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February 2013
COMM 522

Feeding the Beast, Starving the Troll

As news organizations like NPR are flooded with reader comments, strategies differ on how to separate the wheat from the chaff

As a producer at NPR's Social Media desk, Wright Bryan has personally sifted through thousands and thousands of passionate, eloquent and intelligent reader comments over the years. If you ask him, however, about his most memorable experience with a commenter, he doesn't hesitate for one second:

"Oh man," says Bryan. "This one troll. Wrote the most vile words, all over our site, for a period of *years*. We tried to have discussion with this person, we even talked on the phone, but nothing worked. This person just refused to give up. It was the worst."

Though NPR's troll was eventually vanquished by a beefed-up moderation policy, Bryan's conundrum is a representative microcosm of the larger world of reader comments on news websites.

As the popularity of reader commenting [explodes](#) across the board, news organizations are instituting a [wide variety](#) of measures to moderate, censor, promote and simply try to get a grip on the expanding mass of user feedback. Simultaneously, a small group of persistent trolls and spammers are making life difficult for the men and women behind the curtain, as well as frequently, and disastrously, poisoning the larger well of thoughtful reader commentary.

At NPR, editors and producers are pleased with the newest iteration of their commenting system, the byproduct of over four years of trial and error. However, in the tumultuous commenting landscape, it's hard to know what (or who) is coming next.

"We want to make the first comment a good comment"

For the NPR Social Media team, change has been a long time coming. NPR first started allowing comments on its website in September 2008, and has actually retained its core "[community discussion rules](#)" ever since then. What has changed since then, as social media project manager Kate Myers explains, is the technology and moderation policy.

"Initially, all comments were published immediately, and then post-moderated," said Myers. "As the years went on, the volume of 'flagged' comments started overwhelming our team of three moderators. We decided to experiment with different types of moderation to lighten their burden as well as improve the quality of the comments."

According to Myers, NPR [decided to partner](#) with an external moderation company – [ICUC Moderation Services](#) – in October 2010. According to Bryan, the presence of a small, dedicated core group of trolls – as well as the increased prevalence of spammers – were both major contributing factors in the decision to outsource moderation duties. After being trained to follow NPR's community discussion rules, ICUC moderators took on the brunt of the "abuse queue" of flagged comments, as they do to this day.

In March 2011, NPR [launched a trial period](#) of a “pre-moderation,” where all new users had to undergo a test to make sure their comments adhered to NPR guidelines before they were published. If approved, commenters were then given free reign to post straight to publication.

“We went on with that system for a while, and actually saw quite a few positive benefits and more quality comments,” said Myers. “However, as we kept moving forward, we found that it was a hard system to maintain.”

NPR’s final shift in policy occurred in late 2012, when they [switched](#) to a “topical” system of pre-moderation. This means that on typically “controversial” categories of the website – such as news and blogs – comments are pre-moderated. Everything else on the website – arts, culture, music and books – is post-moderated. NPR also switched to the popular [Disqus](#) commenting platform.

“Everything we do to reduce negative impact on our community in terms of moderation is to allow the great comments to come through,” said Myers. “We want to make the first comment a good comment.”

Similar problems, different strategies

Elsewhere around the web, news sites are [dealing with the same issues](#) as NPR – a small amount of aggravating spammers and trolls – while also trying to highlight and elevate the discourse of their growing commenter-ships.

Jeff Sonderman, a digital media fellow at the Poynter Institute, is one of the media journalists reporting at the forefront of this digital sea-change.

“Some sites - like [NyTimes.com](#) - choose to only enable comments on some stories, so their staff can keep up with pre-moderating everything. Others – like the [Huffington Post](#) - allow comments on all stories but focus [their moderation efforts](#) on posts that attract controversial comments (racial issues, deaths, etc.). Some – like [Gawker Media sites](#) - have really strong communities that can do a lot of self policing of comments. Either way, it's up to the news organization to make sure it does what's necessary to maintain standards,” said Sonderman in an e-mail interview.

Sonderman also points out that the issue of anonymity is a [major player](#) in the online commenting world. Some news sites have [openly embraced](#) the traditional virtue of anonymity, whereas others have [turned the other way](#) towards Facebook comments, which tie a real name to every comment, often [diminishing trolling](#) in the process.

Sonderman said that neither philosophy is airtight in terms of achieving perfectly open forums for discussion that are also hate and spam free, but both offer constructive ways forward for busy news sites and their comment-happy readership.

As for trolls and spammers, Sonderman says they’ll always be somewhere on the Internet, but, “...they also tend to seek the path of least resistance. If you manage comments well, you can chase them from your site, and they’ll spend their time elsewhere.”

“Trouble and disappointment” to “awesome”

For the NPR crew, cultivating a productive and harmonious commenting community has been a laborious process that is just starting to bear fruit.

“Comments were often a source of trouble and disappointment for us in the past,” said Mark Stencel, NPR’s managing editor for digital news. “We had a lot of intelligent discussions that were being drowned out by useless and hurtful jabber – jabber that required a lot of people time to police and moderate.”

Stencel said that an “overwhelming” desire from polled NPR listeners to increase moderation in comments sections was behind the site’s recent experiments and expansion of pre and post moderation.

“People expect public media – like NPR – to be a gathering point, but not a gathering point for people who troll for sport,” said Stencel. “The Disqus system – which enabled comment threading - has allowed us to elevate good comments from smart people, and we love hearing from them.”

While Stencel is very rosy on the quality of discussion going on in most NPR web stories as well as the potential of users as a “second set of eyes” to educate journalists and correct mistakes, he is also careful to set ground rules and remain realistic.

“You still have to be careful with comments, because they can turn into bar fights pretty fast,” said Stencel. “There have been times when our sources and subjects of articles have come under fire in the comments, and it has personally hurt the people we were covering.”

“The commenting public is very subjective, excited, angry, and often all of the above,” said Bryan. “It can be hard to carry on a conversation like that when you have to be restrained and objective as a journalist. In my opinion, that’s why it’s hard to bring a traditional news organization like NPR into the new online world.”

So it goes for NPR, caught in a grand balancing act between helpful commenters and trolls; old media and new media; moderation and freedom.

“Comments are capable of educating us, and they’re also capable of producing a great deal of acrimony,” said Stencel. “If they can make our journalism better, though, then that’s awesome.”

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