍 **The Express Tribune, Pakistan**

## Constructive guidance

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Not all community guidelines are rules about what you can't do: some offer more positive, constructive advice to help readers come up with appropriate comments and articulate arguments.

“Please treat others with respect.... Attack the issue, not the person... Be reflective, frame issues as best you can... Propose ideas and alternatives... Groundviews is open to reflective and thought provoking content that is: 1 Pithy and provocative, 2 Bears witness to the denial of justice, human rights and gross ceasefire violations 3 Essentially humanizes and critiques conflict and peace through alternative cultural, social, economic and political perspectives.”

🐘 **Groundviews, Sri Lanka**

“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**

“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.**

“When you have finished crafting your comment, read it again before posting it. Consider whether others will understand your arguments. Something that you meant to be satirical or humorous might not be clear to another reader. Also, take into consideration that your words will remain on the internet for a very, very long time, if not forever.”

🐘 **Mail & Guardian, South Africa**

“Keep a cool head. Even if a subject particularly excites you, we ask you to keep your posts free of generalizations and provocation, of hasty and irrelevant contributions, and specific disruptions to the debate.”

🐘 **Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany**

## Registration: real name or anonymous?

Whether or not to require registration to comment on a site and if so, how to do so is another key question for news organisations. Most feel that registration helps promote constructive conversations. There was general agreement that requiring registration made the number of comments fall, but the quality of those remaining is much higher. Fewer comments also means less moderation, which most perceive as a benefit.

In addition, requiring people to comment under their real name is generally thought to create a more civil conversation and this is a key motivation for people who require or encourage commenters to register with real names. Although only a couple of news organisations felt that there was any legal obligation to obtain the real names of commenters, many ask for these regardless.



Twenty out of the 91 organisations who were able to give details about their registration process made a concerted effort to ensure that their commenters use their real names, either through requiring official ID numbers, checking up on addresses, or only offering login through social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or Google+.

A majority, 53 out of 91 news outlets, require registration, involving at the minimum an email address, but make no particular effort to verify real names and/or allow the use of pseudonyms.

A further 18 organisations allowed 'guest' commenting, without any form of registration required.

Several publications, predominantly Latin American (Folha de Sao Paolo - Brazil, O Globo - Brazil, Zero Hora - Brazil, El Mercurio - Chile, El Espectador - Colombia, Politiken - Denmark), ask for an official identification number which they use to verify who the commenter is.

Several are very happy with their choice of real name communities.

Zero Hora, Brazil, switched from a registration-free system to one that requires a full name, email address and ID number: "We used to have a huge number of comments but they were very poor – it wasn't a relevant debate. So we decided to close that and now we have this registration requirement for everyone who wants to comment. This is also strategic so that we have fewer comments and we can monitor them with more attention."

### What is asked for?

The minimum information required is an email address. Most verify this by sending a confirmation email with a link.



At iDNES, Czech Republic: “We lost commenters when we switched to real name: before November we had some 30,000 comments a day; after November, 10,000 a day. We now have 48,000 registered users - that is less than before but are happy that we have changed. The comments are much better now and we don’t have to erase so many.”

“Most of our commenting is constructive. We are a real name community so our readers are not the average web reader hiding behind a cloak of anonymity. We have real name standards here and commenting histories and profiles are visible so it’s almost like a social network,” said The Wall Street Journal’s community editor.

However, it’s hard to verify whether or not people are using a real name unless you ask for an official identification number.

The Wall Street Journal, which has a close-knit real name community, takes this seriously: “we have help from customer service in vetting if names are real. We’ll review all new accounts and be able to follow up if we know someone did not use

their real name. The main thing is that their ability to comment on the site will be suspended until they have spoken to customer service and straighten out their account. A reader who has been suspended for a fake name is pretty much guided on how to correct the situation.”

Many don’t make the effort to truly check names, and adopt a more ‘encouraging’ approach. For example, to urge people to use their real names, The Times of India allows readers to accumulate points through a loyalty/reward programme each time they read, comment or recommend a story. These points lead to badges and the user gets their photo posted on the website as an incentive to use their name.

Some publications also said that while they don’t enforce real name registration, many people still disclose it. For example, Mint in India said that most people don’t have an issue with using their real name and that normally the people who sign up anonymously have their own agenda, maybe a political one.

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## The value of anonymity

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Other organisations believe that it’s very important to allow their users to remain anonymous when commenting so as to allow people to write things that they might not be able to express publicly using their real names. “There is quite a lot of value in allowing people to have anonymity,” said the BBC’s social media editor.

At The Irrawaddy in Myanmar, “A lot of comments are made by people who don’t want to reveal their identity for political or security reasons,” despite the fact that the country is becoming more open, the editor said.

At Haaretz in Israel, users are offered the choice to log in through Facebook or to

remain anonymous. Ninety nine percent of the comments are anonymous, the editor said.

The Denver Post encourages real name registration but doesn’t verify the names. “You get more robust discussion if you allow pseudonyms,” the social media editor said. “I think the key is consistency - so if you are the same pseudonym all the time. The problem is when you have people creating multiple accounts. That is against our rules. We understand that anonymous commenting has its drawbacks but as long as it’s consistent it’s okay.”

Gawker Media Network, US, goes to some lengths to ensure absolute anonymity for its

commenters, if they want it. They can either login through a social network – Facebook, Twitter or Google – or they can use the anonymous ‘Burner’ method which involves the site issuing a 16-character key for a one-time only login. Gawker doesn’t store the key, any of the user’s information or their IP address. As the site’s founder Nick Denton explained on the site, “there is no username, email address or password that could compromise your identity. Yes, even if we’re hacked.” He explains his site’s determination to allow anonymity when so many others are moving away from it: “we’ll accept some disorder, if that’s the price of freedom in one’s personal life, in politics and the press.”

Some queried the effectiveness of real name policies. Although Tamara Littleton, CEO of eModeration believes that anonymity “leads to quite intense trolling and hate speech,” she added that real name policies don’t always work, pointing out that there is some “awful stuff” across the 400+ Facebook pages that her company moderates. Laura Oliver of The Guardian, UK, also questioned the argument that real name requirements on social networks actually improve discussion, and asked, “Have you seen our Facebook page?”

Others posit that anonymity must be valued, as it is part and parcel of one’s right to freedom of speech. Andrew McDiarmid, senior policy analyst at the Center for Democracy and Technology said that in this context, the center discourages real name policies.

“The importance of maintaining anonymity increases as a platform grows to tremendous size,” McDiarmid said, noting that a small niche publication would be

impinging on a much narrower set of users’ rights by obliging them to use their real name, compared to a site like Facebook that is meant to be a global community and is very central to the way people express themselves online.

Online commenting software provider Disqus found in a 2012 study that pseudonyms actually helped spur constructive comments for many of the sites that use its services.

In the study, they looked at how the quality of participation of commenters on the sites that use Disqus depended on how people register: registering using their real name, registering but able to use a pseudonym, or no registration (guests.)

“To be honest what we were thinking we would find is that we would see the highest quality from the real names and the highest quantity from the guests,” said Ro Gupta, VP business development at Disqus. “It turned out that neither of these things were true: the pseudonym group scored better on both counts. They gave the most comments and they received the most positive signals and the least negative signals from people using the tool.”

Helen Lewis, writing in The New Statesman<sup>1</sup>, quoted Tom Postmes, a researcher at the University of Groningen, who said: “It’s too simple, too straightforward, to say it turns you into an animal. In all the research online that we know of, anonymity has never had that effect of reducing self-awareness.” He suggested to Lewis that it might be more to do with the lack of consequences: after all, what percentage of people would steal, or lie, or drop litter, if they knew they would not caught?

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1 ‘Who are the trolls?’ – Helen Lewis, the New Statesman  
<http://www.newstatesman.com/helen-lewis/2013/07/who-are-trolls>

## Who is involved in the moderation process?

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There is a significant range of staffing allocations to moderation: from larger news organisations with dedicated teams comprising several full time staff who are providing 24/7 moderation, to smaller newsrooms where checking comments is a side or occasional job for web editors or other newsroom staff.

Approximately one third of publications (33) that accept comments had some kind of dedicated moderating team. Thirteen outsource moderation to external companies but at more than half the news organisations we spoke to, comments are moderated by journalists or other newsroom staff, often the online team. Many of the latter cited lack of resources as an explanation for no dedicated team.

For example:

At El Espectador, Colombia, nobody is assigned specifically to comment moderation but if someone reports a comment then the editorial team receives an email and they will look into it.

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.

At Južne Vesti, Serbia, the journalists monitor their own articles two or three times a day for the first three days.

At Zero Hora, Brazil, each section of the paper is responsible for monitoring the comments and all the content related to their presence on the Internet.

Hurriyet, Turkey, has one full time moderator.

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

Blic, Serbia, has six people doing comment moderation, reporting to the social media editor.

The Times, UK, has a team of six people who moderate comments: between one and three will be working at any one time.

The New York Times, US, has a team of 13 people moderating comments; as some work part time, this is the equivalent of about nine full time positions.

## Advanced automation

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Several organisations use automated filters to block certain comments from being published. A couple of organisations we spoke to have more advanced approaches.

Der Standard, Austria, uses self-learning software, that learned from the manual moderation of more than 100,000 postings plus some blacklisted words. If the software is not sure, it passes the comment on to a human being. "It is costly, but the software really helped us in reducing other costs. We

also think of it as a good investment rather than a cost," said the editor

And as online identities multiply, quickly and at times amorously, technical solutions will be key to managing them. For example, the executive editor for online news at Blic, Serbia said that "it's silly for me to think that in ten years I'll have more people administering comments than writing a story, which would be the case if we didn't come up with some kind of technical solutions."

In addition to having a spam filter, Blic has also implemented keyboard shortcuts to speed up the moderation process.

The New York Times, US, is experimenting with sentiment analysis to complement its human moderation. Based on the rejection or approvals of previous comments, the tool can determine a likelihood that a comment will be approved, based on the words and sentences somebody is using.

For 40% of the comments submitted on a given article, you can have a 95% certainty that that comment will be approved or rejected. "So in cases where the issue isn't controversial, we'll sometimes use that to get more comments through at first, and we'll go back to read them later," said the editor.

## Level of staff participation in the discussion

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There was widespread agreement that staff participation in the comment sections improves the quality of discussion. Often, a staff contribution will be highlighted or marked, with a star, for example, so that it is easily distinguishable amongst the chatter.

“I think their presence there makes a huge difference because it gives readers a sense that they are being heard and appreciated.”

📍 **The Wall Street Journal, US**

“People are much more productive and better on the site the more we engage with them: if they are heard, and we care.”

📍 **BuzzFeed, US**

“The best way to ensure the discussion is fruitful is when we also participate, and we are trying to do it more and more.”

📍 **Der Standard, Austria**

“The best comments happen when the journalist joins in with the discussion: when there is an interactivity between comment writers and readers online.”

📍 **Bergens Tidende, Norway**

“The rule of thumb is that if the owner is taking part in the conversation the quality is suddenly so much better.”

