# Mapping Moderation: Cultural Intermediation Work and the Field of Journalism in Online Newsrooms

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# Certificate of Original Authorship

I hereby certify that the thesis entitled *Mapping moderation: Cultural intermediation work and the field of journalism in online newsrooms*, submitted to fulfil the conditions of a *Master of Philosophy*, is the result of my own original research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award. The human research conducted for this study was granted ethical approval on *9 November 2016* with approval no. 2016/701

Signed:

*Timothy Koskie*

Date: 29 June 2018

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## Abstract

This study investigates the work of moderating and managing audience comments in two Australian online news organisations to find how their staff conceive, practice, value, and develop these new intermediary duties. Using a Bourdieusian analytical framework, it examines whether these work roles operate as new forms of cultural intermediation in news production and how they are influenced by 'the field of journalism', which comprises journalism's power relations, norms, logics and history. Using interviews and participant observation, this study comprehensively documents the distinct objectives, tasks and practices of comment moderators and community managers, as well as identifying the people, aspects of social and cultural capital, and organisational systems that have influenced their approaches to the work.

The study demonstrates that comment moderation and management work culturally intermediate between the organisation, readers, and commenters as fringe producers, with a focus on communicating the organisation's vision for comment sections. However, it finds a distinction between the tasks and workplace status of comment moderators and community managers and reveals prioritisation's importance in shaping discussions' flow and tenor. The field of journalism significantly influences this work, as workers with journalism experience evaluated comments based on their contribution or adherence to journalistic values. Participants' field alignment also affected how they moderated comments or managed their community, with most comparing their comment sections and practices to those of other prominent journalistic organisations.

These results show the need for more development of cultural intermediation strategies and techniques to enable online news organisations to build constructive commenting communities while communicating their editorial values.

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# 1 Introduction

The news media's move to online publishing has brought many changes to newsroom work, with the Internet aiding the gathering and dissemination of information (Ekdale, Singer, Tully, & Harmsen, 2015) and audience interaction adding to already burgeoning workloads, for example with new responsibilities around the verification and curation of 'citizen journalism' (Compton & Benedetti, 2010). For many news organisations, digitalisation and internet publishing have upended their entire business model, as the costs of change management mount and revenue from advertising drops rapidly in the transition to more diversified online news markets (Hanusch, 2015; Paterson & Domingo, 2011; S. Smith, 2017). Yet, while there have been many journalism studies of news work transformation in the digital age (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Chung, 2007; Deuze, 2003, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Loke, 2012; Pavlik, 1999; Rottwilm, 2014; Weaver & Willnat, 2012) there has been relatively little research on how news organisations accommodate and adapt to the work of governing audience comments on news stories.

Online news media are struggling to "find the balance between strategic priorities and cost" (Huang, 2016, p. 19) of hosting and managing onsite comments on their articles, as they are unsure of the value of this activity and the labour involved is not clearly a part of traditional journalism work. Some advocate pushing this activity onto social media channels, and away from in house comments sections (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Goodman, 2013). Academics, news organisations and journalists have different conceptions of how news commenting might contribute to journalism. For Graham and Wright (2015), it can represent an extension of the Habermasian public sphere,[1] while Ruiz et al (2011) note that publications from different media systems can generate different models of comment debate. Researchers also see value in

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1. (Habermas, 1989, 1992, 2006).

commenting's potential to give voice to the silenced (Meltzer, 2015; Meyer & Speakman, 2016)

and to improve the quality of journalism (Morrison, 2017). News organisations and journalists

can see the inclusion of news comments as an evolution in their relationship with the audience

or as a threat to their authority or business model (Goodman, 2013; Hermida & Thurman, 2008;

Huang, 2016; Meltzer, 2015; Robinson, 2010). Lewis (2012) sees some evidence that the

journalism profession is beginning to appreciate audience contributions "and to find normative

purpose in transparency and participation", though Robinson (2010) suggests that the inclusion

of this work within the boundaries of journalism is still contested. Commenting certainly has

economic value in increasing user time on screen and attracting new customers who have the

potential to subscribe (Goodman, 2013; Vujnovic, 2011), though some organisations have

realised this benefit more than others, according to Huang (2016). Some journalists value the

feedback on their work as a guide to correcting or improving their output, and others compete

to attract audience reactions (Graham & Wright, 2015; Robinson, 2010).

Online news organisations must weigh these measures of value against the drawbacks of

hosting comments. Both news organisations and researchers are finding an intimidating amount

of hate speech and abuse appearing in comment sections (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele,

Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; Meltzer, 2015), which can have legal consequences for the publisher

(Huang, 2016; Trygg, 2012) and a negative impact on the readers' perception of news content

(Conlin & Roberts, 2016; Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2016). Some organisations are finding

comments too expensive to moderate (Huang, 2016) and closing them down (Finley, 2015), and

Roberts (2014) notes that commercially outsourced moderation is 'dirty labour': low status,

poorly paid and invisible.

Those organisations committed to this form of participation are taking divergent

approaches to managing their comment sections to mitigate these drawbacks and enhance the

benefits. Where one organisation might focus on hosting an engaging, deliberative discussion,

another might strive to mitigate legal risks (Trygg, 2012). Some organisations filter or 'pre-moderate' heavy-handedly, deleting or rejecting comments in large numbers (Huang, 2016), while others are reluctant to infringe upon users' speech freedoms (Reader, 2012). The 96 news organisations reporting to the World Editor's Forum (WEF, part of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers) initial survey of comment moderation practices (Goodman, 2013) show limited consistency on best practices, such as the use of community management techniques to improve comment quality. While some research has sought to find effective ways to achieve organisational goals in comment sections (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Domingo, 2014; Goodman, 2013), there has been limited analysis of the practices involved in inviting, filtering, managing and capitalising on news commenting (S. Smith, 2017). Organisations' policies and practices are based on their unique news cultures, corporate values, histories, and forms of agency, and in their governance decisions, companies are reacting to and shaping journalism as a profession (Willig, Waltorp, & Hartley, 2015). While there are, to some extent, internationally recognised understandings of traditional journalistic values and practices (Hanitzsch et al., 2011), no such consensus has emerged yet about how to handle commenters, their contributions or their relationships with journalists and each other.

This research tackles a gap in the journalism studies literature to date. It investigates how these new forms of mediatory work have developed within the confines of contemporary newsrooms, what objectives, tasks and practices they involve and what meaning and value commenting has acquired for news media workers. This study analyses comment moderation and community management work in two Australian news organisations to find how it is conceived, practiced, valued and developed by the newsroom staff most involved.

## 1.1 Positioning this new work in the newsroom.

This study proposes that comment moderation and community management be understood as the work of people who Pierre Bourdieu labelled "cultural intermediaries"

(Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu, in his initial use of this term, was referring to all those involved in occupations of "presentation and representation" (p. 359) such as art critics and others who acted as 'tastemakers' — defining, for both readers and producers, what constituted good and bad cultural production and promoting particular ways of life. As members of the petite bourgeoisie, these intermediaries positioned themselves as having the insight of "ideal consumers" (Maguire & Matthews, 2010, p. 408), giving voice to consumer demands, while simultaneously being employed by producers and promoting consumption of their cultural production.

This research will argue that we can also understand the work of community managers and comment moderators as cultural intermediation. Community managers are charged with encouraging audiences to engage in commenting (Bakker, 2014), and this increased engagement is used to support the business model of the organisations (Vujnovic, 2011). They foster the legitimate vision, from their perspective, of conversational environments: as civil, inclusive spaces (Meyer & Speakman, 2016), hosting deliberative debates (Singer & Ashman, 2009), or as tools to increase brand loyalty and improve journalistic production (Domingo, 2014). Comment moderators, on the other hand, reinforce editorial direction more directly, weeding out comments that do not fit the news service's vision of appropriate and valuable public conversation and simultaneously highlighting those comments that do (Goodman, 2013; S. Smith, 2017).

While comment moderation and community management employ different practices to achieve their goals, analysing them as forms of cultural intermediation offers a way to understand how this work promotes the legitimacy, distinction and value of media participation, and how it is seen in relation to traditional journalism production. This framework can be used to show how these new occupations are "routinized and codified" (Maguire & Matthews, 2010) and what practices (tools, codes, techniques and criteria) and objectives ("dispositions, rationalities,

motivations and aspirations") they adopt to accomplish their work and to give value and meaning to it (p. 411).

Despite the fact that much moderation and community management work is done in the newsroom, and often by journalists (Bakker, 2014; Goodman, 2013; Meltzer, 2015; S. Smith, 2017), it is less clear whether, and how, it is part of journalistic work (Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Robinson, 2010). Some journalists and editors feel the work can't be accommodated within work routines (Goodman, 2013, p. 35), does not meet traditional standards of journalism (Singer, 2010) or undermines the authority of the journalist (Robinson, 2010). Journalism, as Lewis suggests, is an occupational ideology based on exerting professional control over news production, and which, "as it changes over time, excludes or marginalizes certain ideas or values just as surely as it codifies and makes salient others" (2012, p. 845). He argues professional ideas about journalism are in tension with participative ideology of internetworked communications, which celebrates distributed control, and "a more engaged, representative and collectively intelligent society" (Lewis, 2012, p. 848).

This study then tests whether the field of journalism is defining how the work of comment moderation and community management is rationalised, practiced and valued in online newsrooms. In doing so, the study strives to answer these interrelated questions:

*RQ1 & 2. What is the work of cultural intermediation done by comment moderators and community managers, and how does the field of journalism influence it?*

To address these questions, however, it also needs to explore the following sub-questions, to see how the answers are related to traditional conceptions of news journalism:

*RQ3. What are the objectives and practices of this work?*

*RQ4. What are the knowledge, skills and education standards of these intermediaries?*

*RQ5. What is the value of cultural intermediation in comment sections, according to the people doing*

*that work?*

Answering these questions will help explain how comment moderation and community management work are regarded and valued in newsrooms, and indicate to what extent their objectives and practices are the result of that news context and their position in the field of journalism. The hypothesis is that the field of journalism will play a defining role in how this work is conducted, perceived and appreciated, due to the profession's historic interest in retaining control over the standards of communication in news production.

### 1.2 Ethnographic observation and field theory analysis.

This study will fill a gap in the literature by cataloguing and analysing the objectives, practices and context of this work as it is performed by editorial workers in online newsrooms. It demonstrates how these activities are commensurate with the work of cultural intermediation, an often overlooked but existing role of journalism (Maguire & Matthews, 2010). The study then uses Bourdieu's theory of fields (Bourdieu, 1993), as applied to news media by Willig et al. (2015) to map these new forms of cultural intermediation work to the larger field of journalism.

Using field theory to understand the dynamics at play in developing these intermediary practices marks a different approach from that of others researching this type of work (Lewis, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011; S. Smith, 2017), as does analysing this work as cultural intermediation. Consequently, this is an exploratory study collecting detailed data on these work roles, tasks, and practices in context. Ethnographies were designed for just this purpose (Robben & Sluka, 2015), and have proven valuable for capturing changes to newsroom work in many studies, as indicated by Cottle (2000) and Singer (2009). Specifically, this study will employ the ethnographic techniques of participant observation (Cottle, 2007) and in-depth, unstructured interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) to explore cultural intermediation work in online newsrooms. The participant observation offers rich empirical data, but that data is limited to

what can physically be observed by the researcher during the periods for which access is granted (Hegelund, 2005). In-depth interviews with the workers themselves then allow insight into other factors that feed into their work and add meaning to what is observed (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

### 1.3 Towards a frame of understanding.

Researchers like Robinson (2007), Anderson et al. (2014) and Meltzer (2015) demonstrate the dilemmas facing news organisations over how to manage user-generated content such as onsite comments, including ensuring editorial quality while hosting public debate, and ensuring civil communications without infringing on freedom of speech. Huang (2016) notes that these tensions have led newsrooms to blame lacklustre commenting sections on commenter behaviour and systems, rather than poor cultural intermediation practices. Consequently, this study, in line with the goals of Bourdieu (1993), strives to reveal the invisible forces influencing news organisations' cultural intermediation strategies in a way that allows for effective critique of these strategies, and also accounts for the individual agency, disposition and backgrounds of the workers. This analysis will help the institutional stakeholders of comment sections, as well as academics researching the dynamics of the field of journalism, to reflect on how comments can be better governed to achieve journalistic goals and improved audience representation. It will also help the news media find ways in which they might more effectively use their limited resources, as Huang (2016) and Compton and Benedetti (2010) found that this new work is arriving alongside tightening budgets and falling revenues for news organisations.

Academically, the significance of this research is that it demonstrates the value of Bourdieu's theories in capturing and understanding the transformations happening in journalism as a result of digital innovations and the economic and cultural shifts resulting from the widespread use of the Internet. The study highlights a potentially growing role for news organisations and their staff in mediating what Ruiz et al. (2011) call the "Public Sphere 2.0",

where users contribute to widely accessible online communities of debate. By differentiating the practices of comment moderation and community management, this study provides more precise details on the material practices involved in this cultural intermediation.

### 1.4 An outline of the study.

Before detailing the methodology of the study and the results, the next chapter reviews the academic literature on interactivity and participation in online news and the work of comment moderation and community management that intermediates these features. Chapter 2 also reveals the changes to newsroom work resulting from digital innovations, which provides the context for investigating new forms of cultural intermediation. Finally, it demonstrates how comment moderators and community managers represent new incarnations of Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries (1984) and how their work, along with the value they invest in it, relates to their alignment with the field of journalism (Benson, 2006).

Chapter Three outlines the research design for this study and discusses the comparable studies (Domingo, 2008; Schultz, 2007) that informed this approach. Chapters Four and Five then detail and analyse the results of the observations and interviews. Each chapter focuses on a different participating news organisation, one a large, legacy commercial news organisation and the other a digital-born, not-for-profit, philanthropically funded, multinational online news organisation.

The final two chapters draw together the data from those organisations and participants for analysis and discussion. Chapter Six explores the implications of these findings for understanding the objectives, practices and value of comment moderation and community management work. It considers the ways in which this work constitutes cultural intermediation, and how the field of journalism has impacted the development of this intermediation. The Conclusion reconciles this analysis with the aims that guide this work as well as examining the significance and limitations of the study and opportunities for further research.

## 2 New News Work and Changes in Journalism

In the introduction, I propose that comment moderation and community management are a new kind of cultural intermediation work for news organisations which struggle to identify the work's practices, objectives and value, as well as its relation to the field of journalism, its professional values and ideologies. This chapter investigates journalism studies and sociological research to define the objects of the study and introduce the theoretical frameworks being employed.

Here, I show how journalism and media studies researchers have explored these new forms of cultural intermediation and where there are gaps in how they define this work and how it is situated as part of journalism. The use of past studies of comment moderation and community management work provided the definitions of the research objects of this study but also revealed where this study could provide further detail to these definitions. The chapter further uses research into journalistic reactions and perceptions of cultural intermediation of comments to map the work to the field of journalism, simultaneously demonstrating how a closer look at the material practices and workers can clarify this link.

The chapter focuses first, however, on outlining how scholars have analysed the tasks, practices and objectives of news organisations' comment moderation and community management work, as well as the value applied to the work and the comments, investigating areas where there is scope for additional detail and problematisation. From there, it looks at the research on journalists and news organisations struggling to accommodate this new work and interactive feature to explore how this context is shaping the work's development. Finally, the chapter discusses how Bourdieu's concepts of cultural intermediation and field theory apply to comment moderation and community management work and its place in the newsroom, providing a way to understand how this new cultural intermediation work might be interacting

with journalistic habitus, doxa, capital and field and how this interaction could be impacting the work's development.

### 2.1 Adopting interactivity through comments.

Chung's (2008) early work on engaging news readers suggests newsrooms introduced new interactive features to their websites during the mid to late 1990s to allow audiences to participate in media production. Enabling audiences to comment on their websites offered the news media a way of pursuing the Internet's potential for 'interactivity', which Domingo (2008) (paraphrasing Downes and McMillan (2000)) defines as "the power of the user of a medium to control the communication flow or even alter the message sent by the producer" (p. 685). Interactivity was initially viewed as an opportunity and a revolution for news organisations that started or moved online (Chung, 2008; Pavlik, 1999) with journalism and media researchers proposing that news production could be transformed by providing audiences space to make comments on the news, to ask questions of journalists, to critique stories and discuss news with other readers (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2003, 2007; Martin, 2002, 2011). Several well-regarded media scholars saw interactivity as a potent force for transformation of both production and consumption of journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 1999, 2003; Mosco, 2005).

Initially, this interactivity was enabled using forum software (Bradshaw, 2018), but it was later positioned blog-style below some news and opinion articles (Goodman, 2013) and from the mid-2000s, invited on branded social media channels (Stassen, 2010). Indeed, Braun and Gillespie (2011) suggest that social media platforms are increasingly the home for this type of interaction, while (Stroud, Duyn, & Peacock, 2016) note a growing number of users will post on a news organisation's social media channels rather than on the news website itself. The news media do not discourage this, as they see social media as platforms where people can say what they like without their own companies being held accountable (Huang, 2016). Some organisations feel comments are better suited to social media, and cite that when they turn their

own in-house commenting systems off, as U.S. magazine *Popular Science* did (LaBarre, 2013).

Indeed there has been some industry debate in recent years about whether onsite news

commenting is worth sustaining (Finley, 2015). However, given the widespread uptake of this

news innovation, it seems important to examine the work it involves and how that work is

regarded to better understand its value and prospects.

There is always reason to explore how, and how vigorously, news organisations might

take up any digital innovation as this may differ from case to case and over time. Boczkowski's

(2004a) study of videotex adoption found that newsrooms take on new technologies that

reinforce their values and assist current methods and standards of production, and discard

innovations that do not. Similarly, Thurman (2008, p. 139) found the news media's adoption of

user generated content was shaped by "local organizational and technical conditions", including

the cost of change. Aside from structural pressures, journalism innovation studies also suggest

that editorial values shape technological-change decision-making. Domingo (2008), in his study

of Spanish newsrooms, found that journalists and editors were hesitant to allow high levels of

interactivity online as they felt the presence of user contributions could undermine their

authority and the quality of their production. Thurman (2008) found news staff were worried

about the quality of user contributions not meeting editorial standards, while Nguyen (2008)

suggested journalists often took a defensive approach to innovation. Other scholars have noted

that journalists and editors have often ignored the content of comments, responding only rarely

(Meyer & Carey, 2014), diminishing the utopian promise of interactivity. Certainly news

organisations' enthusiasm for commenting appears to have diminished over time, as several of

the comment-hosting organisations interviewed by 2013 The World Editor's forum survey of

moderation best practices (Goodman (2013) had stopped hosting comments when Huang (2016)

followed up on that research three years later. Nevertheless, comment sections have become a

staple of many news organisations online and are now broadly expected by users, according to a

survey by Stroud et al. (2016).

While enabling the public's freedom to speak through comments is of concern to the news media (Trygg, 2012) due to editorial concerns about the quality, legality, accuracy and civility of user generated content (Thurman, 2008; Wolfgang, 2018) 'gate-keeping' techniques to restrict access to participation in comments or debate have been introduced over time.[2] News websites now typically require audience members or users to register personal details such as name and email address before they can comment, often asking for personal details from users to determine whether users are genuine (Goodman, 2013). Then the comments users post may go through 'moderation', an assessment and filtering process that prevents poor quality and abusive comments from being published (Domingo, 2011, 2014; Goodman, 2013; Wolfgang, 2018). It is this process of moderation that requires further study, to analyse how this work is rationalised and organised.

In this study, comment moderation refers to the ways that news organisations directly publish, reject, edit or remediate the contents of their comment sections. The term comment moderation here comes from the work by Braun and Gillespie (2011, p. 384), which used it in relation to journalists "…grappling not only with whether the user comments fit the journalistic mission of their sites, but also whether deleting comments or censoring language fits their journalistic principles" (p. 384). This intervention involves a range of practices, but each news organisation employs its own agency in choosing what practices to employ (Goodman, 2013). The practices may include both automated moderation, using software to removing swearing, derogatory or abusive language (Chu, Jue, & Wang, 2016; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011) and human moderation conducted by editorial staff or outsourced to third party firms (Goodman, 2013; S. Smith, 2017). This study is interested in exploring the variety of techniques used to gate-keep the publication of audience comments, as well as techniques used to encourage audiences

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[2] A central concept to traditional journalism, Bruns (2008) defines gatekeeping as "a process of selecting what events to observe, what stories to cover, and what responses to publish"

to contribute high quality comments, which come under the heading of community management.

Community management, in this study, is differentiated from comment moderation by the target of its work. Instead of focusing on comments, it focuses on modifying the behaviour of individuals who may post or have posted a comment and their interactions with others onsite. The term community has many meanings, but here, following Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005), it is used to define a group of individuals with a shared interest in communicating:

> Community has become the 'in-term' for almost any group of people who use Internet technologies to communicate with each other. Depending on whether one takes a social perspective or a technology perspective, online communities tend to be named by the activity and people they serve or the technology that supports them. (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005)

Community managers guide the behaviour, perceptions, and expectations of the online community. For Bakker (2014, p. 598), who studied this developing position in the newsroom, "Community management means surveying the digital environment, but also actively asking for contributions, encouraging users to contribute, and managing and moderating online discussions" (p. 598). Though his definition includes moderation, the community manager roles he described emphasise stimulating quality discussion and encouraging user contributions.

### 2.1.1 Separating comment moderation and community management.

Much journalism research places both comment moderation and community management in some way under the same umbrella. Goodman (2013) describes both in the report section "Best Practices in Comment Moderation." Domingo (2014) names comment moderation as a specific form of news work but does not label more community-focused work as community management. Braun and Gillespie (2011) alternate between the two terms when describing the collection of practices used to mediate comment sections, with no apparent

distinction in meaning. Zamith and Lewis (2014) and Bakker (2014) use 'community management' for both sets of practices while Goodman (2013) refers to them both as 'comment moderation'. This study sets out to distinguish between these roles, and to delineate the mediating tasks and practices they apply to comments sections.

Another reason these roles blur is that they work synergistically. While encompassing different practices, comment moderation and community management can work toward the same aims. Both the rejection and deletion of comments (Domingo, 2014) and the censure or banning of problematic users (Goodman, 2013; Reader, 2012) stem the incidence of poor comments. Highlighting quality comments and promoting community standards are both ways to curate and improve discussions (Huang, 2016). Similarly, there are times when the literature suggests that community management helps comment moderation and vice versa. Redirecting and reprimanding commenters who are violating community standards reduces the number of comments that need moderation later (Goodman, 2013; S. Smith, 2017; Trygg, 2012). Deleting abusive comments is critical in cultivating a space where more users feel safe to comment, thereby benefiting the community of commenters (Meltzer, 2015; Meyer & Speakman, 2016). According to Meyer and Speakman (2016), without some comment moderation, there may not be a community to manage.

It is also possible that there is some overlap between the tasks and practices depending on who is undertaking the role, but these roles are not always mutually inclusive. Goodman (2013), for instance, found news organisations that would delete and publish comments but not communicate with the commenting community. Morrison (2017), on the other hand, shows how news organisations can be more focused on empowering the commenting community than gate-keeping the comments. Separating these two roles then, while acknowledging the ways they work together and overlap, allows this study to explore their distinct objectives, practices and values, and any differences in the status of the work they involve.

### *2.1.2 The location of news commenting.*

While many news organisations now encourage commenting on their branded social media channels, this study will focus on how the news media moderate and manage their in-house or onsite commenting for three reasons. Firstly, while Stroud et al. (2016) found more people posting news comments to social media than news websites, a worldwide survey of online news organisations found many editors see social media platforms as spaces where peoples' comments do not need to be moderated by journalists and where they can say what they like (Goodman, 2013). This means these new types of work are more likely to be performed to mediate in-house comments sections. Secondly, social media platforms perform some of their own moderation practices, meaning a part of the moderation and management of those comments is not being done in a newsroom or by editorial staff and is not easily observable by journalism researchers. This limits the scope of a study on cultural intermediation in news work, and its shaping by the field of journalism. Finally, some news organisations, like *The New York Times*, have managed to make onsite commenting a profitable and beneficial part of their website, while others have found them to be a burden (Huang, 2016). This means it is likely that different approaches to this work can have a significant impact on the success of comments sections and their contribution to audience engagement, yet these differences are documented by very few journalism studies (Bakker, 2014; S. Smith, 2017).

While this study focuses on the work done to maintain comment sections on news websites, that is not to suggest that these comment sections are ubiquitous. Some news organisations have chosen not to host comments or have turned theirs off (Huang, 2016). After all, there are other forms of 'interactivity' available to online news organisations, such as forums, polls, and journalist blogs (Chung, 2008; Fortunati, Raycheva, Harro-Loit, & O'Sullivan, 2005; Garden, 2016) and only a small percentage of users leave comments at any rate (Huang, 2016) – though Barnes (2014) recommends news organisations also consider those who feel part of the

commenting community without commenting. Even news websites that host comments do not always host them on every article.

Nevertheless, comment sections on news stories are possibly the most common form of participatory journalism (Reich, 2011, p. 97), and most news consumers look at comment sections and expect to have the option to comment (Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). This leaves many organisations to find a strategy to accommodate the work the comment sections entail. However, they cannot necessarily turn to the approaches of other businesses that host online communities or forms of user generated content, as these have distinct objectives for their relationship with their user groups. Thus, studies of moderation and community management in other online communities will not necessarily provide deep insight into the work done to maintain news communities.

### 2.1.3 Journalism's approach to online comments and community.

News organisations are not the only bodies to host their constituents' comments or to develop comment moderation and community management practices for governing them. Health care providers are particularly interested in building online communities, for instance, inviting users to leave comments about their conditions, treatment and care, for providers and each other to discuss (Young, 2013). Similarly, governments have created websites to host discussion between users of public services (Paris, Colineau, Nepal, Bista, & Beschorner, 2013). In retail, brands have hosted online discussions as a marketing and customer relations strategy (Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Each case may involve the use of different systems for hosting user contributions, from message boards and forums to customer review postings. In each case the objectives for moderation and management have been developed to support the needs of the field; for Young (2013), health care communities cultivated commenting communities that provided support for the ill, where Jung et al. (2014) found communities supporting the brand and the product.

Online news organisations, on the other hand, try to elicit comments and build communities that complement the products of their work and accord with their journalistic values (Graham & Wright, 2015; Meyer & Carey, 2014; Singer, 2010). Journalism can be understood as a field of cultural production, alongside art and academia, with its own norms, practices and values (Bourdieu, 1999). Journalists have historically been valued for the content they produce and the debates they initiate rather than their ability to cultivate a creative community or reinforce the value of a brand. Consequently, this study is interested in how everyday news commenting, which is not historically part of the journalistic field (Meltzer, 2015), might be shaped by the work of gate-keeping and community management to meet traditional journalism objectives and values.

Theoretical approaches from the social sciences or marketing are not entirely appropriate for this purpose, though they could provide some benefits. Social science studies of community can certainly help us understand individual and social behaviour in online communities. Barnes' (2017) extensive and ground-breaking media sociology of online commenting, draws on insights from psychology and anthropology explore the many facets of how our communicative behaviours shape the cultures of the social media communities in which we participate. Other smaller studies provide insights relevant to communities with distinct objectives.  In the social science study by Kraut and Resnick (2012), for instance, they measured a community's ability to retain members and get people returning to a discussion, an issue that is particularly important to health care and deliberative political communities. On the other hand, marketing research tends to look at the impact online communities have on brand perceptions and consumption (Jung et al. (2014). These approaches can provide deep insights into the formation and operation of online communities, but provide only limited understanding of the specific relationship between journalists, news commenters and the news media.

Journalism studies of news commenting, such as that embodied by the works of Meltzer (2015) and Morrison (2017), instead analyse how comment sections affect, and are shaped by, journalistic values and journalism work. Meltzer (2015), investigating the correspondence between news organisations and journalists, is able to show how these groups are incorporating comment moderation and community management into their routines and responsibilities. Morrison (2017) uses common journalistic values and the views of the journalists, to show how comments can be an extension of, rather than in contest with, journalistic production. Consequently, this study takes a journalism studies approach to exploring the impact that news commenting is having on the work of journalists and workflows of newsrooms.

## 2.2 Taking on mediation work in the newsroom.

Journalism studies research to date indicates that comment sections have indeed had a visible impact on news organisations, journalism and their relationship with the public. Even if journalists are not engaging with the users in the comment section, in-house comments appear alongside their work and on the organisation's website, with reputational consequences. Uncivil or factually inaccurate comment sections negatively affect audience perceptions of the organisations and their work (Chung, 2007), and unattended comment sections give the impression that organisations do not care about users (Goodman, 2013). Simply hosting comments, regardless of their quality or content, can lower the credibility of the organisation and its articles, according to Conlin and Roberts (2016). Singer (2010) and Meltzer (2015) find newsroom staff actively debating how to handle these concerns.

Thus, comment moderation and community management can be seen as strategies to minimise the risks of this new relationship and to explore its potential. Through their strategies and practices, news organisations enact a variation of what Flew (2015) calls 'social media governance', specifically private governance: "the responsible self-management of such sites by companies themselves to achieve broad compliance with social norms and user expectations" (p.

2). However, the news organisations' commenting governance policies go further than this, also achieving "broad compliance" with their organisational and journalistic norms through their community management and comment moderation. This study looks to examine the range of objectives for these forms of work, and how they might be related to traditional conceptions of journalism.

### 2.2.1 The objectives of comment moderation.

There are many conceptions of the objective of comment moderation from the sweeping to the narrow. Meltzer (2015) found organisations looking to foster civility, improve the deliberative quality of discourse, and safeguard their credibility, objectives they adopt from both professional and academic sources. Reader (2012), on the other hand, finds journalists and news organisations focus, potentially to their detriment, on rooting out rough language and impolite speech from comment streams. Overall though, there are three general objectives of comment moderation: quality control, mitigation of legal risks, and abatement of uncivil discourse.

Quality control is a moderation objective emphasised by S. Smith (2017) in his study of Slovakian news organisations' comments work. There, 'quality' comments were those that reflected the moderators' views of deliberative discourse. They were on topic and introduced relevant information. Comments outside this definition were rejected. Quality control was also fundamental to the way *The Guardian* staff moderated their comment sections from the earliest days of the feature (Singer, 2010). Goodman (2013) and Huang (2016), in their reports for WEF, found some organisations used quality concerns as a reason to shut comments off. While quality in these cases was defined by journalists and editors, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) found readers often shared their concerns.

There is also consensus in the literature on news moderation about the importance of mitigating legal risks. The legal risk of comments is that a commenter may defame or vilify a person or group and that the news organisation could be held liable for the content being on

their website (Goodman, 2013). This is an existential concern for some news organisations

(Goodman, 2013; Huang, 2016), as many are running on tight budgets already and can ill afford

the costs of a defamation lawsuit. Compounding this risk is a lack of clarity on how news

commenting is viewed by the law; organisations in the US have been found not liable for the

contents of comments they have not read, but others are being held liable (Goodman, 2013).

Huang (2016) notes:

> In Europe, it is still unclear as to whether or not publishers bear legal responsibility for
>
> reader comments. Last year, the European Court of Human Rights decided an Estonian
>
> online news portal, Delfi, was liable for comments posted by its readers. But this year,
>
> the same court reversed that decision in a lawsuit lodged by two Hungarian websites,
>
> *Index.hu and MTE.* (p. 9)

Consequently, moderation is employed as a safeguard, with organisations deleting or refusing to

publish any comments that risk defamation or vilification according to national laws (Anderson

et al., 2014). This risk is not perceived equally across organisations or countries; Trygg (2012)

found that one Swedish paper incorporated applicable laws formally into their moderation

policy, while legal language was largely absent from *Guardian* policies.

The most broadly discussed objective of comment moderation, however, is to enforce

civility. Uncivil comments in the comments section can be directed at other commenters, the

writers of articles and their sources, or other public targets (Meltzer, 2015). They take many

forms, from simple name calling to racist slurs. Meyer and Speakman (2016) and Domingo

(2014) have found that failing to address this abuse can lead to what Noelle-Neumann (1993)

described as the "spiral of silence", keeping some commenters out of the conversation and

eventually shutting down discussions. News organisations told WEF that this silencing effect can

extend to sources that contribute to news articles, as well, who fear commenters targeting them

(Goodman, 2013). Controlling the civility of discourse in the comment section dominates

research into comments on news stories and the news organisations themselves see it as their responsibility to maintain civility (Meltzer, 2015). This study will examine how moderators from different companies regard the relative importance of these objectives and how they influence the focus and conduct of moderation practices.

### 2.2.3 Comment moderation tasks and practices.

While the Kiesler, Kraut, Resnick, and Ren (2012) study of regulatory behaviour in online communities outlines a variety of practices used in comment moderation, including 'disemvowelment' or removing the vowels of offending posts, and quietly hiding posts that users believe have been published, the journalism studies literature suggests that news organisations only employ a few key practices.

