

How to make story comments better



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I didn't write this column by myself. But we'll talk more about that later. For now, let's acknowledge that the news industry has experienced several spasms of doubt over the inclusion of readers' comments on stories.

In 2005, the Ventura County (Calif.) Star made media headlines and lit up the blogosphere when it yanked reader comments for a week because of a spate of hateful, racist and insensitive remarks about some of its stories. The debate resurfaced again, for the same reasons, in late 2006 when the Arizona Daily Star, Tucson, pulled down comments from a number of its stories and reconsidered whether to maintain the service.

And last summer, bloggers and media pundits debated it all over again after the WNYC public radio show "On the Media" did an extended segment about the topic, questioning whether story comments undermine the credibility of mainstream media news outlets online.

As long ago as June 2005, in a column on Poynter.org, media pundit Steve Outing called story comments a minimal "first step" in opening up newspaper Web sites to more reader involvement, adding, "It appears to remain threatening to many people in the journalism and publishing professions."

Almost exactly three years later, The Roanoke (Va.) Times editor Carole Tarrant told "On the Media's" Bob Garfield, "It surprises me that this conversation still keeps coming up because I thought this was dead. I thought we'd had this in like 2002. And papers are getting in this conversation and acting surprised that there's this ugliness out there."

These are just a few examples of advocates in the industry who say we need to invite more interactivity on our Web sites, not less. We need to acknowledge the legions of our audience that aren't content to be passive news consumers.

So why are we still debating whether readers should have their say on the stories we write? I'm here to suggest the following:

First, we should keep readers' comments on our stories. Period.

Second, we should keep discussing it — but the discussion should be about how to do it, not whether to do it.

Third, we should come to grips with the fact that there are morons among us, trolls who say any nasty thing that pops into their heads. They shouldn't be allowed to ruin it for the rest of us.

Fourth, story comments may make us more credi-

ble as sources of news — not less.

As far as my first point is concerned, I'll be brief: We're here now. We've invited story comments. Bloggers have encouraged comments for a decade — in fact, you're not really blogging if you don't invite comments. We can't retreat now.

So the issue needs to be about doing it better, raising the level of discourse on our sites and with our stories. How can we do that?

Participate. Let them know you're there. If you have story comments, you should be involved with them. Respond to readers. Post moderators' notes when you delete or close comments. Let them know you're paying attention. Most readers appreciate it because it keeps the discussion civil if everyone knows "mommy's watching."

Be clear and conversational about the rules. Yeah, the lawyers will want to have their say and your "official" commenting guidelines may be expansive and full of jargon. But you should have a simple statement that spells out your expectations. We basically have three rules on my newspaper's site: Keep it clean, keep it civil (no personal attacks) and keep it on topic. Throw in that warning against saying things you wouldn't want your mom to hear — and you'll cover a multitude of sins.

Be merciless in enforcing the rules. When you're in the trenches, it may become tough to define "civil" discussion, but keep this in mind: You want readers to feel welcome and comfortable.

Look for tools that will help. Registration is a must, so you can ban trolls. Some other features you might look for include:

Allowing readers to "rank" comments and hide comments that don't rank high enough (and letting readers set their own threshold). See digg.com as an example.

Sorting comments — either newest first or oldest first. USA TODAY does this well, using Pluck as its tool.

A profanity filter. Almost every site has a form of this. Azstarnet.com actually lets readers choose whether profanities should be filtered.

The ability to highlight or feature the best comments. The New York Times' features a comment on its story pages.

The ability to turn off comments on a particular story — again, a fairly common feature.

Ranking comment authors, creating pride in authorship — a "good karma" system. Slashdot.org does this well.



Encourage self-policing. We make it very clear that we cannot review every comment on the site and that readers are not only invited, but encouraged to report any abuse they see. We have a mechanism in place to address those reports.

Experiment. Look at NewsMixer.us for an example of this. The Medill School of Journalism and Gazette Communications in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, collaborated on a project to provide new ways for readers to contribute. The site allows readers three forms of interaction on a story: Paragraph-level annotations of stories in a question-and-answer format, short Twitter-like quips, and a letters-to-the-editor format.

So, do story comments make us less credible as sources of news? If the Associated Press Managing Editor's survey last

April is correct, editors say yes. In that same survey, however, readers were divided almost equally on that point. We don't know the demographics of the responses, so we can't draw any conclusions. But I want to know this: Is the always-connected, YouTube-ing, blogging, Twittering, Facebook-ing generation more comfortable with the place of conversation mixed with news?

Frankly, I'd like to think so. Because I also know this: When used well, story comments can enhance our journalism. They clue us in to story angles we might have missed. My colleagues have found sources and broken news from what readers have told us. And, as I said at the start of this piece, I didn't write it by myself.

In early January, a 14-year-old boy and his friend died when he wrecked his

mother's car while joy riding near St. Louis. One of the first comments on the story: "Thinning the herd." I queried my followers on Twitter to ask how they'd handle the comment. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last.

I learned a lot about how people feel about story comments. Responders favored them, but wanted a comfortable environment for readers to participate. They acknowledged that it's sometimes worth hearing the coarse remarks, because they tell us something about our community. They reminded me about some of the best tools for managing comments, such as digg.com's.

They helped shape my attitudes about how (not whether) we should continue story comments. And they made this column better. ❖