📍 **O Globo, Brazil**

“We know that having that staff presence early on in threads on our site dramatically increases the tone of the conversation that follows: it lessens the need for moderation as well because it sets a high barrier and gives people direction. It encourages people who have never commented before to take that leap of faith.”

📍 **The Guardian, UK**

“Yes we encourage all our staff – reporters and editors – to participate in discussions because we've discovered that participating in discussions is probably THE best way to raise the level of debate. People act very differently when they see that somebody from the newsroom is actually involved in the discussion.”

📍 **Die Zeit, Germany**



Research at the University of Texas, US, part of the Engaging News Project<sup>1</sup>, backs up this sentiment. Project Director Natalie Jomini Stroud and her team worked with a local news TV station to gauge the impact of staff participation on comments. The project team set up a randomized schedule for the station staff's participation in the comments sections: some days they didn't get involved at all, others they had a generic member of staff contribute and others they had the political reporter participate. They then tracked more than 2000 com-

ments over a period of 60-70 days, looking at how many comments different posts garnered, how many likes, how much agreement and disagreement there was and how civil or uncivil the comments were.

Preliminary analysis showed that when the political reporter was engaging in the comments section, the discussion was more civil. "It's really exciting to be able to demonstrate that," said Stroud, adding that previous studies looking at this issue have been largely based on anecdotal evidence.

## Those that don't participate

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Despite this, there are many (32) publications whose staff do not participate in comment threads on their sites; some because of reluctance on the part of journalists or a lack of time, others on principle.

Some believe that comment sections are best left to the readers. "Journalists have a lot of occasions to express themselves and that's a space for readers," said La Tribune de Genève, Switzerland.

"We don't interfere with comments," said The Straits Times, Singapore. "If there is a big issue at hand and we really want to have a discussion with our public we organise a proper structure for engagement, we set up a live blog, and announce that we're doing that, maybe with a panel of experts."

"We try to keep the commenting space as clean as possible from our interference. In a particular situation, when required, we can post a comment from the newsroom explaining something," said La Nación, Argentina.

For El Siglo de Torreón, Mexico, the issue is that participating could detract from the

journalist's objectivity in their reporting.

"We forbid the reporters from getting on the website and commenting on stories... That would mean that they are getting in there to give their opinions and we try to separate that. If there is an interesting story idea, the reporter can contact the user posting that directly or privately through email."

Several other publications have found that journalists simply don't have sufficient time or the will to participate, even though the community or online editor thinks it's a good idea.

"We are really trying to have journalists participating in the discussion, which isn't easy because they are not used to have that kind of exposure or to have a conversation with readers," said Público, Portugal. Progress is happening, however: "Right now, when someone has reported a mistake in an article, they thank them in the comments and advise that the article has been corrected."

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1 Engaging News Project, <http://engagingnewsproject.org>

## How much is being deleted?

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.

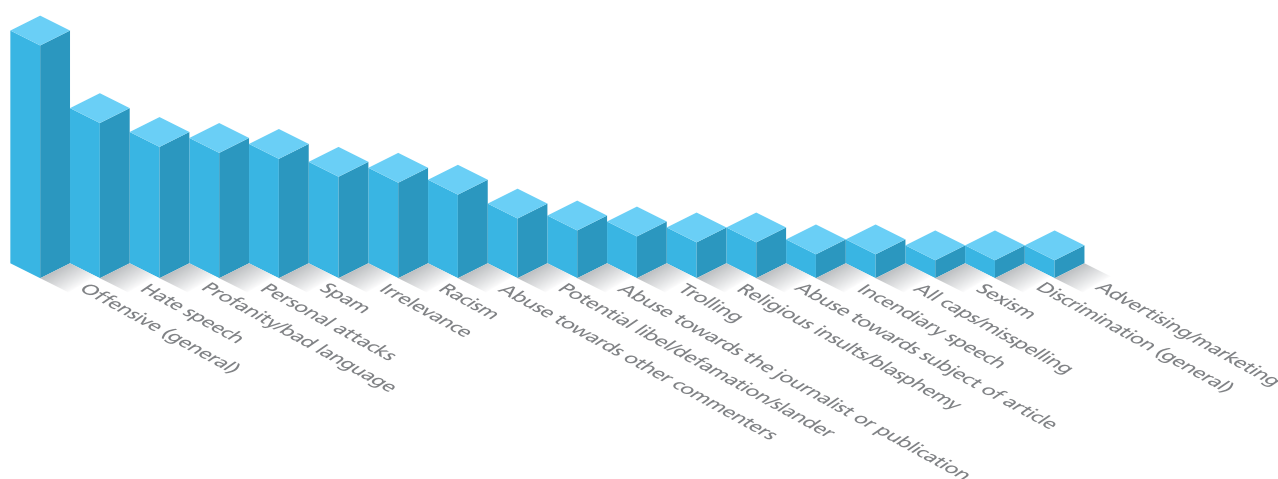
All of the 97 publications we spoke to that accept comments sometimes block comments from being published or delete them after publication. Out of these, 53 were able to guess the percentage of comments that were deleted. The figures varied massively, from 0.5% to about 60%, with an average deletion rate of 11% (without two outliers at 50 and 60%, the average is 9.3%).

The main reason for deleting or blocking comments was generally offensive content, cited by 39 editors and managers as one of the key reasons. Next was hate speech which came up 26 times, followed by profanity/bad language at 22, personal attacks at 21 and spam at 20.

Seventeen editors and managers cited irrelevant, off-topic comments as a main factor in deletion. Just 6 specifically mentioned trolling in answer to this question, but trolls came up in discussion a further 25 times during the interviews.

Racism was the most commonly-cited type of discrimination, with 16 mentions, compared with sexism which was only mentioned 3 times.

More cited abuse directed at other commenters than at the journalist or the subject of the article as a reason to delete.



Factors that lead news outlets to block/delete comments

“Really it’s personal attacks - attacking the person rather than the idea. It’s the difference between saying you’re an idiot and your ideas are unfounded. We have a rule in not revelling in the misfortune of others or wishing violence if they’ve done terrible things: in this country you’re innocent until proven guilty.”

🗞️ **Denver Post, US**

“I tend not to worry about libel that much. I tend to worry more about reader sensitivities. It’s less about particular persons and more about groups of people. If people are being offensive towards gays, or Jews or blacks, or whatever – that’s something that tends to bother us more than someone calling a politician names.”

🗞️ **O Globo, Brazil**

“It’s a thin line of course. Politically we can accept even very extreme opinions but only if it’s an opinion and not an insult.”

🗞️ **Kathimerini, Greece**

“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.**

## Hiding rather than deleting

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Some news outlets have a two-stage process for comment blocking: comments can either be fully deleted, or hidden, so that readers have to actively choose to read them.

“We can soft delete the comment where we can hide it if it could upset people or if it’s borderline. There’s an option for people to click the comment and see it. Or we hard delete it and write a note in the user’s profile.”

🗞️ **The Denver Post, US**

“With the hide function, the comments that are not fully offensive but could be controversial are hidden and a note says, ‘some people think this comment is inappropriate but if you want to read it click here.’”

🗞️ **Capital Weekly, Bulgaria**

“We have had complaints from older readers who find [comments] offensive. That’s why the commentaries are collapsed by default and you have to open them to read them.”

🗞️ **El Espectador, Colombia**

## Banning commenters entirely

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Many editors and managers also have the option to block specific commenters entirely if they consistently break the rules. Seventy one percent of those we spoke said that they sometimes block individuals, either by account or by IP address.

Numbers of users/accounts blocked varied considerably:

- about 600 user accounts in the past 4 months at IDNES, Czech Republic
- about 12 a month at Winnipeg Free Press, Canada
- about 12 over the last 4 years at La Silla Vacía, Colombia

News organisations also go about blocking users in different ways.

Several struggle with the fact that blocked commenters keep creating new accounts. At The Seattle Times, “We’ve had people create over 100 accounts.”

“They always find a way to come back,” said the editor of El Siglo de Torreón, Mexico, a sentiment that was echoed at O Globo, Brazil. “You can’t stop someone from commenting if they really want,” said the editor of Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland. At The Times of India, staff try to block offending commenters by their IP address. Staff at SME, Slovakia, do the same: “We had huge problems during the elections with paid commenters: the same person with several accounts. We check IP addresses, and allow one account for each. We blocked the rest.”

Some have two-phase systems for blocking offenders:

“We give yellow or red cards to them. Yellow means that we pre-moderate their comments more closely. Red card means they’ve been banned.”

📍 **De Standaard, Belgium**

“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**

A couple hide comments from everyone but the offending user - to make it appear as though there is little interest surrounding their comment:

“I can hide comments and ban users if I recognize their name and it’s an ongoing issue. The comment will still show up for them but not for everyone. They don’t know. I assume after a while they’ll figure out that it’s not showing up because no one is responding to them.”

📍 **BuzzFeed, US**

“We use what we call a bozo filter - that user still sees their comments but no one else does. It’s a ‘don’t feed the trolls’ idea: they’re posting in their own isolated world and no one else can see it... It works pretty well.”

📍 **Winnipeg Free Press, Canada**

Some are willing to give commenters a second chance:

At Fædrelandsvennen, Norway, staff will unblock users and give them another chance after a few weeks.

At the Winnipeg Free Press in Canada, commenters must do a quiz<sup>1</sup> on the site's terms and conditions to have their accounts reinstated. "Then I know they've read it," the editor said. "They can get access back - 100 percent on the quiz and they can come back. If they're blocked again they blocked forever."

At Die Zeit, Germany: "We email them and most of them complain immediately and then we explain. We also review a lot of the cases. We block someone but if they apologise and promise to behave better we'll reactivate their profile again."

Out of those who don't block users, some don't have the technical capability, and for some the issue just hasn't arisen (yet). But some operate on principle:

“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**

“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**

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1 <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/Winnipeg-Free-Press-Commenters-Quiz-193388041.html>



# How to find the best comments

How to separate the good, appropriate or most insightful comments from the inane, or vulgar nonsense is a question many publications grapple with. Should there be a meritocracy of comments, more contextualisation or peer review from within the online community?

The traditional commenting thread has long been simple, and chronological. But as commenting systems become ever more important, many publications are already thinking about how they can use software to encourage meaningful debate.

Forty-seven news organisations had some way to distinguish the 'best' comments, although in several cases this just meant a 'like' button, without any possibility to re-order comments through this filter.

As well as making the good comments more visible, highlighting them rewards those commenters, making them feel valued and more likely to return to the site and contribute. Presenting the most thoughtful comments first can also help bolster moderation systems by drowning the more irrelevant or inappropriate comments.

The two most common ways that news organisations distinguish comments are:

- Allowing readers to recommend, like/dislike or thumbs up/thumbs down each comment. Some will allow readers to sort comments by highest rated.
- Enabling staff to recommend certain com-

ments. Either, these staff picks are displayed in a separate section or tab, or users can choose to sort by staff recommendations. Some even give these more prominence higher up on the page.

Helsingin Sanomat, Finland, which has a rating system that allows users to say not only whether they agree or disagree, but also to say "this was well-argued", "this was not well-argued". If a lot of people think that the comment is well-argued it gets more points, and they get even higher points if people say they don't agree but it is well-argued. An algorithm puts them in order of how relevant the opinion is in the discussion, and readers can choose if they want to display comments according to the level of points they have received, or just chronologically.