The first is deciding which articles will be open for comments. According to news organisations surveyed by the WEF, editors will often not open comments sections on articles likely to provoke problematic comments, such as race relations, and will lock discussions that attract high rates of comment rejection or deletion (Goodman, 2013). Huang (2016) advocates these strategies, as such debates have the potential to overburden comment moderators.

One of the most common approaches to comment moderation is to pre-moderate comments before they can be published, rejecting any comments that violate the organisation's standards (Goodman, 2013). As notes Silva (2015), there are benefits and drawbacks to this approach:

> The "pre-moderation" strategy, in which the journalist retains a gate-keeping role when assessing every comment before its publication, entails more responsibility and investment from media outlets, as well as normative concerns about the quality of the debate. But mainly due to newsroom budgets and staff (Singer, 2014, p. 60), most news organizations use a "post-moderation" system, in which journalists would only intervene in case of complaints of users or violation of the terms of participation (p. 34).

Given news media are only willing to allocate limited moderation resources, some delay in the

discussion is inevitable in pre-moderation (Goodman, 2013) though particular organisations, like

NPR in the U.S., make a commitment to get comments published within 15 minutes of posting

(Domingo, 2014). To speed up the moderation process, some organisations apply algorithmic

filtering solutions that remove comments that include swearing or other forms of offensive

language, but the complex cultural and contextual nuances of abusive comments make

automated filters often imperfect (Chu et al., 2016; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). According to

Goodman (2013, p. 71), "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

well-trained moderators and community managers" (p. 71). Also, despite the relative

effectiveness of pre-moderating comments to remove direct risk, in some countries, pre-

moderating comments increases the organisation's legal liability for those comments that are

posted (Huang, 2016).

Organisations that post-moderate, allowing posted comments to be published

immediately, deal with problem comments by deleting or hiding them (Domingo, 2014; Singer &

Ashman, 2009). However post-moderated discussions can develop quickly, adding to the

difficulty of the task of finding problematic comments before they can impact the flow and tone

of conversation (Goodman, 2013). Consequently, organisations that have successfully employed

post-moderation have relied on a combination of community management practices and

comparatively high deletion rates to achieve risk minimisation, according to Huang (2016). She

cites an approximately 20% deletion rate for *The New York Times* and even higher for Pakistan's

*DAWN,* a culling that signals to commenters that their posts are being monitored, while

community management techniques persuade them to keep engaging in more appropriate

language. These latter cases illustrate the synergistic relationship between comment moderation

and community management, where community management can reduce the need for comment

moderation (Kiesler et al., 2012) and comment moderation can effect community management

(Chua, 2009). This study will look at both pre-moderated and post moderated comments systems to explore the different types of relationships that develop between those roles in the two contexts.

As well as filtering comments, moderators can remediate them, deciding which comments appear first and how replies are displayed, for instance (Goodman, 2013). These or any other remediation practices, such as comment editing or 'curation', where excellent comments are singled out and ranked higher or differently than others (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011), play a part in comment moderation, making the desired comments more visible or rendering invisible unwanted comments. Software developers can also engage in this work, by designing a system to allow comment ranking (Hsu, Khabiri, & Caverlee, 2009) via up or down voting.

The work of software developers and website designers is key to the conduct of comment moderation, yet remains relatively under-researched. They design the systems that allow comments to be posted and which display those comments (Goodman, 2013), as well as playing a part in programming algorithmic filtering solutions (Chu et al., 2016). According to the news organisations themselves, having a software developer onsite is critical if approaching innovations in comment moderation (Trygg, 2012). However, journalism researchers like Meltzer (2015), Bakker (2014) and S. Smith (2017) say little about their contribution to comment moderation work.

This study will explore the practices of comment moderation in two very different news production contexts, and observe the range of work roles involved from system design to post-moderation intervention, to analyse the extent of mediatory acts performed on news commenting to ensure it meets journalistic objectives.

### *2.2.4 The objectives of community management.*

Where comment moderation curates and remediates the contents of the comment sections, community management focuses on influencing the way participants engage with commenting, journalists and each other. Bakker (2014) puts these workers in a position of actively communicating with the community to promote discussion. The community management job descriptions Bakker studied included objectives such as getting commenters posting, promoting civil and quality commentary, and clarifying or reinforcing the regulations of the comment sections. Interestingly where Bakker's research equates all of these objectives with one role, the community manager, Goodman (2013) identifies them as important aims for online news organisations in general.

A core community management objective is persuading users to leave a comment and participate in discussion. This aim involves more than just attracting higher numbers of comments, however. Domingo (2014), in referring to *The Guardian* as an example of best practices, draws particular attention to their effectiveness in attracting genuine engagement in not just the words, but the ideals, of the comment sections. In doing so, community managers invoke what he calls "the virtuous spiral" (p. 159). In contrast Meyer and Speakman (2016) allude to the community managers' job in avoiding the "spiral of silence" that can occur in comment sections, whereby abuse and negativity can repel commenters, reducing discussion until it disappears. Consequently, Barnes (2014) recommends that websites pay attention to creating an inclusive community, as "the inclusion of 'other voices'—those making active contributions through leaving comments—enhances the overall experience of visiting the sites" (p. 553).

Community management work promotes civil and quality discussions, cultivating an understanding of what constitutes good comment according to the organisation's standards. Goodman (2013) frames this aim as one of educating the community on what to do and what to

expect in comment sections. Morrison (2017) found that quality comments may appear at some

rate even without direct intervention, but nevertheless several researchers (Domingo, 2014;

Meltzer, 2015; Singer & Ashman, 2009; S. Smith, 2017) found newsrooms and their journalists

foster higher quality comments from the community by communicating their expectations and

highlighting commenter behaviours.

Part of fomenting this quality is explaining and reinforcing the news organisation's

community standards, another key community management goal. While online communities

sometimes form their standards through democratic processes (Kiesler et al., 2012), news

organisations generally decide on the standards of conversation applicable to their websites

(Bakker, 2014; Singer & Ashman, 2009; S. Smith, 2017; Trygg, 2012; Zamith & Lewis, 2014).

These standards can include the news organisation's legal concerns or their ideological

aspirations (Trygg, 2012), but generally explain the organisation's policies and goals for the

comment sections. It falls to community management practices to make sure that the

commenters are aware of and adhere to these standards.

### 2.2.5 Community management tasks and practices.

The literature reviewed for this study suggests that there is no one set of practices to

achieve the goals of community management. There is, however, a common theme to this work:

it generally involves communicating, in some way, with the community of users in the comment

section (Bakker, 2014; Domingo, 2014; Goodman, 2013; Huang, 2016).

One key task for community management is controlling access to the community. This is

typically done through the design of registration systems, which can require something as simple

as an email address or real name and personal information (Goodman, 2013). While having rigid

and extensive registration requirements can put off some commenters (Springer et al., 2015), un-

gated online communities can become host to extraordinarily problematic commentary; for

example, one un-gated online Jewish community came to be dominated by neo-Nazis (Chua,

2009). User registration also adds a barrier to bot accounts that automatically post 'spam', unwanted advertisements or propaganda in comment sections (Woolley, 2016). Consequently, user registration has become a common management tool, with the best practice organisations cited by Goodman (2013) and Domingo (2014) all having a registration requirement. A more confronting access practice is closing those gates to users who violate community standards, banning them, permanently or temporarily, from commenting. In the literature, community managers report a great hesitation to doing this (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Goodman, 2013; Reader, 2012). This study is interested in the ways community managers talk about controlling access to commenting, as news organisations have a tendency to over-perceive the amount of abuse taking place (Domingo, 2014) and struggle to balance the public's right to speak with the problems their comments can represent (Trygg, 2012).

A significant task then for community management involves the development, publishing, and reinforcing of community standards. Visible and strategic standards perform a vital function in shaping the commenting community and, subsequently, the comments they produce (Domingo, 2014; Goodman, 2013; Ksiazek, 2015). Consequently, *The Guardian* made its standards clear when first incorporating comments below articles (Singer & Ashman, 2009). Kiesler et al. (2012) argues that these standards provide guidance for comment moderation and even enable users to self-moderate, if they are sufficiently aware of the rules, where Trygg (2012) and Weber (2014) found that commenters self-censor to adhere to community standards if they know moderators are present. Conversely, if standards are poorly explained or inconsistently applied to moderation, users can lash out (Løvlie, Ihlebæk, & Larsson, 2017). This makes analysing the creation, display and adherence to community standards a critical part of understanding contemporary community management practice.

To foster higher quality discussions, another key practice is for community managers to speak directly with commenters, often through posting in the comment sections.

Communicating with the community directly has been shown to have a large impact on the way in which commenting communities develop (Domingo, 2014; Huang, 2016; Meltzer, 2015; S. Smith, 2017). Goodman (2013) found editorial staff will post comments themselves to achieve a number of outcomes, such as highlighting quality remarks and reminding users of community standards, or to step in on threads that are becoming uncivil. Other community managers post to redirect conversations away from escalating abuse (Meltzer, 2015). Commenters often take note of this institutional contribution, and it can have a large impact on how users perceive the comment section and the organisation (Bakker, 2014; Stroud et al., 2016; Zamith & Lewis, 2014) as well as changing commenter behaviours.

Community management practices appear to be more diverse and positively oriented than moderation practices. They include nominating voluntary super-users who may have an expanded function in the comments section, such as rights to flag problem comments, or permission to post comments directly in an otherwise pre-moderated comment section (Goodman, 2013). Some organisations are looking for ways to reward users for quality comments (Huang, 2016). Innovators in a joint project trying to re-imagine comments suggested news organisations reach out to good commenters and offer them the opportunity to write op-ed style articles (Zamith & Lewis, 2014). Yet while many organisations that spoke to WEF about commenting lamented the cost of moderation, few described extensive community management efforts, despite the recognised success of such practices (Goodman, 2013). This makes a study of community management practices timely and valuable.

### 2.3 The challenges of taking up comment sections.

The addition of comment moderation and community management work to news production routines is coming at a challenging time for journalism. A 'journalism in crisis' narrative is pervasive both within the industry (Goodman, 2013) and among academics (Compton & Benedetti, 2010; Deuze, 2008). While the products of journalism now are arguably

better than in the past, according to Hesmondhalgh (2006), there is no denying the impact of

structural pressures such as increased competition and loss of advertising to digital platforms

(Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013; Compton & Benedetti, 2010; Vujnovic, 2011).

Changes in audience, employment and revenue have provoked organisations to take on new

strategies and ventures in order to adapt (Powers, Zambrano, & Baisnée, 2015). However,

adding interactivity to news websites through comments on articles adds its own specific set of

resource management challenges.

There are several obstacles to newsrooms developing comment moderation and

community management strategies. The first and most widespread is the strain on resources, be

they financial or human (Compton & Benedetti, 2010; Huang, 2016). As Huang (2016) notes,

moderation and management are new expenses in what are already financially challenging times.

Resources are made harder to secure by the fact that news organisations have found it difficult to

prove comment sections yield benefits for the organisation that outweigh the costs and risks

(Goodman, 2013). The costs of this new work also have to be considered alongside the broader

intensification of work for news producers (Compton & Benedetti, 2010). Attempting to cut

moderation costs by outsourcing the work brings its own disadvantages, according to

Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011), in the form of losing access to valuable user data and

relinquishing some control over quality.

Certainly, it can be argued that news commenting can support rather than detract from a

news business model and that is why some organisations have taken it up (Vujnovic, 2011).

Some companies have seen comments as a new avenue to profit, with editors evincing a

particular interest in the commercial value of interactive features (Domingo, 2008; Hermida &

Thurman, 2008). Indeed, Huang (2016) identified several best practices cases in his report that

had managed to leverage comment sections into profitable ventures. This study will note any

arguments for the financial viability of news commenting, but that economic rationale is not a central concern of this research.

The more common refrain in industry and academic studies is that hosting comments is a difficult project to rationalise. Goodman (2013) found that most organisations identified no benefits at all, and were simply following a trend in audience participation, with most employing moderation to limit the potential damage of low quality contributions. Journalism studies record a widespread perception that comment sections provide little or no value either for the news organisation or its product, a view held by both editors (Domingo, 2008) and journalists (Bergström & Wadbring, 2014). Where editorial staff do find value in this activity, they are usually newer or younger journalists (Robinson, 2010). Nevertheless, many remain apprehensive about the incivility, irrelevance or inaccuracy of most comments (Graham & Wright, 2015). This tendency for journalists to devalue comments makes the exploration of the work involved in managing them more salient.

Industry research has found that problems with hosting and managing comments are often grounded in a lack of investment and planning, rather than in a lack of intrinsic value for journalism. Huang (2016) and Goodman (2013), after talking with news organisations, emphasise that beneficial comment sections are the result of strategy, effort and investment. Meyer and Speakman (2016) and Domingo (2014) found that diversity and quality in commenting were the products of comment moderation and community management. Meltzer (2015), in looking through 'intramedia' correspondence between journalists, found news organisations and journalists generally acknowledge that civil comment sections require more strategic intervention.

Any industry hesitation to develop such strategy may be due to the difficulties of reconciling this innovation with the traditional values and practices of journalism. Numerous studies have found journalists and editors struggling with how comment moderation and community management fit with traditional journalism objectives, work and values (Bergström &

Wadbring, 2014; Canter, 2013; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Singer, 2010; Trygg, 2012). This conflict between journalistic norms and the new demands of interactivity predates comment sections on news articles (Boczkowski, 2004b; Chung, 2007; Fortunati et al., 2005). Robinson (2007), in her interviews with newsroom staff, noted that editorial staff feared a loss of authority to the audience, hence the title of her article: 'Someone's gotta be in control here!' She found a divide between those journalists and editors who embraced interactive features and those who asserted this work was not the purview of journalism. Hermida and Thurman (2008) found similar issues when looking at British newsrooms, as did Domingo (2008) in his research in Spain. Among the 78 news organisations that spoke to Goodman (2013), were some that felt journalists and editors should not interact with comment sections because intervening in the discussion would clash with journalistic objectivity.

For this research, it is more important to see where work in the comments sections corresponds, as well as clashes, with traditional conceptions of journalism, and where it is being shaped by the journalistic field. This naturally lead to consideration of how commenting has been identified within journalistic frameworks in past research.

### 2.3.1 Seeing and enforcing the values of journalism in comment sections.

A consistent theme in studies about comment moderation and community management is the way these roles represent new forms of gate-keeping. According to Bakker (2014), as much as journalists and news organisations might focus on fostering comments, they are also making decisions about which comments appear and why. Indeed he argues that editorial workers are now more likely to be gate-keeping content that producing it: "chained to their desk and glued to their screen, searching for content, curating content, asking others for content, moderating content and editing content" (2014, p. 603). Domingo (2008) and Hermida and Thurman (2008) also found this gate-keeping position reinforced when comment sections and other user-generated content were in earlier stages of adoption. Goodman (2013) suggests that editors are in

constant dialogue about what kinds of comments should get posted or filtered out – a

conversation with moderators, not commenters. Thus, analysing the gate-keeping practices of

these new mediating roles is an important step in understanding their relation to journalism

work.

From another perspective, it is significant to examine how commenting work is related

to enabling the public to debate and express their opinions, an historic civic or democratic calling

of journalism. According to Braun and Gillespie (2011), "Chief among the principles on which

the authority of journalism rests is the claim that the press advocates for the public, serving as its

voice in a mass-mediated society" (2011, p. 385), a calling that is noted in the U.S. Hutchins

Commission of 1947 (Robinson, 2010). Several news organisations that spoke to Huang (2016)

refused to turn off comments, even if they found them problematic, because they felt a duty to

give people the freedom to speak. Loke (2012) found journalists not only felt that hosting this

content was their responsibility, but even hoped that the public would gain even broader access

to expression as time goes on. She argues that hosting a public conversation, to some journalists,

also means representing the diversity of voices present in society, although the task of ensuring

balanced representation is a new and difficult role that requires some exploration in this study.

Comment sections do not represent the diversity of society well (Diakopoulos &

Naaman, 2011), and are certainly gender biased (Martin, 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). Some

commenters also actively try to silence others (Meyer & Speakman, 2016). Consequently, this

hosting of the public debate requires the news media to remove uncivil, abusive or offensive

comments, something journalists often did not view as censorship (Meltzer, 2015). According to

S. Smith (2017), keeping comments sections civil is a highly regarded and common justification

for journalistic intervention. This study is certainly interested in the degree to which journalistic

public interest goals are raised as objectives for mediation work on commenting.

It will also investigate how hosting managed and moderated comment sections can support traditional journalistic work and values. At a time when the expanding pressure of immediacy pushes journalists to publish their stories directly, without oversight from an editor or subeditor, commenters can act as proof-readers as well as providing news tips and story suggestions (Paterson & Domingo, 2011) – although Singer (2010) found some journalists who saw commenters acting as overly critical editors. Journalists told Robinson (2010) that they enjoyed having feedback on their articles, while editors appreciate the potential to enhance the accuracy of the work. Graham and Wright (2015) found an increase in journalists using comment sections for news tips and corrections when they were under a lot of time pressure. Overall, the research suggests comments bring a new kind of accountability to journalistic work (Singer, 2010). Their feedback can promote accuracy, accountability and newsworthiness, all important traditional qualities for the profession of journalism (Lewis, 2012). The question then is to what extent contemporary comment mediators are seeing these dynamics play out during their work and how they are intervening to promote journalistic values.

Several studies have suggested that comment moderators and community managers themselves employ journalistic values in their work. Robinson (2010) found that the writing standards of journalism are also applied to evaluating comments during moderation. Editors encourage journalists or community managers to respond to or highlight comments that are particularly newsworthy or that provide additional, accurate details (Goodman, 2013; Graham & Wright, 2015). Huang (2016) and Goodman (2013), who advocate vigorous comment moderation and community management, find moderating to existing editorial standards to be a success factor for news organisations.

Beyond adopting traditional journalistic standards and values, however, it is possible that comment moderation and community management are finding a place in the definition of journalism work. The 'convergers' in Robinson's ethnography of online newsrooms (2010) saw

work in the comment sections as integral to journalism rather than apart from it, and this perception is more prevalent in later research. Meltzer (2015) found news organisations describing comment moderation and community management as a part of journalistic best practices. Organisations observed by S. Smith (2017) similarly viewed it as a new professional duty, while Meyer and Speakman (2016) found that neglecting this type of work reflected poorly on the organisation and the journalist. For these reasons it is important for this study to test whether, and how, Australian news workers view the place of moderation and community management work in journalism.

### 2.4 Seeing this new work as cultural intermediation.

A variety of theoretical frameworks have been applied to exploring how comment moderation and community management might be considered part of journalistic work. Graham and Wright (2015) apply the concept of the public sphere to examining comments as a deliberative political field, while Lewis (2012) uses the sociology of professions to show how journalism is reacting to, and adopting, this new work. One approach that has not been applied to analysing this work, to date, is the theory of cultural intermediation, which attends to the comment moderators' and community managers' function as mediators of cultural production in their work with different news commenting stakeholders.

While deleting comments and developing community standards does not immediately present itself as traditional journalism work, there is a historic role in the newsroom for mediation work. According to Matthews (2014), in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, journalists have always negotiated for meaning between their sources, the organisation and the audience, making cultural intermediation a potentially valuable framework for understanding journalism work:

The cultural intermediary approach offers a new vantage point from which to view journalists' work situation. Journalists exist within structures that stretch beyond their

organizational milieu, and as kindred to other intermediaries perform work as part of a

chain of actors. […] Viewing journalists as intermediaries then allows us to assess their

overall contribution to the process of constructing meanings. Of particular interest is to

view their relationship with others as negotiating a framing of reality that is finalized in

journalism production, which brings us to consider their material practices. (p. 146-147)

This study's focus on comment moderation and community management work in newsrooms

expands on Matthew's work, answering his suggestion for further research into other journalistic

practices that illustrate this intermediating function (p. 154).

However, Pierre Bourdieu's original conception of cultural intermediation does not as

easily apply to the everyday work of comment moderators and community managers. Bourdieu

(1984) envisioned cultural intermediaries as members of the new cultural bourgeoisie, such as

food and theatre critics, who would assess what new and established forms of cultural

production were worthy of praise and scorn "Assigning themselves the impossible, and therefore

unassailable, role of divulging legitimate culture – in which they resemble the legitimate

popularizers" (1984, p. 326). Bourdieu argues cultural intermediaries leech cultural capital from

legitimate producers; the cultural intermediaries he wrote about produced no art yet leveraged

their cultural capital, acquired by virtue of their bourgeoisie status, to define the desired qualities

for cultural production (p. 326). These assumptions do not necessarily apply to comment

moderators and community managers, who are working in a field that often attracts more scorn

than praise and who – in the case of comment moderators – may be underpaid and overworked,

with much of their work being inherently invisible from the public eye (Roberts, 2014).

However, Bourdieu also notes that cultural intermediaries play a role in bringing

legitimacy to otherwise marginalised cultural production. He asserts that intermediaries perform

a "canonization of not-yet-legitimate arts or of minor, marginal forms of legitimate art"

(Bourdieu, 1993, p. 326) – an act that he calls "subversive" or potentially the result of "misplaced

recognition of the hierarchies, as anarchic as it is eager" (p. 326). For Hutchinson (2016, p. 160) these cultural intermediaries not only make visible this marginal or 'fringe' production but also help shape it, a role he sees as both communicating the values of organisations and helping the producers more successfully tailor their work to achieve acceptance. Hutchinson (2015, 2016) saw this dynamic at work when the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC) sought to engage and publish user-generated media content, with its cultural intermediaries playing a key role in communicating and negotiating between creative users and other institutional ABC stakeholders.

While Bourdieu (1984) made only limited reference to cultural intermediation work and did not analyse specific types in depth, other researchers like Hutchinson (2013, 2015, 2016) have since found it a useful lens for investigating the meaning and value of a specific form of cultural production work. Maguire and Matthews (2010) attempted to accommodate Bourdieu's and other researchers' conceptions of cultural intermediation into a functional definition of the role:

> Thus, cultural intermediaries are defined by their role in mediating between production and consumption. They have a broadly pedagogic function, shaping the perceptions and preferences of consumers in order to mobilize their actions along desired routes. In this, they effect a 'symbolic imposition' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 362), framing particular cultural products as legitimate and, thus, as valuable. They contribute to the 'production of the value of the work or, what amounts to the same thing, of the belief in the value of the work' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 229). In short, they add value. (Maguire & Matthews, 2010, p. 408)

In their book, *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader* (2014), Maguire and Matthews detail a variety of professions engaging in this cultural intermediation, from fitness trainers who promote a particular lifestyle to the wine makers and tasters who communicate good tastes in wine consumption. This study will observe how comment moderators and community managers

might shape the value of cultural production in comments sections through their material practices, defining and communicating desirable standards of participation.

According to Hutchinson (2013), this function of cultural intermediation has taken on a new importance with the interactivity of online media platforms. Hutchinson, in his study of cultural intermediaries at the ABC (Hutchinson, 2013), shows how cultural intermediaries facilitate communication and negotiation between creative users, journalists and the ABC. His cultural intermediaries strove to understand and then translate the desires of each group to each other, improving the cultural satisfaction for all parties:

> The cultural intermediary is ideally located within the middle of these three stakeholders [the ABC Pool team, the ABC Pool participants and the ABC as institution] and interacts with them by incorporating the interests of the other two stakeholders. (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 81)

In applying the concept of cultural intermediation to this work, he highlights its utility for understanding new roles in converging digital media environments.

This study will examine how these various ideas of cultural intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984; Hutchinson, 2016; Maguire & Matthews, 2010, 2014) apply to the work of comment moderators and community managers at online news organisations. There are some indications in existing studies. By deleting comments they see as uncivil or low quality, moderators act on behalf of both the organisation, in enforcing editorial standards (Ksiazek, 2015), and the users, in improving their experience of discussion (Meyer & Speakman, 2016). Similarly by encouraging users to read and comment, community managers are contributing to the business model of the news organisations (Vujnovic, 2011) and promoting engagement with comments sections. Finally, it is possible that by fostering the values of the news organisation in the comment sections, these comment moderators are also acting as Bourdieu's tastemakers (1984, 1999) and reinforcing the status of journalists and news organisations as legitimate cultural producers.

If comment moderators and community managers are reinforcing the status and legitimacy of journalists and news organisations, it remains important to examine why some news organisations might hesitate to develop this area of cultural intermediation work, aside from any financial burden. In this study, Bourdieu's theory of fields (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 1993; Compton & Benedetti, 2010) offers a theoretical framework for understanding how this new kind of journalistic work is adopted and valued.

### 2.4.1 Positioning this new cultural intermediation work in the field of journalism.

One way to understand both how comment moderation and community management operate as part of journalism and how they are influenced by journalism is by looking at the workers as part of the journalistic field. In this study, the journalistic field is understood as a field of cultural production, analogous to the artistic, academic and literary fields detailed in Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). Bourdieu (1993) posited his theory of fields, and initially applied it to the arts, as a way to understand the process by which cultural products are produced and perceived. To define this term, Bourdieu (1993) explains:

> What do I mean by 'field'? As I use the term, a field is a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy. The existence of the writer, as fact and as value, is inseparable from the existence of the literary field as an autonomous universe endowed with specific principles of evaluation of practices and works. To understand Flaubert or Baudelaire, or any writer, major or minor, is first of all to understand what the status of writer consists of at the moment considered; that is, more precisely, the social conditions of the possibility of this social function, of this social personage. In fact, the invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game, which I term the literary field and which is constituted as it establishes its

autonomy, that is to say, its specific laws of functioning, within the field of power. (as

quoted by Willig (2012, p. 375)

While he initially did not apply field theory to the media, he eventually delivered a field-oriented

treatise on televised media and journalism, *On Television* (Bourdieu, 1999), and was a key

contributor to Benson and Neveu's (2005) *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, one of several works

signalling his interest in journalism as a semi-autonomous field (Benson, 1999; Willig, 2012,

2016; O'Donnell, 2009). His theory, as applied to journalism by Benson (1999) and Willig (2016),

provides a framework for analysing the forces shaping this new kind of cultural intermediation

work in online newsrooms.

Applying the theory of fields to journalistic work, and by extension the new newsroom

work of community management and comment moderation, is possible due to the way fields are

constituted. According to Willig (2012), who applies this concept to journalism as a form of

cultural production, "Defining a field is primarily an empirical question, and the structure of a

field depends on the kind, amount and distribution of capitals which structure the possible

positions of agents" (p. 374). The 'agents' of Bourdieu's initial theory of fields (1993) were

individuals, like the novelist Zola, and a meso-level collections of cultural producers, like

naturalist writers. Similarly, the 'agents' of Benson/Neveu and Willig's treatments are journalists

and news organisations.

Existing journalism studies already place comment moderators and community managers

as part of the field of journalism. Researchers suggest these roles have significant overlap with

journalistic work – indeed, the work is often done by journalists (Bakker, 2014; Goodman, 2013;

Graham & Wright, 2015). Meltzer (2015) finds that journalists increasingly view maintaining

these comment sections as the responsibility of the news organisations. Even if that were not the

case, the work is often done by staff who occupy the same organisational, social, and

geographical space (Goodman, 2013). Consequently, as distinct from the varieties of comment

moderators and community managers studied by Kraut and Resnick (2012) in fields from social media to education, the people performing this work in news organisations are exposed to the journalistic field through its standards, agents, practices, context and history. It is the contention of this study that this exposure has a defining influence on how they do the work.

Identifying the influence of the journalistic field in the work of comment moderators and community managers, means finding evidence of field theory's key components. These include the parameters of the field, and the operation of capital, habitus and doxa. Bourdieu (1993) applied each of these concepts individually and their operation together to analyse the fields of literature and theatre. Willig (2012) provides a practical way to translate these concepts into journalism more broadly.

First, this study must investigate the nature of the 'field' itself, the social and cultural context defining how journalistic work is defined and valued in an online media era. According to Willig (2012), the field of journalism encompasses the history of struggles between its agents (who occupy different positions in the field based on their store, and type, of capital), the social and political environment in which journalism is performed, and all of the contextual factors that inform and influence the definitions and values of journalism. The field is not static – journalists are hired and fired, political players come and go, and cultures develop to accommodate changes in population and technological innovations. According to Benson (Benson & Neveu, 2005), "If cultural and economic resources structure fields along one dimension, the 'old' and 'new' represent the second major structuring dimension" (p.5). It is this dynamic property of fields that might allow the journalistic field to incorporate and influence new forms of work like cultural intermediation of comments, a key concern of this study.

Determining how comment mediating agents are regarded in the field of journalism requires knowledge of their standing vis-à-vis the amount of heteronomous or autonomous capital they have. Bourdieu (1993) explains these forms of capital as they relate to other fields:

> The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake'), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise. (p. 40)

Heteronomous capital is that type of social power which can be generated in any field of society, such as politics or business, but autonomous capital is specific to the field in question (Nash, 2016, p 180). In this way, an individual or organisation can have a high status in the field of journalism due to their autonomous journalistic capital, their history of well-regarded journalistic work and influence, despite having limited financial or political power (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 4).

The individuals' or organisations' capital affects not only their position in the field, but also how they interact with it. According to Benson (2005, p. 4), "Fields are arenas of struggle in which individuals and organisations compete, unconsciously and consciously, to valorize those forms of capital which they possess." Organisations like *The New York Times*, with a history of "professional excellence" (Benson & Neveu, 2005) in journalism, have the power to shape the field of journalism through their autonomous capital, and an incentive to do so in order to increase the value of that autonomous capital. However, as the field of journalism is strongly, arguably entirely (Bourdieu, 1999; Couldry, 2003), aligned with the fields of economics and power, people with power in those fields can also exert influence over the field of journalism, drawing it more into alignment with economic and political values and norms. This study will explore whether comment moderators and community managers in online news organisations possess professional or other capital that gives them an influential position within the journalistic field, and enables (or prevents) them from having an impact on it.

Understanding the status of agents in any field requires knowledge of their norms and habits, attitudes to work and assumptions about it, the collection of which Bourdieu (1977) called 'habitus'. The habitus of these intermediary agents is a reference to their internalised, even subconscious, way of seeing the work of journalism – the agent's conception of the way journalism is and should be done, including their ideas about the importance of new forms of news work like comment moderation and community management. Habitus does not determine actions, however. According to Willig (2012, p. 378), Bourdieu's concept of habitus:

> …captures the social condition that we as individuals experience as 'freedom' and 'independence' in our actions. Yet at the same time, we are the products of specific social, economic and cultural conditions and histories. 'Individual choice' is relative and relational (see also Crossley, 2001). This goes both for social practice in general and for journalistic practice.

Each agent applies their own beliefs, opinions and ethical agency when they undertake their work; the habitus is simply the deeply ingrained and often unconscious cultural background that influences their choices, rather than being the rationale for the choices themselves.

While habitus provides a way of looking at how intermediary work is done in a particular way, it does not completely reveal how that work is perceived and judged, which Bourdieu (1993) explains in the concept of doxa. Willig (2012) succinctly summarises doxa as "a blind belief that the game is worth playing", the game being a metaphor for the field of cultural production. Willig posits that journalistic doxa refers not only to the sense that journalism is worth doing but also to the sense of what its values are. In Willig's newsroom ethnography, for instance, she found that journalists argued that news should be 'exclusive', and held the conviction that that judgement was appropriate, suggesting 'exclusivity' was a form of doxa they had internalised, despite it not being codified in policy or textbooks. Though internalised and largely subconscious, this doxa is also subject to the dynamism of the field as it is shaped by its

agents. In the online environment, well-curated news is now also regarded as a legitimate form of journalism (Cui & Liu, 2017). To understand this field realignment, this research will explore how journalistic doxa and habitus affect the valuing of comment moderation and community management work.

This overview of field theory leads to the second fundamental question propelling this study – how does the field of journalism affect the work of these new entrants, the comment moderators and community managers – and vice versa? While comment moderation and community management have only recently emerged as distinct aspects of news production work, they have often been done by journalists (Goodman, 2013; Singer, 2010), though some organisations are now seeing value in hiring dedicated community management and moderation staff (Bakker, 2014). This raises questions about what the status of moderators and managers is in terms of their cultural capital and professional position in the field. Further, though comment moderators and community managers work in many industries (Kiesler et al., 2012), those in newsrooms are either coming with habitus and doxa derived from traditional journalistic work, or are potentially inheriting these ways of being from the context in which they work. This study is unique in examining how this shaping of intermediary work might be developing. It contributes to an emerging body of work that explores how this work meshes with the field of journalism, and how it might be realigning the boundaries of that field.

## 2.5 An opening for exploration.

The task for this study is to see how comment moderation and community management, this new digital, networked cultural intermediation work, is designed, directed, practiced, interpreted and valued. It also explores how it is shaped by the specific location and context of the online newsroom, and interactions between people in different positions of power throughout the newsroom and its support structures. Consequently, this study needs to look at the practitioners of comment moderation and community management in context to create a

picture of the work they do, the objectives they have for that work and values they espouse in doing it.