The screenshot shows three comments from Helsingin Sanomat's website, each with a rating system. The first comment is by 'NLK2' at 14:17, titled 'Miltähän tavalla agromafia osallistuu säästöihin ??'. It has 4 'Kyllä' (Yes) and 0 'Ei' (No) votes. The second comment is by 'Kynnissinus hämmötys' at 14:33, titled 'Vaihtokäytäntöjen yhteiskuntapolittisia akuteenisia meritejä, uskoisin että valtionlaivan ohjauksessa "loppuun metminen" on sitä luokkaa kalista ja aikaa vievää, että parempi kuin on ripaus hyvää taitoa ja repästä toimintaa. Jos on sitä oikeanlaisia tekemisen meininkiä niin virheet ehdittäin korjata ja tilaan kokemusta rikkaampia nopeammassa tahdissa kuin joku on miettinyt kalliilla konsultilla tai työryhmillä puhki.'. It has 4 'Kyllä' (Yes) and 2 'Ei' (No) votes. The third comment is by 'Judge Dredd' at 14:37, titled 'Aika hyvä analyysi näin HS:sta luettuna. Perussuomalaisiakaan ei haukuttu yhtään.'. It has 5 'Kyllä' (Yes) and 0 'Ei' (No) votes. Each comment also has a 'Hyvin argumentoitu' (Well argued) button with 'Kyllä' (Yes) and 'Ei' (No) votes.

Comments on Helsingin Sanomat's website

BuzzFeed, US, enables editors to give comments badges to help guide the conversation. If, for example, a comment is not highly offensive but not constructive, an editor can give it a shaking head badge. “We’ve noted then that it’s not appropriate and that will diffuse the situation,” hence discouraging other readers from responding.

“We have a feature called NYT picks<sup>1</sup>. If we think a comment is particularly meritorious, and the picks tab is the default tab for older stories. On a new story we’ll have the newest comments tab as default, but after 24 hours we’ll switch over to NYT picks which is a list of the curated comments that we like the best... When we select comments for our NYT picks, what we try to do is to get a wide range of views that are interesting, and so you’ll see a high proportion of conservative views in the NYT picks than generally on the site, by design. That would be a way that we would prop up a minority view.”

🗨️ **The New York Times, US**

In a redesign, commenting software provider Disqus introduced changes so that it was easier for users to disagree with a comment by voting it down, but less tempting to outright flag a comment for abuse, VP for business development Ro Gupta explained. “Often in commenting systems we see people use these features in the wrong way. Just because they politically disagree with a comment they’ll flag it as inappropriate.” The change led to a 79% drop in abuse reporting. Disqus also provides a complex quality sort to display better comments higher.

Many who don’t allow for any way to distinguish particular comments would like to do so, but lack the technical capabilities. One way to circumvent technical shortcomings is to print editor favorites in the printed paper. That can provide a similar incentive to offer an articulate, thoughtful comment.

A few don’t think it’s appropriate:

“That would require a subjective judgment that we really don’t want to make, because why would we single out one on top of another. The reader can decide for themselves whether a comment is partisan, fanatic or unhelpful or what comments are worth reading.”

🗨️ **El Siglo de Torreón, Mexico**

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1 Perfectly Reasonable Question No. 5: On Comment ‘Picks,’ Margaret Sullivan, <http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/02/perfectly-reasonable-question-no-5-on-comment-picks/>

Sort by: **Newest** | Oldest | Recommended (21) | Most Discussed | Agree | Disagree | Logged in Comments **Now!**

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**Vivek Dobhal** (Dehra Dun, India)  
1 Follower [Follow](#)  
26 mins ago **Silver: 572**

Only 8000 !!! I think we have more IDIOTS in INDIA


[Reply](#)





[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)


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**Indian Dan** (Europe)  
16 Followers [Follow](#)  
27 mins ago **Gold: 11.1K**

Please enroll all our politicians with criminal records, in or out of jail. Please ensure it is a One-way ticket.

[Reply](#)





[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)


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**COLRANBIRLAMBA** (PTA)  
408 Followers [Follow](#)  
28 mins ago **Platinum: 70.6K**

must be fed from life.. MHUHE MERRI BIWI SE BACHOO TYPE... om puri may also join the bandwagon

[Reply](#)





[Agree \(0\)](#)  
[Disagree \(0\)](#)  
[Recommend \(0\)](#)  
[Offensive](#)

Times of India's comment section

Some news outlets use points-based reward systems to encourage commenters.

At The Times of India, readers accumulate points<sup>1</sup> by reading, commenting on or recommending a story and these lead to a variety of badges. As previously mentioned, they get their photo displayed on the site. "We've seen a shift with this. People get really excited," said the editor.

At SME, Slovakia, "users can rate the comments with a button next to each one. You have a 'karma,' and if you write a good comment and a lot of people give you positive ratings, you will get a bigger karma. The bigger your karma, the more rights and privileges you get; you can even get to the moderating team."

At Público, Portugal, a points system allows people to have different 'levels' of reputation, and eventually awards moderator status to some of these users. One problem with this, however, is that "the reputation system gives points even to people who don't post very constructive comments. They risk having a high level of reputation even if they just say: "I agree with this". We are afraid because we don't know these readers very well, as they don't say that much, and we are worried about what they'll be going to do with their rights of moderation when they'll get to the final level."

1 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/abouttimesrewards.cms>

# Moderation on social networks

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As well as their own comments sections on their sites, most news organisations have a presence on major social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ where their readers can leave comments or communicate more widely.

Facebook and Google+, which allow brands to create and manage their own 'pages,' posting links to articles, photos or questions, for example, most closely resemble a comment section. A news outlet doesn't own its presence on the social media platform in the same way as it does its website, however.

Many news organisations do not have the resources to moderate another platform as thoroughly as they do their own sites, which as their own territory are the first priority in most cases. Even if they do have the resources, there is no option to pre-moderate on a social network, and some refrain from posting their more controversial stories to their Facebook pages because of this.

The majority of publications therefore don't moderate their Facebook pages and other social networks as heavily as their own sites. Several also believe that the real identity policies make the discussion less controversial.

“Moderators don't look at the Facebook page. A lot of people try to keep an eye on it but we don't have an organized way. Our social media producer looks through the Facebook threads but those are not legally underneath our publication. Also there are not so many bad remarks there because people have to operate under their own faces. Facebook threads are often much 'cleaner.'”

📍 **Helsingin Sanomat, Finland**

“We're much more careful about what stories we post on Facebook because the moderation there is more difficult. I think people post less sketchy things on Facebook because they are using real name but it's not as closely moderated. We mostly use Facebook to post interesting, good stories, rather than the most controversial.”

📍 **Winnipeg Free Press, Canada**

“We do moderate on Facebook, but very, very lightly, if it is a hot story that we suspect that would need moderation. We would also not put certain content on Facebook because it is feeding the trolls. Certain types of stories - you know what kinds - we won't because it's not our platform.”

📍 **News24, South Africa**

“Anything offensive will be taken off – comments on Facebook tend to be much less serious, lots of one-liners. There are a lot, but the level of discussion is lower.”

📍 **Project Syndicate, Czech Republic**

# Help is at hand: outsourcing

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## Moderation services

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Thirteen news organisations we spoke to, all European except one Canadian, outsource their online comment moderation.

- Bergens Tidende, Norway
- BBC, UK
- Corriere della Sera, Italy
- The Economist, UK
- Faedrelandsvennen, Norway
- Kaleva, Finland
- Libération, France
- Le Monde, France
- Norran, Sweden
- La Repubblica, Italy
- La Tribune de Genève, Switzerland
- Volkskrant, Netherlands
- Winnipeg Free Press, Canada

We spoke to three different moderation companies, based in the UK (eModeration), France (Netino) and Canada (ICUC). They gave two key reasons why they believe news organisations and others use their services:

The cost: comments are seen as a must-have but with very low added value. If

moderation is done by a journalist, it's time that they are not spending writing articles or on other added-value activities. Outsourcing is also a more cost-efficient route rather than increasing head count by hiring dedicated moderators on staff.

The experience and expertise: debates can flare up very quickly and it does take a certain amount of expertise to handle a difficult situation. People get very angry if their comments are deleted so you need a certain amount of specialist experience to know when to remove comments and also how to calm people down. Moderation firms also stay on top of developments in social media.

There are some related practical motivations, they believe:

Moderation should be carried out over night and weekends and many organisations are not equipped for that.

Companies will often log all comments made, what was deleted and why, and can provide this information as needed.

Moderation companies often provide services in different languages.

## The process

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eModeration has about 15 media clients and works with many other large brands. The company employs about 350 moderators who mainly work in the UK and the US with a few in Europe and Australia, said Tamara Middleton, CEO.

Netino, founded 10 years ago, works with 20+ media companies out of a total of about 60 clients. A staff of 20 in Paris work with just over 100 French-speaking mod-

erators around the world, mainly in Madagascar and North Africa, some in India and China. Some are based in France as some clients specifically request France-based moderators, CEO Jérémie Mani explained, but for financial reasons the work attracts more dedicated individuals in a country like Madagascar.

Canada-based ICUC has more than a dozen news clients. Its moderation is "very



location-contextual” said the company’s president and founder Keith Bilous.

Moderation guidelines are usually put together by the company in collaboration with the client. For example, the guidelines often define defamation, give examples of this and potentially defamatory words, and invite the moderator to ask him/herself questions about the comment, such as ‘can you identify the target?’ even if no individuals have been named.

At Netino and ICUC, moderators are usually dedicated to just one client so that they can be thoroughly familiar with just one set of guidelines. “If you took a moderator from Nouvel Observateur and asked him to moderate Le Point it would be a disaster,” Mani said.

At eModeration however, moderators often work for more than one client. Usually clients with similar guidelines are grouped together, but sometimes it’s good for the moderator to have a change, Littleton believes. “We have an American news client where the content is very intense - vitriolic and hate fueled... From the moderator’s point of view you don’t want to spend all day every day just removing homophobic and racist comments – it’s nice to do something a bit fluffier.”

At each company, moderators are trained and tested on the guidelines of the clients they will work with. Most clients require social media monitoring also.

At Netino, moderators provide an additional service by marking particularly interesting comments that the client is then alerted to, in case the editorial team want to make use of them.

Using a moderation company doesn’t mean that the publisher loses control over their comments. “We also have an internal team who keep an eye on the comments as they are appearing. We can override any particular decision and take down comments if we need to,” said the BBC, UK.

Additionally, there is usually close contact between the moderating firm and the publisher client. Bilous from ICUC said there was daily contact with clients.

As the Economist community editor explained, speaking of his relationship with eModeration: “I have a dedicated account manager who contacts me with a weekly report of what they’ve taken down and what they’ve left up and some basic headline figures and percentages of what they’ve deleted. I have a personal relationship with them and they know that there are certain things that I like to be escalated to me. So occasionally they’ll contact me and say that they have lots of comments on a certain topic... Normally I don’t let them delete users but I ask them to tell me candidates, so commonly they will point to a user that they think is behaving badly on an article and ask if I want to do anything about it.”

La Tribune de Genève, Switzerland, spoke of the “very direct” communication between the newsroom and Netino and mentioned that the newsroom sometimes alerts the moderators to particularly controversial issues.

One complaint that arose from a local news organisation was that the moderators from the outsourcer it used were not from the area, so were not familiar with the local people and places. The three moderating companies we spoke to all offer location specific moderators when necessary, but at a national rather than a local level.

## Commenting software

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News outlets can build their own commenting software, or they can use a provider such as Livefyre, Facebook Comments or Disqus. Disqus is used by close to three million websites worldwide, said Ro Gupta, vice president for business development. The tool is used by at least 12 of the organisations that we interviewed, more than any other external software.

The advantages of using Disqus' software, Gupta said - apart from the fact that it is much easier and cheaper (it's free) to set up - include the fact that people believe that "you can really control quality by enforcing certain identities." Disqus allows publishers to choose whether or not to require registration, and allows pseudonyms when people register, but they are the same pseudonyms across all the sites that use Disqus.

Gupta believes that this is also beneficial for the user. One of the reasons Disqus was founded, he said, was in response to the "siloed, disparate experience on the web for a user."

"One of the benefits of a common tool is that it makes it much more frictionless for a user to be signed in every place they go - that reduces a lot of the barriers," he said. "Another benefit is developing a track record and reputation that they can show on their commenting profile from site to site and that the publisher can also see."

This track record can also be useful to moderators when they are going through comments. Each commenter has a reputation category - low, average or high - so reliable commenters are distinguishable.

The Mail & Guardian, South Africa, said people can always get around "the system" but that the ranking function helps understand frequent commenters. "People can get a high or low reputation. It will happen when people comment quite often and so they get a track record. If they get deleted a lot their reputation gets lower and lower. I remember one reader having to get banned. It's so rare though,"

Based on reputation signals combined with positive feedback from the community, Disqus provides a sort-by-quality option to try to keep the better comments at the top and the "riskier" ones further down, or collapsed.

Disqus is also seeking to solidify a new revenue stream for the publishers that use its commenting tools: Promoted Discovery. Publishers and brands who publish content can place promoted links alongside the organic recommended links that Disqus provides. Links can only be to editorial content, and not to a store or service. It's optional for publishers, Gupta said, but many have opted in.

## Making the value of comments clear

"I think the biggest challenge is understanding the value in a very tangible way of comment discussion and community-building," Gupta said. The tool's redesign seeks to make measuring the value of comments a little less "fuzzy," he said.

Disqus has been tracking how many people scroll down to the comments on a page, and found that 54% of all visits to sites that use Disqus see the comments, up from 42% last year.

Prachatai, Thailand uses Disqus for two

reasons: mainly because it's better for avoiding spam, the editor said, and also because storing the content outside the publication's website might provide them with better legal protection.

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

Kathimerini, Greece, however, said it has had some problems with Disqus: disappearing threads, which anger readers.

Disqus helps you find new and interesting content, discussions and products. Some sponsors and ecommerce sites may pay us for these recommendations and links. [Learn more](#) or [give us feedback](#).

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**Loneliness Can Literally Kill You. Here's How.** New Republic

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**Bill seeking to crack down on graft tabled** 1 comment

**Facebook: Uganda requests for user account information** 18 comments

**Government spends Shs2,500 a month on each citizen's healthcare** 6 comments

**Facebook rejects government request for user's record** 10 comments

What's this?

27 comments

Leave a message...

Best

Community

Share

jojo · 9 hours ago

Tanzania needs to get the message that their indecent expulsion of East Africans is unacceptable especially if it if for political reasons. It was stupid, sectarian and regrettable.period. If East Africans are illegal in any East African country..then what is the East African Community about?

11

^

↓

Reply

Share

Comments powered by Disqus on The Daily Monitor's website

47

## Facebook comments

Another external software option is Facebook comments. The social network offers a commenting plug-in that news organisations and others can make use of to allow comments on their sites.

A key motivation for implementing Facebook comments is that Facebook's real name policy is expected to 'civilise' the conversation. Another is that it is free and easy to implement, and that it potentially increases visibility of, and traffic to, the publisher's site, as by leaving a 'Post to Facebook' button checked, readers will also

be posting stories to their friends' news feeds when they comment on a site, with a link back. It can also be used in parallel with an organisation's own system.

As Facebook explains on its site, "Friends and people who like the Page can then respond to the discussion by liking or replying to the comment directly in the news feed or in the Comments box on your site. Threads stay synchronized across Facebook and on the Comments box on your site regardless of where the comment was made."

24.com publishes all comments posted on articles provided that they adhere to our Comments Policy. Should you wish to report a comment for editorial review, please do so by clicking the 'Report Comment' button to the right of each comment.

▼ COMMENT ON THIS STORY 17 comments

ADD YOUR COMMENT

Comment 1500 characters remaining

f POST COMMENT

**Cj Venter** - August 30, 2013 at 15:02 [Comments Policy](#) [Report comment](#)  
haha, fraudsters copying fraudsters, go figure.  
64 2 [Reply to Cj Venter | 2 comments \(hide\)](#)

**Freddie Miller** - August 30, 2013 at 15:13 [Comments Policy](#) [Report comment](#)  
How dare he... that is the preserve of ANC cadres only.  
24 3

**Atheitis** - August 30, 2013 at 15:41 [Comments Policy](#) [Report comment](#)  
Are they so sure he is an imposter?  
22 1

**Lawson Lutchman** - August 30, 2013 at 15:03 [Comments Policy](#) [Report comment](#)  
Give this man a bells!

News24's comment section, using Facebook Comments

Facebook also offers moderation tools:

- Admins can choose to make the default for new comments entered either “visible to everyone” or “has limited visibility” on the site (i.e., the comment is only visible to the commenter and their friends), to help mitigate irrelevant content.

- Admins can also blacklist words and ban users. If a new comment is published from a banned user or contains a blacklisted word, this comment will automatically have limited visibility.

It also offers a grammar filter, which will add punctuation and spaces, expand slang words, fix common grammar mistakes (e.g. dont), and trim extra white space.

Several news organisations have chosen to use Facebook for commenting.

“Early in 2012 we made two fundamental changes to the system which greatly improved the quality of comments and our ability to weed out the trolls. First, all commenters must log in before commenting. They can do this only with their Facebook account. This means that we can track users and their accounts on our system, and take the necessary steps should they contravene our policies... The obvious advantage is that they have Facebook identities - you’d be able to block, delete profiles that don’t meet standards. Once we did that we saw an increase in quality (and a little decrease in volume). Some people complained that they didn’t want to go on with Facebook but it wasn’t a lot so we went ahead with it. They have a choice to share on Facebook or they can untick the box.”

📍 **News24, South Africa**

“We think users have already created profiles and they use them for all kinds of things (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook). We use them to log into so many services that I think we want to be an extension of this ecosystem: using it for our website and linking back

and forth with our content. These people get to know each other. There is a sense of community... That community is already there. The idea of a news site, or any site, being a destination is a question and we go where our readers are.”

📍 **Dallas Morning News, US**

However, not everyone is so positive about it.

“We experimented using Facebook as a platform for comments on a sub-site about a year ago. It lasted about three months and we decided it doesn’t work for us... Our volume of actual dialogue dropped to almost nothing. People were too reluctant to have their real name associated to their identities when they were participating in that stuff. So instead of 40 comments, and constructive ones, there are five comments spouting out their own opinion and not caring what they say. So even though it’s free, it didn’t work. Basically, to me, people who move to Facebook comments are saying that they don’t really care if there is no discussion or community going on in their comment thread.”

📍 **The Seattle Times, US**

“We tend to notice Facebook users are more deplorable and aggressive. It’s always very surprising since their name is associated with it. With BuzzFeed comments you can make up your own name.”

📍 **BuzzFeed, US**

“A lot of people think that Facebook comments are a saving grace. It increases your Facebook sign-ups, maybe, but I don’t like it because I don’t like giving up my content to a third party like Facebook... if Facebook goes away I don’t know where those comment threads will go. I want us to own the comment threads.”

📍 **The Denver Post, US**





# Issues and challenges

## Legal accountability: awareness and repercussions

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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.

### Lack of clarity

There was a striking lack of clarity concerning the precise laws surrounding reader comments. The view that this is a hazy area with little legal precedent came up again and again:

“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**

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

🗞️ **Haaretz, Israel**

“It’s a bit of grey area in Canada. We have a disclaimer that says we are not responsible for what our users post. We take the approach that would not want anything illegal on our site and we’re careful to not allow that but I think it’s largely untested in Canada.”

🗞️ **Winnipeg Free Press, Canada**

“Right now, it really depends on a judge or a lawyer asking for us to be held accountable. It has never happened though. There’s no clear law in Brazil about that.”

🗞️ **O Globo, Brazil**

“That’s a grey area. There’s no law, no criminal defamation in this country anymore. No going to court, or anyone, else for a comment. The government has repeatedly over the years threatened to bring about guidelines that would include the registration of websites. For any site that has news, there are various extrajudicial ways to control the content on these sites, but there is no law that holds me accountable for the content that goes up on the site or in comments.”

🗞️ **Groundviews, Sri Lanka**

“If we’re responsible just because we’re moderating comments I’m not sure, I guess we would be, but that has been changing over the past couple of years depending on each case. I don’t think we would be but I don’t think that’s decided.”

🗞️ **Die Zeit, Germany**

“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 proactively 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**

“It’s a grey area. But we consider ourselves legally responsible.”

📍 **Corriere della Sera, Italy**

“We don’t really know what the legislation is on that. We think that the disclaimer is enough to disassociate us from the comments.”

📍 **El Siglo del Torréon, Mexico**

## Repercussions

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What is clear is that the fear of being liable for reader comments leads to two quite different moderating strategies.

In many countries, including much of Western Europe, news organisations are liable for comments if they moderate pre-publication, but not if they leave them to be reported by readers.

In the case of The Economist, UK, for example, the legal liability is a key reason for choosing a reader-reporting approach. “It deters us from moderating [comments] more accurately: it deters us from things like reading every comment. There are lots of reasons why we don’t want to read every comment before it appears, but one of them is the fact that there would be lots and lots of decisions that we would have to make that we could then be held responsible for. If we wait for the users to complain then we don’t have to make those decisions and we can’t be held responsible for getting it wrong.”

Some aren’t deterred, and moderate regardless:

“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**

In other areas, the threat of liability is the reason for much tighter pre-publication moderation.

At Radio Television, Serbia, “We would prefer to leave the comments really open but the kind of language used is just not acceptable, simply impossible. Better to be safe than sorry. According to Serbian law, comments are part of the story and you are responsible for the content. We are totally responsible for whatever comes out on our website so we have this need to control things.”

At the New Zealand Herald, which also moderates pre-publication, “We do not publish any content that is potentially libelous. In keeping with New Zealand law, we

do not publish any comments that can be considered discriminatory on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual preference, nationality, age, disability, etc.”

At the Apple Daily, Taiwan, the publication is not afraid to take responsibility for comments, the editor said. But in order to protect their readers, they only leave comments up for 24 hours, as the police can demand IP addresses of commenters.