Pursuant to the call of Cottle (2007), Paterson and Domingo (2008), and Willig (2012) for more effective newsroom ethnography, the next chapter will elaborate on the ethnographic method used to capture knowledge about these new areas of intermediary work, and their relation to existing models of news production.

# 3 Approach and Methodology

As the previous chapter argues, the concept of cultural intermediation offers a way of interpreting and analysing the work of comment moderation and community management in online news organisations, while Bourdieusian field theory provides a lens for understanding how this work relates to the objectives and values of journalism as an institution and profession. The research design challenge for this study then is how to marry these lenses with a means of observing and documenting this new area of work in a way that also captures how the field of journalism is impacting its development.

This chapter demonstrates how theories that emerged from critical sociology provide the theoretical frame for this work. It then discusses how a newsroom ethnography-based research design provides the best means to meet the challenge of understanding newsroom intermediation work and to provide rich data for analysis. It ties the research questions, theoretical framework and methods to the perceived gaps in the literature and details how the research design will address the aims of the study set out in the introduction. Further, this chapter shows how the research design both builds on, and constructively critiques, similar ethnographic journalism studies projects.

The chapter starts by outlining the fundamental disciplinary and theoretical underpinnings of the research. It then explores the hypothesis of the study and the research questions to be answered. The discussion moves on to establish the way the study approaches these questions compared to, and based upon, past similar research. Following that, the chapter surveys the specific methods used and the kinds of data collected. The section concludes by canvassing the potential drawbacks and limitations of this methodology as well as exploring the researcher's distinct positioning as an outsider to journalism and newsrooms.

## 3.1 Critical approaches to journalism research.

This research is a critical sociology of online journalism work. It joins a growing body of journalism studies conducted using critical theoretical approaches (Maras, 2005; Skinner, Gasher, & Compton, 2001; Steensen & Ahva, 2015). While there are many definitions of critical sociology (Delanty, 2011) and approaches to critical communications theory (Maras, 2005), by utilising Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1993), this study naturally aligns itself, to an extent, with Bourdieu's critical sociology (Benson & Neveu, 2005). His sociological theories, such as the field theory used for this study, distinguished themselves from the structuralist "objective sociology" of his time by reconciling agency and the unique contexts shaping individuals (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85). Bourdieu, alongside the Frankfurt School, criticised the orthodoxy of prevailing cultural theory as misrepresenting reality, which either was too objectivist, "treating social facts as things" or too subjectivist, reducing "the social world to the representations that agents have of it" (Bourdieu, 1989, pp. 14-15). The goal of his work, and by extension this work, is to overcome this opposition, revealing the "dialectic" relationship between subjective and objective.

While he did not initially extend his theories to the field of media, he levelled considerable criticism at the media in his work *On Television* (Bourdieu, 1999), in which he envisaged a journalistic field and illustrated how field theory could be applied to understanding journalism. More recent researchers have extended his theory to investigating the doxa of journalism (Schultz, 2007), to problematising news institutionalism theories for ignoring the potential for journalist autonomy (Benson, 2006), and to exploring the ways in which the media exert influence on other fields (Couldry, 2003). This study adopts a Bourdieusian framework because it offers a means to critically investigate current conceptions of both the value of comments on online news websites and of the cultural intermediation work these organisations are doing to moderate and manage them.

There is room to interrogate the critical sociology of Bourdieu, however, and this study strives not to take his theories of cultural intermediation or 'field' for granted. This questioning approach is an important part of conducting critical research, according to Maras (2005), who also points out the danger of "inventing" or presupposing the existence or definition of a problem; this study in particular focuses on critically interrogating the assertion that comments on news articles are inherently problematic, as asserted by some professionals (Goodman, 2013; Huang, 2016) and academics (Conlin & Roberts, 2016; Prochazka et al., 2016).

In the case of Bourdieu, his numerous works (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989, 1993, 1999) define the bourgeoisie and posit them as a sinister force with unique power to shape culture and consumption, but there are problems with this depiction in a contemporary socio-economic framework. Hesmondhalgh (2006) argues that this singular focus on the wealthy does not account for other significant sources of influence, such as political power. Similarly, Neveu illustrates that Bourdieu's depiction of the struggles defining cultural production does not take into account national differences (Benson & Neveu, 2005). The wealthy may have enormous impact on the values, norms and practices of some fields of cultural production through their economic capital, but that does not explain why US and French media systems are so distinct from one another. His rather narrow, class-oriented perspective of cultural production explains why Bourdieu (1984) originally posited cultural intermediaries rather negatively as a group of petite bourgeoisie leeching cultural capital from legitimate creative producers while propagating bourgeois tastes for the masses. Conversely, Hutchinson (2016) and Maguire and Matthews (2014) show how the work of contemporary cultural intermediaries plays potentially valuable roles in helping consumers and producers. Thus, while Bourdieu provides valuable starting points for analysing the mediating role, objectives and influence of comment moderators and community managers, his conceptions of class and power deserve some critical interrogation.

This study also does not take the bourgeoisie and its field of power as a singular force against which the field of journalism expresses its autonomy (Bourdieu, 1999), but one force among many homologous to the field of journalism, particularly politics and economics (Champagne, 2005), but also other fields of cultural production like academia (Couldry, 2003). This study investigates the objectives, tasks and practices adopted by comment moderators and community managers, and their development in the context of old and new newsrooms to identify all the possible agents and artefacts, social and cultural factors, that are shaping these new types of work – rather than focusing on the influence of other fields. It pursues Delanty's pluralist approach (2011) of adapting critical perspectives like Bourdieu's use of more practice-oriented frameworks, like those of Maguire and Matthews (2014), whose aim is to show how the concept of cultural intermediaries offers a new means of exploring "theory, creative work and cultural production" (p.3).

This is not to refute Bourdieu's perception of the forces shaping journalism; there is no denying, for example, the impact of economic forces like media competition on digital journalism.[3] While Hesmondhalgh (2006) gives due weight to several sources of influence on cultural production, he does not deny that economic and political forces are more dominant than the cultural field of arts or the research field of social sciences. However, this study tries to avoid what Delanty called "a characterisation of the social world as one of unending disputes over different orders of justification" (Delanty, 2011, p. 86) by locating factors other than competition or globalisation that could also have a significant influence on the way cultural intermediation of news commenting is developing.

The prevailing theories this work seeks to unpack and question are those that give determinative power to certain forces, people, or phenomena. While the influence of economics and politics clearly shape the field of journalism and its digital evolution, other dynamics at work

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[3] The economic field was a point of particular concern for Bourdieu himself (Bourdieu, 1999).

in the newsroom could have a similar, or greater, level of influence, such as the need or desire to accommodate technological innovation. Deuze (1999), Pavlik (1999) and Bowman and Willis (2003) suggest the power of technological innovation to cause change, but they fail to account clearly for the role of the newsroom power systems, and various forms of agency and influence, in that change, power systems that Bourdieu alludes to in his field theory (Benson, 2006; Bourdieu, 1999). Boczkowski (2004a) theorises a mutual shaping of technology approach that incorporates both social forces and the impact of innovations, but does not differentiate between the influence of social shapers, something that is at the heart of field theory approaches (Compton & Benedetti, 2010). This study does not seek to dismiss these earlier approaches to exploring the dynamics of digital news development, but rather will interrogate their assumptions so as to provide a more nuanced picture of how certain forces might shape intermediation work in online news production.

Critically interrogating these theories requires a post-positivist research design. That means avoiding both entirely interpretive or positivist designs (Wildemuth, 1993) and choosing research techniques that best fit the individual research question. According to Wildemuth (1993), positivists require the study of an objectively verifiable reality, which Bourdieu (1984) shows to be hard if not impossible to define. Bourdieu, in his reflexive sociology, recommends checking subjective assumptions against empirical data and observable phenomena (Grenfell, 2008). Hegelund (2005) suggests researchers, particularly ethnographers, need a fundamental correspondence between "word and world" in order to avoid the arbitrariness of atheoretical objectivity, providing unanalysed description, or the circular logic of extreme relativism, wherein nothing can be definitively stated, and suggests Bourdieu's theories offer just such a bridge. For Bourdieu (1993), while fields are defined socially, they result in physical tasks and practices, forms of social reproduction and of valuing activities that bridge the subjective and the objective. This research design, consequently, tries to uncover the socially determined activities and values attached to comment intermediation and to relate them to the existing world of news workers.

### 3.2 The unanswered questions.

The literature review has outlined some of the challenges facing newsrooms that host comment sections, and suggested something of the scope of the work required to sustain and build a community of commenters. Chapter 2 also indicates there is some ambiguity regarding the objectives for hosting and managing user comments, how comments should best be moderated or the participating community managed, and who should be doing the work of this cultural intermediation. The review finally queries if, and how, the mediation of audience participation fits into contemporary journalism work.

To improve understanding of this new work in the newsroom, this study follows in the steps of past newsroom ethnographies that conducted critical research on journalism work. Robben and Sluka (2015) succinctly define ethnography as "the first-hand study of people, cultures, and subjects in local settings, and to their description and analysis in written texts" (p. 178). While they made no mention of journalism or news organisations, Cottle (2007) and Paterson and Domingo (2008, 2011) have shown that ethnography can fruitfully be performed in the local setting of a newsroom, studying the people and culture of news organisation. According to Paterson (2008):

> As Schlesinger (1981, p. 363) explained, the ethnographic method of news production
> research makes available "basic information about the working ideologies and practices
> of cultural producers," (p. 363) and provides the possibility of observation – informed by
> theory – of the social practices constituting cultural production. This is impossible with
> other methods, such as surveys or web content analysis – the dominant modes of online
> news research. (p. 2)

Cottle (2007) posits that these observations yield several benefits, such as making "the invisible visible", identifying practices that are otherwise obscured or taken for granted by news organisations. Both Paterson (2008) and Cottle (2007) warn that new practices have developed in

online newsrooms that have gone undocumented by ethnographers, with Cottle calling for "a 'second wave' of ethnographic studies that deliberately set out to theoretically map and empirically explore the rapidly changing field of news production and today's differentiated ecology of news provision" (Cottle, 2000, p. 21).

This study primarily builds on the early ethnographic work of Domingo (2008), who investigated the incorporation of interactivity into online newsrooms. However, this study uses different theoretical lenses. It examines the ways in which the community managers and moderators of these comments are acting as cultural intermediaries, a concept conceived by Bourdieu (1984) and refined by Maguire and Matthews (2010). It then explores how the practices, objectives and value of this role can be further understood by positioning the workers and the work in the field of journalism, an approach suggested by the sociology of Bourdieu (1993) and adapted to journalism by Willig (2016).

To understand how news workers acted as cultural intermediaries, the researcher follows Maguire and Matthews (2010), who recommend detailing "material practices" of the workers as a means to provide "a grounded assessment of the similarities and differences within and across cultural intermediary occupations" (p. 411). Achieving this grounded assessment requires documenting and analysing details such as:

> … occupational tools, codes, techniques and criteria, as standardized through training programmes and in textbooks, and manifest (and modified) in their actual application; and the dispositions, rationalities, motivations and aspirations expressed by cultural intermediaries and codified in their training programmes. (p. 411)

It is the goal of this ethnography to observe these artefacts at work as they are present in the newsroom or office of comment moderators and community managers to uncover the ways they do, and do not, function as cultural intermediaries.

The application of Bourdieusian field theory to media studies then had further implications for what the author set out to observe in newsrooms. Willig (2012) uses the concepts of habitus, doxa, capital and field to demonstrate the ways that field theory connects to the actors, actions, and context of journalism. However, practically capturing data to demonstrate these separate concepts required careful consideration of what objects and phenomena to study and how to document these. Aligning the theoretical lenses to explore how cultural intermediation work might mesh with or depart from what we know as journalism work then led to the creation of two interrelated research questions, supported by sub-questions designed to uncover the elements of the journalistic field impacting these workers. The hypothesis here is that the field of journalism is defining how cultural intermediation work is done and valued. Consequently, the central questions this study seeks to answer are:

*RQ1 &RQ2. What is the work of cultural intermediation done by comment moderators and community managers, and how does the field of journalism influence it?*

To investigate the presence of the field, the research will also seek answers to three further questions:

*RQ3. What are the key objectives and practices of this work?*

*RQ4. What are the knowledge, skills and educational standards required of these intermediaries?*

*RQ5. What is the value of cultural intermediation work in the comment sections according to the people doing that work?*

Answering these questions will provide a rich portrait of the work that these intermediaries perform and enable it to be mapped to the field of journalism.

### 3.3 Weighing approaches.

Testing the hypothesis required an in-depth description of its research object: the work of comment moderation and community management in online newsrooms. This study collected data on the roles, objectives, tasks and practices of commenting intermediaries, their social and material contexts, their educational histories, and their opinions about, as well as attitudes to and aspirations for, their work. I weighed several research designs that could provide this data before finally adopting an ethnographic approach.

The first challenge for this study was deciding how to examine work as it happens in the newsroom. This presents difficulties for journalism researchers, as they get increasingly limited access to observe work in newsrooms (Cottle, 2007), making alternatives like surveys and interviews of personnel attractive alternatives. Several journalism researchers have turned to the journalists themselves, utilising in-depth interviews in a small number of organisations, or just one, to study changes to newsroom work (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Canter, 2013; Chung, 2007; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Graham & Wright, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Singer, 2010; Thurman, 2008). Through these interviews, they obtain descriptions of how journalists and newsrooms are adapting to various digital innovations. Their interviews, which were from 30 minutes to over an hour long, enabled these researchers to go into more depth on more aspects of work than they could with surveys or questionnaires. Researchers could then compare and contrast journalists' diverse observations and anecdotes with any survey or questionnaire data, or extend their own ideas of what phenomena were important to explore.

Several researchers leveraged these methods to reveal significant insights about developments in journalism. Hermida and Thurman (2008) for example interviewed editors and journalists at the time when user-generated content was starting to be broadly adopted in the U.K., identifying a range of attitudes towards the interactive features and the new forms of work

they bring to journalism. These interviews were complimented by a survey, revealing that this mixed reaction to user-generated content was occurring alongside organisations adopting broad ranges but also differentiated interactive features. Singer and Ashman (2009) and Loke (2012) used interviews to explore the practical ways that newsroom changes are affecting the work of journalists, as well as the implications of the changes. The interviews permitted the participants to raise issues that may not have occurred to the researchers when they began their study.

Ultimately, however, relying solely on interviews with journalists and editors, even alongside the delivery of surveys and questionnaires, would have presented limitations for this study. First, Goodman's (2013) report suggests there is not always a definitive person or group of workers to interview about comment moderation and community management work (Goodman, 2013). Instead it seems a variety of staff members are engaging in the work in a way that varies from newsroom to newsroom, with some newsrooms encouraging journalists to intervene in comment sections and others hiring full-time community managers (Bakker, 2014). This study needed to obtain a comprehensive view of the actors involved in this cultural intermediation work across the newsroom and news organisation. Further, as the exact activities that constitute this work are not completely or universally established yet (Domingo, 2014; Meltzer, 2015) this study needed to observe the work being done, in order to document and analyse potentially new or unexplored activities and their meaning. The potential diversity of approaches to this work and the people involved made the task of preparing one standard set of survey questions, or a semi-structured interview process, appear limiting and inadequate to the task of capturing that diversity and fluidity. Rather, the exploratory scope of the study demanded observation of this work in situ, to provide empirical data that could be elaborated by later interviews, which could contain questions informed by emergent observational analysis or worker's contemporaneous comments (Charmaz, 2010).

This study consequently incorporates the mainstay ethnographic techniques of "participant observation" and "open interviews" (Robben & Sluka, 2015). Participant, in this case, refers to the newsroom workers volunteering for this study who are engaging in comment moderation or community management work in the newsrooms. Observation means noting down the physical practices and context in which they work. The researcher, while attempting to minimise his intrusion, invited commentary on and annotation of his work by the participants in the course of the observation.

Interviews, in this ethnography, are 'open' in the sense that there is no singular set of questions for every participant; rather, the research questions are paired with observations to create questions that are relevant to the specific worker. This approach enables the ethnography to make full use of the lived experience of the participants but also to corroborate that input with, and analyse it alongside, the material practices and context of intermediation work (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Though questions varied by participant, some topics in every interview were guided by the research questions to avoid what Hegelund (2005) described as "drowning in a virtual data flood" (p. 652) and enabling the ethnography to focus on its research object. By not pre-supposing the most pertinent factors driving this work, as semi-structured interviews would do, this approach also accommodates for the agency of the individual workers, which is central to Bourdieusian analysis (Willig, 2016).

Designing this research as an ethnography also works to fill a gap in the literature identified by Paterson and Domingo (2008) and Cottle (2000). While both note there is a history of ethnographic research in newsrooms, they contend that the concepts and pictures captured by past ethnographies, many of which were conducted in the 1970s and '80s, are describing news work in now outdated contexts. The routines that were central to the findings of past ethnographies have since been upended, and theories based on these past routines of journalism may already have been overextended (Cottle, 2000, p. 22). Cottle notes that new theoretical and

conceptual frameworks have been created to capture changes in modern newsrooms, but "as always and wherever possible, these must be tested empirically" (2000, p. 21). The implication of this is that the orthodoxy of some news media theory is now in question.

Cottle's push for a 'second wave' of ethnographies (2000) is a call to capture not only new practices but also to do so using novel conceptual approaches. Paterson and Domingo (2008) concur with this call, positing new newsroom ethnographies as a means to "generate the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) still largely absent from our understandings of new media and online journalism" (p. 10). Ethnographic findings by Domingo (2008) have already established the potential value of this work, aiding in a critical review of new media predictions about the impact of incorporating interactivity into news websites (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008), while simultaneously forming a basis for studying new cultural intermediation techniques that can help organisations, and users, better leverage this feature (Domingo, 2011, 2014).

Ethnographies, however, are not easily defined or quickly designed (Hegelund, 2005). They are extremely diverse in design and conduct because they have to be adapted to the phenomena being observed and the conditions of the observation. In deciding on the approach to this study, two ethnographic styles in particular were examined.

### 3.3.1 A field theory approach to ethnography.

One of the most important ethnographic researchers for this study was Ida Willig (formerly Schultz), both for her Bourdieusian reflexive sociology approach (Schultz, 2007) and her application of field theory to journalism. Apart from having done ethnographies herself (Schultz, 2007), Willig has written several articles and texts (Willig, 2012, 2016; Willig et al., 2015) about how to conduct newsroom ethnographies using a field theory perspective. In her ethnography on a Danish television newsroom, she starts by constructing the field of journalism intangibly surrounding it, so as to uncover the invisible and unconscious mechanisms behind the

practices and perspectives of the workers (Schultz, 2007). Her analysis draws on the history of Danish journalism as well as its social, cultural and professional contexts. From there, she uses participant observation and interviews to find how field theory can be seen at work, tying her observations to its key elements of doxa, habitus, field, and capital.

Her decision to employ a field theory approach to an ethnography filled a particular gap in understandings of newsroom work. It led to a theoretically grounded study that served to overcome some of the ontological and epistemological issues presented by Cottle (2007), whereby academics cast doubt on the results of ethnographies due to the potential for the researcher to be unconsciously applying their own unexamined subjectivity. By being securely grounded in the history and social context of the Danish newsroom, Willig (in Schultz (2007)) is able to make clear not only what is being looked at but also the part her research object plays in the evolving practices of the newsroom. The 'gut feeling' doxa she documented, as reported by the participants themselves, opened the door to unpacking an unaddressed but potentially important journalistic doxa in the form of 'exclusivity', which led journalists to pursue certain stories on the basis that other news organisations had not.

If there is one disadvantage of Willig's approach, it is the potential for the researcher to construct the field in a way that constrains the possible interpretations of the ethnography. An ethnography that constructs the field prior to doing the observation necessarily compromises some of the benefits of grounded theory and emergent analysis often employed in ethnographic research (Charmaz, 2010; Hegelund, 2005). These inductive approaches promote the development of new concepts based on cycles of data gathering, interpretation and conceptual reframing. Constructing the field prior to such systematic, comparative and reflective forms of observation, or alongside observation, creates a challenge when striving for an open, paradigm-breaking interpretive perspective, and one that is 'objective' in ethnographic terms – that seeks

"true correspondence between word and world", as unbiased by prior conceptions of how this work be shaped as possible (Hegelund, 2005).

This study sought to first create an objective, detailed description and analysis of cultural intermediation of news commenting in two different new organisations and only then applied field theory to understand how this work might have developed in the ways it has. In order to consider how these new practices might mesh with or diverge from the field of journalism, this study first needed to investigate them in detail, as unburdened as possible by past conceptions of journalism work.

### 3.3.2 A critical ethnography approach to new media changes.

To work towards this objective description, it was necessary to look to other critical research of journalism through ethnography. Though he did not approach ethnography from a Bourdieusian perspective, Domingo's approach to online newsroom ethnography was in keeping with Bourdieu's call for reflexivity in media research (Bourdieu, 1999), in this case by contrasting subjective assertions about the importance of interactivity for online journalism with an empirical analysis of professionals' practices and experiences engaging with it. Simultaneously, he leveraged his unconstrained observation to provide a critical look at newsroom practices and perspectives. This meant reflecting on the technologically deterministic assertions of scholars like Pavlik (1999), who suggested that journalism would be transformed by the existence of the Internet without accommodating the need for journalists to drive that change.

Domingo's online journalism ethnography (2008) looked at changing digital newsrooms in an attempt to reveal the disconnects between organisational and professional rhetoric, academic theory and newsroom practices. Domingo started his work by laying out some new media theorists' predictions, including from Deuze (2006) and Pavlik (1999), about the implications of technological innovations for media work, then interrogating the ideas they had put forward. Domingo then conducted a detailed ethnography in several locations to compare

their assertions to the events on the ground. His data covers the presentation of the news, the

processes and practices of the journalists and the tools and devices being used. Journalists

provide their views about technological change, but Domingo juxtaposes these with observable

behaviour and artefacts. His detailed physical observations are then contrasted with the

conceptualisation of journalism work presented by the theorists and the journalists in his study.

This juxtaposition both exposes the disconnections in their accounts and goes some way to

explain their causes. His research provides further ethnographic evidence in support of those

warning against technologically deterministic predictions of new media (Boczkowski, 2004a;

Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Robinson, 2010). The strength of Domingo's analysis comes from

his careful documenting of journalists' physical professional practices and the news websites that

result from them.

Domingo's objective approach empowers his critical analysis, but it is limited in its

capturing of the social dynamics contributing to the development of these perspectives and

practices. He does not cover the extent to which those emerging practices are an ongoing

negotiation between the workers in the field of journalism, as Benson (2006) notes – a

negotiation that has not ceased. Newsroom practices and perspectives are changing rapidly

(Compton & Benedetti, 2010), so the mechanisms of change need attention. This dynamism and

negotiation of how news work is defined can potentially be captured, however, with the field

theory approach to new media research applied by Willig (Schultz, 2007).

### 3.3.3 Arriving at an ethnographic model for this study.

As Paterson and Domingo state in their anthologies of online newsroom ethnographies

(Paterson & Domingo, 2008, 2011), each ethnographer adapts the method to the needs of their

study. While grounded in Domingo's (2008) critical and descriptive approach, this study

incorporated a different theoretical framework and had a different object of study. It collected

data from two highly distinct, Australian news organisations, rather than a collection of

newsrooms. Where this study deviates most from Domingo's research is in following Willig (2012) in employing Bourdieu's field theory (1993) to map the observations and data to the field of journalism as it is experienced and embodied by the participants. In doing so, this study shows how ideas and practices develop, rather than comparing current practices with past or contemporary conceptions. In considering comment moderation and community management as forms of cultural intermediation the study positions this not as some type of innovation, representative of Mosco's 'myth of interactivity' or a reaction to the problems invited by hosting user generated content (Domingo, 2008; Mosco, 2005), but rather as a new unfolding of an older role of journalism (Bourdieu, 1984; Maguire & Matthews, 2010).

Having investigated this cultural intermediation and its value for the workers, the study then analyses how the field of journalism has impacted the participants, noting the extent to which they are embedded in, or are exposed to, the field, capital, habitus and doxa of journalism. Doing this means observing and talking to the people who participate in forming strategies, setting examples, defining quality and establishing objectives for cultural intermediation of the comments (Benson, 1999).

### 3.4 Selecting and collecting data.

This study investigates four factors potentially influencing comment moderation and community management in the online newsroom: interactions between colleagues, the work in practice, the working environment and conditions, and the perceptions of the people doing the work. The information was derived from observation of work, from interviews and from comments exchanged between the author and participants, and between participants and their colleagues while doing the work. Observations were recorded as field notes accompanied by photographs, and considered alongside audio recordings and transcripts of interviews.

### 3.4.1 Interactions with colleagues.

In approaching this study, I sought to note and categorise interactions between the participants and their colleagues that explained or explored how cultural intermediation work should be conducted. Social interactions were recorded both qualitatively, with a description of what happened, and quantitatively where possible, noting the duration and time of the interaction. While the words of the conversation are significant, the statements of each person are often imbued with status indicators relating to the person's relative position in the field (Benson, 2006). Field notes indicate the job title or relative authority of both speakers, though only participants are directly quoted or identified. These interactions also include emails, phone calls, signage, contracts or organisational charters, where relevant and available, provided they in some way affected, or were affected by, the cultural intermediation work of the participant.

### 3.4.2 The realities of work.

Fundamental to this study is an understanding of what the work of comment moderation and community management entails, so the largest number of field notes are dedicated to these tasks and practices, as well as their objectives. These notes describe both specific actions and the way the actions are done. Social interactions are included as work if they appear to be a routine or necessary part of the process. Quantitative measures, such as how many times a participant does an activity, are noted, but only used comparatively, as there is not enough data to underpin a quantitative analysis.

Due to constraints on the amount of time for observation, and the range of participants available, the study relies on interviews and comments from the workers to get a fuller picture of the tasks, practices, and objectives. This is particularly true of references to rare or one-off elements, like training and annual reviews, which were too infrequent and inaccessible to be observed in this study. The participants are fundamental contributors to the findings of this study on many levels, but particularly in this regard. Some of the participants' community

intermediation work was too occasional to be observed directly, such as moments spent developing the organisational strategy for comments, so detailing these tasks relies on participant descriptions.

### 3.4.3 The view from the chair.

The conditions in which the work took place were photographed, where this was allowed, and details of the workspace were kept in field notes and on a site map. As the numerous ethnographies in Paterson and Domingo (2008) show, the organisation of an office both impacts the flow of work and offers a perspective of the relative power and position of workers. In this study, that meant making maps of workplaces and taking photos of work areas. The organisation of these spaces also had an impact on the amount and type of communication taking place between news workers, which was observed particularly in remote work areas. Some aspects of these working conditions are less visible and concrete in nature, and these are relegated to field notes. These can include conversations that occurred surrounding the site of observation, which may or may not have included the participant. The existence and nature of this socialising is noted, where relevant, as part of working conditions.

### 3.4.4 Interviewing the workers.

Finally, participants took part in interviews of varying length, from 30 minutes to 1 hour. These were transcribed and analysed for thematic and other forms of correspondence. In the interview, participants discussed the details of their work, their view of it, and the history of its development as well as the relationships they saw between their work and the received notions of journalism work. For each participant, further questions were asked relating to their unique position and responsibilities, as well as any work practices observed. A digital hand-held device was used for the recording, and the digital files were then de-identified and transferred to secure data storage. Later, these de-identified files were transcribed manually.

The transcription is predominantly word-for-word notation, but the author omitted repetition, reformulations, notations of non-verbal communication and outside noises, despite their potential interpretive value (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), as such detailed linguistic style notation also has the potential to distract interviewees when they verify accounts of their contribution. Verification of selected quotes was later sought from participants. This was mainly done to check the accuracy of the statements participants had made – even though Metro-Jaffe (2011) says interviewees who verify their speech in writing can find themselves poorly represented by the print version, as it lacks the qualities of intonation and context that are integral to effective verbal communication. However, the unstructured nature of the interviews meant non-verbal implications could be followed up in a direct question during the interview.

### 3.4.5 Compiling the results.

Once this data was collected, the site details, work practices, social interactions and interview transcripts were examined for patterns and correlations. As this is a study of conditions and practices, and ethnographies have as their goal to capture routine lived experience (Cottle, 2007; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Robben & Sluka, 2015), behaviours that happened repeatedly and consistently became the focus in detailing a description of the key tasks, practices and objectives. In addition, the interviews and social interactions were then analysed to uncover any effects of the field of journalism tied to the capital, habitus, or doxa of each worker, as well as their relative position in the field.

These observations formed the basis of my analysis, which tied the descriptions and analysis of participants' cultural intermediation work and their views about this work to the field of journalism. Investigating the nature of cultural intermediation meant finding instances where participants were mediating between the organisation, the audience for comments, and the commenters themselves; directly or indirectly promoting consumption of the news organisation's journalistic production; or engaging in taste-making, trying to cultivate in the audience a specific

sense of how to produce, evaluate or respond to comments. Exploring the influence of the journalistic field meant uncovering the influence of journalistic habitus, through the tasks and practices performed; doxa, through the value individuals (and their teams) invested in their work; capital, by identifying the amount of autonomous or heteronomous capital positioning the participant in the field; and field, by noting the influence of other prominent actors and historical factors on the way cultural intermediation was carried out.

The results were finally sent to the participants to verify the accuracy of the account and invite any additional comments. While not all participants provided time for observation of their work during the study period, each sat for an interview, so every participant plays a critical role in helping construct the account of cultural intermediation and its relationship to news production in these two Australian news organisations, Fairfax Media and *The Conversation*.

### 3.5 Australian news organisations as context for newsroom ethnography.

Australia offers a context for journalism work that is distinct from the European contexts of the ethnographies that inspired the design of this study (Domingo, 2008; Schultz, 2007) and context of journalism in the US (Paterson & Domingo, 2008, 2011). The lack of recent newsroom ethnographies in Australia is, in fact, one driving reason to conduct this research. While there are many shared qualities in journalism internationally (Fortunati et al., 2005; Goodman, 2013; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellor, 2008), identifying the ways in which national contexts and cases differ does not detract from establishing journalism as a field; indeed, it reinforces the explanatory value of field theory, according to Benson (Benson & Neveu, 2005), by demonstrating how a different field of positions results in distinct cultural practices and values. Similarly, the unique context for journalism in Australia provides some explanation for how its journalism is also uniquely practiced (Hanusch, 2015).

Two of the key issues that define aspects of Australian journalism are issues of concentrated media ownership and strictly enforced media regulations. There are other

significant distinctions in Australian newsrooms that impact its journalism, such as the lack of demographic diversity in newsrooms (Forde, 2005) or the significant influence and development of Australia's large public broadcaster, the ABC (Zaman, 2014). However, Australia's lack of media pluralism and its strict laws surrounding defamation and vilification had a noteworthy impact on the work of the practitioners in this study and on this ethnographic research.

### 3.5.1 The news landscape.

Getting news organisations to agree to this research was challenging because Australia has relatively few large generalist news organisations to approach. Australia's commercial news media is owned and run by a disproportionately small group of operators compared to countries like the U.S. and U.K. – it has some of the most consolidated media ownership in the world (Forde, 2005). In all but two major cities, there is currently only one daily newspaper. Online, offerings are more diverse, and there are a number of local, regional and national sources for news, as well as international outlets that have an Australian presence, like *The Guardian, Daily Mail, Buzzfeed* and *Huffington Post*. However, the most visited news websites in Australia are almost all owned by the same major media outlets, News Corporation and Fairfax Media (Harding-Smith, 2011). *The Conversation* is the largest of a small number of otherwise struggling independent publishers, and is unique in being a multinational operation funded largely by universities and research bodies.

This field of participants is further narrowed when looking for news organisations that host comments on their websites, as some websites did not allow comments on their articles or did not do internal cultural intermediation of their comments. News Corporation, for example, outsources much of its moderation to Canadian company ICUC (Martin, 2019). For many smaller news organisations, the lack of comments could be due to resource constraints; Canter (2013) found most small, local, or community news organisations cannot afford to host comments as their small readership means limited resources available for adapting to, or

adopting, digital innovations. Some online news organisations approached in this study were operating out of home offices and run full-time by only a few people. Conversely, the major news organisations have newsrooms in many cities, but only one of the two biggest news organisations, Fairfax Media, does all its own comment moderation work. These factors significantly reduced the number of news organisations available to study.

### 3.5.2 Regulation and litigation of comment spaces.

Also impacting the news organisations' approach to cultural intermediation were the media laws of Australia. While U.S. media studies often refers to that nation's constitutional freedom of speech when investigating the rights of news organisations to publish as they please, there is no such explicit press freedom in Australia, particularly regarding defamation (Dent & Kenyon, 2004). Defamation is a constant concern for the news media in Australia, because the publishers of a text that harms an individual's reputation are held as liable for the text's damaging meaning as the author.[4] Media organisations have had to retract stories and pay heavy fines for articles that were determined to be defamatory. In some cases, even satirical media, such as songs lampooning politicians, have been ruled defamatory, despite their explicitly ironic or mocking character (Stratton, 2000).

Simply hosting comments, then, means news publishers will take part in spreading defamatory statements if these appear in their comment sections. While Australia lacks legal clarity on publisher's responsibilities to act in this matter, which is a problem common to many nations (Goodman, 2013), Chapter 2 noted international precedents for news organisations being successfully sued over their users' comments. This means that comment moderators and

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[4] While Defamation Act 2005 (*Defamation Act 2005*, 2018) establishes liability and consequences of defamation in Australia, it does not actually define what defamation is. For this, it relies on 'general law', or common law, making international legal precedents especially significant considerations for Australian news organisations. A broadly accepted common law definition is: "The publication of any false imputation concerning a person, or a member of his family, whether living or dead, by which (a) the reputation of that person is likely to be injured or (b) he is likely to be injured in his profession or trade or (c) other persons are likely to be induced to shun, avoid, ridicule or despise him" ("Defamation in Australia," 2008).

community managers need some understanding of Australian law to do their work, as do journalists (Hanusch, 2015). While there has not yet been a comprehensive survey of Australian news organisations' views on hosting comments, this legal risk could provide some explanation as to why many news organisations forego hosting in-house comments sections and forums entirely, leaving users to talk about their publications on social media.

### 3.5.3 Gaining access to closed newsrooms.

Gaining approval to carry out this newsroom study was not without its challenges, as some of the news organisations that did host and moderate comments were not easily contacted. Several news websites lacked any email address on their websites and only offered forms that could be filled out to send inquiries. Others had no obviously listed phone number, other than for advertising sales. Where email addresses could be obtained, there were rarely email addresses available for the comment moderators and community managers specifically; meaning the only way to contact these staff members was through general inquiries to the editor in chief. Fortunately, I gained access to the first two organisations I approached, which was critical to the success of the study because I did not receive a single response from the other companies I contacted.

Most news organisations provided limited if any information about comment moderation policies, and confined their guidelines for audience interaction to their legal Terms of Service. The participants in this study are notable exceptions. They both have public statements on the practices and policies of moderators and community managers. Fairfax Media provides a link to its commenting guidelines above its comments sections ("Commenting guidelines," 2012)(See Appendix A), includes further information about regulatory limits on posting to its publication network in its Conditions of Use (Fairfax Media Limited, 2018a) and publishes annual articles by its chief moderator (Ashton, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), explaining the reasoning used in moderating and curating comments. *The Conversation* also prominently displays a link to the

community standards ("Community standards", 2015) (See Appendix B) at the bottom of every webpage, and the standards are frequently referenced in the comments themselves, by users, moderators and others. Both provide multiple methods of contacting the news organisation or individual staff members. Consequently, the following observations need to be foregrounded with the understanding that they are taking place at distinctly 'open' media organisations.

### 3.6 Problematising the approach to the case study.

This account must acknowledge several limitations of the researcher and the research design. While it is possible to mitigate the impact of some of these factors, which present both opportunities and challenges, others have implications for the scope and generalisability of the research findings.

### 3.6.1 The unacquainted observer.

The author of this research is an unacquainted observer of digital journalism, lacking a professional background in either traditional journalism or the comment moderation and community management work being studied. Ethnographies are often taken up by people in a position they wish to analyse, be it professional, personal, or cultural (Desmond, 2014). In this case, however, the researcher approaches the work as a consumer rather than producer of journalism. This brings advantages and disadvantages to the study.

A potential benefit of being an outsider to newsroom work is that of scientific objectivity. Many aspects of the journalistic field are unspoken and internalised, such as professional habitus or the doxa of the newsroom (Schultz, 2007). As such, people exposed to the social structures behind newsroom work are more inclined to adopt their nuanced 'sense' of journalism (Benson & Neveu, 2005) and may be influenced in their observations by the disposition and its assumptions about the object of study. Journalism outsiders, like the observer in this study, lack such a subjective disposition to journalism, and thus following Hegelund (2005), are more inclined towards one of the more traditional concepts of research objectivity.

The observer's 'sense' of the work will necessarily be based more on empirical observations and verified accounts than on their knowledge of, and history within, the field of journalism.

On the other hand, researchers advocating and utilising the theories of Bourdieu (Cottle, 2000; Schultz, 2007) make clear how important it is for ethnographers to have a clear and detailed understanding of the object of study. Without this focus, the application of Bourdieu's field theory becomes more challenging and problematic, as it becomes harder to connect the data with the larger, more diffuse and fluid field of journalism. Unfortunately, a researcher coming in as an outsider will naturally have less knowledge of the field prior to observation. This limitation has the potential to obscure some aspects of the object of study and may have led to some important details about journalistic practice going unnoticed.

Nevertheless, the observer's position as an outsider provides this work with a unique and valuable perspective. Zamith and Lewis (2014) demonstrate the potential benefit of incorporating diverse perspectives on future journalistic work in research accounts, and certainly the participants in that study, coming from a range of professional and personal backgrounds, suggested many valuable ideas for the research that had not previously been considered. This study endeavoured to achieve similar results by using the lens of its distinct observer and recruiting participants in as many different aspects of comment mediation work as possible.

### 3.6.2 Overcoming ethical ethnography issues.

This study also had to consider and accommodate the ethical ramifications of ethnography. These concerns relate to how consent is gained from the people whose lives will be closely observed (Parker, 2007), ensuring no harm is done to participants (Singer, 2009), and providing a description of their observed activities that corresponds empirically and objectively

to what is being observed (Hegelund, 2005). Addressing these ethical concerns carefully in the research design was central to this study's ethics approval.[5]

The first ethical consideration was how to ensure that participant consent was fully informed. Past ethnographers have found that people can agree to participate in a study without fully understanding the implications of their contribution (Parker, 2007), leading to unintended harm or distress. Even in the case of interviews, where participants' own words are used in context, the participants can later look back with discomfort on the things they unwittingly revealed to the researcher (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). In this study however, participant vulnerability was less of a concern than in, for instance, medical studies, which see a wider variety of less expert and more possibly ill or dependent participants (Parker, 2007). All participants in this research are tertiary educated professionals involved in news work of some sort. Given the similarities between ethnography and some aspects of journalism research (Singer, 2009), they will be more familiar with the implications of giving consent to a study. Nevertheless, all participants were reminded of their rights prior to all points of contact, both in writing and verbally, and these rights were reiterated during observations and communications.

During the research, providing an accurate description of the work being done was critical both in terms of the ethicality and validity of this research, but was a challenge for several reasons. For Singer (2009), recording a faithful description requires not just noting incidents but also being careful to document their context. However, as Cottle (2007) notes, this context includes external influences that are potentially not directly observable, such as past managerial decisions and the legal environment. Through triangulating the data collected – the literature surveyed, the workplace observations made and the interviews recorded – this study strives to remove inaccuracies and misinterpretations of the practices and participants being observed. The notes, with the aid of photos and site maps, focused on capturing physical descriptions of

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[5] Approval of this study, as Project 2016/701, granted by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee on 9 November 2016

objects, people and actions while the larger context is obtained both through interviews and analysis of recent literature on digital newsroom operations and transformations. The resulting analysis was then sent to participants who could fill in any missing details, correct errors of fact and discuss or dispute interpretations.

In addition to ensuring the validity of the results, this repeated correspondence with participants served another purpose: preventing indirect harm to the participants contributing to the research. A fundamental difference between journalism research and ethnography, according to Singer (2009), is that an ethnography's primary concern is for the participants. Participants of this study could withdraw any part of their contribution at any time up to final submission of the thesis. I have worked with them to ensure that no part of this study will harm them professionally or personally. Further, participants were only identified if they consented in writing and only to the extent that they permitted this identification.

### 3.6.3 Dilemmas in participant observation.

Participant observation is often problematised beyond these ethical concerns. Despite it being fundamental to most ethnographies (Robben & Sluka, 2015), researchers have discussed the challenges of participant observation in practice (Feldman, 2011; Jaimangal-Jones, 2014; Levinson, 2010; Moore & Savage, 2002; Parker, 2007; Uldam & McCurdy, 2013). The problems described include maintaining focus on the object of research in longer ethnographies (Levinson, 2010), accommodating the position of the researcher during the observation (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014), effectively negotiating access and consent with participants (Gillárová, Tejkalová, & Láb, 2014; Levinson, 2010; Moore & Savage, 2002) and the specific challenges of studying modern newsrooms (Gillárová et al., 2014). It is the last two issues that weighed most heavily on the conduct of this study.

Negotiating access to restricted spaces and participants is a daunting task for ethnographers. This can be for cultural reasons, as Levinson (2010) notes, for ethical and

bureaucratic reasons, according to Moore and Savage (2002), or due to increasingly closed professional environments (Cottle, 2007), such as those examined in this study. While careful, ethical approaches are necessary to conduct academically rigorous ethnographies (Levinson, 2010; Singer, 2009), an overly complicated process of negotiating access and consent will put off potential participants (Moore & Savage, 2002). In doing ethnographies for health research, Moore and Savage (2002) struggled with both finding consenting participants and sufficiently informing participants about the study prior to their giving consent, without worrying them unnecessarily. On the other hand, Levinson (2010) shows the problems that can arise when not adhering strictly to participant approach guidelines. In his review of a study on a local population, he found the researcher had failed to have proper negotiations with participants over access and consent. As a result, the study not only violated ethical rules, but also lost sight of its primary objects of research. This process of negotiation, he argued, is also a way of keeping studies on track and ensuring everyone participating is clear about the aims, conduct and intended outcomes of the study.

This study heeded Levinson's call (2010) to keep research aims and processes transparent and up front for participants, even if it meant reducing the potential pool of contributors. The researcher presented extensive documentation about the study to all potential participants and ensured their full consent. Participants received a digital and paper copy of any documents, and the researcher went over the details in person to clear up any confusion at the time of observation or later by email or phone. The goals were to ensure that participants understood the terms of their contribution and to empower them to be confident and comfortable contributing to this study. Ultimately, all participants presented with the extensive documentation opted to proceed with the research.

Another limitation for this ethnography was the limited number of participants it could effectively access, and the constraints on observation, within the timeframe allowed by the

participating organisations. According to Gillárová et al. (2014), newsrooms are increasingly closed spaces, and it is getting progressively harder to find participants willing to be observed or even talk to researchers – partly because of increased workloads, but also because progressively more work is being done offsite. Initially the plan was for this study to observe as many as twenty participants over significantly more days, however the researcher found some potential Fairfax participants worked in New Zealand, while others were unavailable during the study period. *Conversation* moderation is carried out in sites across the world, but all but the Melbourne office were inaccessible to the researcher. There were also predictable financial and time constraints on the student researchers' mobility. Ultimately though these access issues did not affect the diversity of the participant sample or the quality of the eventual observations and interviews. While *The Conversation* has offices internationally, limiting access to the Australian office enabled the results to better compare to those of Fairfax, and its Melbourne office is also the starting point for the entire organisation (The Conversation, n.d.-b), making it highly influential.

### 3.6.4 Open interviews, open issues.

A final concern was the issues presented by utilising open, unstructured interviews. Open interviews are face-to-face conversations based on a diverse range of questions, but unlike other research involving interviews, they do not have an entirely standardised set of enquiries (Fontana & Frey, 1994); rather, questions can emerge as a result of observations or in response to participant contributions. These unstructured interviews deliver more personal and individual insights, but present their own complications for researchers.

A key complication of open interviews is the increased risk of de-identifying participants without their consent. Because questions are tailored to the specific background, situation and responses of participants, according to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), they are more likely to elicit responses that contain personal, or personally identifying, information. Mero-Jaffe

(2011) finds that participants are often surprised by the contents of interview transcripts, reinforcing the need for participant approval of interview contents.

Consequently, the research design of this study incorporated safeguards against this risk. Not only did participants have a right to look over the documents, per the consent form, but any data that presented risks was carefully assessed by the researcher and discarded regardless of its value for the research. This research was never intended to be a criticism of newsroom practices, so there was no attempt to obtain or present data that would reflect negatively on the organisation or the participants. There is the potential for this limitation to have implications for the analysis. It is possible, for example, that the research could have made more critical observations about aspects of cultural intermediation work that did not appear effective or productive. However, that was not the intention of the study. As noted earlier, the researcher acknowledges that the primary responsibility of an ethnographer is to the subjects of their research, not the potential value of their contribution (Levinson, 2010).

Finally, with interview topics changing from participant to participant, some interview responses could not be directly compared between participants, making some results harder to generalise and the analysis more limited. This is not entirely a limitation – one of the goals of choosing open interviews was to invite the participants to be co-creators of the descriptive material, rather than simply filling in the blanks the researcher had created. Participants were asked questions and gave responses that were relevant to them and their positions. While this exploratory work welcomes the diversity of descriptions, future research will likely want to constrain the questions to create a more generalisable understanding of the work of comment moderation and community management.

### 3.7 Conclusion.

This study's design engages with Bourdieu's critical sociology goals of bridging the structures influencing cultural production and the independent agency of the individuals doing

the work, agency that is grounded in their personal and cultural context (Bourdieu, 1993). It also addresses his call to reconcile sociological theories with empirical analysis of practices and practitioners (Bourdieu, 1977), in this case tying his theory of fields to newsroom work and workers. Domingo (2008) and Willig (2012) offer a means to achieve these goals through their newsroom ethnographies, which provided a model for the design of this study. The methods of newsroom ethnography needed to be tailored to the specific object of this study – comment moderation and community management of comments in online news organisations – which presented unique challenges. Ultimately, by designing the research to accommodate the challenges and to focus on the objects of research, this study produced a method of newsroom ethnography that has yielded significant conclusions about this new form of cultural intermediation.

The next two chapters present the data about, and analysis of, how comment moderation and community management operate on site in newsrooms in two organisations in Australia. This analysis presents a fuller picture of the current practices and practitioners of this cultural intermediation work than exists in current journalism and media literature, and depicts unique approaches to comment moderation and community management, as well as the factors influencing their development over time.

# 4 A Look at Moderation at the Coalface

This chapter paints a complex picture of cultural intermediation through comment governance in Fairfax Media, and its subsidiary production hub, Pagemasters. The participants, working in newsrooms, news production centres and home offices across Australia, each employ their individual understandings of how to engage with commenters and their contributions, organisational strategies and policies for this work and professional standards and values.

Moderation work is distributed across diverse roles, but symbolically centred on the chief moderator, and his team, who have developed a lexicon of inappropriate speech to guide their moderation practices. Journalists have distinct dispositions and approaches to moderation, with a focus supporting the volume and flow of conversation. Community management practices are broadly limited compared to comment moderation, but each participant engaged with some form of community management, with practices being distinct for each candidate. Overall the chapter finds workers exerting their own agency in their cultural intermediation strategies, but notes that these choices often align with organisational or journalistic values.

This chapter analyses the observations of, and interviews with, Fairfax staff and one participant working in an affiliated company, Pagemasters, who is responsible for moderating comments on Fairfax news websites. It introduces each participant in turn starting with some contextualisation of their location within a unique news organisation.

## 4.1 In the offices and newsrooms of Fairfax and Pagemasters.

These participants manage the comments and commenters for a massive legacy media organisation, Fairfax Media Limited (Fairfax). Fairfax is a multi-platform media company, which also has a presence in New Zealand. It manages radio stations, newspapers, event coordinators and a wide variety of websites, including news websites (Fairfax Media Limited, 2018b). Though the news websites are a newer addition, some of their newspapers started circulation over a hundred and fifty years ago. While it is a corporation and operates under the direction of a

board, it has a separate editorial charter that allows the newsrooms to operate somewhat

autonomously. Pagemasters is a separate company, but they do the comment moderation and

subediting work for Fairfax news websites (Pagemasters, 2018).

These two organisations work together to moderate comments and manage the

commenting community on Fairfax's five online news websites: *The Sydney Morning Herald, The*

*Age, The Australian Financial Review, BrisbaneTimes.com.au* and *WAToday.com.au*. Fairfax relies on

pre-moderating comments, so few comments appear on their news websites without being read

and approved. The bulk of this work is done by the moderation staff at Pagemasters, including

the chief moderator and his part time staff. However, individual journalists and columnists at

Fairfax also read and approve comments on their own articles and add their own comments to

respond to or redirect the community. The editors at Fairfax also get involved, coordinating with

the Pagemasters moderators and the journalists to ensure comment sections are active but also

moderated and managed.

At Fairfax and Pagemasters, the members of staff working in the comment sections are

geographically separated. The newsrooms of Fairfax are widespread, as they produce

publications for individual cities, towns, and regions across Australia and New Zealand (Fairfax

Media Limited, 2018c), while Pagemasters does its work outside of any of these newsrooms.

None of the participants in this study worked in the same space – two were in the same

newsroom, but on opposite sides. Further, none of the participants were seated next to a person

with codified responsibilities in comment moderation or community management. This made

for minimal interaction between the participants, who rarely mentioned each other during the

observations.

As a consequence of this, each participant had distinct practices, tasks and objectives in

doing their comment moderation and community management work. Their work was not

mutually exclusive, however; it often overlapped, with certain tasks shared and some practices

loosely coordinated through emails and phone calls. The most organised and detailed approach

to this cultural intermediation work was that of the person most involved in cultural

intermediation in the comment sections, Ashton, the Chief Moderator.

### 4.1.1 The chief moderator.

Rob Ashton, employed by Pagemasters (a subsidiary of Australian Associated Press), is

the chief comment moderator for Fairfax Media's five metropolitan news websites. He is the

central coordinating figure for comment moderation and community management of Fairfax's

comment sections. He, along with the team of three comment moderators in Auckland that he

remotely manages, oversees moderation of comments for the Fairfax news websites; Fairfax also

employs a full-time moderator in Canberra. Ashton also corresponds and liaises with Fairfax

staff engaging with comments, such as editors and journalists moderating and community

managing responses to their own articles. While he works at Pagemasters Sydney, well outside of

the Fairfax newsrooms, he plays a key role in the cultural intermediation of Fairfax's dialogic

interaction, with his team responsible for publishing most of the user comments seen on the site.

Ashton sees his role as enabling speech freedoms and media critique:

> The way I see it fitting into the newsroom is that we are playing an integral part in
>
> encouraging reader engagement. We are playing an important role in making sure that
>
> readers on those websites know that if they want to, they can make a comment. In part, I
>
> think it's about not only engagement, but also about freedom. People may not ever
>
> actually make a comment, but they have the freedom to make a comment if they want to.
>
> So I think that's an important thing to have. It also means that people can make the
>
> comment, and also means that they can make comments that actually are critical of
>
> Fairfax, if they want to, or of the moderators, if they want to… (Ashton Interview, 2016)

He also believes that younger readers grow up expecting a commenting platform, a way of interacting with the organisation so that what he does will in the future be "a more important role for responsible or reputable media organisations" (Ashton Interview, 2016).

While Ashton's comment moderation work involves multiple tasks, the first and most impactful is deciding which comment sections to prioritise. Reviewing which articles are open for comments and choosing which comments to work on next occupies a relatively small amount of his overall workload. However, these are critical intermediating functions as they determine which comments will appear first and shape discussions in the comment sections. Consequently, Ashton glances back at 'open' stories and re-prioritises his work regularly. If an editor, staff member, or (rarely) journalist is moderating a set of comments, Ashton will move on to another section, but he still checks to see that comments are being published or rejected on the previous section. Though Ashton ultimately aims to review all comments posted, the volume of material posted throughout the day necessitates this prioritisation.

Ashton factors in a few concerns when prioritising. One is whether an article has attracted a high number of unpublished comments or no or few published comments. Fairfax editorial policy also provides direction on what gets done first:

> We prioritise what is above the fold on the websites. So, it stands to reason, you know, one of our readers pops onto *The Age, The [Sydney Morning] Herald* or one of the other three ones, to look at the website, we want to have the comments ticking over on those ones, which normally are the busiest ones anyway, because they're the ones that have the most readership. So I want to see that people know we are actively moderating those comments. (Ashton Interview, 2016)

He was asked by Fairfax to include, in the moderating team's daily report, a list of the articles they had worked on that day that had attracted at least 100 published comments. Ashton and his team are careful to keep track throughout the day of which articles might reach that threshold.

Also, if his team has time, or "bandwidth" as he calls it (Ashton Interview, 2016), they will open more articles to comment. He often confers with his staff of moderators, who may be focusing on other articles at the same time, about where to focus their energies. Once he makes the decision, though, it benefits him to stay in that section, as every time he moves on to a new one, he may have to read some of the articles and parts of the comment threads that have been published by other moderators, which takes time away from reviewing comments.

From there, Ashton reads the comments to decide what to publish or reject, a cultural intermediation task that dominates his daily workload. To do this, he often accesses the comment-moderating platform by clicking on individual articles on the Fairfax websites. There, he can moderate comments for that individual article. Alternatively, he can moderate individual comments in a stream. His team also separately moderate *Executive Style* articles (when asked) and all *Traveller* articles, which are linked to but not hosted on the metropolitan news websites. Both of these sites use the Facebook social plugin for comment hosting. For moderating, shorter and more positive comments require less attention and Ashton can publish several quickly. Similarly, comments that violate standards in a clear way, such as those with personal abuse, are promptly rejected: 'If you get a comment rejected, have a look at why you think it might be rejected. And, a simple example is, if you've called the person you're replying to a fool, well, you know, that's the reason' (Ashton Interview, 2016). For longer or borderline comments that could potentially be seen as abusive, defamatory inaccurate or off-topic, the process can take much longer, on rare occasions for five minutes or longer for a single comment. He would not spend this length of time researching one comment unless it would help him to better moderate other comments for the same or similar articles. In these cases, he looks at the comment section and reads not just the comment itself but also, on occasion, part or all of the comment thread and the article.

> We spend a lot of time in Google checking links, checking quotes, and that's just, you
> know, Google, that's just the online research we need to do to be able to have the

information to decide whether we should publish a comment or not. (Ashton Interview, 2016)

The reading of comments occupies the vast majority of his day. He can remain focused on this task for two or more hours at a time, with only intermittent breaks to re-prioritise.

Ashton's need to balance corporate and reader interests demonstrates how publishing and rejecting comments can operate as cultural intermediation. On behalf of Fairfax, Ashton focuses on preventing defamation and vilification as well as maintaining civil discussions, "…[The executive] has publicly stated this, keeping a civil conversation in our comment thread is what we are aiming to do" (Ashton Interview, 2016) He also has to consider Fairfax's corporate reputation, and its need to maintain editorial standards. Simultaneously, he frequently conjures and weighs the feelings of readers when considering what comments to reject:

Empathy is something you need because we need to, when we see a comment, imagine how we would feel if we, imagine how the person who is being replied to might feel about what is said in the comment. Or the person who may be named and photographed in the article, how they may feel about this comment. Or a whole range of things; we've got to basically be able to put ourselves in the shoes of all sorts of people and try and decide, 'Is this a fair comment?' 'Does this cross the line?' 'Is this crossing the line into being abusive, rather than a constructive civil comment?' (Ashton Interview, 2016)

This empathy extends to considering how the context for commenting, a death or accident, might impact on his moderation decision:

If someone's paying respects to someone who's just died, that is an example that I feel, and I think that most people in the community would feel, [I] don't really want to reject someone's tribute comments…but by the same token, I can't publish a comment that's

inappropriate; that might be making a dig at someone else, for example. (Ashton

Interview, 2016)

In reconciling the editorial concerns of the publication with the interests of its participants,

Ashton's comment moderation practices reflect his awareness of his role as an intermediary.

A less common comment moderation task that Ashton performs is to draw the attention

of Fairfax staff to relevant comments; in doing so, his work has direct parallels to that of the

cultural intermediaries described by Bourdieu (1984, p. 326), rendering visible cultural

production that is otherwise overlooked due to the cultural capital of the producer. On these

occasions, Ashton will send an email to a journalist or editor to notify them about the concern of

a commenter: "It could be a request to write an article about a particular topic. It could be that

they feel a certain point in the article was omitted, and that's an important point that should be

included" (Ashton Interview, 2016). In response to this communication, newsroom staff have

made corrections to articles, pursued leads and added their own comments to the discussion

threads. Ashton, in this capacity, is performing two key roles described by Bourdieu, mediating

between consumers and producers and drawing attention to fringe production, in this case user

comments.

Community management is a less frequent part of Ashton's cultural intermediation work,

most often in the form of responding to email complaints from commenters about rejected

comments. This requires Ashton look at the rejected comment and then explain his moderation

reasoning. Where commenters query his decisions in a discussion thread, Ashton occasionally

posts his response as a comment. However, if the comment concerns a sensitive issue, Ashton

himself may initiate email contact, an action that highlights the degree to which he empathises

with users' expressive aims:

That particularly happens when there's an article, say, and it's what we call an 'in

memoriam' article, so someone has died… once in a blue moon, someone will send in a

comment and it's very heartfelt; they are very upset. The RIP is included. But they've said

something that is inappropriate, so I might just shoot them a quick email and say 'Look, I

don't feel great having to reject your comment; I only did it because of this one sentence.

Just letting you know in case you want to resubmit without that sentence or modify that

sentence.'…I'm not telling them to change the comment; that's up to them. I'm just

explaining to them, I can't publish the comment as it is. I do feel bad about it. (Ashton

Interview, 2016)

Other times commenters inadvertently expose personal aspects of their lives "it might be to do with domestic violence in their family, alcoholism in their family, suicide in their family" (Ashton Interview, 2016) or in others' families, he will contact them and ask them to anonymise their comments. Through these responses, he helps the commenters shape their expression so that it fits into the cultural standards of Fairfax comment sections.

Ashton communicates these cultural standards as well as reflections on his comment moderation work through articles published on Fairfax news websites. The first of these articles, "Why I reject your comments" (Ashton, 2013) included a video interview, and it describes the reasons why some kinds of comments get rejected as well as the forms of cultural intermediation work he does. Since then, he has published several more on a nearly annual basis (Ashton, 2015, 2016, 2017). The purpose of these is to share his experiences of his work: "I'm just talking about what the view from the coalface is; wanting to share that experience as much as possible with our readers, with our commenters" (Ashton Interview, 2016). He also responds to commenters in the discussion threads beneath these articles, which usually have "a fair few comments" (Ashton Interview, 2016). His latest article "Flame wars, friendly comments and fake news: Chief comment moderator's year in review" (Ashton, 2017) has 132 published comments. Even in this community management work, however, moderation plays the key role – the writing centres on his experience of moderating comments. Nevertheless, the articles also illustrate how community

management helps him communicate the cultural standards he is cultivating in the commenting community through his moderation.

These annual articles see him performing in a traditional journalistic capacity (Robinson, 2010), but Ashton sees all of his cultural intermediation work as part of the field of journalism.

What we are doing I regard it as journalism. I mean, I haven't checked the definition for journalism for a long time but… we interact with the editors and the journalists, you know, the reporters. We interact with a lot of people at Fairfax, production people and so on. So, yeah, I think we're all part of the same mixing pot of getting the quality Fairfax journalism out to our readers. That's what it's all about. And many of our readers like the comments. I don't know how many of them do, but many of them say it. They say, 'Wow, I really like the comments…on this story.' 'I've come here mainly to read the comments.' (Ashton Interview, 2016)

During his work, Ashton moves in and out of the traditional field of journalism. He has intermittent contact throughout the day with journalists and editors, either reporting on the status of various comment sections or answering questions about moderation decisions, commenter feedback, or his team's current focus. He and self-selected Fairfax staff occasionally work in parallel to get comments moderated quickly on new articles. In addition to the training Fairfax provided when he started the job, Ashton is inspired by the cultural intermediation practices of other prominent news organisations, such as *The New York Times,* to which he is a subscriber. Consequently, the doxa and habitus Ashton exhibits in doing his work partly reflect this association with editorial staff and news organisations – for example, he is strict about ensuring the accuracy of comments – if it is about an important or sensitive issue – and preventing defamation. He investigates the claims made by commenters and verifies the quotes, again if they are important or sensitive. He sees his role as a way to promote and improve

Fairfax's journalistic production. In these ways, he embodies practices and values common to the 'converger' journalists of Robinson's work (2010).

Ashton's association of his work with journalism is facilitated by his location in a different type of journalistic environment, that of the Pagemasters office in the AAP news agency, which Fairfax part owns. Ashton shares his Rhodes office space with national and international journalists from a range of organisations. Thus, while he does not come from a background in journalism, by education or work experience, he is developing his professional habitus and doxa in workspace filled with journalists, journalistic activity and artefacts. The walls of the AAP office are covered with quotes from historically significant news stories and pictures of famous Australian journalists, celebrities and politicians. One of his favourite features of the AAP newsroom is the red news ticker on the far wall, displaying brief descriptions of events happening in Australia and across the world – something he finds exciting. Along with the fact that he is surrounded by newspaper and magazine subeditors as well as journalists, he feels part of journalism, despite his physical distance from the Fairfax newsroom.

Ashton is isolated from the editorial staff and journalistic production of Fairfax in several ways. First and foremost, his workspace is at least thirty minutes' drive away from the Darling Island offices of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the nearest Fairfax newsroom. Secondly, and potentially because of his location, he is not part of Fairfax daily news conferences or typical newsroom 'water-cooler' style social encounters, though he has the equivalent in one of the staff kitchens with Pagemasters and AAP news colleagues – as well as journalists from the international agencies who work in his office – where they often discuss the news of the day. While newsroom journalists have daily meetings and press reviews (Cottle & Ashton, 1999), Ashton jumps directly into his work from entering the office, with occasional greetings and brief chats with his manager. Other than that, he mainly works with his New Zealand-based team, also located outside Fairfax newsrooms, discussing whether to pick up where they left off or to agree

on a strategy for tackling the current load of comments. He and the team also work

collaboratively every day with the Fairfax comment moderator in Canberra.

It is these moderators, rather than the journalists and editors, that plays the biggest part

in negotiating a shared sense of the tasks, practices and value of their cultural intermediation

work. Together, they have established their own standards of how to cultivate a civil

commenting community, even collaboratively writing a "lexicon" – the first iteration of which

was approved by Fairfax – listing controversial forms of expression such as 'grub'. The team has

also developed a kind of doxa regarding the importance of consistency in their judgments; the

first criterion Ashton listed for good cultural intermediation is that the workers are "always fair

and impartial." (Ashton Interview, 2016), fairness being the first point in the Australian

Journalist Code of Ethics (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2018). Ashton considers

having personal interest in the topics being moderated is another important attribute:

> What I look for in the moderators is someone who is very interested in current affairs,
>
> who is very interested in the media, who is very interested in playing a part in those
>
> forum conversations and our part is moderating the forum… It means you're going to be
>
> reading the stories and moderating articles, and you understand the issues that people are
>
> making the comments about. (Ashton Interview, 2016)

Consequently, the field of journalism has a significant balancing influence on Ashton's work,

with his team of moderators.

Ashton's cultural intermediation work, primarily through comment moderation, is the

result of both his relationship with the journalistic field and his distance from it. While journalists

and editors at Fairfax have a defining role in how Ashton works, his external team of

Pagemasters moderators as well as the readers and commenters have also influenced the way his

tasks, practices and values have developed. Nevertheless, Ashton makes the case that

commenting, moderation and community management are an integral part of the future of journalism.

### 4.1.2 Senior entertainment writer.

Karl Quinn works as a full-time journalist in one of Fairfax's largest and oldest publications, *The Age* in Melbourne. His primary responsibility is to report and write entertainment news, features and comment/analysis, but he also writes and edits stories in other areas as the need arises.