## Specific legal cases

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Many of the publications had not seen any legal action taken against them. The most common reasons for those that had, were for libel and defamation. Some examples:

Der Standard, Austria, explained that if anyone feels a comment is defamatory against his/her person, they can ask the newspaper for the user data to sue that person. The paper has to consider if that person is rightfully asking for the user data, if not, then the paper is liable, and there have been cases where they have been sued. In one instance, a public authority asked for the user data of someone thought to have published confidential information. The paper made the decision not to give the authority the user's data and were sued, but they won.

Prachatai, Thailand, experienced a widely-reported legal case that began in 2009. In 2012 a Thai court found web editor Chiranuch Premchaiporn guilty for failing to react quickly enough in removing some comments that were critical of the country's royalty. She was given an eight-month suspended jail sentence and a fine of 20,000THB (€483). Under Thai law, inter-

mediaries are deemed responsible for third-party content. After the case, the paper closed the online forum discussions, which had provided an open platform for people to discuss 200 to 300 topics a day. That produced a huge amount of content to be monitored: 2000 entries per day. Comments at the end of the stories are less demanding and overall less risky, Chiranuch said, as there are fewer, they are shorter, and they are more focused on the story.

IDNES, Czech Republic, has seen two cases. In one case, readers wrote comments that claimed a real estate company was treating its clients badly, and the company sued IDNES for leaving the comments up. “Our opinion was that they were writing their experiences and that's okay,” the editor said. IDNES won the case.

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

Público, Portugal, is currently involved in a legal case in which both the editor and the person who published the comment are implicated. The anonymous comment accused a lawyer of corruption.

## US vs EU intermediary protection laws

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The laws protecting news websites from liability for comments vary widely from country to country. In their role as 'intermediaries,' news outlets bear a degree of responsibility for the content written by others on their sites, often depending on the level of involvement they take in publishing the content.

The US has the most favourable intermediary liability laws, said Andrew McDiarmid, senior policy analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Democracy and Technology. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act shields intermediaries from liability for third-party content even when they do take some kind of editorial action.

"No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider," reads Section 230, specifying that: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be held liable on account of... any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected."

As McDiarmid explained, this means that "the operator of a site is free to moderate and cultivate the sort of environment they want without assuming total liability for everything that they do let through."

"We feel very strongly that liability for intermediaries – whether that be someone like Facebook that hosts a broad array of content online or someone like a newspaper that is opening up their site for comment and conversation – neither should be held liable for what is effectively third party content that they don't control the creation of," McDiarmid said.

"In Europe, the line is drawn in a different place," he said. "We've seen some cases where simply creating a space that invited certain types of content, even if not intentional, has led some courts to place liability on the site operator."

In the EU, intermediary liability is regulated by the Electronic Commerce Directive (EU Directive 2000/31/EC). According to a press release at the time of the adoption of the directive's legal framework, "To eliminate existing legal uncertainties and to avoid divergent approaches between Member State, the Directive establishes an exemption from liability for intermediaries where they play a passive role as a 'mere conduit' of information from third parties and limits service providers' liability for other 'intermediary' activities such as the storage of information."

It is this policy that has led to the prevalence of notice-and-action or notice-and-takedown systems that mean that content hosts are essentially liable for content once it has been drawn to their attention that it is offensive or potentially illegal. The problems with this system, McDiarmid said, are both that although something like copyright infringement can be relatively easy to spot, defining something as defamation would usually require some legal analysis, and that many intermediaries will almost invariably comply with takedown requests if they face liability, without necessarily considering whether the content actually merits this.

It is extremely important to protect intermediaries from liability, McDiarmid said, and allow open space for expression and counter-speech. "Inevitably, as you try to create rules that limit the space for expression there will be mistakes and over-broad application, and valuable speech will be chilled as you try to curtail what is illegal and offensive."



# Freedom of expression: moderation promotes rather than limits

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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 that they have a right and obligation to protect their own site:

“People are free to express themselves everywhere but this is our publication and we decide what to publish on it. I think it's a misconception when people think that we are responsible for taking care of the freedom of expression by publishing everything that comes in.”

📍 **Helsingin Sanomat, Finland**

“Freedom of expression is quite different. This is about posting something on a platform that someone owns, which is open for opinions but only abiding certain rules.”

📍 **Reuters, UK**

“We are not a government body so we are not responsible for ensuring freedom of speech – we provide a message board and we maintain it so it's our responsibility to make sure that the content there is not offensive or against the policies which people come to our site for.”

📍 **The New York Times, US**

“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**

“We are hosts of our website. When you invite someone to your home you don't allow them to say hate speech, so why on our website? While we believe in freedom of speech and free Internet, we just don't want some comments to be on our website.”

📍 **Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland**

“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**

Another was that, as aptly expressed by an editor at Serbia's Juzne Vesti: “we don't ban free speech, we ban hate speech.”

“We are not censoring points of view, we are censoring the inflammatory way things are said.”

📍 **O Globo, Brazil**

“Freedom of speech is not freedom to insult each other. We are responsible for having a civil debate”

📍 **La Tribune de Genève, Switzerland**

“The person will often know that their comment is not going to be published: they are being violent, offensive and they know a newspaper would never publish. If the person wanted their comment to be published they could have written it in different language.”

📍 **Zero Hora, Brazil**

Several argued that by moderating comments they were ensuring freedom of expression rather than limiting it:

“I would say that sometimes not deleting a comment is more limiting to freedom of expression rather than deleting it. That is a space for debate and should not become a space where the ones with a louder voice and insults prevail. Moderation is important to protect everyone’s freedom of expression”

📍 **La Repubblica, Italy**

“We do believe that people’s freedom of expression is limited within other rights. We do believe that people have the right to get along, to inform and discuss openly. But we have established that if we delete something it is impinging on the rights of others. It is very exceptional and therefore we would not think that we are censoring anybody.”

📍 **El Espectador, Colombia**

“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**

“I’ve seen a lot of abusive comments from government leaders using different names and they appear on Burmese Facebook - hate speech to small minorities. It’s very damaging and I don’t feel guilty preventing the spread of hate speech.”

📍 **The Irrawady, Myanmar**

“We only block comments when they are offensive, we’re not limiting freedom of expression, we are protecting people from offensive content”

📍 **El Mercurio, Chile**

Several find the balance between ensuring free speech, while maintaining a constructive dialogue, to be tough.

“It’s an everlasting struggle to publish as many as possible, to allow everyone to have their say without destroying meaningful conversation. For example, if we are in the middle of an important political discussion in our comments and you have two sides - e.g. pro-life/pro-abortion. If you allow 20 comments in a row that are pro life - that is not meaningful, but should we let everyone say that? ... Are we too lenient? Are we too harsh? It’s a day to day discussion. We are trying to have as much published without insulting, without hurting feelings or committing any form of discrimination.”

📍 **Blic, Serbia**

“We often discuss within colleagues whether a comment should be published or not. We really try our best to allow everyone to express themselves but they should follow the rules and not be offensive”

📍 **Público, Portugal**

“There are tough calls to be made every day. We have readers that are widely accused of being anti-Semitic for example. These readers, in some cases, are very knowledgeable and they are able to cite the historical precedents but to the extent that they are still using stereotyping language. We’d still have to respond and recognize the potential for it to be interpreted as hate speech. That’s just one example.”

📍 **The Wall Street Journal, US**

“Sometimes I read things as the comment moderator that I don’t feel too comfortable about but are just differing opinion: you have to be as neutral as possible. We had someone say everyone who is gay should be murdered - no doubt that should be removed. So I think a lot of it is just sitting there and thinking, I might not agree with what this person is saying, but we do also value that people have different opinions. Once you are attacking someone you’ve crossed the line.”

📍 **BuzzFeed, US**

“I think, if you delete comments simply because they might be offensive then you might run into trouble because it might become a form of censorship. so you shouldn’t over-edit. We are very careful, we want people to debate on our website, we don’t want to stifle any voices – that is our general view. So mostly we’ll delete it because it’s defamatory.”

📍 **City Press, South Africa**

But for others there’s a clear line between what’s passable or not.

“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**

Vorarlberg Online in Austria also said that as long as there are clear guidelines in place, it’s easy to know when a commenter crosses the line.

## Tackling hate speech

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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.

As *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland said, “the line between hate speech and opinion is very thin. We don’t want to be censors but we have to take care, it’s really thin and really difficult.” The paper uses its readers to help decide whether things are worthy of deletion: “everyone who is reading the opinion can indicate a plus or minus on a comment. If we are not sure if we should keep it, we look at how many thumbs up or thumbs down there are.”

“Hate speech in the South African context: there is a requirement that there be an imminent danger,” said *City Press*. “It’s a bit difficult to classify something as hate speech without going to court, but particularly with some of the comments on race, for example if there’s a call to action to attack another race group, that would be approaching hate speech.”

“We have a law against hate speech – it’s probably a law that hasn’t been used very much because it’s really difficult to use, I think,” said an editor at a paper in Denmark.

Many specified that their guidelines ban hate speech, but few have proactive measures to tackle it and most are not educating their readers and commenters on this issue. Just telling people not to do something doesn’t mean that they won’t do it, and doesn’t mean that they will understand why.

None of the publications truly had proactive ways to invite minority opinions. Many expressed a similar strategy to *Público*, Portugal: “We have rules on countering hate speech and xenophobia but we don’t actively invite minority opinions. We just hope to have them.” The *New York Times*, US, did stress that when selecting comments for the NYT Picks section they “try to get a wide range of views that are interesting”. This includes minority viewpoints, which on the *New York Times* site, means conservative.

## How much action should publications take?

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The main way that hate speech is being directly dealt with is by deletion. All publications delete comments that they consider to be hate speech, whether they find it or they are alerted to it by their readers. Most will not take any further action. Even though challenging hateful comments with counter-speech, rather than silencing them, might be considered by many to be a more effective method to truly tackle hate speech, the legal, moral and reputational risks mean that this is not a real option for most.

Several publications who moderate pre-publication said that they are seeing less and less hate speech because commenters have come to realize that there's no point in posting it, as it just won't get through the filter. This is not always a reliable preventative measure, however, as getting hate speech past even rigorous automated, or even human, filters can be done if it is subtle enough. Le Monde, France, sees "extreme right propaganda on racist issues," but it is difficult to block the individuals posting it "because they became very subtle and never really cross the line despite trying to be provocative."

Although not targeted specifically at hate speech, many news organisations are taking measures to tackle the wider issue of incivility in comment threads.

Real name policies are generally seen as encouraging more respectful and less uncivil conversation. For some, it is the anonymity of the Internet that enables the kind of anti-social behaviour such as hate speech. "It is time for Internet intermediaries voluntarily to consider requiring either the use of real names or the registration of real names in circumstances, such as the comments section for news articles, where the benefits of anonymous posting are

outweighed by the need for greater online civility," believe the authors of the book 'Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet,' Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf.

"Most of our commenting is constructive. We are a real name community so our readers are not the average web reader hiding behind a cloak of anonymity. We have real name standards here and commenting histories and profiles are visible so it's almost like a social network," said The Wall Street Journal.