Quinn also engages extensively in cultural intermediation of the comments in response to his articles. This work is not part of his codified duties, but he does it willingly as he feels it is part of good journalistic work and it gives him feedback on the quality of his own journalistic product:

> I find it quite invigorating because it does feel like you are more directly in touch with your readers. Sometimes I find that there's really useful stuff in the comments, like if people pull me up on mistakes, I can quickly correct them… We don't display our corrections. I think arguably we should, but you know, that's just our style. But I'm happy to acknowledge them and correct them in the comments section… I like it being an immediate kind of feedback mechanism. I find that really kind of exciting. You know… it keeps you on your toes. It increases engagement on the part of readers. And… you know, with a bit of order, it can be a really energising kind of space. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

Most of Quinn's intermediation work revolves around comment moderation – reading the comments on his articles and then deciding whether to publish or, relatively rarely, reject them. He is not alone in doing this work as there is a small, dedicated comment-moderation team, but he often does the work himself to cultivate the discussion he wants to see. For Quinn,

pre-moderating and publishing comments quickly is a way of encouraging discussion under his articles, even if this approach does not always serve the desires of readers:

> The fact that comments are not automatically posted I think is a good thing, but it can mean you miss the window in which the conversation is most active. If you've got comments turned on for a story that goes live in the evening or overnight, and comments are being posted but nobody is looking at those comments to moderate them and post them until, say, 6 a m or 7 a m, then potentially you've missed … several hours in which people are most actively engaged with others in the topic of discussion. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

Consequently, Quinn scans through and publishes a large number of comments as soon as he can after his articles are published, favouring those that are not off-topic, abusive or defamatory. In Quinn's experience, a higher number of published comments lead to a higher number of comments being posted:

> I think the volume of comments serves as a flag to people to get into the discussion or not. So if there're a lot of comments on a story, more people are likely to comment. If there's one comment on a story, fewer people are likely to comment. There's kind of a tipping point driven by volume and speed of response, so if people start commenting fairly quickly, then that will drive commentary. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

Quinn then, through moderation, is partly working to elicit the voice of the public.

When Quinn has finished publishing unambiguously safe comments, his attention turns to the comments that threaten to violate his standards. He considers the potential offence of each comment individually. Quinn's rejections are rare – he sometimes even looks at other moderators' rejections and reverses them, publishing less serious offences – but when he does this he tries to apply "an intrinsic logic, albeit one that might only be apparent to me at that

moment in time" (Quinn Interview, 2017). If his editorial judgement might seem somewhat

arbitrary, according to Quinn, it is because comment moderation presents dynamic and

contextual challenges:

> Drawing the line between what is trolling and what is simply slightly tangential but still
>
> more or less on-topic can be difficult. Deciding at what point to say somebody is merely
>
> trolling versus expressing a counterview or whatever is also difficult. I find it's pretty
>
> fluid. I don't have a rigid set of parameters that I bring to bear and I can bolt on to any
>
> situation. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

His internalised sense of what is allowable speech helps him to make difficult editorial decisions,

in much the same way that the doxa and habitus of the journalists helps them choose their

stories (Schultz, 2007).

Community management is also a part of Quinn's cultural intermediation work and he

does it in a way that reflects the value he finds in comment sections, though he does it much less

often than comment moderation. His community management involves posting his own

responses to comments on occasion, as well as replying to emailed comments (via email). He

generally offers answers to questions or makes small corrections to misunderstandings in other

comments, though he also acknowledges and thanks commenters for their feedback on his

article. The impact of this work can sometimes be markedly different from his comment

moderation in that it effects a change in the commenter rather than the comment section:

> Definitely there have been instances where somebody has posted a comment, I've
>
> responded, although I'd say this actually happens probably more in emails, where people
>
> will email directly over a story and I'll respond to them. Even if it's very negative…I will
>
> try to respond in a kind of considered way, 'I disagree but thanks for taking the time, and
>
> here's what I was getting at blah blah blah.' And you'll often find that there is a change in
>
> tone: that they will go from being belligerent and aggressive towards you…to being

impressed with the idea, I think, that you've taken the time to respond. They're grateful

that there's been a dialogue. And, I don't know whether you're actually changing

anybody's mind, but you certainly end up changing their disposition. (Quinn Interview,

2017)

At other times, his responses reflect appreciation for the feedback the commenters have

provided, even those that are critical or correcting errors. In these cases, he finds that responding

politely can offset some of the commenters' negativity: "I generally find that, if you respond and

acknowledge, they are quite forgiving. If you get belligerent and defensive of your errors, they're

not" (Quinn Interview, 2017). While he spends less time managing the community than

moderating the comments, Quinn values the interaction with the audience that comments allow.

According to Quinn, "it opens up a direct dialogue with the readers" (Quinn Interview, 2017).

The habitus and doxa that Quinn employs when moderating comments and managing

the community align significantly with the field of journalism because most of the guidance he

gets on the work comes from news organisations, his fellow journalists and his own work as a

journalist. Fairfax advocates that journalists read and participate in the comment sections, but it

is on a voluntary basis and they do not strictly outline how the work should be done. "I mean, I

don't get an awful lot of direct guidance on an ongoing basis. Whatever discussion has happened

on the topic has happened years ago, for the most part" (Quinn Interview, 2017).

However, through his time as a journalist with Fairfax, he has formed what he feels is "a

general kind of consensus view" of how this work should be performed (Quinn Interview,

2017). He most frequently cites examples from his own experience and that of other journalists

who are active in their comments sections, even calling up past comment sections from these

journalists that he particularly appreciated. For particularly unique or difficult issues, he might

contact or be contacted by Ashton's team of moderators at Pagemasters. Ultimately, though, he

finds himself most often having to rely on his own experience and judgment, "generally it's pretty much that I'm flying solo" (Quinn Interview, 2017).

The commenters reinforce his journalistic approach, to an extent, because their interactions with him are based on his journalistic production. Their comments to him, on in-house sections or social media platforms, are often aimed at improving or refuting the article rather than at his moderation and management choices, and may thank him for the article or abuse him for his choice or treatment of a subject. In one example:

> I recently…wrote a piece about Mariah Carey and her miming, or in fact complete failure to mime, on New Year's Eve, and I was the subject of a string of abuse over days by Mariah Carey fans, many of whom appear to be living in Singapore, and a lot of it was very personal, like, 'How can somebody who looks like this say bad things about Mariah?' You know, posting my photo on Twitter and so on. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

While he has proven resilient to this type of abuse, "I think I've got a pretty thick hide" (Quinn Interview, 2017), he notes that it has put many of his colleagues off looking at comments. In one case he recalls, Charlotte Dawson, an Australian television presenter, suicided after being subjected to abuse in comments and social media ("Charlotte Dawson's death puts cyberbullying back in spotlight," 2014). For each example of harassment he cites, the aggressive post is a reaction to the article rather than a response to some aspect of moderation or community management.

That responses focus on his journalism rather than his cultural intermediation work is not a drawback for Quinn, however; one of the greatest values of comments for him is precisely when they provide quick and useful feedback on his journalistic product:

> In terms of what I get from it, I often am educated by readers on things I've got wrong or I've misunderstood, or whatever. When I say often, I mean, I hope it's not every story

I write, but, you know, every so often there'd be something I've got wrong and somebody'll pick it up and I'll go 'Oh, Okay, thanks'…and I find it really helpful. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

The number of comments on his articles provides another kind of feedback, being factored into the analytics used by him and the organisation to judge the success of his journalism. At the same time, Quinn is particularly frustrated that many negative commenters have not engaged fully with his narratives, having "read the headline and maybe the first paragraph, precede, but not read the actual story before commenting" (Quinn Interview, 2017). The value of feedback is greater, for Quinn, if the commenter has read through his work and asked intelligent questions or made an informed response. Consequently, both the quantity and the quality of the comments are important for Quinn, "I would like to see a higher volume of better quality comments. A greater quantity of greater quality: that's what I would like to see, ultimately" (Quinn Interview, 2017).

For Quinn, comment moderation and community management are not external to journalism. Indeed, he sees comment mediation as a good journalistic practice. "Others could do that, and I think that others *should* do that" (Quinn Interview, 2017). Further, he sees the need for journalistic skills for comment moderators and community managers:

I think an awareness of defamation law is important. I think an appreciation of the value of robust discussion is important. A sense of where the boundaries around free speech versus protection from abuse, where they lie. If you are moderating your own comments, I think a degree of resilience is pretty essential. If you're moderating somebody else's, then I think you also need to have an awareness of the values of the masthead and what's appropriate for the masthead. So, is it a particular skill set? I don't know. I think some of them are personal some of them are journalistic. (Quinn Interview, 2017)

Given these requirements, Quinn asserts that journalists and dedicated human moderators, as opposed to algorithms, are needed to cultivate and find value in comment sections, "Personally, I think that's the best way to do it" (Quinn Interview, 2017). He does not find his work with comments or commenters burdensome or tangential to his other journalistic responsibilities, even though he notes it is not a codified part of his duties: "It's just part of my job" (Quinn Interview, 2017).

### 4.1.3 The columnist's view.

John Birmingham is a freelance columnist who publishes an article weekly on Fairfax's *Brisbane Times*. The provocative nature of his writing and his history of engagement with his audience mean his articles frequently get numerous comments, and he has often stepped in to do moderation and community management of this participation. Like Quinn, Birmingham does not have a codified responsibility to look after these comments. Nevertheless, he has been drawn to the discussion users are having about his work out of personal and professional interest. Over time, and particularly following encounters with U.S. based racists, he has become more and more disenchanted with this form of interaction:

> I was a big believer in the sort of, you know, the transaction, or the exchange, or the conversation, whatever you want to call it, of early blogging… I, like everybody else, was really excited by the promise of this two-way exchange, you know. Previously, it'd all been, like, one-way. We'd write the story. It'd go out there and you'd have very little way of knowing whether or not you'd had an impact. Whether you've reached people. Where [then] there was this immediate adrenal rush of feedback when people started putting comments underneath. After a while we sort of came to understand that, you know, maybe not everybody commenting should be fucking commenting. And then, after a while you realise that the nuts have taken over the asylum. (Birmingham Interview 2017)

At the time of this study, most of Birmingham's cultural intermediation in comment

sections was reading and responding to user posts. In these responses, Birmingham thanks

people for kind comments, engages in discussion, answers questions, responds to criticism, or

confronts abusive commenters. His direct, often personal writing style inspires significant reader

participation. One article he wrote about abstaining from alcohol for a year saw people thanking

him both for the subject matter and for his dialogic interaction:

> …it's very honest, it's very personal, quite open, somewhat vulnerable content and
>
> people responded in kind. And they responded kindly, so, that was, when I was reading
>
> those comments, and I read them all, and responded to a lot of them, I responded at a
>
> much greater length than I normally do. I often just toss off a one- or two-line response
>
> whereas with those, I took the time to respond at length to people who had engaged or
>
> communicated in a, you know, in a particular way. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

For Birmingham, making these personal responses led to a better conversation beneath this and

similar articles. However, he notes commenters have become increasingly abusive and

challenging, particularly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and escalating to threats of

violence, making interaction with them difficult. Nevertheless, Birmingham still tries to respond

to, and even reform, users' commenting behaviour. The key to effective community

management in these situations, Birmingham said, is to avoid retaliating against or trivialising the

abuse:

> Do not get into a flame war with a punter. You'll win but you'll lose. You know,
>
> generally because of the work you do, your language skills are going to be better, your
>
> research is going to be better, but it doesn't matter. You know, as Trump has proven,
>
> none of that stuff matters… if you get into a, you know, a sort of rhetorical punch up
>
> with them, you're effectively punching down and they're punching up, so it's not a good
>
> look. The first skill you need to develop is that sort of Obi Wan Kenobi ability to turn

off the lightsabre and just wait for them to strike and then ignore it when it happens. Ignoring shitheads is about the most valuable skill which you can have as an online journalist. If you are going to engage with people, then, I guess, just, you know, do it honestly and generously. Don't be flippant. I tend to, that's my major sin. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

By responding adroitly to hostile comments, he had, in the past, cultivated a largely civil community that was, he notes, praised by other journalists. However, his capacity to personally manage these interactions has been reduced by administrative shifts in his organisation.

Even though Birmingham finds comment moderation critical for shaping the conversations he wants to see, due to content-management system access changes at Fairfax Media, community interaction was the only form of cultural intermediation available to him during the study observation. Previously, Birmingham would go into the separate CMS (Content Management System) Fairfax uses for comment moderation so that he could publish comments and foster discussion beneath his articles, but:

…because of the CMS issues with Fairfax, I don't have the ability to manage the comment threads in the way that I once did. And to be honest, even if I had that ability, I don't know that I would have the fucking energy to do it anymore. You just, you get tired of trying to sandbag the relentless flood of shit that comes in. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

Moderation access had previously enabled him to reject comments that he felt were off-topic or defamatory or that were not contributing to the discussion. Beyond managing legal risk, he said that comment moderation should be employed, as a measure of "quality control" (Birmingham Interview, 2017), and in doing so pointed to a comment that he felt added no value to a thread:

> This comment, it's, you know, it's not offensive, it's not defamatory; it's nothing. You
>
> know, it's a waste of our readers' time to read it because there is just no content to it at
>
> all. You know, do you put that up? I argue no you don't because you're just putting
>
> useless shit in your sites. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

In some comment sections, the quality of comments was sufficiently poor and the abuse
sufficiently prevalent that he had had to close the article for further comments. In doing these
cultural intermediation practices, Birmingham focused on improving interaction between
participants and ensuring comments had some informational or entertainment value.

Both comment moderation and community management come with a significant
drawback for Birmingham, however. Engaging in comment moderation means reading through
the comments that will be rejected, which can be extremely and personally abusive:

> I don't want to read all the comments that we can't publish, because they are foul. Every
>
> time you read one of those, whether it is about you or somebody else, it just, you know,
>
> it cuts a little piece of your heart out. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

The degree of personally directed anger and conspiracy theory, have persuaded him he does not
want to moderate comments anymore. Recently, he says has seen an increase in commenters
who come exclusively to attack him or the general topic, and seem ill informed about his
journalism, "Most of the time I get the impression that a lot of them haven't even read the piece.
They're just using the platform of the media organisation to put their own shit out there"
(Birmingham Interview, 2017). Avoiding making flippant responses to aggressive posts then
abates what he calls "the flame wars", but also works against his community management
techniques of interaction and facilitation, as he primarily engages with comments when he is
interested in or amused by the discussion.

The value judgments Birmingham applies to intermediating comments derive from his long history with journalism, in part because these comments are sharing the webpage with his journalistic product. As moderating and managing comment sections are ostensibly not his responsibility, he receives only limited input from Fairfax on how to conduct these tasks. Consequently, he bases many of his decisions on his journalistic doxa and habitus, which were developed over two decades of writing columns and features for magazines, newspapers and online. For Birmingham, commenters do not understand the standards required of the articles they comment on, "It goes through a filtering process of editors and subeditors and publishers and possibly defamation lawyers. The idea that we just think shit up and throw it at the screen, that's…that's not how it works" (Birmingham Interview, 2017). He thinks it is reasonable that commenters be held to some of those standards if they are going to occupy the same space. He feels they not only should be aware of defamation law, but should also write material that engages with the article, the author, or the other commenters.

While Birmingham finds that comments are increasingly problematic and not worth the effort, he does think they can have value if the organisation is willing to engage in enough cultural intermediation. To illustrate this, he compares the approach of other prominent news organisations and journalists in the field:

> The comments on a *New York Times* piece are generally going to be worth reading because they just have zero tolerance for the shit and they spend a lot of time getting rid of, just, you know, toxic crap in their comments. But that's, you know, that's an investment that they've made… The comments on an Andrew Bolt column at, what is it, the *Herald Sun*, that's just an open sewer… I don't think, unless you're willing to, like, invest as much into the infrastructure of comment management as you are in the infrastructure of journalism, you're not going to see any point to them. (Birmingham Interview, 2017)

According to Birmingham, extensive comment moderation and community management is required to make comments a good addition, with a focus on training the commenters. The problem, he says, is that the extensive effort and investment required, may outweigh the benefit of hosting the comments, which is compounded by the strategic challenges many news organisations have faced transitioning to online news. Consequently, he would prefer to keep user comments on social media channels, "they're social networks so use them for what they're meant to be" (Birmingham Interview, 2017).

Birmingham demonstrates how cultural intermediation can reflect journalistic values but also how adopting commenting features can be problematic for journalistic production. In his position as a journalist with a long and successful history, he is well posed to shape comments and communities to complement the articles and provide value for readers, but the significant time, effort and even emotional investment suggests that the benefit comes at a high cost.

### 4.1.4 The deputy editor's chair.

Mex Cooper, the deputy digital editor of Fairfax's *The Age*, works on comment moderation and community management strategies at the organisational level. Cooper makes decisions about which stories to open for comments and corresponds with other staff, including those at Pagemasters, to ensure open comment sections are getting attention. Rarely, she also corresponds with commenters by email in response to moderation and management decisions. Her input into this kind of cultural intermediation is decisive but also limited, as it competes with her many other responsibilities in the newsroom. She does not publish or reject comments directly through the, like Ashton, nor does she post comments, like Quinn and Birmingham. At the same time, she oversees, to some extent, all the comment sections on *The Age* website.

Cooper's most apparent comment moderation work is to look at stories and decide if they should be open for comments at all, making her work critical in enabling readers to have the option to express their views about production – a key aspect of cultural intermediation. When

opening articles to comments, one of her considerations is whether the subject is something

readers would even be interested in commenting on:

> So, for instance, we often try and open lots of stories up for comments but the ones that
>
> get a lot of comments aren't always the ones that you would think of… So last week we
>
> had a story about a Norwegian cruise ship being stuck, and it got more reader response
>
> in terms of people wanting to send us comments and tips than any story has for a long,
>
> long time and we were all a bit like… 'Who would've thought a Norwegian cruise
>
> ship…?' so it's always a learning experience, but then we would know from that that next
>
> time we had a cruise ship story, clearly that's of massive interest to people. (Cooper
>
> Interview, 2017)

In addition to gate-keeping comments, Cooper needs to ensure there will be staff to evaluate

those comments or none will be posted due to Fairfax's commitment to pre-moderation. She is

in regular contact with Ashton at Pagemasters, other editors and journalists like Quinn to get a

general idea of the workforce available. Simultaneously, Cooper looks at open comment sections

to decide if they should be closed to further comment. Her verdict tends to depend on the

amount of comment rejections taking place or the overall tone of the discussion. She does not

open and close sections unilaterally though; she coordinates with other editorial staff and in

consultation with Ashton and his team, who occasionally initiate contact about important

developments in individual comment sections.

Cooper's cultural intermediation work extends to community management, but chiefly in

addressing emailed queries of complaints. Like other Fairfax and Pagemasters participants, she

receives emails from upset or concerned users who have had their comments rejected or who

have other concerns about the commenting system not working. She works with the relevant

staff, such as Ashton, to convey the justification for the rejection or to secure any other answers

required. While she sometimes blocks users on social media platforms, she rarely does so for in-

house commenters on *The Age*. "I think it would be rare that we would take those kinds of steps in our normal comments on our actual articles that we host on our page. It seems to attract a different kind of commentary" (Cooper Interview, 2017).

Part of the reason Cooper's hesitates to block commenters stems from the value she sees in hosting comments and engaging in cultural intermediation. For Cooper, giving voice to the audience's perspective is not only part of intermediation, it is the benefit of doing the work:

> I think more and more we want to sort of signal to our audience that we are interested in having a two-way discussion with them and not just being sort of a broadcaster where we tell them things but we want information from them and we want them to share their experiences and so on. (Cooper Interview, 2017)

The feedback from commenters is diverse, from complaining about cultural intermediation practices to expressing their interest in certain topics, but critically for Cooper, it has the potential to improve the production of *The Age*.

> I think you can only learn, really, as long as you keep a thick skin about anything that's sort of having a go at you. I think you can learn a lot from… in terms of what, how the readers react. (Cooper Interview, 2017)

Cooper puts this commenter feedback into action, using their tips, suggestions and criticism to influence newsroom production, from editing stories to following up on story leads.

In addition to their benefit for the organisation, Cooper also finds the comments on the website are easier to mediate than on Facebook, where moderators have less control over what is posted by users, and can't pre-moderate comments. She sees more and worse abuse there than in comments under the website's articles:

> … [A]lthough we…get trolls to our site, I think because it's so heavily manually
>
> moderated, they probably don't target us as much, as they could go on our Facebook
>
> page and do it and it's a lot easier for them so why bother us? (Cooper Interview, 2017)

Consequently, she advocates for the manual, labour-intensive pre-moderation that Fairfax does for its in-house comments sections, despite its resource demands. She also looks at other news websites, evaluating their apparent comment moderation and community management systems and decisions and the resulting commenting culture. As a result, she does not support a reliance on automated moderation solutions; she finds news websites that attempt to automate moderation often have low quality and abusive comment sections. If it were not for a lack of space and resources, she would prefer to have Fairfax moderators sitting in the newsroom, communicating with the other journalistic staff.

Cooper finds not only the comments themselves but also the cultural intermediation work behind them contributes to the news organisation's production, suggesting an increasing place for the work in the field of journalism. Cooper has extensive exposure to the field of journalism, having worked her way up to being Deputy Digital Editor (and more recently Digital Editor) but also having a degree in journalism. In her view, comments are not only a part of the news organisation's work, but that part can be expected to grow, "I think that's going to become more and more part of what we do" (Cooper Interview, 2017). Learning more about the readers and incorporating their feedback is a critical concern, "I think if they are our readers, and they are reading our stuff, then we should listen to them" (Cooper Interview, 2017). According to Cooper, commenter input can be applied to improve the accuracy of their stories as well as to get stories that are relevant to their readers. The potential for negative feedback does not, in her view, necessarily impact their value for the website's journalism, but rather is to be expected, "basically what we do, 90% of the time, pisses someone off" (Cooper Interview, 2017). She is

clear that she understands and sympathises with journalists who fear exposing themselves to commenter abuse, but she thinks highly of the journalists that are willing to do so.

While Fairfax started long before the Internet, Cooper shows how its staff accommodate new innovations like user comments on articles and even leverage this addition to improve the organisation's journalistic production. In her relatively high position in the field of journalism, she is uniquely situated among the participants to expand definitions of journalism to include this new kind of cultural intermediation work. Possibly as a result of her being the digital editor, she highlights comment moderation and community management, with a focus on receiving the feedback of commenters, as not just journalistic work, but the work of estimable journalists.

### 4.2 Conclusion.

Fairfax and Pagemasters participants demonstrate how comment moderation and community management practices can effect cultural intermediation, as well as how this intermediation is influenced by the field of journalism. For three of the four participants, Ashton, Quinn, and Birmingham, this intermediation was mostly achieved through comment moderation, with their decisions about what comments to publish or reject (and what to publish first) both impacting the production of discussions and communicating standards to commenters. Other participants engaged more in unique community management practices, with Quinn and Birmingham posting comments in the discussions, Ashton writing annual articles to review his moderation decisions (Ashton, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), and Cooper devising strategies as well as handling escalated commenter complaints related to moderation choices. Most participants welcomed the contribution of comments to their news publication, but all of them revealed some of the challenges, and opportunities, that come with hosting public input.

In each case, participants' cultural intermediation work correlated with their relationship to the field of journalism. These participants, with the exception of Ashton, are having to find ways of accommodating new forms of reader input into their long-established professional

practices. These participants' work has evolved over time through social contact and professional exposure, but it has had to reconcile with historical understandings of newsroom work at one of the oldest news organisations in Australia.

The next part of the study looks at a digital born news organisation, *The Conversation*, founded after the industry's adoption of comments on news articles. For this publication the issue of cultural intermediation of news commenting is less about adaptation to historic standards and more about news innovation.

# 5 Innovation in a New Online Newsroom

The previous chapter explored how Fairfax, as a legacy media organisation, along with the affiliated staff at Pagemasters, its subsidiary production hub, approached comment moderation and community management on Fairfax major news websites. The results found cultural intermediation strategies that leveraged extensive comment moderation to achieve comment sections that conformed to their organisational and often journalistic standards. Most participants welcomed comments as feedback or a form of reader engagement, but all of them revealed some of the challenges, and opportunities, that come with hosting the input of the public.

This chapter shifts the focus to a digital born, philanthropically funded media outlet, *The Conversation*, investigating their strategies, practices and values for cultural intermediation of comments. Unlike for Fairfax's news websites, comment sections can be found on almost all articles at *The Conversation* and they are post-moderated, which impacts the ways, and amount, they rely on comment moderation. Consequently, staff at *The Conversation* rely on community management practices and strategies to effect their desired commenter communities and comment sections, which some participants value for their contribution to journalistic production and as part of the editorial product of the website. Distinct from Fairfax, cultural intermediation for these comments is spread across the newsroom, from editors to website developers, though each participant reveals the impact of their journalistic or non-journalistic habitus and doxa in their approach to comments and the value they invest in them.

While the chapter focuses extensively on the comment moderation and community management work of participants, it also ties the participants' tasks and practices, as well as their objectives, to the concept of cultural intermediation. Further, it analyses the participants and their work for the ways that they align to or are influenced by the field of journalism. These are investigated in the individual accounts of participants' work.

### 5.1 Moderating in new online news environments.

As an online news organisation, *The Conversation* has many points of distinction from Fairfax, but the most important of these is that it is digital born, having always been published online. While it has a dedicated physical headquarters, where most staff work, almost all its public presence is online. There is no printing press on the premises or anywhere else; their occasional physical publications, such as year-in-review books (Watson, 2016, 2017), are rare and the printing is outsourced. The articles they publish are written for the Internet, and are free to published on other websites with attribution.

One implication of starting online is that interactive features, such as commenting on news articles, do not constitute digital innovations as they had already existed before the organisation. *The Conversation* had commenting options on their articles from their first month of publication in 2011 (Mapstone, 2011), and they open comment sections on their articles by default. These comment sections remain open indefinitely unless the discussion generates a high number of comments requiring deletion. Consequently, the participants do not talk about the challenge of adding comments to articles, but rather about *The Conversation*'s developing approach to them. The systems for managing comment sections, the CMS they use which was built in-house by their own staff of website developers, have comment moderation and community management tools easily accessible for all related staff, and these tools are subject to constant updates, maintenance and innovation. Their digital born history differentiates them from Fairfax in significant ways, but there are also key organisational distinctions between the two online news organisations.

A key difference that impacted this study was the geographic distribution of the cultural intermediation work. Where Fairfax has local newspapers and consequently local newsrooms and offices, *The Conversation* has almost all their staff in their Melbourne headquarters. *The Conversation* participants in this study all worked in the same newsroom and even spoke to each other

frequently, including during the observation period. As a result, participants frequently shared similar visions of the work, knew the same stories about past practices and referred to each other's ideas. By contrast, staff working on the same individual article's comment section for Fairfax could be in different newsrooms or even different countries.

This centralised newsroom staff does not account for all their comment moderation and community management, however, as a central factor in their cultural intermediation work is their Community Council. This is a group of voluntary moderators and frequent contributors who support the staff in overseeing and shaping comment sections and the commenting community. Consisting of ten authors who provide articles for *The Conversation* and ten frequent commenters, these volunteers moderate comments, flagging content for review in comment sections, and help manage the community, vigilantly pointing out user accounts that violate the community standards, typically the real names policy ("Community standards," 2015). Their contribution is vital to the intermediation of *Conversation* comments, as the organisation's funding arrangements do not allow for the hiring of a large team of moderators.

Fairfax and *The Conversation* have distinct funding arrangements, which impacts their approaches to the comment sections. *The Conversation* is a not-for-profit with sponsors in government, universities, and other institutions, and the funds they get from users are tax-deductible donations rather than subscriptions (The Conversation, n.d.-b). Their funding is not impacted by the number of people seeing or interacting with advertising on the site, though the number of people reading their articles and interacting with their production is important for showing to sponsors to highlight the success of their production. Consequently, other organisations, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, are free to reprint articles provided *The Conversation* is credited as the source. Consequently, *The Conversation* has a larger monthly readership than Fairfax, when accounting for republishing (Robertson, 2016; The

Conversation, n.d.-a). Their readership is diverse, half being female and half being male as well as coming from a variety of backgrounds (The Conversation, n.d.-a).

Finally, where Fairfax hires journalists and columnists to write the articles for its websites, *The Conversation* sources few of its articles internally. Their articles are generally written by experts at universities and other institutions. Consequently, unlike at Fairfax, the comment moderators and community managers are mostly managing comments on articles they did not write. They are still targeted by abuse, but the abuse relates to their moderation and management work rather than their journalistic production.

## 5.2 Maintaining conversational spaces at *The Conversation.*

Looking at the different organisations already provides insight into how the audience is differently positioned to these two organisations, but the individual participants further reveal the unique characteristics of cultural intermediation at *The Conversation*. Each approaches the work from a different position and with a different disposition.

### 5.2.1 The audience development manager.

No one in *The Conversation* spends more time looking at comments and communicating with commenters than Molly Glassey, audience development manager. While she says she devotes about 30% of her time to comment related work, with the majority dedicated to other responsibilities, such as posting on social media or handling the republishing of articles on other sites, Glassey maintains a constant presence in the comment sections across the website. At regular intervals, she looks in on the most active discussions, deleting inappropriate comments, redirecting off-topic conversations, and corresponding directly with commenters. There is even overlap with her social media editing, as she sometimes directs Twitter or Facebook attention to particularly active or successful discussion threads. Given her consistent contact with the editors and managers of *The Conversation* and the commenting community outside, Glassey is the organisation's foremost cultural intermediary for commenting.

According to Glassey, her intermediation work is a balance of comment moderation and community management: "Half of it is removing comments and the other half is actually kind of directing people in the way that they should be commenting… So, enforcing community standards. And that's done in…a very personal way in that commenters are contacted, [or] that I will reply to comments that have been put on our articles." (Glassey Interview, 2017). Moderation frequently demands her attention. She spends most of this time reading and assessing comment sections – not individual comments, but the flow of larger conversations. While she is responsible for deleting comments that violate community standards [see Appendix 2], this takes little time compared to that needed to contextualise, interpret and evaluate these offending comments.

While the in-house content management system interface makes deleting comments easy, the deliberative process behind her editorial choices means reconciling *The Conversation's* vision of how comments should appear with the rights of the commenters to have their voice heard. Transgressions against the standards can include abusive, uncivil or even just nonsensical comments. People need to use their real names and be careful not to personally attack or defame others. Finally, *The Conversation* requires that comments relate to the article, though some comments can be moved to its Off-Topic Thread for the week, for users to continue their discussions. Glassey's assessment is not to consider if a comment has crossed the line, but rather to identify if it is a problem in the context of the discussion. Consequently, for every comment she might potentially delete, she needs to read the comments above and below to see if she could be creating a disjuncture in the discussion by removing it, as well as to consider the position of the commenter. The hardest cases she says, taking the most time, are where abuse and incivility are subtle:

I think it's very difficult in comments because it's sometimes hard to interpret the snide

snarky things that are being said, which would probably be most insulting, but because

it's text based … it could be read two different ways. (Glassey Interview, 2017)

By contrast, the easiest and quickest comments to delete are those that clearly attack people

using insulting language: a key goal for Glassey and *The Conversation* is that the conversations be

civil. In this way, Glassey's comment moderation practices embody what Maguire and Matthews

(2010) argue is the cultural intermediation work of translating the producer's values for the

public, but she does this work while considering the potential impact of her choices on the

commenters.

Glassey's moderation work involves prioritising which comment sections to review – a

task made difficult by the fact that *The Conversation* generally opens all its articles to comments,

meaning she must maintain some awareness of what is happening across the website. To do this

effectively, Glassey gets some assistance from section editors and the Community Council, as

well as getting users involved in the process. According to Glassey, "I think it's such… a massive

space to be dealing with, and we're getting so many hundreds of comments, thousands of

comments every day. I think, if it was me trawling… the job wouldn't get done" (Glassey

Interview, 2017). Users can report comments for breaching standards. This sends a notification

for her to check. In addition, her awareness of commenting history on the site, both directly and

through colleagues, means she knows which articles are likely to have problems with defamation

and abuse. When a controversial article is posted, often on religion or politics, she knows to

check in with greater frequency to see how the discussion is unfolding. Finally, she takes some

time, between other tasks, to quickly look through the open articles on the homepage – mostly

to gauge the level of activity, but also to briefly monitor the tone of conversations. All of these

factors, her community support, her experience and her routine browsing, assist her moderation

prioritisation.

A less regular moderation task is to close comment sections to further comments, an activity which underscores the need for cultural intermediation: "If I know something is going to get a mad amount of comments, I've been deleting such and such percentage, [and] it's Friday afternoon, I'll close them. I don't think it's the worst thing in the world" (Glassey Interview, 2017). In one article on women's rights, for instance, five out of nine comments had to be deleted for abuse and bigotry, so she closed commenting. Leaving the comment section open means that, discussions can be further sidelined by this behaviour, and despite her preference for enabling discussion where possible she sees shutting down the comment section as the safer option. She does note however that while she is strict about removing personal abuse and discrimination, she is less inclined to shut down a conversation because it is going off-topic:

> I think it goes off this whole idea of it's much better to leave a comment when you can rather than remove it. It's better to encourage people to talk rather than to kind of present this idea that comments that don't align perfectly and strictly to what we [want]…are going to be removed. (Glassey Interview, 2017).

Concurrently, Glassey spends as much or more time engaging in community management work, and it is in this work that her role as a cultural intermediary is most prominent. The biggest task in this regard is communicating with the Community Council. *The Conversation*'s Community Council is a select group of ten highly active users and ten article contributors who volunteer to spend their personal time monitoring, reporting for moderation, responding to and guiding commenting. They play a major role in moderation, according to Molly: "I think it would be fair to say that every comment on every article gets read thanks to these guys" (Glassey Interview, 2017). Glassey notes that some of them have even developed specialty roles in reporting real name violations or discriminatory language. While they have limited moderation rights as super users, being only able to flag comments for specific attention, their main contribution is their extensive feedback on both commenters and comment sections.

When they flag a comment for deletion, they often discuss amongst themselves, in a string of emails or other online communications platform, like Skype, the merit of the potential deletion and what constitutes a violation of the community standards. Whether she is addressed directly or not, Glassey has access to these discussions and occasionally participates in them, having the final say on deletions or other recommended sanctions. She is the central point of contact for this group, relaying their concerns to *The Conversation* staff and vice versa. Thus, she mediates between organisational and user cultures of commenting governance.

Glassey's community management work also involves direct interaction with users. She herself posts comments to discourage incivility, keep discussions on topic or encourage more comments. These forms of dialogic facilitation help cultivate the participatory culture *The Conversation* wants to see in the comment sections. Her posts, for example, reinforce the community standards on avoiding personal abuse:

> I do have to get in there when there are these threats that go on and on and say, 'Hey, this isn't how you should talk to other people. Please refrain from using personal abuse.' And you'll have three people saying, 'Hey, sorry Molly.' That's like, well, it's all good. (Glassey Interview, 2017)

Her interventions also have a noticeable impact on others' behaviour, as she sometimes sees other commenters posting similar responses to offending comments before she can intervene.

Glassey portrays an intimate understanding of how her work and her words can affect the audience. "Imagine getting those emails saying, 'your comment has been removed.' They're not nice. And you don't know how many comments get removed, like we do. You might think you're the one comment of the day" (Glassey Interview, 2017). Consequently, Glassey has to find a way to implement the organisation's vision of the comment sections while also reconciling the position of the commenters in her communication with them. For some violations, like of

the real names policy, Glassey herself initiates the correspondence and gives the user time to

rectify the situation.

> I think it's a big thing to block someone or remove their account. So, you go to every
>
> measure before you actually have to do that, sending another email, saying, "did you get
>
> this email," which is probably kind from our end. (Glassey Interview, 2017)

In this way, Glassey's work shows that intermediaries are not simply lines of communication, but

representatives of both the interests of the organisation and the commenters.

Glassey's tasks and practices also interface with a network of other staff working on the

comment sections. The audience development manager and Glassey's direct supervisor provides

direction and advice as well as occasionally reviewing comment sections to check their status and

(rarely) moderating comments. However, Glassey works most closely with the section editors

officially tasked with comment moderation and community management. Their input is key to

her moderation work because they are in a better position to judge the relevance of comments to

the article content. Comments flagged by users as off-topic may have relevance to a specific

story element:

> There are these conversations going on that some of them are saying 'oh, that's off-
>
> topic'. Well, it's off-topic if you've read the first three paragraphs. But, if you continue
>
> down, they are actually referring to this one sentence. So, that's why you need an editor.
>
> (Glassey Interview, 2017)

As well as playing a key role in comment moderation, editors may also correspond with Glassey

in developing and implementing approaches to intermediation work. This collaboration has

played a part in forming the habitus for her work, "Editors on those reported comments have

just as much right as me to delete them, and will sometimes beat me to deleting them, I guess

seeing their actions probably has more of a say than actually talking to people" (Glassey

Interview, 2017). Some staff provide less direct support, such as the website developers, who survey commenter profiles to search for bot accounts that sign up to spam comment sections with advertisements or propaganda. Article contributors, working from their universities outside of the newsroom, add their comments to improve the quality of the conversation.

Beyond her interaction with colleagues, a key factor shaping Glassey's approach to her work is the history of comment moderation and community management – the results of past struggles – which further demonstrates the dynamism of the field of journalism as it accommodates new actors and innovations. Her training for the job (she was a recent addition to this team) was not just with managers but also with *The Conversation's* previous community manager, who was highly regarded by all the participants in this study. Her predecessor introduced the community standards she uses, and sweeping changes to the organisation's approach to community management and comment moderation, like adding the Community Council. These changes addressed problems members of staff were seeing at that time with provocative, exclusionary behaviours:

> …that was when you had rampant commenters…It was exciting and a warzone. But then you can look at those same commenters comment today, and it's just a totally different voice. It's not the 'rage, rage, rage'; it's the 'let's have conversation. Let's have discussion.' (Glassey Interview, 2017)

Glassey's moderation and community management role is more collaborative with other editorial staff than that of her predecessor addressing the problem he faced of an unworkable moderation load. This strategic shift in responsibilities, and the gradual building of governance measures, suggests that *Conversation* workers are already forming a new kind of journalistic habitus and doxa through their adaptation to the editorial demands of creating an effective, cooperative commenting culture.

Simultaneously, Glassey's role as a cultural intermediary means the audience also contributes to her developing sense of habitus and doxa. When she does her comment moderation and community management, she envisions the kinds of readers and potential commenters who would look at, and potentially participate in, the comment sections:

> I think you have to think about that in a way, as well, is if it's a sixteen-year-old student who might be considered a minority. And so, if they go down to the comments and see something Islamophobic, or… and you do get Nazis, racists, down there and that's how I deal with removing comments. What would a student think? (Glassey Interview, 2017)

> I would love it if, like, this mum and dad in a little country town feel that they could comment on an article and not feel that they are going to get jumped on or they're going to get trolled or there's going to be someone who says 'that's wrong; here's my pre-recorded message why.' (Glassey Interview, 2017)

For Glassey, comment sections have most value when people acknowledge each other's ideas or even change their own. She appreciates it when people use each other's names or apologise for their transgressions. She cannot abide comments that make the comment sections an uninviting space to readers or other commenters.

Glassey comes with her own professional background in journalism, and this grounding in the journalistic field impacts the way she views comment sections and her comment moderation and community management work. She attained an undergraduate degree in journalism, formerly worked at a small local news organisation and had done other jobs for *The Conversation* prior to starting in this role. She currently continues her editorial work by remediating news stories in the company's social media channels and in managing article republishing. In line with traditional journalistic values (Ruiz et al., 2011) Glassey sees it as part of a news organisation's job to provide a forum for public debate. She weighs deleting comments against the rights of the public to air their grievances. She also considers the impact of comments

on the quality of the articles as an editorial product. She wants comment sections that contribute to the meaning of the article:

> I think the comments are a story that complements another story, that story being the article. I think that's half the point of curation when it comes to comments moderating because we have to work off this assumption that someone finishes the last line of that story and then reads the comments as well. (Glassey Interview, 2017)

Glassey provides key insights into the tasks and practices of cultural intermediation work and how they have developed in moderation and community management. She shows how her work simultaneously entails projecting the organisation's values and protecting its editorial interests, while sympathising with the needs and interests of commenters and readers. At the same time, she demonstrates the impact that the field of journalism has over her work from many angles – the history behind her role, the social and professional context in which she works, and her own internalised habitus and doxa from past positions.

### 5.2.2 The director of a new kind of newsroom.

Misha Ketchell is the editor of *The Conversation* in Australia and he has a uniquely definitive role in shaping the comment moderation and community management practices of its staff. Ketchell does not moderate himself, but he does make key choices about how work responsibilities are distributed and how staff should respond to developments in the community. This is a small portion of his editorial duties, but has a large impact on the way comment sections are hosted on *The Conversation*'s articles and how its cultural intermediation work is approached. As *The Conversation* is a public service media organisation, funded by a range of institutions and individuals and dependent on the creative goodwill of its academic authors, his managerial contributions to shaping its co-creative culture are critical.

Ketchell's central roles in this respect are first in identifying, developing and implementing strategies for comment moderation and community management. Through

negotiation and discussion with staff, he helps craft the commenting, moderation and

community management standards and guidelines for staff overseeing comments sections. He

holds meetings and conferences with staff, authors and stakeholders to troubleshoot the current

commenting system, to innovate work approaches and to plan future engagement and

participatory initiatives. The results of these meetings are communicated to the members of staff

who ultimately engage in the comment moderation and community management work.

Changes to this work happen on a yearly basis or more quickly in response to the content

and context of comments and innovation strategies. Ketchell and his team have run numerous

experiments in participation and quality control, including author Q&A, off-topic comment

threads, and centralised and decentralised comment moderation. In developing their current

system, "we said, 'Okay, in addition to creating rules around what people can't do, we're going to

try to do some things to make our comment streams better'" (Ketchell Interview, 2017). Many

of these experiments have proven fruitful, with high numbers of high quality comments, paving

the way for further innovations later.

In formulating participation, moderation and community management strategies,

Ketchell must incorporate the feedback of *The Conversation*'s many stakeholders. An initial drive

behind developing the current commenting system was to address negative author input on the

participatory experience: "…academics were coming to us and saying 'Oh, I've seen the

comments on my article. I'm not going to publish with you guys again. I don't want to be part of

this level of sort of toxic aggression" (Ketchell Interview, 2017). At the same time, he also needs

to respond to emails from the commenters themselves, who have their own arguments as to why

posts should or should not be moderated. Members of the newsroom staff have also proven a

vital source of feedback and innovation; the former comment moderator and community

manager in particular was instrumental to developing the community and guiding the

organisation's vision of comment sections. Through his consultation and correspondence,

Ketchell is able to compare, evaluate and reconcile the variety of opinions on how the commenting should be hosted.

Not all his cultural intermediation work operates at the organisational level, however; Ketchell also engages in limited direct correspondence with individual commenters. This tends to happen with escalated complaints, so the interactions can be considerably negative: "You know, it's often 'I want to complain to the UN because you've moderated my comment' or explaining why you've moderated a comment" (Ketchell Interview, 2017). One of his goals in these cases is to reach an amicable resolution of the grievance to keep it from escalating even further. He does this by carefully crafting emails that attend to the commenters' concerns while also firmly stating *The Conversation's* editorial position and objectives:

> "I made a decision, which was a very considered decision, which was: comments are not a free speech issue. Every time you moderate a comment, somebody says 'It's outrageous. You censored my speech.' Well, in actual fact, you can say whatever you want. There's a thousand places you can say it. You can say it on Twitter. You can say it on Facebook. But on our site, it's an editorial product, and we're basically going to have curated comments. We're going to try to have comments that provide some meaningful value for readers and…that take things further, that add new information." (Ketchell Interview, 2017)

The correspondence from commenters is not always critical. Ketchell also addresses emails from commenters with suggestions and requests for authors and for the site, and he has implemented ideas or commissioned articles on that basis.

In these respects, Ketchell's cultural intermediation work is much more focused on the people behind the dialogic interaction than on the comments themselves. He does not directly moderate comments. Through his occasional interaction with commenters and Community Council members, he does get involved in community management. His experiments, such as

the author Q&As, are attempts to better engage the commenters and the readers more broadly. While he emphasises the importance of removing offending comments, this is mostly left to the people in charge of the articles and comment sections – the section editors and Glassey.

In doing this work, Ketchell's aims are also to improve the offerings of the website and the impact of its journalism. There are economic reasons for him wanting to encourage more comments, which give the publication data on user engagement with its articles as well as return participation in public debate, both valuable audience measurements that illustrate the success of the organisation to sponsors, but these are not the definitive factors behind his decisions. First and foremost, he emphasises that the comment section is part of the larger editorial strategy. "I've always wanted to create a sense that the comments are something that we take seriously. They are a legitimate, valued and respected part of the editorial product and the offering" (Ketchell Interview, 2017). He sees curation of comment sections, through deleting low quality comments and managing the community, as a way of working towards that journalistic objective. An emphasis on aspects of quality control and community management, particularly in engaging with the Community Council, enables *The Conversation* to curate its many comments, despite having only limited resources to devote to comment moderation.

Ketchell sees the value of comments sections primarily in their meaning for *Conversation* readers, which in turn informs his interest in improving intermediation strategies:

> What's important is that we can learn from the comments. We can learn from the exchange of ideas, from the perspectives, from the exchange of knowledge, from the servicing of evidence, from the referencing and other things in that free-flowing creative dynamic space, which is what a conversation is. A conversation is, you know, two or more sensibilities, two or more human beings, in an unstructured way, bouncing off each other. And engaging in a dialogue that is exploratory, that can be quite playful. (Ketchell Interview, 2017)

Ketchell's views on the value of comment sections are also informed by a long history in the journalistic field. "My entire career has been as a professional journalist" (Ketchell Interview, 2017), he indicated, working in various types of news media organisations and as a news editor. It is his sense of editorial accountability for published content, for instance, that led him to require *Conversation* users post comments under their real names:

> My thinking on this was really informed by my background in journalism and journalistic ethics … I think that the anonymity, it doesn't just free people up. It encourages them to be careless, to not take responsibility for the moral repercussions of what they say. (Ketchell Interview, 2017)

His work in journalism further impacts his perception of a good comment moderator or community manager. To him, the necessary qualities are, "Basically, a lot of human qualities, as well as really professional journalistic qualities. I mean, we are looking for people who are widely read, who know the topics, who know the issues" (Ketchell Interview, 2017).

Ketchell's sense of journalistic values also contributes to his editorial decision-making and the value he perceives intermediation work to have. He works to create a commenting system that gives stakeholders and subjects a "right of reply":

> If an academic writes something about BHP, and BHP feels that they have been unfairly characterised, they can write a comment. They can't write an article, because we only publish academics. So we need a capacity for people who are not academics to engage in an appropriate way. (Ketchell Interview, 2017).

Similarly, he sees the comment sections offering a space for public debate and editorial critique, giving journalists, and authors feedback on how readers feel:

> That interaction of an audience or a group of people who are not experts with the ideas, teaches you a lot about the ideas and is part of public discourse, which, for any journalist,

should be a part of journalism and be something that you learn from, so I think they're

really important. (Ketchell Interview, 2017)

Ketchell's work and the decisions he makes provide a clear demonstration of how

comment moderation and community management choices can reflect and reinforce journalistic

values. At the same time as his choices reflect the field of journalism he uses his significant

position to show how this new cultural intermediation work can be a part of newer definitions of

journalism – for example, as a public exchange of ideas. While he plays a central role in

developing moderating and management strategies, his own direct work is exclusively with

community management, and it is this community that provides the most value of comment

sections for him.

### 5.2.3 The deputy editor.

Working alongside Ketchell is Deputy Editor Charis Palmer. Like Ketchell, Palmer plays

an integral part in organising the work of cultural intermediation in *The Conversation's* comment

sections, but she also spends some of her time performing the comment moderation and

community management for unattended articles and trains staff on the practices and objectives

of the work. In coordination with Glassey and the section editors, she ensures both that

comment sections are inviting forums and that the comments adhere to the organisation's goals.

The most visible and frequent task that Palmer performs in comment moderation and

community management is when she provides support for busy section editors or Glassey. In

these instances, Palmer opens any articles with comment sections that are under-monitored,

reads the article and then directly deletes comments that violate standards or cause problems for

the discussion. She also posts comments to get commenters back on topic or prevent hostile

dialogues. As her job has a broad range of responsibilities that preclude her from maintaining an

active presence in these comment sections, Palmer relies on community management to keep the

commenters themselves reinforcing community standards. One way she does this, for instance,

is to contact the authors and have them participant in the discussions: "If the author is in there responding to the commenters, you know that you can kind of not have to keep such an eye on it. If the author's there, the tone is generally better" (Palmer Interview, 2017). She pays more attention to these tasks with especially contentious topics or especially active discussions:

> You've already seen ten comments that are kind of off-topic and you know it's going to be problematic, so you're going to have to keep a closer eye on it. So then, that case, the role is mostly about, you know, deleting the off-topic comments. You know, posting reminders that people need to stay on topic and just following up. (Palmer Interview, 2017)

Palmer maintains a sense of not only how the work is distributed, but also of the current workload of the relevant staff. Her presence is only needed when the newsroom staff, the authors and the Community Council are unable to keep up with contentious discussions, such as those under political articles, though she does rarely commission articles herself and oversee their comments.

Performing roles in developing strategy and in comment moderation and community management, she is well positioned to train all staff on the practices and objectives of moderating comments and managing the community, making her a kind of internal cultural intermediator. Her comment moderation and community management training sessions are available for and attended by staff from across the newsroom – even the software developers can and do attend. The sessions inform staff of the kind of culture they are trying to cultivate in the comment sections, both the kind of comments they want to elicit and what judgment to use when deleting comments. "There's always the questions about, 'Oh, what if it's, like, right on the borderline?' And we run through case studies of 'here's one that, you know, it's on the borderline: here's why" (Palmer Interview, 2017). While training was historically held annually, since Palmer took on the job, she has endeavoured to increase the number of sessions available,

and is making training available several times throughout the year. Getting a wider variety of staff involved in community management and comment moderation is part of an organisational goal of making them highly networked tasks, "Because, as I said, we expect everyone to engage with comments and help moderate" (Palmer Interview, 2017). Simultaneously, staff at these meetings can offer their own input on how things might be done, particularly members of staff like Glassey who are closer to the work. In this way, her cultural intermediation work operates both outside and inside the organisation, instilling the organisation's values while simultaneously reconciling the staff's input.

Having an organised and pro-active approach to comment moderation and community management is important for Palmer because the value she sees in comment sections is only realised through the organisation's cultural intermediation work. To Palmer, comment sections are not automatically valuable, nor automatically necessary, for *The Conversation*. It was only through cultivating a commenting community that respected the community standards, and developing an effective approach to moderating comment sections that she could appreciate the comments place on the website. "I've been here the whole time; I've been here about four years. Yeah, it was pretty, like, you know, the Wild West. And it's gotten a lot better" (Palmer Interview, 2017). *The Conversation* was initially reluctant to moderate their comment sections for various reasons – concerns about freedom of speech, confusion over practices and uncertainty over the value. "A lot of people really didn't know how to deal with the problems, so they just let it run. They either let it run or they turn comments off. So there wasn't a lot of in between" (Palmer Interview, 2017). Through exposure and after trialling new approaches to moderation and management, she has become a "convert" to appreciating comments. "You know, it can meet our ideal and our ideal is that the comment section adds as much value as the piece" (Palmer Interview, 2017). *The Conversation* has an educated audience, according to Palmer, and their input on the articles can often provide useful details or even corrections to the articles' contents.

Palmer's view of the necessity of comment moderation and community management for realising this value highlights these workers' role as cultural intermediaries. The members of staff engaging in this work are able to communicate the organisation's values while also enabling the audience to have some influence over production. A common refrain for Palmer and the other participants was that *The Conversation* is there to "bring academics down out of their ivory towers" (Palmer Interview, 2017), and comments do that by allowing readers an opportunity to interact with the authors and to have the commenter's input appear below the articles. The commenters are having some influence over the production of the organisation and its authors through the cultural intermediaries overseeing the comment sections, as authors and editors make changes in response to the most relevant and impactful suggestions and criticism, which makes their production better, according to Palmer. At the same time, she trains the comment moderators to delete comments that violate *The Conversation's* standards and shows staff how to actively reinforce those standards by commenting and corresponding with the commenters, putting her and the staff in the culturally intermediating position of communicating the organisation's values to the commenters and the audience. Thus, Palmer and the staff she trains perform the two-way translation of values that is a central function of cultural intermediation.

For her part, Palmer's view of comments and commenters is significantly impacted by her relationship to the field of journalism. Palmer sees comments as "very much on the fringe of journalism" (Palmer Interview, 2017) based on her history both with journalistic work and with the comments. Palmer has a long background in journalism, through education and work experience, and she evinces a strong sense of journalistic doxa and habitus in her evaluations of the website's offerings and the commenters' contributions. In her experience, while commenters provide valuable feedback, their general understanding of journalistic production prevents them from making a more impactful contribution to the website's journalism:

It would sometimes make you question the tone, you know? And sometimes they,

people, will have a go at your headlines, which is sometimes helpful, because it's like 'oh,

that's totally not how I saw that headline but that's how you read it, so that's an issue'…

it's useful feedback to have. But it's certainly on the fringe and there's certainly a real

sense from commenters generally, and I don't think this has changed a lot over time, of

that they don't really understand how journalism works. (Palmer Interview, 2017)

She has a clear understanding of the way journalism operates, and appreciates initiatives to

cultivate this understanding in the audience, "The more we can surface that, I think, the better it

will be to engage readers in a way that isn't… that kind of brings them more into the process"

(Palmer Interview, 2017).

Through her description of her practices, objectives, and values, Palmer provides a

strong sense that the field of journalism plays a central role in developing the cultural

intermediating practices of comment moderators and community managers at *The Conversation*.

At the same time, she demonstrates how comment sections and commenters can play an

important role in good journalistic work.

### 5.2.4 The website developer.

Mark Cipolla, *The Conversation's* web developer, along with his colleagues in the

technology team, builds and maintains the website and its comment sections. The website is not

a finished product; Cipolla and his team use agile planning to make continuous tweaks and

improvements to the publishing system, sometimes on a daily basis. Beyond this technical work,

Cipolla performs comment moderation and community management duties as the need and

personal interest arise.

If, as suggested in Chapter 2, comment moderation can be defined as the work involved

in evaluating, approving or deleting, organising and publishing the contents of the comment

section, then Cipolla is one of the organisation's most crucial comment moderators. Cipolla has

done extensive software development of the commenting system that provides interfaces for moderators to remediate comments, enables users to comment and displays those comments under the relevant articles. In the current iteration of the website 'front end', a reader will automatically see the first two comments displayed under an article, after which all comments are hidden unless the reader chooses the "show all comments" button. A chat bubble icon displays the number of comments published. As the Fairfax example shows, this is not the only way to host comments, nor is it the only way *The Conversation* has hosted comments in the past. Rather, it is the result of conscious choices made by developers like Cipolla and other stakeholders.

The practices behind developing the comment moderating system are layered and complex. When a staff member or reader suggests a useful change to the system, Cipolla tries to translate their ideas into what the software can do. "It's usually just visual representation. So people will draw on paper. 'I want something like this, something like that, I think it should fit there', and it's typically been an iterative process" (Cipolla Interview, 2017). Iterative planning is the key, as a single request can be realised in many ways in practical implementation. In the past, Cipolla has added and removed comment filtering and recommending, changed the order of comments, and trialled adding more levels of nested replies. "We build something. We try it for a while, see what doesn't quite work, and then change it and keep refining until we get what we're happy with" (Cipolla Interview, 2017). These changes may remediate both moderation and commenting activities, changing the ways in which comments sections can be read and interpreted, so he often has to evaluate his development choices from a user, rather than simply a technical, perspective. However, he only does this work on the comments system when a valid request comes his way, as there is always a queue of work to be done by the technology team.

Cipolla and his colleagues do other comment moderation and community management work. They can block problematic commenters, such as accounts intending to spam advertisements, before they can disrupt discussions. They can recognise those new user accounts

that have the potential to be spammers even before they start posting by looking at their ISP addresses, which shows the user's location, to manually compare them to previously banned accounts or current accounts registered at the same location. From there, Cipolla can monitor their comments and decide if he needs to ban their accounts. As these spam accounts are often just bots, they generally do not question the banning and sometimes attempt to re-register later. However, through early intervention, Cipolla's team can prevent spam in the comment threads and prevent the website from being perceived as an easy target.

Cipolla has a significant impact on the cultural intermediation of comments thorough his development role. He occasionally has conversations with commenters – usually by email – about their website experience, responding to feedback about what they would like to see changed. There are far too many suggestions for him to implement them all, "We're a small team; we can't do everything we'd like" (Cipolla Interview, 2017). Some suggestions would have other implications, such as expanding the demands for cultural intermediation when expanding social media sharing options beyond Twitter and Facebook, "You get diminishing returns once you get outside the big ones" (Cipolla Interview, 2017). However, he discusses those suggestions that are promising and implementable with the technology team and others in the newsroom. Part of the system remediation process involves negotiation with other staff members, because a change to the commenting system often means a change to moderation and community management work. Thus, commenters can also have some impact on *The Conversation's* commenting system by corresponding with Cipolla.

Cipolla engages in this type of intermediation work due to the strategic responsibilities of his job as a software developer and from his personal interest. As part of his work, he is always troubleshooting the operation of the website, and this includes the comment sections. Where other members of staff have a reactive position towards comment sections, waiting for problematic comments to come in, Cipolla and his team have a plan of action, a queue of

developments and repairs for the commenting systems. Also, being involved in overseeing the engagement analytics for the site, he cannot help but be drawn into community management work out of personal interest. When he sees users commenting who he is sure are not genuine, he and his colleagues feel the need to jump in to prevent community violations. His heavy workload mostly precludes him from getting involved in discussion threads, but he nevertheless regularly talks with colleagues about what is being said in the comment sections. His technical team also take a personal interest in the comments sections. They enjoy reading and participating in the comments, and responding to other commenters.

Despite his interest in the comment sections, Cipolla is ambivalent about their value for *The Conversation's* broader journalistic work. While the comments can be fun to read, he argues that they often do little to contribute to the content of the article, and that the commenters are not doing the work of journalism. Beyond the hostility he saw generated in earlier iterations of *Conversation* comment sections, he still sees frequent attempts to spread propaganda and spam. When doing his direct comment moderation and community management work, he says he is often trying to shut down a "vector of attack" (Cipolla Interview, 2017). However, what comment sections can provide in Cipolla's view, when they are well maintained, is a place for discussion between commenters, who can be "wonderful" (Cipolla Interview, 2017).

To Cipolla, moderators and community managers are needed to keep comment sections running well. Despite his position on the technology team, he is dubious about the prospects of an automated solution to comment moderation:

> To do it programmatically is just insanely difficult. Language processing is just really hard stuff to do. And as soon as someone cracks the… how to police a pleasant space of discussion without human interaction, they'll be worth billions of dollars. (Cipolla Interview, 2017)

As a result, he credits the work the editors, Glassey, the writers and the Community Council do to keep comment sections working. For his part, tracking down suspicious accounts can be enjoyable but, there are always more signing on – often the very same user he just banned signing on under a new name. In the face of these and other atavistic commenters, he is not sure that comment sections are worth the considerable care they require.

In considering the best qualifications for a comment moderator or community manager, Cipolla does not necessarily see a need for journalistic skills. Indeed, he has no education or work experience in journalism. He argues the skills a moderator needs are partly what he calls "soft skills", relating to diplomatic and social competencies: "How do you give people a gentle wrap on the knuckles and keep them as an engaged commenter?" (Cipolla Interview, 2017) He does see a need for some "hard skills" as well, such as investigating user identities (Cipolla Interview, 2017). This means understanding the information and publishing systems supporting the commenting feature as well as having a broader awareness of how subversive commenters can leverage those systems.

Cipolla is a crucial component of the cultural intermediation work of *The Conversation*, both for moderating its comments and managing its community, and his practices and decisions stem from his relationship to the field of journalism as well as his own background. In his own words, he approaches comment sections "obliquely", but without his work, the comment sections would not appear as they do, and potentially would not function at all (Cipolla Interview, 2017). The system he helps create and maintain has a decisive influence on how comment moderators and community managers, like Glassey, do their work and the way commenters comment on articles. At the same time, Cipolla's choices in developing this system interact heavily with the field of journalism. While he himself has no background in journalism, he does his work in collaboration with journalistic staff and in consideration of the systems at other significant news organisations. As shown in the next chapter, Cipolla's work and views

demonstrate both how cultural intermediation is achieved through comment moderation and community management on these news organisation websites but also how they are influenced by and influence the field of journalism.

### 5.2.5 The audience analysis manager.

The audience analysis manager provides insight and support for the cultural intermediation work happening across *The Conversation* and for Glassey in particular. She is responsible for stakeholder engagement, audience analytics and communicating how the organisation works with its readers and participants. In focusing on audience analytics, she knows how much, and in what ways, users are interacting with the website's articles and she occasionally looks through the comment sections to maintain awareness of discussions. Having moderated *The Conversation's* comments and managed the community prior to Glassey's arrival, she is able to provide Glassey with specific and practical advice and direction on how to do the work.

As with Ketchell, the audience analysis manager supervises comment moderation and community management work rather than doing it herself. She is more focused on how the work is organised: "I'm more involved in, I guess, the strategy of how [the comment section] was created, not involved in the day-to-day stuff" (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017). This largely means coordinating with other staff, like Ketchell and Palmer, to outline the goals of hosting comments and the kinds of discussions they want to cultivate. She checks that the comment sections as well as the moderation and community management practices are satisfying for all stakeholders, from the users to the sponsors. With their input, she works alongside Glassey and the section editors to ensure that comment sections are appropriately moderated, that the community is participating and that it is informed about the organisation's objectives for interaction and debate.

Occasionally, the audience analysis manager provides support for Glassey and the section editors doing comment moderation. This can mean advising them on whether to delete a comment or how to deal with a commenter, but she has also done some comment moderating on their behalf. However, most comment sections are overseen by at least two people – Glassey and the relevant section editor – so she only needs to undertake this work when people are absent or overloaded. Even when not intervening directly, she still intermittently looks at various discussions throughout the day and points out significant occurrences to other staff, such as when renowned U.S. astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson left a comment on an article.

The audience analysis manager's work with the comment sections has several objectives: to improve their contribution to the editorial offerings of website, to provide support for the staff responsible for overseeing the comments, particularly Glassey, and to ensure that the public can have better quality discussions, which bridge the gap between academia and readers and include a plurality of ideas.

Like Ketchell, the audience analysis manager emphasises commenting's role in contributing to the public's interest in journalism, "We try and curate it as much as possible to make it as much of an editorial product as possible" (Audience analysis manager Interview 2017), but emphasises that comments are just people's opinion, not a form of journalism itself. To her, allowing readers to have their say on articles is part of being an organisation called *The Conversation* and her work helps to improve the quality of that discussion between commenters and with academics. Her supervision and occasional intervention enables the organisation to keep abuse and other problematic comments under control. For example, introducing the real names policy, she argues, was a means enforcing participatory transparency on users:

> It really came about because we require our authors to be ultra-transparent in who they are, what sort of disclosures they have, you know, where the research for their funding comes from, where the funding for their research comes from, so we have all of these

demands on our authors. So it seemed only fair to put a few hurdles in place for the

readers as well. (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017)

Strategically the audience analysis manager is most interested in expanding the array of

opinions expressed in discussions, and to bring together in-house and social participants in

conversation:

I'd like to see an increasing diversity in the type of commenters that we have…they are a

little bit too skewed towards a single demographic [older white males], so it would be

nice to see that more broadly represented…we've got a really social community, as well,

and I'd like to bring the online community, you know the people commenting at the

bottom of articles, more closely in line with our social community because I think the

social community is quite representative, and quite a good group of people. Very diverse,

you know, so I'd like to sort of bring those two together. (Audience analysis manager

Interview, 2017)

Two of the strategic initiatives she highlights are commissioning academics to contribute

comments in their area of interest (an approach with variable success "because there's not a huge

motivation for the academic to do that") and promoting lively comment threads on social media,

which she calls "shining the light on good behaviour" (Audience analysis manager Interview,

2017).

Through the cultural intermediation work of the audience analysis manager and her

colleagues, the organisation has found a way to make comments an asset. "You know, comments

works reasonably well. It's a good part of our story. It's not perfect but no one's is" (Audience

analysis manager Interview, 2017). She feels that the comment sections let the public debate the

serious issues their articles raise, a key goal for *The Conversation* and one that prevents the

publication from abandoning its dialogic project despite the intermediation challenges*:*

> Our main reason for existing is to get good stuff into the public debate so that the public can have better discussions… I think [comment sections are] a must-have. I don't think it's right for us to turn it off. (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017)

In her time with the organisation, the audience analysis manager has had the opportunity to see not just how this cultural intermediation work affects users, but also how different approaches to the work have led to different results. According to her, "In terms of what we've done, that definitely influences their behaviour… You certainly see sort of a direct link between that" (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017).

What makes the audience analysis manager distinct among *The Conversation's* staff is that she does not come from a journalistic background. "[I'm] probably one of few in the organisation who isn't… my background is communications and public policy. Mostly from within government" (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017). This informs her strategic interest in the organisational goals for moderation and community management work, like transparency and cultural diversity in participation, and her view that comments are not categorically a part of journalism:

> That's just people having their opinion. And I think that's important, and it can feed into the production of good journalism, but it's a misnomer to think that a bunch of people having their say with a megaphone is journalism. (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017)

The value she finds in comment sections is a space for readers to debate issues, even contentious issues. For the audience analysis manager, a better comment section is one that represents the wider public in a civil discussion:

> I always get proud when you have a contentious topic, so climate change, feminism, vaccination, you know, those flashpoint ones, and you see a constructive discussion. So, I

like it when there's… when it's meaningful discussion; a bit of disagreement is good as long as it's constructive. So, you know, not personal and the like. And a wide variety of voices, as well. They'd be the three things that I'd look for. (Audience analysis manager Interview, 2017)

As a non-journalistic participant in this newsroom, the audience analysis manager, like Cipolla, provides a clear contrast with journalistic participants Ketchell, Glassey and Palmer. Her perspectives of the value of comments and the objectives complement those of her colleagues, but also demonstrate how her own habitus and doxa has an impact in how she engages in this new journalistic work.