When IDNES, Czech Republic, switched to a real name system, "The quality improved dramatically," the editor said. "The comments are much better now and we don't have to erase so many."

But, as identified previously in this report, despite the problems associated with anonymity, it is also considered by some to be an essential guarantee of free speech, and real name policies are hard to enforce without asking for some kind of official identification, which is likely to limit participation.

Staff involvement in the discussion threads can also help to clamp down on incivility. "The best way to ensure the discussion is fruitful is when we also participate and we try to do it more and more," said Der Standard, Austria. "We've discovered that participating in discussions is probably the best way to raise the level of debate. People act very differently when they see that somebody from the newsroom is actually involved in the discussion," said Die Zeit, Germany.



## Specific cases

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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."

A report from the Nairobi technology centre iHub and the crowdsourcing company Ushahidi also found that online hate speech proliferated in the weeks before the March 2013 elections<sup>1</sup>. The researchers began collecting information in September 2012 and recorded hate speech by degree of severity with the goal of finding non-governmental solutions to combatting hate speech and the possibility that it could spark violence on the ground. The Kenyan government reportedly used a software to identify hate speech, but the researchers in this case used their own eyes to identify hate speech in different vernaculars that could circumvent automated filters.

During the elections, Kenyans were mindful of hate speech with the violence and mass displacements from the 2007-2008 elections not far behind them. However, the Star, Kenya said its decision to pre-moderate was not just to shield its readers, but because the government was essentially calling on news publishers to play a role in preventing the spread of hate speech.

"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."

The editor believes, however, that the government should play some role in reducing the volume of online hate speech. He suggested that a few of the more "rabid" distributors of hate speech should be charged and fined to "send a message." However, he said that the government seems to be tending towards censorship for everyone: "They have a list of words that Kenyans should stop using. I really worry about that -- you're talking about a very serious direct threat to media freedom."

Groundviews, Sri Lanka, has seen a major reduction in hate speech, the site's founder reported, due to his efforts to educate and engage with commenters. "When we started there were a lot of trolls and I suppose looking back the majority were trolls and hate speech," he said, but "now I'm barely taking down anything unless it's totally off topic."

If the site receives an unsuitable comment, in the case that the commenter has provided a valid email address, "I say to them 'hey, you have a really good argument but the way you've said that, or couched that, contravenes our submission guidelines.' And I urge them to rewrite the comment and submit it back for consideration. And surprisingly around 90 percent, when there's a valid email address and I've written to those folks, they've gotten back with a comment I could put back."

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1 Umati; Monitoring Online Dangerous Speech, February and March 2013 report. Ihub Research and Ushahidi

# Best practices

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The over-arching aim of moderating comments is to cultivate a comments section that is informative, accessible, interesting to read, and adds value to the journalism and to the publisher's site as a whole. To achieve this, editors and managers should promote respectful dialogue and conversation rather than uncivil rants and insults, and allow intelligent, thoughtful

input to shine while discouraging unsubstantiated hate and offence.

But how to succeed in this? Based on our conversations, we have identified some best practices to assist news organisations in their comment strategies. Further examples can be located in the key findings section.

## Publish guidelines for commenters

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These should be clear, thorough, transparent suggestions that enable the news organisation to host an intelligent discussion and defend your moderation decisions. Including proactive suggestions can help foster constructive commentary rather than merely a list of 'don'ts.'

Ideally, as well as expressing a zero tolerance policy for hate speech and illegal content, guidelines should:

- Describe the kind of environment the publication hopes to create and the kind of discussions it hopes to have
- Clearly define hate speech, defamation, libel etc.
- Promote opportunities for counter-speech
- Encourage commenters to substantiate their opinions with facts
- Remind commenters that they should be discussing the issue rather than attacking each other

## Hire a community manager to keep on top of conversations

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Hiring staff to working solely on comment threads and user generated content can be a hard sell in tough financial times. But to effectively cultivate constructive discussions, gather relevant input and protect readers from abuse, it is necessary to allocate dedicated staff to this task rather than relying on journalists or editors who will have many other duties to fulfill.

An ideal solution, if resources allow, is to appoint a community manager to animate and guide conversations in addition to moderators.

## Encourage journalists to participate in conversations (unless you have a specific reason for not doing so)

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As described above previously, staff participation is widely believed to improve the quality of discussion, and research supports this. It is also likely to get readers coming back and commenting more on a site: for readers who are passionate about a particular news source, being able to enter into conversation with a particular journalist is an exciting opportunity.

“We also know that – we’ve done studies into it – having that staff presence early on in threads on our site, dramatically increases the tone of the conversation that follows. It lessens the need for moderation as well because it sets a high barrier and also gives people direction. It encourages people who have never commented before to take that leap of faith”  
🐞 **The Guardian, UK**

Journalists can both pose and answer questions, respond to criticism and highlight the most interesting comments.

At De Standaard, Belgium, journalists pose questions to the readers for them to respond to in the comments section. “The questions are embedded in the article and this guides the conversation if they are answering a particular question. We ask questions daily and they can respond via Facebook, Twitter, or in the comments. There’s also a whole page in the newspaper about it.”

Many editors and managers expressed frustration at the reluctance of other staff to get involved in comment threads, which seem to be frequently regarded with disdain by more traditional journalists. This is a mindset that is changing in many areas of the world, and it could be hastened by making a concerted effort to attract higher quality comments.

## Find ways to surface most valuable comments

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Ideally, a news organisation’s comments areas should be interesting to read even for those who don’t comment themselves. To create this sort of space, it is essential to make sure that the most interesting comments are easy to find.

As well as making the good comments more visible, this also serves to reward and encourage those commenters who have made contributions that are worth reading. An added bonus is that these comments can then be used by journalists to add value to their stories.

Letting readers like or dislike comments is a good start to this: it not only enables a

way to display the most popular comments, but also lets readers feel as if they have a further chance to participate in the conversation. Helsingin Sanomat’s approach, in Finland, which allows users to not only say whether or not they disagree but also whether or not they believe the comment was well-argued, is particularly interesting.

Staff picks are a way to further highlight the best comments but also to show commenters that staff are reading and value their input. It is also a chance to showcase the wide range of opinions that readers can offer, and to show other potential commenters the kind of contribution that the publication values.

## Give feedback and educate your readers

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To grow and strengthen your commenting community, give feedback to readers who might not have intended to offend, rather than simply deleting unsuitable comments with no information.

News organisations report that educating does make a difference:

“If people have a question they can email and someone will get back to them and explain. Part of it is educational... Sometimes, it’s people who don’t realise that it’s a legal issue or that what they were talking about could be deemed offensive in conjunction with that story. Most of the time people realise and apologise and we don’t have further problems with them.”

🐞 **The Guardian, UK**

“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**

It can be done simply:

“What we try and do is when you remove a comment the moderators can choose from a dropdown list of reasons for why the comment has failed. That’s something that the user would see.”

🐞 **BBC, UK**

“If this is not a spam message, we explain why the comment was deleted: usually ‘offense’ or ‘swear words’.”

🐞 **Sloboda LLC, Russia**

“In the thread appears: “this comment was rejected by the moderation team because it violated ... [x guideline].”

🐞 **La Nación, Argentina**

Or more inventively:

“I will ask blocked readers who come back to me, to do a quiz on our terms and conditions. Then I know they’ve read it. If they get 100% on the quiz they can come back... Before a comment is removed two people have to find it offensive. First the reader and then the moderator. So if the reader doesn’t think it should be blocked I tell them it’s offended two people, so maybe try rewording it. Try and think why someone thought it was offensive and rewrite it.”

🐞 **Winnipeg Free Press, Canada**

## Seek legal advice and share with staff

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Our interviews showed a distinct lack of clarity about the legal situation regarding third party content hosted on a news site. It may well be that, due to a lack of precedent, there is a good deal of foggi-

ness around this issue in many countries but despite this, any moderators, community managers or online editors should have up-to-date knowledge of the situation.

## Other ideas worth considering:

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- 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.”
- Increase transparency by debating community management, like Der Standard, Austria: “Community management is also debated in a special section of the website.”
- Encourage those who complain about comments to contribute directly to the discussion, like Libération, France, where politicians sometimes get in touch because they want to respond to a comment: the paper encourages them to create a profile and answer directly.
- Moderate the moderators: with a moderating team, news organisations should ensure that there is regular discussion between the team and superiors to check that standards are clear and being met.
- Seek to protect minority opinions: if minorities constantly feel they are being overwhelmed by the majority, they will stop contributing to the conversation. If a publication moderates actively, they can use this procedure to ensure that minority voices aren’t continuously drowned out.



# What's next?

“We’re really ready for a more comment centric future. It’s democratising, and I think we should be held accountable, and for the journalistic excellence of our work. Our readers are relentlessly energetic and have a very discerning eye for what are the strengths and weaknesses of this content, so it makes us better journalists and our news organizations are much more plugged into the modern era.”

🗨️ **The Wall Street Journal**

Comments from readers are going to be playing a role in the digital future of news organisations, whether they like it or not. The ways that they are being used are constantly evolving and interesting new initiatives are emerging.

## Pinning comments to individual paragraphs

Project Syndicate allows readers to choose to pin their comments to a specific paragraph in an article so that users have the ability to comment on a specific point, argument or idea. A small dialogue box appears alongside each paragraph as you scroll down an article, prompting readers to comment. When a comment is made relating to a particular paragraph, a pin appears beside that paragraph and readers can click on that to read those comments.

“The content we produce is exclusively opinion and commentary so each article is making an argument or point on an issue. We liked the idea of allowing users

to agree with or debate specific points of an author’s opinion,” said Project Syndicate’s founder, Nicolas Chatara-Morse. “We saw this as an engagement tool, but also thought of it in academic terms, where one has to defend certain points in his or her thesis.”

“What is the purpose of comments, generally?” Chatara-Morse continued. “I see it as the reader’s (or user’s) chance to contribute his or her voice, opinion or ideas to the discussion that evolves from a piece of content. We have given our readers a tool to focus his/her voice on a specific point of that discussion.”

If Soros were right, and Germany had to choose between Eurobonds and the euro, many Germans would surely prefer to leave the euro. The new German political party would attract much more support, and sentiment might shift. The euro itself would be finished; after all, its primary task was to break the Bundesbank's dominance in monetary policy.

But Soros is wrong. For starters, there is no legal basis for his demand. Article 125 of the European Union expressly forbids the monetization of debt.

Worst of all, Soros does not recognize the real nature of the eurozone's problems. The ongoing financial crisis is merely a symptom of the monetary union's underlying malady: its southern members' loss of competitiveness.

The euro gave these countries access to cheap credit, which was used to finance wage increases that were not underpinned by productivity gains. This led to a price explosion and massive external deficits.

Commenting during your visit up and up the site is a great feature.

Gunnar Eriksson Expand

Gunnar Eriksson 4 May 2013  
In reading Mr Soros propositions in New York Review I did not get the impression that he intended neither Germany nor Greece should leave the Euro, but rather be prepared to discuss the EUKO problem in a more intelligent way. He appear to me have some success as Professor Sinn. Expand

Guillermo Fernandez 4 May 2013  
The fact stated by professor Sinn its hard to be argued, its pretty clear Southern countries have loose competitiveness while relying their dependency on northern neighbours. This result from the tandem: bad leadership and uncontrolled subsidies. This funds originally provided to help our countries to Expand

William Wallace 4 May 2013  
In the case of Spain, it was the massive inflow of hard funds

Project Syndicate's comment system allows users to 'pin' comments

A similar process has been adopted by Atlantic Media's digital business news outlet Quartz and Twitter's blogging platform Medium. Quartz calls its reader contributions 'annotations' rather than comments,

and Medium calls its version Notes. "The goal is to encourage more thoughtful and directed conversation," Quartz senior editor Zach Seward told Nieman Lab<sup>1</sup>.

## Wider, focused discussions around specific issues

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One of the problems with just allowing comments on individual articles is that you might have many different articles on a big topic, and thus the discussion will be fragmented.

The Washington Post. US, has been addressing this, along with the fact that, as Cory Haik, the paper's executive producer and senior editor for digital news, said: "What you get is a lot of volume of conversation on stories - things that are hot issues - but you don't always get that meaningful response that you are looking for."

After the US Supreme Court's ruling that it was illegal to prevent gay couples from marrying, the paper decided to tackle UGC on this issue in a different way, creating an interactive app that asked readers to choose a variety of statements to explain how this decision affected them.

It was important, Haik said, to "offer a way for folks to respond in a meaningful way - we were looking to understand where our readership was, we were genuinely interested." The app was packaged with every story on the groundbreaking decision.

The results were displayed in the form of a Venn diagram, with comments below in a grid that showed which statements each had picked. This served to tell its own story, showing the views of more than a thousand readers and correlations between their varying opinions.

It was a "huge team effort" across the newsroom, Haik said, involving the audience development team and interactive graphics department as well as the reporters and editors who were covering the story. But there is potential to 'templatise' such an app so that it could be more easily adapted for different issues, Haik said.

Without some form of 'templatisation,' creating such apps would be a challenge for smaller news organisations. But finding different, visually-attractive ways to display comments gives them the chance to truly shine in a digital publication.

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1 <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/08/exegesis-how-early-adapters-innovative-publishers-legacy-media-companies-and-more-are-pushing-toward-the-annotated-web/>



**In their own words**

3,598 total responses

As an individual in a same-sex relationship I am restricted to the states that have laws that would recognize my marriage rights legally. But these are not necessarily places I want to live. My hope is that the Midwestern states will follow suit and I can be close to my family there.

June 26

I was married heterosexually, but then my husband had gender reassignment surgery as a transsexual in 2004. We remained married, but because of DOMA, I was no longer allowed to be on her federal government medical insurance, even though we were still legally married in EVERY state of the union.

June 26

Heartwarming to know that a friend and his partner of 34 years have been shown the respect their relationship deserves.

June 26

I think same sex partners should be allowed to register as domestic partners to receive tax benefits, health insurance, property, etc. However, I do not agree that they should be allowed to marry. Historically, the social mores fell then the collapse of civilization followed.

June 26

It forces a significant segment of society to accept deviancy on par with normal human beings. A true disappointment from SCOTUS ... again

June 26

It's of historical significance that the day after the Voting Rights Act is gutted this decision comes down. What do these two decisions mean about our country's current views of justice? Has there been a major shift when it comes to thinking about social equity?

June 26

Who someone loves is personal. Family is not determined by what sex you are, but rather by the love and commitment of it. The state does not need to determine who you may marry. It's a fairness & equality issue.

June 26

I do not understand how the fore fathers define marriage as being between two people, without a man and a woman is impossible To have birth. I believe that gays should have rights but that should not be called marriage. Its should be called civil unions just like the Netherlands. may God help us

June 26

I am a foreign national married to my American same-sex partner with whom I have two biological children. Today's decisions impact enormously on our legal rights and socio-economic situation as a family - and give us added faith in both the legal system and the country as a whole.

June 26

## Bringing comments up beside the story

Comments have traditionally lived below the article, sometimes only visible when deliberately expanded: they are an addition to rather than a part of the story. The New York Times has started to change this: in a prototype of a redesigned article page that was released in March 2013 but has yet to be implemented, comments are shown alongside the article rather than below it.

For some stories, comments have been given an even higher status, brought into the body of the story as pullout quotes. As noted by Journalism.co.uk<sup>1</sup>, the first article to experiment with this was a story on altering the DNA of oranges to save them

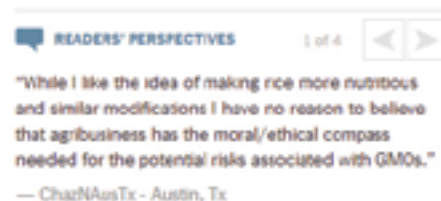
from disease. A few paragraphs in, a quote from the reporter, Amy Harmon (accompanied by her picture), invites readers to, “share your perspective on the issues raised in my article. What are the main considerations that inform your opinion on genetically modified foods?”

These ‘reader perspectives’ are then displayed at several points throughout the story, offering a carefully-chosen range of viewpoints.

As well as providing a clear signal to readers that their comments are highly valued, reader input on a divisive issue such as genetically-modified foods can be a fascinating complement to a story.

“It’s easy for someone who can go down to the grocery store and buy anything they need to be against G.M.O.’s,” said Dr. Jaynes, who faced such barriers with a high-protein sweet potato he had engineered with a synthetic gene.

To Mr. Kress in early 2011, any comparison to Monsanto — whose large blocks of patents he had to work around, and whose thousands of employees worldwide dwarfed the 750 he employed in Florida at peak harvest times — seemed far-fetched. If it was successful, Southern Gardens would hope to recoup its investment by charging a royalty for its trees. But its business strategy was aimed at saving the orange crop, whose total acreage was a tiny fraction of the crops the major biotechnology companies had pursued.



The New York Times has placed reader perspectives within the main flow of the story

1 <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/new-york-times-elevates-comments-from-below-the-line/s2/a553677/>

## Live chats

Several news outlets operate live chats with reporters, editors and others, sometimes in addition to, sometimes as an alternative to comments. These might be regular appointments with a specific reporter, or on important issues as they arise.

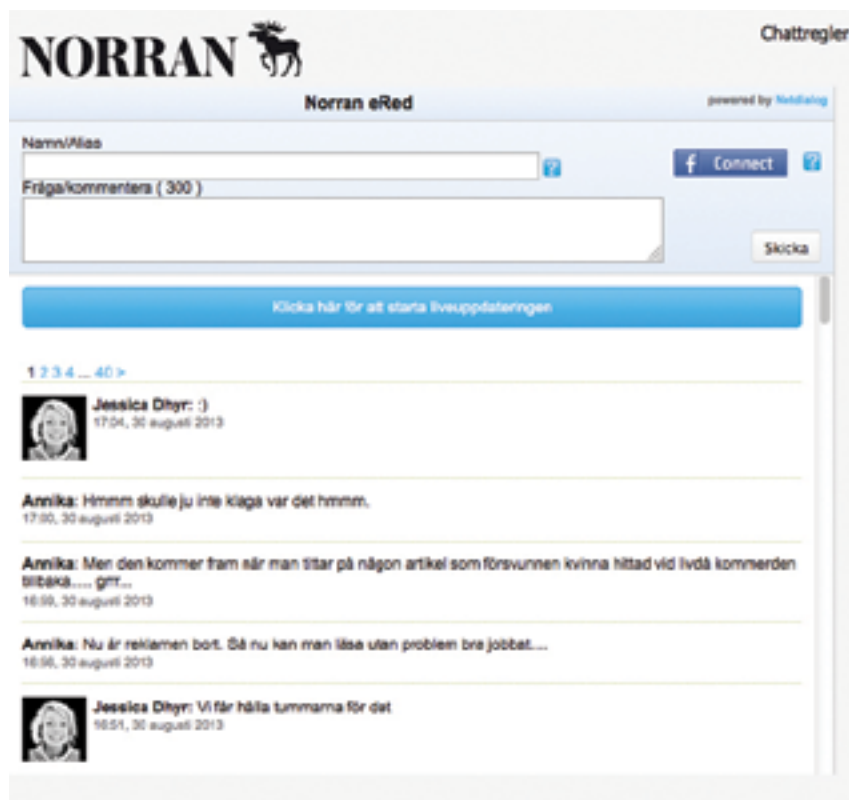
The Seattle Times, US, hosts live chats with experts and reporters on specific issues, the editor said. "We can weed out bad questions that way, it can be an alternative to comment."

Norran, Sweden, operates a continuous live chat on its home page with a web editor, offering readers the chance to directly ask questions about coverage, and provide

tips for stories. Unlike the requirements for leaving comments, users can participate without an email address.

At Le Monde, France, comment sections are seen as a space for readers to express themselves and journalists do not get involved: live chats, led by journalists are the key way that the staff participate in discussions with their readers.

At news outlets where journalists struggle to find the time to regularly interact with readers via comment sections, a scheduled live chat can be a good way for readers to feel as if they have the chance to truly interact.





## Reactions as well as comments

Providing the option to click a button to express a particular emotion about an article allows readers to react to a story without necessarily putting effort into composing their own comment. It has the potential to both encourage more overall reactions to an article, while eliminating some of the less thoughtful comments.

Buzzfeed, US, provides buttons such as 'heart,' 'OMG,' 'WTF,' 'LOL,' 'cute,' 'win,' or 'fail,' to allow its readers to easily react to an article.


As described earlier, editors can react to comments, giving them 'badges,' such as

a shaking head badge to note that a comment is not seen as appropriate, discouraging other readers from responding. A gold star on a post, meanwhile, means that a BuzzFeed editor thought it was interesting or useful.

These buttons and badges are clearly suited to BuzzFeed's type of content, but a more traditional news organization could adapt the idea accordingly: it provides a straightforward way for readers to interact with articles and for editors to interact with readers.

ebfruchu A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **EW** about 4 hours ago

mollieh5 A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL** about 4 hours ago

**emilyc14**  
about 4 hours ago


Um, okay. So this is me. I'm @poopcutie on Twitter. I started the board a long while ago and it's just now getting attention. Thanks for the recognition!!!! Follow my Pinterest board :)

RESPOND 0 2 SHARE

E B A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL** about 4 hours ago

misaor A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **WIN** about 4 hours ago

kanelbulle A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **WIN** about 4 hours ago

gailshor  A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **FAIL** about 4 hours ago

copykiwicatbird A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL** about 4 hours ago

Kellystardust A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **WTF & LOL** about 4 hours ago

JoselynT A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **WTF & LOL** about 4 hours ago

laurenwynne A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL & WIN** about 4 hours ago

matthewo6 A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL** about 4 hours ago

Jk2the4th A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **LOL** about 4 hours ago

cated A Pinterest User Has Been Attributing... and thinks it's **TRASHY** about 5 hours ago

# Conclusion

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As journalism increasingly tends towards becoming a dialogue between reporters and readers, online comments and other reader input will only become more important. The challenges they pose are not going to go away, but they can be addressed, and the potential of comments to make a positive contribution to a news outlet is considerable.