## 5.3 An opportunity for analysis.

*The Conversation* proved a highly distinct organisation from Fairfax in regard to their cultural intermediation practices, strategies and values, but the participants similarly revealed the influence of the field of journalism in shaping their comment moderation and community management work. They revealed how community management strategies guide commenters and discussions to adhere to editorial standards and even become part of editorial production. Conversely, non-journalistic staff focused on creating and maintaining civil discussion spaces to achieve comment sections that reflect the value these participants invested in comments.

Comment moderation and community management work at *The Conversation* provide a useful contrast from the work done at Fairfax and Pagemasters. Both organisations are responding to similar issues – the positive and problematic comments and commenters of their comment sections, and the cultural intermediation work in both organisations reflects the participants' relationship to the field of journalism. However, each organisation employs different comment moderation and community management strategies, practices and objectives to achieve the unique value they invest in comments. Comparing the results offers more

opportunities for analysis of their cultural intermediation as well as the place of this work in

journalism.

# 6 Cultural Intermediation in the Comments Section

The preceding two chapters have provided insight into the tasks, practices and objectives of people steering comment moderation and community management at Fairfax Media and *The Conversation* as well as the editorial and technical systems that sustain this work, and analysed how participants leverage this work to culturally intermediate comments. These chapters have also explored the participants' educational and working relation to the field of journalism, and how this might have shaped their assessment of comments sections and any ideas about their development. This chapter draws together these results to reflect on how these types of work exemplify the notion of cultural intermediation, as well as how their evolution has been influenced by the field of journalism.

The chapter demonstrates the ways that journalistic norms, conventions and values impact this work, depending on the workers' position in the field of journalism. It also argues that workers engaging in community management and comment moderation work are performing the role of cultural intermediation, but a cultural intermediation that is distinct from Bourdieu's conception. Finally, it shows the value of defining comment moderation and community management as separate forms of work, though each contribute to the work of cultural intermediation.

## 6.1 New cultural intermediation work in the online newsroom.

In Chapter 2, this study laid out how comment moderation and community management might constitute forms of cultural intermediation in the Bourdieusian sense. In many ways, the newsroom ethnography bore this proposal out, but it also found ways in which these workers made for more contemporary kinds of cultural intermediary.

Some participants were engaging in taste-making, one of the main roles of Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries (1984), communicating to commenters and readers not only what was allowed in the comment sections but also what the audience and organisation would expect.

While each organisation had publicly displayed standards for commenters ("Commenting guidelines," 2012; "Community standards," 2015; Fairfax Media Limited, 2018a), individual participants also cultivated their own tastes. For instance, Ashton encouraged and modelled socially appropriate, civil and constructive forms of speech. He communicated his version of taste through annual review articles (Ashton, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), but also through email and rare comments in the comment sections. By contrast, Birmingham, working with the same organisation, stated a desire for comments that offer quality content and not "useless shit" (Birmingham Interview, 2017), even if the comments are civil, something he communicates to his audience by posting and rejecting comments.

For participants with a long history in journalism taste-making meant encouraging commenters to meet editorial standards and to commit to contributing to the journalistic production. Ketchell employed community management strategies like developing and publishing community standards and hosting author Q&A sessions to get commenters to be part of "the editorial product". Similarly, Palmer saw the journalistic value of comments and praised people and groups that helped commenters better understand the processes of journalism and therefore make more informed comments. While this study focused on the intermediating work of the participants rather than the extent to which they fit the petite bourgeoisie vision of cultural intermediaries from Bourdieu (1984), there was evidence of the participants "Assigning themselves the impossible, and therefore unassailable, role of divulging legitimate culture" (p. 326).

However, the intermediary roles described by Maguire and Matthews (2010) and Hutchinson (2013) tie more directly to the work of these comment moderators and community managers. Extrapolating on Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) limited discussion of the concept, these cultural and media studies researchers saw cultural intermediation as a means of communicating the values of the producer to the audience, while also interpreting the value of audience

contributions to the producers, drawing attention to instances of effective user contributions, with comments being analogous to the "fringe" productions of Hutchinson's study (2013), and promoting further audience consumption. In this study, that work was spread between several participants, who each employed unique mediating tasks and practices.

With Fairfax and Pagemasters, the first aspect of this intermediation was done through pre-moderation, work that was done in accordance with participants' habitus and doxa. Birmingham and Quinn assess and approve comments in a way that reinforces their journalistic and the organisation's editorial values. Both saw the benefit of supporting a lively discussion, and hence were keen to process high numbers of comments soon after publishing an article (when they had the time and inclination). This strategy of fast filtering also accords with the organisation's desire to promote audience engagement. Simultaneously, it is also the mechanism that allows most commenters to have a voice. Ashton and his team, in contrast, reject high numbers of comments that are abusive, derogatory or illegal in some respect, communicating the organisation's desire for a civil discussion space in which commenters are better able to express themselves. All Fairfax and Pagemasters participants employed some degree of community management – every participant had corresponded with commenters by email at the minimum – but their comment moderation was the core of their intermediation duties.

By contrast, *The Conversation* focused more on community management practices in their cultural intermediation work. A key way they did this was by frequently referencing and linking to their community standards. While both organisations provided links to their standards beside the comment box for logged in users, *The Conversation* also had this as the first link in the footer of every page. When Glassey, who does the most cultural intermediation of the comments at *The Conversation*, intervenes in a conversation, it is often to point out when comments are a violation of the standards. The superusers of the Community Council, another community management initiative, further reinforce these standards as they leave their many comments on the

organisation's website. Their other community management initiatives, like author Q&A sessions and commissioned comments, further communicate the organisation's expectations while also eliciting participation.

At both companies, intermediation practices are designed to promote news 'consumption' in the form of increased user engagement with articles and comments. Publishing numerous comments starts a cycle of engagement according to Quinn at Fairfax, with contributors likely to respond to a larger number of comments. Those comments that provide useful feedback on journalistic production enable Fairfax to offer better articles. At *The Conversation*, prior to its current intermediation strategy and policy, abusive and low-quality comments pushed both readers and writers away from the site. Through several years of community management initiatives, they have found ways to increase reader engagement.

What makes the participants' position as cultural intermediaries unique and significant is the extent to which their work is a new kind of cultural production. In the case of Fairfax and Pagemasters, without the moderators' assessment and filtering process there would be no editorially sanctioned material in their in-house comment sections. By prioritising some stories to moderate over others, and some comments over others, they shape the flow of conversation, privileging certain voices over others.[6] Similarly, *The Conversation*'s community managers and comment moderators encourage the kind of comments they want to see through promoting, restating and policing the community standards. *The Conversation* even created an entirely separate space for general public discussions, the weekly Off-Topic Thread, which frequently exceeded 500 comments in length. This demonstrates a commitment to enabling debates beyond the scope of editorial direction and news agendas. While these cultural intermediaries are not creating the content themselves, their work directly affects the types of comments published and discussions that develop.

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[6] This is quite different to the limited post moderation available on Facebook, in which moderators can only hide comments that do not meet editorial standards after they have been made.

The impact of these organisations' cultural intermediation practices shows the value of carefully detailing the material tasks and practices of these workers, which will be divided into those of comment moderation and community management.

## 6.2 A new picture of comment moderation and community management.

Many of the objectives, tasks and practices observed in moderation and management work were consistent with past research, although this study found most participants' approaches diverged in some way from other researchers' analyses of this work.

Comment moderation is often seen as arduous, unrewarding, time-intensive work, as found in the research by Roberts (2014) and Huang (2016). Moderators are tasked with identifying and evaluating the lowest quality, most abusive comments and either rejecting or deleting them – after which they sometimes face an aggressive email from the disappointed would-be commenter. Apart from Glassey and Ashton, who were primarily tasked with this work, most participants found this to be unenviable, if necessary, work.

In contrast, community management was seen as impactful work where participants could successfully shape commenter behaviour and engage with readers. Ashton talked about the strong positive reception he got for his editorials, and Glassey positively recalled seeing user behaviour changing over time in response to her communications. Forming strategies and policies and communicating standards to the commenters was often done by the most senior participants in each organisation, and regarded as important and even exciting work. Ketchell and Palmer of *The Conversation* both spoke proudly of their various initiatives to engage with the readers, and Fairfax's Cooper affirmed that hosting comments was a way of connecting to the organisation's community. Even handling commenter complaints, according to Quinn, Ashton, Birmingham, Ketchell, and Glassey, enabled them to persuade angry or frustrated commenters to understand and accept moderation choices or even to try posting again in compliance with community standards.

### 6.2.1 Comment moderation

Most of the comment moderation monitoring, assessment and filtering work this study's participants did mirrored that presented by David Domingo (2011) and Zvi Reich (2011) in their studies. At the pre-moderating Fairfax and Pagemasters publications, Ashton, Quinn and to a limited extent Birmingham did the "comment handling" work described by Domingo (2011), reading through comments, assessing their suitability for publication and publishing or rejecting them. At the post-moderating *Conversation*, Glassey and Palmer sought problematic comments and off-topic discussions and deleted them where necessary. Both organisations weighed which articles to open and keep open and they did not hesitate to turn comments off if an article was getting an excess of aggressive, negative or abusive comments.

Their moderation objectives were also in line with previous studies – preventing defamation and abuse as well as curating for quality (S. Smith, 2017). However, the objectives were weighted differently from organisation to organisation. Concerns about defamation and other legal issues were far more important among Fairfax and Pagemasters participants, with all but Cooper noting defamation as a key reason to reject comments. By contrast, only one person, Glassey, mentioned defamation at *The Conversation*, and she noted that it was not a common issue for their commenters. At *The Conversation,* several participants mention their interest in 'curating' comments – that is prioritising moderation of the best and worst comments to create comment sections that reflect editorial values. Conversely, at Fairfax, only Birmingham was highly concerned with moderating to curate.

Detailed study observations also confirmed that other comment moderation tasks and practices differed between the organisations because of their governance strategy. In the pre-moderated comment sections of Fairfax, prioritising comments for assessment was a highly influential task. As comments were posted constantly – even when there were no moderation staff available – everyone moderating needed to make a choice about which comments they

would look at first. Fairfax editors provided general guidance to Ashton and his team of moderators, but Ashton otherwise relied on his own experience. Quinn and Birmingham, by contrast, received minimal instruction from Fairfax editors, so they made their own decisions about which comments to review first based on what would take least time to verify as accurate and yield greater participation. In practice, Quinn and Ashton would quickly publish the shortest comments that had the least information to verify and go back for the larger ones that required more research.[7] The result was that short, safe comments were prioritised and published first. This prioritisation practice helped Ashton to get more comments finished and helped Quinn to get conversations started more quickly under his articles. They did not prioritise comments in chronological order or by their journalistic qualities, which might have signalled posting early or more thoughtfully as successful kinds of posting strategies.

In the post-moderated comments sections of *The Conversation*, however, moderation prioritisation and assessment work cannot decide how conversations develop. Instead, moderators can only redirect conversations by deleting comments, and even then only insofar as they see these contributions before others respond. Directing moderation energies then requires some predictive skills, guessing where users are most likely to comment and acting quickly to delete inappropriate material, but the participants were sometimes surprised by which comment sections become popular. The Community Council members help direct staff to comment sections that require additional oversight, but again the prioritisation is out of their control – they cannot decide what the Council will flag for attention. This does not mean *Conversation* staff have no say in what they choose to moderate, as Glassey, Palmer and the audience analysis manager focus their attention on articles they expect to generate problematic discussion. However, their moderation practices are on the whole more reactive than they are at Fairfax.

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[7] Birmingham did not have access to the moderation CMS at time of observation.

All moderators faced a challenge when moving from one article to another, regardless of how they prioritised their work. When Glassey and Ashton went to moderate on a new section, they had to re-initiate a process of contextualisation. This meant reading or rereading the article, looking at the published comments, and (re)initiating their research into the themes coming up in the comments. A moderator who is acclimatised to an article and its discussion can process comments more quickly that one who needs several minutes to orient their assessment practice before moderation can continue. This delay even happened for journalist Quinn when assessing comments on his past articles, though the interval was shorter. This 'contextualisation delay' problem was worst for Glassey; she did not have the option to focus on one article, as flagged comments could take her to any article on the site. Further, she had to pay attention to the flow of discussion happening in a thread, as conversation could have continued after the comment in question and her moderation choices could impact that discussion. Consequently, both Glassey and Ashton spoke highly of editors and journalists who engaged in comment moderation, as they could more quickly assess comments under their own articles.

Finally, it is critical to note how programming and web development work plays a critical role in enabling and presenting comments, as well as facilitating moderation. Cipolla, senior developer at *The Conversation*, noted several different commenting features that have been tried on *The Conversation* website, including comment ranking, reply nesting and comment sorting. Through his interactions with colleagues and commenters, Cipolla tweaks the commenting system to impact both how contributors post their comments and how their posts ultimately appear. Additionally, using user-registration details, he and his team can track down automated accounts posting spam. While this study found developers engaged in comment moderation in a variety of capacities, they are comparatively absent in other research (Bakker, 2014; Braun & Gillespie, 2011; S. Smith, 2017).

Technology teams had a different degree of impact on moderation at Fairfax, however, during this study. According to Ashton and Quinn, the size and complexity of Fairfax Media makes quick technical interventions difficult. The two legacy CMS observed during this study, which were expansive information systems built to handle the broad mix of media work done at Fairfax, could not be easily re-engineered to accommodate different moderation or community management approaches. As a result, the newest CMS was unable to be modified to handle comment moderation, requiring participants engaging in moderation to use the old system. This kept at least one participant, Birmingham, from being able to do the work. Since the observation, Fairfax has implemented a new system which, according to Ashton, better integrates the website and the moderation tools, and which was the product of years of planning and development.

### 6.2.2 Community management.

While Fairfax, Pagemasters and *The Conversation* also differed in how, and how much, staff engaged in community management work, this work was broadly consistent with that observed in past newsroom research (Bakker, 2014; Domingo, 2014; Meyer & Speakman, 2016). Community management tasks included interacting with the commenting community, by responding to queries or commenting to redirect conversation, and creating and reinforcing community standards. One community management task shared by all participants, including editors like Cooper, Ketchell, and Palmer, was communicating with commenters, though often by email instead of in comment sections.

Of the two organisations, *The Conversation* favoured a community-management-oriented approach to cultural intermediation of commenting and consequently engaged in a wider range of managerial practices. According to the audience analysis manager, *The Conversation* staff do about as much community management as comment moderation. Glassey claimed to, and was observed to, spend half her cultural intermediation time communicating with commenters, including those in the Community Council. Further, her comment moderation was triggered by a

community management task, as she was responding to user flags on questionable posts. Palmer, the audience analysis manager, and Ketchell engaged in community management strategies such as pushing writers to engage in the comment sections and holding author Q&As. Even the technology team took part, typically in making sure users were adhering to the community standards in terms of using their real names and not posting spam comments. Thus, the effort was networked across the newsroom, with most participants more likely to do community management than comment moderation – though both were only a minor part of anyone but Glassey's job.

### 6.2.3 Behind the differences in approach.

To an extent, this analysis reinforces the points made by Domingo (2014) and Goodman (2013) about the impacts of pre-moderated and post-moderated comments. Pre-moderated comments require more dedicated moderation resources, provide protection for the organisation and allow for more editorial control of contributions. For this reason, *The Conversation's* Ketchell evinced a preference for pre-moderated comments, so as to better shape comment sections as an editorial product. By contrast, post-moderated comments encourage more active commenters, provide less editorial control and require more community management techniques, as seen in *The Conversation.*

However, the differences in cultural intermediation strategies and practices are not reducible to a choice between pre- and post-moderation; the agency of the participants and unique characteristics of the organisations played a defining role. Editors at both organisations, Cooper for Fairfax and Ketchell and Palmer at *The Conversation*, put a different value on comments and have different goals for comment moderation and community management. Cooper, as well as the journalists Quinn and Birmingham, emphasise reader engagement as a reason for having comments. They want reader feedback and to interact with readers. Comment moderation is employed to fend off abusive speech and abusive commenters, as well as

defamation. Community management guides users away from uncivil comments and keeps commenters on topic, as well as explaining moderation choices.

The efforts of comment moderators and community managers at *The Conversation* do engage readers and fend off uncivil discussion, but there is much more emphasis placed on cultivating the editorial qualities of comment sections than at Fairfax Media and more interest in building a sense of community between the contributors. Ketchell, the editor in chief at *The Conversation*, emphasises that comment sections are an editorial product on his publication's website. Beyond providing a space for users to talk, *The Conversation* wants comment sections that interact with authors and with the contents of articles; off-topic discussions are removed from the article to a space separate from the journalistic production. While Glassey strives to make comment sections accessible for everyone, that accessibility is in terms of being able to give your opinion about the issues the articles discusses. Yet curiously *The Conversation* staff do not place a high premium on interactivity between users, the talk that builds a sense of community and trust (Kiesler et al., 2012).

### 6.3 Seeing the field of journalism in this new newsroom work.

The hypothesis of this study was that the field of journalism plays a key role in defining the objectives, tasks and practices of comment moderation and community management work, and the ways in which it was valued in online news organisations.

The observations and interviews suggest the field of journalism's influence on comment governance is apparent in a few key ways. The most visible evidence is the extent to which the presence of journalistic habitus and doxa – the internalised understandings of the methods and the value of journalistic work as described in Chapter 2 – shaped the participants' ideas of how to approach their work, and why it was important to them and their colleagues. It is also likely that the degree of this influence is relative to the participant's position in the field vis-à-vis their relative amount of journalistic capital they have gained through their history. This is visible in the

greater attention to the journalistic qualities of comments evinced by Ketchell and Birmingham, both with two decades of experience in journalistic production, compared to Ashton, Cipolla and the audience analysis manager, who had not previously worked in newsrooms. In addition, participants often referenced other news media organisations rich in journalistic or heteronomous capital, in the process of identifying good and bad intermediation work, as well as when defining the value invested in comments. Finally, the two news organisations studied here have distinct approaches to cultural intermediation, which demonstrates not only the significance of the field but also how these mechanisms capture the dynamism of the field as it incorporates digital innovations and economic and cultural transformations.

Each participant exhibited a unique habitus and doxa for their comment moderation and community management work, based on their professional trajectories, but of the nine participants only three, Ashton, Cipolla, and the audience analysis manager, had not had previous jobs or tertiary education in journalism. The rest either had a tertiary journalism education, experience in journalism – some more than twenty years – or both. These latter participants all exhibited, to some extent, the signs of having acquired some degree of professional editorial habitus and internalised journalistic doxa. Their understandings and evaluation of comment intermediation differed markedly from the participants without journalistic backgrounds.

Journalistic participants more often assessed the value of comments based on their contribution to news storytelling. For instance, Birmingham and Ketchell, the two with the longest history in journalism, also most stringently applied their editorial standards to evaluating the commenters' production – Ketchell referred to this process as one of curating comments (Ketchell Interview, 2017) where Birmingham spoke of exerting "quality control" (Birmingham Interview, 2017), which included removing comments that either did not pertain to the contents of the article, were nonsensical or were poorly written. Similarly, Glassey saw comments as "a story that complements another story", which puts emphasis on audience contributions

extending the goals of the article, over the value of providing a conversational or deliberative space for the public. While she prefers not to delete them, she moves comments that deviate from the article's topic into a special section, away from the journalistic production. Cooper, Quinn and Palmer saw comments as a method of getting feedback that could be used to improve the quality of journalistic production, but expressed some frustration that commenters do not fully understand the processes, practices and aims of journalism when they make their comments.

Participants with no prior background in journalism did not consistently use journalistic standards to assess the value of commenting. Both the audience analysis manager and Cipolla explicitly stated that comments are not part of journalism, but they did not think they had to be. While Cipolla was sceptical of the general value of comment sections, he appreciated *The Conversation's* unique community. The audience analysis manager sees value in providing the public with a space to debate important issues. While Ashton was categorical that comment sections and their work were aspects of journalism, his chief interest in commenting was that it would generate civil discussion in a welcoming social space, like Cipolla and the audience analysis manager. He thought partially off-topic comments could potentially be allowed where they supported a discussion, particularly where they constituted a civil criticism of the organisation or the moderators. For Ashton, unacceptable comments were those that engaged in name-calling or pettiness – he indicated that the lexicon for his team was filled with uncivil expressions and attacks, rather than examples of poor journalistic writing.

Participants' relationship to the field of journalism subsequently influenced their comment moderation and community management practices. This was most visible in that journalistic participants were more likely to engage in community management work, which communicated editorial standards and preferred ways of interacting publicly with audiences. This work included crafting community standards that conveyed organisational values to potential

commenters, posting comments to respond to questions about the article or the author, reminding contributors about commenting guidelines or warning them about the consequences of policy breaches. Quinn and Birmingham occasionally engage in conversations about their articles and Palmer has pushed some writers to do the same for the articles she commissions.

Conversely, non-journalistic participants Ashton, Cipolla, and the audience analysis manager focused on policing discussion by deleting or preventing hostile comments or spam. These participants did not post comments in comment sections with any regularity and most of their direct interaction with commenters happened through email. Of the three, Ashton engaged with the community the most, through rare posts on comment threads, extensive email exchanges with individual commenters and an annual editorial on moderation (Ashton, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017). Significantly, he is also the participant who most unequivocally defined comment moderation and community management as journalistic work, further reinforcing the extent to which it is tied to the journalistic field.

The influence of the journalistic field extended beyond participants' habitus and doxa, however; as other news organisations also had a determining influence on strategies, practices and definitions of good, bad, underdeveloped or innovative intermediation work. According to Bourdieu (1993), capital rich positions, possessed of heteronomous or autonomous capital, give prominent cultural producers additional authority to shape practices and values of the field of cultural production. While he was discussing art and the theatre, this dynamic was also obvious here as participants cited internationally lauded news organisations such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, which are rich in cultural, political and economic capital, as leaders in cultural intermediation practices, with commensurately well-run comment sections. Also mentioned as influential in some way were Australia's major national news media organisations, particularly the ABC, with its public service focus on engagement and the online news websites owned by News Corporation Australia. The latter was identified more with worst-case scenarios, their comment

sections being, according to Birmingham, "an open sewer" (Birmingham Interview, 2017), with

Quinn and Cooper expressing similarly negative perceptions. Even though none of the

participants had worked for these organisations, they were seen as exemplifying success or failure

in comment and community intermediation partly because their cultural, economic and political

capital predates their comment moderation and community management work. In Bourdieu's

theory of fields (1993), accommodating for the influence of prominent cultural producers is key

to understanding the practices in context:

> In short, it is a question of understanding works of art as a *manifestation* of the field as a
>
> whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its
>
> structure and functioning, are concentrated. (p. 37)

Similarly, *The Conversation* and Fairfax can also be mapped to the field based on their

history and their business models, and their positions impacted the doxa and habitus of the

participants. Fairfax is a long-established journalistic institution in Australia with journalistic,

economic, and political capital and it has had a lasting impact on journalism in Australia, with a

history of editorial independence previously granted by its profitable classified section (Simons,

2011).

Commensurately, Fairfax participants used comment moderation and community

management to incorporate the technological innovation of interactivity in a way that reinforces

their traditional values and status in the field of journalism. For instance, participants were

selective about where they allowed comments, not opening them on 'hard' news items, like crime

and court reporting or on longstanding debates like Israel/Palestine but more often soft news

items, like lifestyle or entertainment news, or opinion pieces. This was done because journalists

and editors felt that commenters lacked the journalistic sense to safely make comments without

breaching media laws, and would be likely to make inaccurate and biased statements based on

prejudice. This gate-keeping protects the integrity and balance of the organisation's hard news

production, which, according to Boczkowski and Peer (2011), journalists find to be more important for the reputation of their profession, even if their audiences more commonly consume 'soft' news.

Conversely, *The Conversation* is a new entrant to the field of journalism, attempting to raise its status through its innovative approach to engaging its authors and readers. Its articles are open for comments by default, and authors are encouraged to respond to comments on their work. Ketchell, Palmer and Glassey, the *Conversation* participants with the most journalistic capital, saw comments as a contribution to, and extension of, the organisation's journalistic production, as "an editorial product" (Ketchell Interview, 2017). Through programs like the Community Council or author Q&A, *The Conversation's* community management work often elevated the status of commenters. Mirroring the new entrants to the literary field described by Bourdieu (1993), *The Conversation* participants are disrupting the journalistic field of positions, creating new parameters for good cultural intermediation work rather than adopting tools and practices in a way that preserves the status quo. This desire for disruption is clear in their page, 'Who we are' (n.d.-b), as they assert; "We have introduced new protocols and controls to help rebuild trust in journalism. Their stated hope is that this innovation will, "…hopefully allow for a better quality of public discourse and conversations" (n.d.-b). For them, digital innovation is not a potential threat to their capital, but rather a potential vehicle for gaining it.

Participants from both organisations signalled that hosting and mediating comments is becoming a part of the journalistic field. Editors and managers like Ashton, Cooper, Ketchell and Palmer were clear that comment sections and the cultural intermediation work behind them were not only a part of journalism, but had potentially growing significance – Ashton felt that younger audiences would increasingly expect the option to comment, while Ketchell, Palmer and Cooper see the potential for comments to not just increase reader engagement, but to augment journalistic production. Quinn, as a journalist, argued journalists should be in some way engaging

with commenters, while Glassey saw the comments as, "a story that complements another story, that story being the article."

Not every participant agreed with these perspectives, demonstrating the dynamic by which cultural intermediation, as a new journalistic practice, undergoes the struggles that continuously redefine a field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993):

> These endless changes, which arise from the very structure of the field, i.e. the synchronic oppositions between the antagonistic positions (dominant/dominated, consecrated/novice, old/young, etc.), are largely independent of the external changes which may seem to determine them because they accompany them chronologically. (p. 56)

In contrast to other journalistic participants, Birmingham was dubious about the journalistic value of comments, while Cipolla and the audience analysis manager, at *The Conversation*, flatly asserted comment sections were not part of journalism. This accords with past research showing journalistic ambivalence towards the value of user-generated content and the place of cultural intermediation in journalistic work routines (Domingo, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Singer, 2010).

Certainly, comment moderation and community management work have different status for journalistic participants. Moderating comments through prioritising, assessing, approving or deleting them, or otherwise affecting their presentation, appeared to yield moderators little autonomous journalistic capital. The work was rarely done by editors nor was it an official duty for Birmingham or Quinn. Most journalistic participants, apart from Glassey, emphasised the unpleasantness of reading abusive and low-quality comments. According to Birmingham, an ignorant critique "…rips your heart out." Yet the people most involved with comment moderation, Glassey and Ashton, did not indicate that dealing with nasty talk was the worst part of the job – in fact, they suggested highly abusive comments were easier to reject and delete. Rather, the greatest challenge was in trying to justify why a comment might not deserve to be

deleted, and trying to accommodate contributor feelings in their editorial decisions. Nevertheless, moderating negative comments was seen as an unpleasant burden by most participants, and contributed to the lower status of moderation work.

Conversely, community management was seen as good, productive journalistic work. Quinn and Cooper of Fairfax both suggested that community management work was increasingly part of journalistic best practices, due to its potential to improve journalistic production and to help journalists learn more about their audience. Birmingham, while sceptical of the value of comments, found community management to be critical work for news organisations that choose to host them. At *The Conversation*, every participant, including the developer, felt that the authors and the organisation were doing valuable work when interacting with the community. This response to community management mirrors that found by Bakker (2014), who saw similar interest in developing the roles of community managers in news organisations.

### 6.4 Conclusion.

Comparing and juxtaposing the practices and views of participants demonstrates the ways in which the work of community management and comment moderation constitute new forms of cultural intermediation, but forms of cultural intermediation that has historic ties to the field of journalism. The participants, as cultural intermediaries, used their practices to intermediate, in various ways, between the organisation, the commenters and the audience. Their work also ultimately promoted consumption by increasing reader engagement and preventing readers, as well as authors, from being turned away by abusive and low-quality comments. The organisations' distinct approaches showed the value of separating the practices of comment moderation and community management, both due to their unique mechanisms for achieving results and for the distinct results they achieved. All these practices and perspectives were tied to the participants' relationship to the field of journalism, as well as the practices of prominent

organisations in the field. The participants, their work relationships and their positioning in the

field, demonstrated how these forms of cultural intermediation are potentially a growing part of

how journalistic work is defined.

The concluding chapter will now relate these results and analyses back to the questions

underpinning this research, while also considering the significance of the findings and

opportunities for further research.

# 7 Conclusion

Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984) and his theory of fields as it applies to journalism (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Willig, 2012), this study has investigated the nature of comment moderation and community management work in two Australian news organisations and how the field of journalism has influenced these forms of work.

I argue that the people engaging in comment moderation and community management are acting as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Hutchinson, 2013; Maguire & Matthews, 2014) thus operating in a capacity that Maguire and Mathews suggest is already a part of journalistic work. Comment moderators can have a direct impact on the direction, tone and diversity of news conversations in the approach they take to assessing, curating and deleting or publishing the comments. They do this editorial work on behalf of both news consumers, who might otherwise be targeted by abusive, offensive or otherwise low-quality comments, and on behalf of the news organisations, who do not want low-quality, violent or legally risky content appearing on their websites. Community managers, on the other hand, try to influence participating commenters, the makers of Bourdieu's "not-yet-legitimate" cultural production (1984, p. 326) or fringe producers (Hutchinson, 2016), both to increase the number of posts they make and to shape their discussions to reflect the organisation's values. In doing these forms of work, the cultural intermediaries of Fairfax Media and *The Conversation* attempt to increase consumption of both news articles and in-house comments by drawing attention to the discussion and making it a better read for audiences.

In this study, I situate these intermediary roles in the field of journalism and elaborate on how their position in the field impacts the development of work objectives, practices and values. This investigation's central questions were "What is the work of cultural intermediation done by

comment moderators and community managers, and how does the field of journalism influence it?"

To arrive at an answer, I had to look into a series of sub-questions about the tasks, practices, objectives and values of the study participants, as well as their professional backgrounds. To address RQ3, regarding the tasks, practices and objectives of moderators and community managers, I analysed data collected through observations and interviews to provide details on the nature of these roles, the material practices they involve and the motivations behind the work. When designing this study, I decided to make a clear distinction between the work of comment moderation and community management, which previous researchers had not done, to explore the differing workplace status of the roles and workers' greater ambivalence about moderation. In Chapter 2, I showed how researchers had already been using these terms, but interchangeably despite the different focus, tasks, practices and status of each type of work that this study outlines. In this research, some of the participants made the distinction between these roles unprompted, but the two forms of work were distributed unevenly among the participants' different editorial roles, pointing to one potential reason for the ambiguity in previous studies.

Through my research, I found the form of comment moderation work related significantly to the style of moderation employed. Pre-moderation practices of Fairfax and Pagemasters revolved around prioritising which comments to read and researching their contents, then assessing whether they met editorial standards before publishing or rejecting them. The objectives for these workers were to get a high number of comments published while simultaneously preventing uncivil or low-quality discussion and potential legal risks – with the participants generally defining what constituted quality commenting from a shared, institutional and personal, subjective perspective. On the other hand, *The Conversation's* post-moderation approach involved assessing comments that had already been published, finding potentially

problematic posts, researching their contents and deleting those that breached internal standards while making sure any deletions did not to disrupt ongoing discussions. These moderators' objectives were similarly to get rid of uncivil commentary and low-quality discussion, though with less emphasis on identifying defamation.

Comment moderation practices largely focused on shaping discussions rather than promoting consumption, but, in doing so, they showed how this work constitutes a new kind of cultural intermediation. By deleting or rejecting a comment, moderators shaped the development of the conversation, having a direct and determining impact on what appears in comment sections. This contrasts with the focus of Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries, such as theatre critics commenting post-production on whether a performance is classified as legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1984), or even interior decorators guiding consumers on which home decorating products and services to buy (Maguire & Matthews, 2014). Critics cannot stand mid-performance to redirect the actors, nor can interior decorators stand on the factory floor to correct the manufacture of products. However, this study's participants generally only performed this shaping of production by reducing the number of low-quality or problematic comments and by ensuring as many comments were published as possible. No participant curated comments, highlighting good examples or rearranging comment sections to remediate their display, although Cipolla and Ashton both detailed the ways this remediation could be done.

In observing this filtering process, however, the research revealed an important and unrecognised comment-moderation task; comment prioritisation, which draws attention to standards-compliant, positive comments and promotes this form of comment production. While Fairfax moderators like Ashton and Quinn focused on assessing and filtering comments as quickly as possible, there was an inevitable delay between the comment submission and its appearance on the site. To reduce delays and boost comment approvals, the participants prioritise which comment sections to review and which comments to assess first in that section.