Broadly, news outlets are moving through three stages in their approach to tackling online comments. The first challenge is how to avoid offensive content appearing on your publication, and this was clearly a first priority for those we interviewed. The editors and managers we spoke to were clear that they believe news organisations need to maintain significant control over the content on their sites, and it is important that they are confident in the methods they establish to manage user contributions.

Once a news outlet has found a strategy to deal with this, they can move on to looking at how to cultivate a robust, constructive dialogue on their sites that is a draw in itself, and then finally focus on how to make comments a truly valuable, integrated element of their publication.

Some have already embraced their readers' input with open arms, but for many, a change in mindset from seeing online comments as a burden to seeing them as an opportunity is an essential step to making them actually useful. It isn't just the moderators who need to see the potential in commenting, but the editorial team as a whole.

Getting to the point where you can make best use of online comments also requires investment in resources and intelligence, which is particularly challenging at a time when many news outlets are struggling to establish sustainable digital businesses. More effective automated filters will undoubtedly be developed, but there will continue to be a need for human input in the moderation process and consequently for well-trained moderators and community managers.

The benefits that many see from comments – from feedback and ideas for stories, to genuine loyalty and trust that leads to more visits and time on site – are significant and increasingly important for news organisations in times of tough digital competition.

Predictably, in many cases it is the big, well known organisations that are leading innovation in comments. But smaller news organisations can learn from these and take the results of the experiments that suit them.



## Who we interviewed

We spoke to staff at 104 news organisations across 63 countries. Depending on the size of the operation, those in charge of online comment moderation included online editors, community managers, social media editors and more. On some occasions we spoke to the editor-in-chief as the person with final oversight.

For the sake of simplicity we have generally credited quotations to the publication itself: for the specific staff member please see the list below.

Country	News organisation	Staff member	Title
Albania	Panorama Online	Bruna Prifti	Online editor
Argentina	La Nacion	Rodrigo Santos	Social media and community editor
Australia	The Age	Daniel Sankey	Online editor
Austria	Der Standard	Christian Burger	Community editor at derStandard.at
	Vorarlberg Online	Marc Springer	Editor-in-chief
Belgium	De Standaard	Lies Lecomte	Site manager
Botswana	Botswana Guardian and Midweek Sun	Justice Kavahebatui	Reporter
Brazil	Folha de Sao Paulo	Roberto Prata de Lima Dias	Assistant managing editor
	O Globo	Pedro Doria	Executive editor
	Zero Hora	Barbara Nickel	Online editor
Bulgaria	Capital Weekly	Joana Markova	Social media and online community manager
Cambodia	The Phnom Penh Post	David Boyle	Managing editor
Canada	Winnipeg Free Press	Wendy Sawatzky	Associate editor for digital news
Chile	El Mercurio	Gonzalo Vega Sfrasani	Sub-editor, opinion and internet
Colombia	La Silla Vacía	Juanita Leon	Founder and editor-in-chief
	El Espectador/ICCK	Diego Carvajal	Head of online portal
Croatia	24sata	Bojan Rodik	Community manager
Czech Republic	iDNES	Tomas Ventura	Deputy editor
	Project Syndicate	Nicolas Chatara-Morse	CEO
	Project Syndicate	Lola Boatwright	Global relations manager



Country	News organisation	Staff member	Title
Denmark	Politiken	Christian Lindhardt	Managing editor for politiken.dk
	Kristeligt Dagblad	Maria Lyskjær Mansfeldt	Social media manager
	Jyllands-Posten	Tine Tholander	Community manager
Egypt	Al Ahram	Ahmed Feteiha	Business editor
Estonia	AS Eesti Ajalehed	Allan Sombri	Head of content development department
Finland	Helsingin Sanomat	Paula Salovaara	Managing editor
	Kaleva	Markku Mantila	Editor-in-chief
France	Libération	Olivier Costemalle	Deputy editor-in-chief for online
	Le Monde	Julien Laroche-Joubert	Head of innovation
	Le Monde	Morgiane Achache	Digital project leader
Germany	Süddeutsche Zeitung	Stefan Plöchinger	Online editor-in-chief
	Berliner Morgenpost	Sonja Haase	Online editor
	Die Welt	Holger Melas	Commissioning editor
	Die Zeit	Sebastian Horn	Community & social media editor
Greece	Kathimerini	Nikos Konstandaras	Managing editor
India	Mint	Sundeep Khanna	Executive editor
	The Times of India	Rajesh Kalra	Chief editor of the Times online
	DNA	Mahafreed Irani	Online editor
Indonesia	Jakarta Post	Riyadi Suparno	Vice executive director
Israel	Haaretz	Lior Kodner	Head of digital
Italy	La Stampa	Anna Masera	Social media editor
	La Repubblica	Alessio Balbi	Editor
	Corriere della Sera	Paolo Rastelli	Online editor
Jordan	Al-Ghad	Mo'taz Fouqaha	Multimedia and social media supervisor
Kenya	The Star	Dickens Olewe	Web administrator and journalist
	The Nation	Collins Nabiswa	Social media editor
Lebanon	An Nahar	Ayad Wakim	Project coordinator
	Al-Akhbar English	Jamal Ghosn	Managing editor



Country	News organisation	Staff member	Title
Lebanon	NOW	Michel Farha	Office coordinator
Malaysia	The Star	Philip S. Golingai	Online editor
Mexico	El Siglo de Torréon	Javier Garza	Deputy editorial director
	Animal Politico	Adrian Saravia	Head of design and production
Morocco	Lakome	Ali Anouzla	Online director
Myanmar	Myanmar Times	Ross Dunkely	Founder/owner
	The Irrawaddy	Aung Zaw	Founder and editor
Namibia	The Namibian	Johnathan Beukes	head of online division
The Netherlands	Volkskrant	Laurens Verhagen	Editor-in-chief volksrant.nl
New Zealand	The New Zealand Herald	Cathy O'Sullivan	Online editor
Nigeria	The Nation	Lekan Otufodunrin	Online editor
Norway	Bergens Tidene	Hilde Sandvik	Culture editor
	Fædrelandsvennen	Malin Schulze	Head of social media
Oman	The Times of Oman	Moign Khawaja	Web editor
Pakistan	Dawn	Zaffar Abbas	Editor
	The Express Tribune	Jahanzaib Haque	Web editor
Peru	El Comercio	Maricella Arias	Deputy manager of digital content
Philippines	The Philippine Daily Inquirer	Abelardo S. Ulanday	Associate editor for online
Poland	Gazeta Wyborcza	Mateusz Szaniewski	Social media manager
Portugal	Público	Hugo Torres	Online community manager
Russia	Sloboda LLC	Kseniia Gribkova	Web editor
	MOE!	Vladimir Mazenko	Editor-in-chief
Serbia	Južne vesti	Vitomir Ognjanovic	Owner
	Južne vesti	Predrag Blagojevic	Editor-in-chief
	Blic	Marko Stjepanovic	Deputy editor-in-chief of integrated newsroom and executive editor for online
	Radio Television Serbia	Rade Maroevic	Online editor
Singapore	The Straits Times	Eugene Leow	Online editor
Slovakia	SME	Filip Struhárik	Editor, online discussions

Country	News organisation	Staff member	Title
South Africa	Business Day	Riaan Wolmarans	Executive editor for digital at BDlive and Business Day
South Africa	The Mail & Guardian	Adrian Ephraim	Online news editor
	News 24	Jannie Momberg	Editor-in-chief
	City Press	Liesl Pretorius	Digital editor
Spain	Vilaweb	Vicent Partal	Founder and director
Sri Lanka	Groundviews	Sanjana Hattotuwa	Founder
Sweden	Norran	Jessica Dhyr	Web editor, journalist
Switzerland	La Tribune de Genève	David Haeberli	Head of online
Taiwan	Apple Daily	Daisy Li	Animation news director
Thailand	Thairath	Chavarong Limpattamapanee	Chief of information centre
	Prachatai	Chiranuch Premchaiporn	Editor-in-chief
Turkey	Hurriyet	Cihan Celik	News editor of Hurriyet Daily News
	Dogan Group (Posta + Fanatik)	Ça rı Türkkorur	Digital media director
UAE	Gulf News	Anupa Kurian	Head of Readers' Desk
Uganda	The Daily Monitor	Raymond Mpubani	Online sub-editor
UK	The Economist	Mark Johnson	Community editor
	Reuters	Margarita Noriega	Community editor
	The Guardian	Laura Oliver	Community manager
	The Times	Ben Whitelaw	Communities editor
	BBC	Trushar Barot	Assistant editor, BBC News' UGC and social media hub
Uruguay	El Observador	Carina Novarese	Head of digital

Country	News organisation	Staff member	Title
US	The Wall Street Journal	Demetria Gagellos	Community editor
	The Seattle Times	Bob Payne	Editor, partnerships & audience engagement
	Buzzfeed	Lili Salzberg	Community moderator
	Dallas Morning News	Carmen Cano	General manager, digital & innovation
	Dallas Morning News	Michael Landauer	Digital communities manager
	The Denver Post	Dan Petty	Social media and engagement editor
USA	The New York Times	Bassey Etim	Community manager
	Gawker Media Network	Lauren Bertolini	Community development manager
Vietnam	VietnamPlus, Vietnam News Agency	Le Quoc Minh	Editor-in-chief
Yemen	Yemen Portal	Waleed Al-Saqaf	Founder/administrator
Zambia	The Post	Bivan Saluseki	Managing editor

## We also spoke to:

- **Keith Bilous**, CEO, ICUC
- **Ro Gupta**, VP business development, Disqus
- **Cory Haik**, Executive Producer and Senior Editor of Digital News, Washington Post
- **Gary Kebbel**, Director of Center for Mobile Media, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- **J  remie Mani**, CEO, Netino
- **Andrew McDiarmid**, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Democracy and Technology
- **Tamara Middleton**, CEO, eModeration
- **Natalie Jomnini Stroud**, Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies and Assistant Director, Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, University of Texas at Austin



# Join the World Editors Forum

The World Editors Forum is the network for editors within the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

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WAN-IFRA's members are located in over 120 countries and have a combined reach of more than 18,000 publications, 15,000 online sites and 3,000 companies.

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This vast network allows us to connect and support editors and newsroom executives across the globe as they navigate the journalistic and publishing challenges of the digital age.

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The World Editors Forum's activities are underpinned by three core values. These are a commitment to editorial excellence and ethical journalism and an unyielding belief in press freedom.

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For the past 20 years the World Editors Forum has proved its value as a supportive partner to editors: providing information and intelligence from daily news on our blog ([www.editorsweblog.org](http://www.editorsweblog.org)) to in-depth reports such as this study.



Key to our success is our ability to connect editors around the issues that matter - from digital transformation and its effect on newsrooms to disruptive competition. We help editors anticipate changing reader habits and manage ever-smaller budgets so they can focus on their wider, vital role in society.

The World Editors Forum is guided by a board of editors, representative of the media community from all corners of the world.

If you would like more information about how we can be of value to you and your organisation, email David Newall at [david.newall@wan-ifra.org](mailto:david.newall@wan-ifra.org).

To join our network go to [www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/membership](http://www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/membership)

# WORLD EDITORS FORUM

within



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