The implication of this is that, by choosing shorter, safer comments to publish first, moderators ensure that those are the comments that foster further discussion. This prioritisation could work differently if cultural intermediaries chose to look at larger, content-heavy comments first or personal anecdotes and experiences instead.

This prioritisation also involves a significant topicality factor, as moving to a new comment section led moderators to a 'contextualisation delay' problem, with the effect being they tended to focus on a single article and discussion for several comments before moving on to a new thread. With each move, they had to familiarise themselves with the topic of the article and the flow of discussion. This processing delay posed a larger concern for Glassey of *The Conversation* than Fairfax pre-moderators, as her prioritisation was often triggered in response to user comment flags, taking her to any story on the website to look at a single comment or thread of discussion. Ashton and his team consequently developed article preferences based on personal interest, helping them to more easily contextualise comments made as well as increasing their enjoyment of their intermediation work. This topicality preference was less of a concern for editors like Palmer who only focused on moderating comments under the articles they had commissioned and whose content they were more familiar with.

Another comment moderation task that deserves more recognition and investigation in journalism studies is organisations' process of decision-making around the articles that are opened and closed for comment. While all *The Conversation's* articles are initially open, journalists and editors at Fairfax decide whether to open an article to comments when they publish it, and most are not open. They often open comments on articles that are likely to have a high level of interest or a low level of problematic comments. However, they avoid opening comments on articles with higher potential to generate defamatory or legally prejudicial comments, like crime and court stories, or which have a history of attracting abusive comments, like race and gender issues. These decisions have serious consequences for the types of public debates that are

enabled, and those that are not, such as Israel/Palestine and climate change. Ashton, as Fairfax

chief comment moderator, has recently been granted the power to open comments on his own

when his team has sufficient capacity, or "bandwidth" as he calls it, though he previously made

recommendations to the editors.

Senior editors at both organisations also reserve the right to close comment sections, and

they do so regularly in response to high levels of abuse, low ratios of good to bad comments, or

simply a lack of capacity to monitor and filter the comment sections. Editors made this decision

at Fairfax publications, though Ashton was recently granted this power, while editors and

moderators do so together at *The Conversation* suggesting a more cooperative model of

intermediation at that organisation. Again, the focus of this form of comment moderation work

is quality regulation; articles are generally opened when moderation resources are available, and

closed as a regulatory move or when moderation is not available.

In this study, community management is a more diverse, less regulatory form of work,

and participants had more individualised objectives, tasks and practices. It involved

corresponding with commenters, posting comments to redirect discussions, training users on

good commenting practices through dialogue in the comments section or direct messaging,

creating and presenting community standards and, at *The Conversation*, engaging with super-users

from the Community Council to discuss the development and application of organisational

standards. No one participant engaged in all these practices and the only ubiquitous task was

email correspondence with the commenters. Even then, however, participants emailed

commenters for different issues; Cipolla discussed improving the functionality of comment

sections while Cooper fielded complaints about comments that had been rejected by moderators.

*The Conversation* participants engaged in much more community management work than

Fairfax Media staff, and much of this came down to one of their unique initiatives: the

Community Council. *The Conversation* has given special intermediary status to a group of twenty

website users, comprising ten commenters and ten article authors. Out of their own personal

interest, these users engage in comment moderation and community management for the

website on the premise that they like the website's content and mission and they want to help

cultivate good comment sections. None of these users is employed by the news organisation and

they are not required to do the work, but they have ended up being a key influence on the tone,

discussion direction and interaction in comment sections. Glassey is formally tasked with

communicating with this group, and they converse with her continuously throughout the day.

She sets standards and expectations for their work and arbitrates in the case of difficult

moderation decisions, such as whether a comment merits deletion. She also passes on their

concerns to other staff in the news organisation. Through this interaction, Glassey and *The

Conversation* gain greater external support for their comment moderation and community

management work, as well as engaging directly with their stakeholders in order to build a sense

of community around their commenting standards.

Despite the range of tasks and practices involved in community management, one

objective was broadly consistent across the two organisations studied: it should shape

commenters' expectations of what should be posted in comment sections and how they should

post. This mediatory task was especially important, as there was a feeling that commenters had

unrealistic expectations both of their rights to speak uncensored and how the news organisation

should conduct its work. Regardless of which management practices they employed, the

participants were often working toward this normative ethical end.

Other community management objectives were less universal. Participants who posted in

the comment sections themselves, particularly Fairfax's Birmingham and Quinn, had friendly

conversations with commenters and occasionally rebuked abusive commenters because it could

be enjoyable. Glassey, Palmer and to a lesser extent Ashton posted comments to keep

discussions on-topic and away from personal abuse. Glassey, in corresponding with the

Community Council, interpreted and helped apply community standards to aid council members in their voluntary intermediation work. Glassey was unique among participants in that she would reach out to the community of authors and readers, often through social media, to direct attention to a particularly active conversation. People involved in designing community management strategy at *The Conversation*, such as Ketchell and Palmer, also wanted to increase the editorial value of the comments by getting authors to join the discussions below the articles, which subsequently increased user engagement.

Though this study makes a distinction between comment moderation and community management work, these roles act together to perform the cultural intermediation of comment sections. Comment moderation is broadly focused on shaping user-generated content production, where community management communicates expectations of that production. Both can, in their way, promote greater consumption of public discussion; well-moderated comment sections can be more inviting to readers of either organisation, while community management initiatives, like getting authors involved in discussion, can generate reader interest and stimulate comments. Thus, commenting intermediaries perform an essential role in audience and community development that deserves further investigation, to examine which combinations of tasks, practices and objectives work best to address the interests of different news organisations.

Having addressed RQ 3 regarding the tasks, practices and objectives of moderators and community managers, the study was left with questions concerning intermediary work distribution, as job titles did not always correspond with the types and degree of work performed in either organisation. Ashton and Glassey, for instance, did significantly more comment moderation than any other participants in their respective organisations, although Glassey's role is audience analysis manager. Birmingham, the journalist who did the most community management at Fairfax, did no moderation at the time of observation, while Quinn, another

Fairfax journalist, was engaged in the second highest level of cultural intermediation, even though it was not his codified responsibility. While Glassey did engage in community management extensively, almost all of this work was engaging with the Community Council. Other community management practices, like drawing the author into the comment section, were typically the purview of editors like Palmer. The differences in who conducted this work and why at different organisations requires further investigation, as they are not necessarily explained by the educational backgrounds of the individual participants.

In answering RQ4, regarding the knowledge, skills and educational standards required of these intermediaries, the ethnography found several congruities. The most commonly emphasised requirement of this work was editorial knowledge: journalistic knowledge of the news stories and of defamation and media law, and knowledge of the history of commenting and commenters at the organisation. The latter knowledge came from moderation training sessions for staff in both organisations, and this training was particularly extensive for both Ashton and Glassey. Otherwise, participants picked up the knowledge from doing the tasks and discussing them with colleagues in a type of 'community of practice' (M. K. Smith, 1998), which demands further research. Ashton and his team, for example, committed their history of moderation decisions to a book, which he called the 'lexicon', that helps guide his team's moderation work. At *The Conversation*, Palmer tried to conduct training sessions to transmit the required knowledge across the newsroom; training sessions that she says are widely popular and often attended by staff from across departments.

The skills most demanded of these cultural intermediaries were 'social skills', although this term is open and ambiguous and deserves further attention in future research. Comment moderators and community managers need to be able to diffuse tensions in discussions and to calm commenters who are upset about having their comments rejected or deleted, grievances that often escalate if not handled empathetically and effectively. Birmingham, Quinn and Glassey

in particular emphasised how commenters can become aggressive in the comment sections or follow-up emails, so they added the need for resilience to their list of social skills. Participants seemed to place more importance on these social skills than the technical skills required to navigate the content management systems and perform moderation, though Cipolla noted that data analytics skills could be valuable for finding out more information about potentially problematic accounts, like astroturfers or spammers.

In terms of educational requirements, no one indicated a specific degree was essential. Though all participants had at least a bachelor's degree, their majors ranged from politics to graphic design. *The Conversation's* Ketchell suggested that level of education could be a consideration in the hiring process, but it would not be a requirement. Fairfax's Ashton asserted it was the education on the job, rather than before the job, that was most critical. This would suggest that the educational demands of cultural intermediation are still fluid, and some study is warranted of what pathways are most effective and productive for those interested in these forms of work.

Certainly, in response to RQ4, the research found that personal interest was one of the more important requirements of the work. Participants saw personal interest, both in comments and in news stories, as essential. Ashton reflected that it would not be possible to do the work without this involvement in promoting public talk about news. Indeed, among the participants themselves, personal interest was a common reason to do the work. The technology team found pleasure in tracking down fraudulent user accounts, while Quinn was interested in getting reader feedback on his articles. Ashton was interested in seeing heartfelt comments, and even Birmingham enjoyed getting a vitriolic commenter to change his mind or back down. This finding suggests further research could be done into the pleasurable aspects of moderation and community management, to offset the considerable body of research emerging around negative reactions to moderation work.

While no participants explicitly required specific work experience as a requirement for prospective comment moderators and community managers, participants often relied on their past habitus and doxa, particularly (but not only) from journalism, as a guide to doing comment intermediation work. Participants with experience in journalism, like Birmingham, Quinn, and Glassey, suggested it was their journalistic experience that gave them the social resilience needed for the work. Further, their background enabled Ketchell, Palmer, Birmingham and Quinn to set journalistic expectations for the audience. Glassey's commercial journalistic doxa affected her interest in developing high numbers of commenters' and readers' views, as well as her community management strategy. Non-journalistic participants drew on doxa from their respective professional backgrounds to guide their intermediation work. Cipolla's background in information technology and website development spurred his interest in investigating aspects of user registration and controlling illegitimate accounts, while Ashton used his writing experience to craft his annual moderation review editorials (Ashton, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017). The impact that each participant's distinct habitus and doxa had on their cultural intermediation work is suggestive of the key role that individuals' agency, grounded in their "social origins" and the "weight of dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72), plays in both reproducing and shaping the field of cultural production, "showing how the 'objective' structure is related to the 'subjective' perspectives of individual agents," according to Benson (1999, p. 467).

Ultimately, participants did not agree on the need for a specific set of skills, background or education apart from social skills and news and current affairs topic knowledge. Rather, the study found that each participant's particular educational and professional background had an impact on the value they placed on the work they did.

Regarding RQ5, which asked how participants valued this cultural intermediation work, the study found different types of value in both moderating and managing, with some significant overlap. Not all participants judged comment sections to be an incontrovertibly good initiative;

Birmingham, the columnist, in particular felt comments were often of poor quality, while the audience analysis manager and Cipolla the developer, both questioned whether they had journalistic value. On the other hand, all participants asserted that comment moderation and community management work were required to make them succeed.

In line with Roberts (2014) findings about commercially outsourced moderation, comment moderation was broadly seen as unpleasant work, but it was the one role that all participants saw as categorically necessary. It ensured the positive value of commenting for all stakeholders, acting to keep comments in line with legal requirements, to keep discursive spaces civil and to prioritise the rapid flow of discussion in pre-moderated sections. The very thing that makes moderation unpleasant, assessing and policing often abusive and insulting comments, was what made the work so critical. Fairfax participants also noted that there were other, more positive values accorded this work. In these pre-moderating publications, a public discussion would not have been possible to host without that selection process and rapid filtering of comments to facilitate debate, rendering it necessary in order to increase reader engagement and to receive feedback on their journalistic production. In these cases, the positive values accorded to comment moderation derive from the dispositions of the participants as journalists and editors. According to Bourdieu (1984), "most products only derive their social value from the social use that is made of them" (p. 21); consequently, the value of moderation relates to its capacity to create comment sections that realise the value participants invest in them. Birmingham saw that capacity as lower and preferred not to moderate comments, where Quinn saw it as higher and consequently preferred to moderate comments.

Editors and journalists found community management a good way to communicate with the audience about their journalism and to reinforce its public value. At *The Conversation*, by carefully crafting the community standards ("Community standards," 2015), posting comments of their own to guide and respond to discussion, and by corresponding with commenters by

email, they are able to instil journalistic values in the commenters contributing below their articles, reinforce the value of their journalism, and answer back to reader criticism of their work. Those commenters who critique the organisation's journalism, providing tips, corrections and suggestions that are sometimes used to improve the journalism above the comment sections, also share the pursuit of journalistic excellence.

According to journalistic participants Quinn, Cooper, Ketchell, Palmer and Glassey, both forms of cultural intermediation can be leveraged to achieve comments that adhere to what Deuze (2008) describes as journalistic values, particularly by providing a "public service" (p. 16). Participants saw the potential of comment sections to give audiences a voice and a right-of-reply to contentious issues that concern them directly, making them analogous to the media practitioners in Reich's research (2011), using comments "to exploit new deliberative possibilities to enable those [non-journalistic] voices be heard" (p. 98). Onsite commenting creates a space for the public to debate key issues, one that is more visible and directly connected to news production – if it is not behind a paywall – than social media channels might provide. However, as participants noted, these possibilities could only be realised if comments are moderated and managed. *The Conversation* has experienced how unwatched comment sections fail to yield these benefits.

This analysis of comment moderation and community management tasks, practices and objectives provides evidence that, in response to RQ1, these forms of work function as cultural intermediation between the news organisations, their editorial staff, their reader/audiences and contributors. Further, regarding RQ2, the ethnography has revealed several ways in which the field of journalism is impacting both the work itself and the value invested in that work, an effect that is understood by analysing participant backgrounds and their opinions about the influence of prominent journalistic organisations on intermediation standards and strategies.

Firstly, participants with education and experience in journalism employed journalistic

doxa in valuing this cultural intermediation, which subsequently influenced their practices,

strategies and objectives. Whether they liked comments or not, those people who were or had

been journalists would often judge comments based on the comments' contribution to the

quality of news production, or on their editorial values – their accuracy, readability or extension

of story themes and ideas. Birmingham and Glassey were concerned with how the comments

complemented stories. For Ketchell and Palmer, the comments were an editorial product, and

for Cooper and Quinn, comments provided feedback to improve journalistic production.

Participants with no background in journalism, like Ashton, Cipolla and the audience analysis

manager focused almost exclusively on the extent to which comments contributed to a civil

discussion, especially on contentious topics. Further, though all the participants in this study

played a part in shaping the work of cultural intermediation around news commenting, the

people with the most authority to make the decisions in each organisation have a prominent

position in the journalistic field owing to their professional history and job titles. Consequently,

cultural intermediation strategies tended to reflect a journalistic approach – at Fairfax by focusing

on accuracy and preventing defamation and at *The Conversation* by ensuring discussions related,

and contributed, to story production.

Another way that the participants exhibited the journalistic field's influence in their

cultural intermediation was in comparing their work to the work of other prominent

organisations in the field. Many participants used publications like *The Guardian* and *The New

York Times* and organisations like News Corporation Australia to define what was good or bad

cultural intermediation of news comments. In so doing, the participants were exhibiting one of

the key dynamics of Bourdieu's fields, which he describes as a "space of struggles" (Bourdieu,

1993). As Benson (2006) elaborates:

The contingent outcomes of past historical struggles will tend to have a constraining (though not determining) effect on the future—precisely to the extent that these outcomes are transformed into commonsense assumptions about how the world "naturally" works, which then make them seem beyond challenge. (p. 188)

This effect was not wholly determining though, with the participants often sceptical of other organisations' practices and results, explaining why they did not necessarily apply to the participating news organisations. It did however reveal the importance of innovation leaders in shaping expectations of intermediation work. *The New York Times'* perceived success in managing news commenting created the impression among participants that it is possible to gain economic and journalistic benefits from hosting comments. In contrast, some Fairfax participants believed their competitor, News Corporation Australia, was using the wrong approach and hosting 'bad' comment sections.

How the influence of the journalistic field expresses itself appears to relate to the organisation's place in the field. Organisations like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* were seen as institutions with autonomous journalistic capital and were subsequently exemplars of good practices for participants in both organisations. To Bourdieu, the doxa and habitus gained through comparison to capital rich institutions is fundamental to understanding journalistic practices in context:

In other words, if I want to find out what one or another journalist is going to say or write, or will find obvious or unthinkable, normal or worthless, I have to know the position that journalist occupies in this space. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 41)

In this case, the doxa and habitus of journalistic participants in this study, possibly as well as their left/liberal politics, aligned with the journalistically autonomous institutions *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, potentially with a goal of achieving more autonomous journalistic capital. This goal is written into the mission statement of *The Conversation*: "Access to independent, high-

quality, authenticated, explanatory journalism underpins a functioning democracy. […] We have introduced new protocols and controls to help rebuild trust in journalism" (The Conversation, n.d.-b), asserting they are aligned with autonomous journalism and seek to "valorize" (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 4) that capital, therefore relating their work to that at institutions like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

The participating organisations are also part of the field of journalism and their alignment to heteronomous or autonomous capital has shaped their cultural intermediation strategies. The digital-born organisation, *The Conversation*, aligns more closely with autonomous capital, both journalistic and academic, through its philanthropic funding model, public service orientation and content production model. It has been quicker than Fairfax Media to experiment and try new intermediation approaches that may yield additional journalistic capital while simultaneously increasing its audience engagement. The older, established news organisation, Fairfax, rich in economic and journalistic capital, employs comment moderation and community management to protect the journalistic value of its informational and audience production. Simultaneously, its strategy is to look for new means of gaining economic capital and adapt to digital innovations as the field of journalism develops.

Commensurately, Fairfax's moderation and community management reflect the organisation's distinct relationship to this field. Just as Fairfax is more aligned with historic economic and political capital, comment moderation's value is viewed primarily as economic and political; politically, moderation prevents lawsuits and public censure and economically it makes comment sections inviting spaces, potentially increasing user engagement and participation and thus advertising value. On the other hand, *The Conversation's* community management aligns more with autonomous journalistic capital. It helps the news organisation define the standards and value of news commenting and reinforces aspects of the organisation's intent to "rebuild trust in journalism" (The Conversation, n.d.-b).

The field of journalism does not dictate how comment moderation and community management work is done in these organisations. Individual participants showed their agency in many ways from the articles they prioritised out of personal interest to the way they managed their time due to their personal habits. Further, the field of journalism is not the only influence on how this work evolves. The limitations of the large, complex software solutions that Fairfax uses for online publishing, which constrain efficiency and innovation in cultural intermediation, are at least partially behind the conservative nature of its comment moderation practices (though it has recently upgraded its system to allow more flexibility, according to Ashton). Meanwhile *The Conversation*, which has a newer, more flexible content management system, also hosts comments (at least in part) because of the name chosen for its organisation.

Rather, the argument here is that the field of journalism's social shaping influence is an important consideration for news organisations weighing the value of hosting comment sections and what they might offer. The broader results of the study have further implications for academics, journalists and news organisations in several ways.

### 7.1 The significance and implications of the research.

In part what drove this study was the need to query the negative perspective of some news organisations (Huang, 2016; LaBarre, 2013), which have claimed that hosting comments on news articles was simply not worth the effort required to maintain this user participation. The findings of this study offer a rebuke of those claims. This study set out to discover what work was involved in developing lively, well used comments sections and precisely what value the intermediaries of this engagement are hoping to realise.

The study suggests that organisations and researchers need to recognise that the value of news commenting is not intrinsic to commenters and their behaviour but rather is largely determined by the people doing the work of moderating comments and managing communities, who work to impose something of their vision for public debate on their reader's contributions

to that discussion. Contrary to Singer et al. (2011), these moderators and managers are not "guarding open gates"; rather, they are fortifying the walls of news journalism. When news organisations say that comment sections are not worth the effort, they might instead acknowledge that their chosen approach to this cultural intermediation work has not yet yielded the journalistic value they wanted to see. Framing the failure of their participatory journalism projects this way makes it unsurprising that organisations that do not want to expend resources on effective cultural intermediation are failing to reap benefits, as Goodman (2013) and Huang (2016) reports have implied.

Organisations looking at hosting comments can learn from the diversity of intermediation approaches canvassed in this thesis. When Braun and Gillespie (2011) used the terms 'community management' and 'comment moderation' interchangeably, it obscured the fact that they refer to distinct practices and objectives which need to be equally appreciated, carefully developed and strategically applied in tandem. Organisations can, as Fairfax has, focus overwhelmingly on comment moderation, employing full-time staff members to police comments and subsequently shape discussions. However, without having staff dedicated to cultivating its community, a publisher will not necessarily experience the benefits of engaging and working with that community on building a culture of civil talk. On the other hand, *The Conversation*, which utilises community management, more to guide commenter behaviour and to share moderation duties among its community, is exploring those possibilities. While both organisations have established comment sections that they found satisfying, according to their own standards and objectives, further research is needed to see how their different approaches affect their users' sense of trust and inclusion in the news production process and their connection with others in their commenting community.

That is not to say that the two forms of cultural intermediation are regarded equally. Another significant discovery from this study was the differing status of comment moderation

and community management work. Community management appeared to have a higher status, being performed more by senior staff and praised as important journalistic work. On the other hand, comment moderators were in positions with less authority and were doing work that journalists appreciated but expressed a desire to avoid, according to participants. This difference in status could explain why some news organisations find comment sections a burden that may not be worth carrying – their focus is too squarely on the negative aspects of policing user voice and not focussed on the more enjoyable and challenging work of shaping participation. Elevating the status of comment moderation work or re-orienting the work to emphasise community management could be a way around the impasse for those organisations still searching for a better approach to hosting public debate.

The research also revealed new areas of research in exploring the prioritisation of moderation work and means of reducing contextualisation delay. In pre-moderated systems, such as those at Fairfax, the prioritisation decisions moderators make can have a significant impact on the success and development of discussions and yet their actions have been little studied. Moderators could prioritise measures of success other than rapid interaction, such as the news value of comments or the quality of writing. Equally, it is possible that there are design or procedural innovations that might help moderators to contextualise stories and threads more quickly, and manage their increasing workload.

In this study, researchers and organisations can find evidence that hosting commenting features can become a way to reinforce, rather than erode, the value of a news organisation's production, provided the users' contribution is effectively shaped by cultural intermediation. Both Fairfax Media and *The Conversation* participants have indicated in this study that increasing levels of cultural intermediation, through comment moderation and community management, yielded comment sections that better reflected the value that they wanted to see. In the case of *The Conversation*, developing cultural intermediation strategies took editors from disliking

comments and considering turning them off completely to having comments open on every article and being generally proud of the content as part of their "editorial product".

Indeed, this study problematises the myth of interactivity explored by Domingo (2008) a decade ago. Now, rather than the inertia of traditional journalistic values slowing the take up of interactive features, as he originally suggested, these news organisations have adopted everyday dialogic interactivity, in conjunction with cultural intermediation, to help reinforce and disseminate their editorial values. Further, given journalists from both participating organisations noted that user comments sometimes provided feedback that improved the accuracy or other aspect of their coverage, then it is likely that a complementary, rather than adversarial, relationship between interactivity and traditional journalistic values could be developing, one supported by cultural intermediation.

However, some study findings do mirror Domingo (2008) in other ways. Similar to findings in his research, the newer, digital-born organisation *The Conversation* embraced this form of interactivity more than the older, legacy organisation with its roots in traditional journalism, which may suggest that the new organisation is better able to communicate its journalistic values to its commenting community. This is certainly an area for further investigation. Further, the results show some of the dynamics of Boczkowski's mutual shaping theory (2004a), which was central to Domingo's research, in the way these organisations developed their intermediation work around their respective information systems and then simultaneously developed, or bought in, content management functionality in response to changes in this work.

Using field theory in conjunction with the concept of cultural intermediation has revealed how the field of journalism shifts and develops in response to the changing conditions surrounding cultural production in newsrooms. Through cultural intermediation, the field of journalism is extending its influence to this influx of fringe producers contributing to comment sections (and possibly also social media channels, although this study was not able to examine

the latter in detail). It is also likely that the fields that interact with the field of journalism, particularly the economic field, shape these cultural intermediation practices, at least to the extent that the future of journalism is likely to be in subscription and so more resources will need to be allocated to building subscriber engagement avenues like commenting spaces. This demonstrates that field theory remains a powerful tool for capturing the dynamics that shape journalistic cultural production.

## 7.2 Limitations and openings for further research.

As a form of basic, exploratory research, this study has focused on providing a better understanding of the nature of digital news work, which in turn has uncovered a variety of objects for future study. Future researchers could undertake a larger scale study that compares cultural intermediation work in news commenting across several countries and contrasts the work done on moderating and managing in-house commenting with that of mediating audience participation on branded social media channels.

The largest gap in this research is that it does not examine how comment readers and contributors perceive, react to, and value the work of these cultural intermediaries. Though this newsroom ethnography was able to show the input of the workers into the comment sections, it could not, for reasons of time and limited resources, observe or consult the communities being constituted, moderated and managed. A valuable line of ethnographic research would be to observe potential contributors as they read comment sections, decide whether or not to contribute, and produce their comments, and to explore the factors affecting their decision to participate or not. This type of research is time-consuming and difficult, given the need to recruit audience members, but is especially critical where commenting is become a central part of a website's audience engagement and development strategy.

Non-ethnographic audience research could also provide benefits. Surveys, quantitative or qualitative, could capture participating audience members' reactions to particular styles of

comment moderation and community management choices. A more utilitarian approach could employ discourse analysis to track and compare the impact of certain community management and comment moderation choices on the resulting tone, direction and diversity of comment sections. Any research that captures users' responses to community management and comment moderation work would prove a valuable complement to this study's findings.

Ideally, future journalism studies will further explore how reading and moderating comments affects editorial staff. Quinn, Birmingham, Ketchell and Glassey evinced some fatigue and irritation from being subject to an inordinate amount of insult and abuse and this had the potential to diminish the value of comment sections for them. Further, Quinn, Glassey and Ashton also indicated that working constantly with abusive comments could constitute a mental health concern. Corollary research could gauge the health impacts of comment moderation and consider how organisations could mitigate the impact of incivility and aggression on comment moderators and community managers, such as through training in mediation techniques and mindfulness, or via redistributed workloads.

Abating abuse was a key objective for the participants engaging in comment moderation, but the work of achieving this was prioritised in different ways by different participants leaving another opening for research. Quantitatively measuring the amount of abuse before and after cultural intermediation strategies are employed could indicate the efficacy of different approaches. While a comparative discourse analysis of the comment sections of two organisations with different strategies would be a simpler approach, it would have to accommodate the different readerships of the organisations and differing reader reactions to controversial subject matter, both factors that participants asserted were significant in shaping their comment sections.

It seems important to investigate whether these new cultural intermediaries indeed do act as tastemakers, in the Bourdieusian sense, that is in shaping audience conceptions of journalistic

work and its objectives. Through interviews and surveys, future research could ascertain the extent to which news organisations are able to use cultural intermediation to communicate their aims and values to their contributors and audiences, as well as the extent to which the commenters feel they are able to impact news production. The results of this type of study would subsequently inform news organisations' decisions to host comment sections and how much to invest in them, as well as gauge the influence of the cultural intermediaries and their work.

Finally, a promising line of future research would investigate the ways that this cultural intermediation work extends to social media. Participants expressed a range of diverse, even contradictory, views of comments on branded social media channels, with Palmer and Cooper having opposite views about whether social media or on-site comment sections feature more abusive and problematic comments. This suggests a productive line of inquiry would be to investigate how journalists and other newsroom staff regard the distinct benefits and disadvantages of each type of participation, and how they rationalise their views. This type of study would further expand on both the cultural intermediation work of news organisations and the strategies their staff are developing to accommodate user interactivity as part of their journalistic production.

### 7.3 In conclusion.

Whether comment sections on news articles, or comments on branded social media channels, continue to be a part of online news production or not, newsrooms are having to adopt increasing interactivity with their audience into their work roles and routines. This move will be part of the digital transformation of news as it moves from an advertising-led model to more diverse sources of revenue, including subscription and events. How the news media effect this transition will be determined less by digital innovations and more by journalism practitioners and the contexts in which they do their work. This observation of comment moderation and

community management work reveals the compelling influence of the field of journalism on its development, as well as the agency of editorial and other workers in interpreting how the work should be done. For its part, this study proves this cultural intermediation work can provide great value for journalists and news organisations seeking to better interface with their consumers and to re-establish their significance in the crowded contemporary market of online journalism.

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# Appendix A – Fairfax Commenting Guidelines

## Commenting guidelines

7 March 2012 — 1:33pm

It's in the debate around the news where progress is made, so we encourage you to join the conversation through our comments section.

All comments are moderated before publication, and due to the volume of comments posted daily, we're unable to enter into discussion about why a specific comment was not published. Once a comment is published, we reserve the right not to remove it.

To maximise your chances of publication, and aid a constructive debate, please keep the following in mind when crafting your contribution.

**1. Be respectful of each other**
- We value passionate debate, but comments that can be reasonably considered insulting, offensive, threatening or obscene will not be published.

- Material that may incite violence or hatred will not be published.

- Comments that we believe may be defamatory or breach copyright will not be published.

- Respect each other's time, and keep your comments relevant to the discussion at hand.

- Comments that advertise, promote or solicit any goods and service will be not published.

- Limit the use of links in comments. Comments containing links to unsuitable material or videos of any kind will not be published.

- Never impersonate someone else, or post personal details (such as phone numbers, email or postal addresses) that could inadvertently put someone in danger.

**2. Criticise ideas, not people**
- Focus your comments on the idea being expressed, not the person expressing them. We give some leeway for criticism of politicians, given the nature of their work.

- Comments that gratuitously abuse individuals - be they other commenters, writers, or subjects of articles - rather than make a substantive contribution to the debate, will not be published.

### 3. No offensive language

- We'll always consider the context, but as a general rule, comments including swear words and other offensive language (including leetspeak) will not be published.

- Please don't SHOUT (or post in all capital letters) either.

If you see a comment that doesn't meet these guidelines, hit the "flag" icon and it will be reviewed again by our moderators.

("Commenting guidelines", 2012)

# Appendix B – *The Conversation* Community Standards

## Community standards

### Community standards and participation guidelines

We want The Conversation to be a place for intelligent discussion. By posting, you'll be contributing to independent, fact-based debate. We want the discussion of an article to be, if anything, more illuminating than the original article and we need your help to do that. Follow these guidelines to help keep things on track.

### In brief

- Don't attack people and don't respond to attacks – report them and move on
- Keep your posts on topic and constructive
- Take responsibility for the quality of the conversations you take part in
- Above all, respect others and their opinions.

### Be you

We require real names: they help us maintain a transparent forum. We reserve the right to delete comments made under aliases.

If you've signed in via your Twitter account our site will use your Twitter handle by default. Please change it to your real name using your Conversation profile page.

### Be considerate

We're here to talk about ideas, not the people behind them.

We'll delete: personal attacks directed at anyone; all forms of discrimination (or posts that could be interpreted as such); posts we believe exist only to provoke or mislead; posts identifying or

sharing the personal information of another person (including children) without their consent; and comments that are commercial or repeatedly shared external links.

**Be respectful**

Treat people with the respect you'd like to receive. Admit when you're wrong. You'll come across opinions you disagree with. That doesn't make them invalid.

**Be on-topic**

Keep comments relevant to the article and replies relevant to the initiating post. We reserve the right to delete off-topic comments to keep threads on track.

For example: in an article about the policy response to climate change, comments about the science of climate change will be considered off topic.

**Be constructive**

Explain why you disagree or agree with something. Your reasoning is as important as your opinion.

"This article sucks"

will be deleted.

"I disagree with this article. Here's why…"

won't be.

"You're an idiot"

will be deleted.

"Have you considered…"

won't be.

Back up your ideas with evidence and fact where possible. If you're claiming something as scientific fact, try to provide credible references. Ask any questions you have for the author or your fellow commenters.

Aim to add a new idea to each approach rather than repeating what's already been said. Move on if things get stuck.

We'll distinguish between constructive comments and smear campaigns. We'll remove any deliberate attempts to misinform, distort facts or misrepresent the opinions of others.

**Be legal**

Don't post anything that may put us in legal jeopardy – nothing defamatory, nothing in breach of copyright.

**Be proactive**

Take responsibility for the quality of the conversations you participate in; only reply to things you consider worth your attention.

Report posts you think violate these standards. Tell people when they post something you appreciate and press the 'Recommend' button on their post.

**What we'll do**

We reserve the right to remove comments that breach these standards and lock accounts of commenters who breach them repeatedly. We take a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination.

Replies to comments that have been deleted may themselves be deleted, either to remove the thread or because they don't make sense out of context. Comments may be closed if these standards aren't met.

As per our policy on removing content, we will only remove comments that don't violate these standards in exceptional circumstances.

We won't discuss moderation on the site. If you need to discuss anything, contact our Community Manager.

Moderation disputes are handled by our Community Manager and escalated to our Managing Editor.

Last updated: 26th June 2015

("Community standards", 2015)