

Why do we moderate news websites? (new LSE research project)

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Why do we moderate websites? We held a research seminar on Chatham House rules with a great group of website editors from across the news media spectrum as well as some other academics and analysts. This report is by [Sanna Trygg](#), a visiting research fellow who is heading up this project.

1. Could the restriction of the reader's voice through the moderation of comments be considered a limit on the freedom of speech?
2. Is anyone interested in visiting a non-moderated website?
3. Has the Web 2.0 made it more possible to have an equal relationship between the media and its consumers?
4. Does the media create a certain agenda by moderating in a particular way?

These were amongst the many questions brought up during the Polis seminar last week where I presented my research to UK journalists, editors and academics. The main aim of the discussion was not to focus on how to moderate, but why we moderate in a certain way and what the possible effects of this might be.

1. First question. Could the restriction of the reader's voice through the moderation of comments be considered a limit on the freedom of speech?

My answer is, well, it depends. If traditional media still want to be considered as the main forum for free speech and critique, it is hard to argue for a stricter moderation than what is restricted by the law (libel, racism etc). If its main purpose has less to do with offering a platform for free debate than in protecting the newspaper's reputation, then it is easier to justify deleting opinions that might be considered improper, going against the norm or just wrong. I think that the following quote from one of the participants speaks for itself:

"I am not concerned about free speech; there are enough places online where people can go to be heard. The paper is a brand, like any other brand."

2. Is anyone interested in visiting a non-moderated website?

Today it is out of question, both in the UK and in Sweden, to have an online debate that is not moderated. There are two main reasons for this, namely legal and strategic. But does that mean that people are not interested in visiting websites/blogs that are not moderated? No.

The Swedish website [Flashback](#) is one example that proves the opposite. It is an underground forum known for its hostile atmosphere. Flashback is also a public space where people discuss controversial issues that are not usually covered in the mainstream media (such as migration, drugs and sex). Anonymity makes it possible to share sensitive information. The debate is not always constructive, ordered or pleasant.

By looking at the actual amount of people using it, it is indeed popular. The forum has almost 600,000 members (taking into consideration that there are only 9.4 million citizens in Sweden).

Another highly successful example is the UK blog [Guido Fawkes](#), run by the political blogger Paul Staines, which is also minimally moderated. This does not mean that there are no good reasons for the traditional media to moderate their comment fields. But, to say that people will not visit the website if it is not moderated is unjustified.

3. Has Web 2.0 made it more possible to have an equal relationship between the media and its consumers?

Interactivity, reader participation and transparency. There is not a single media organisation that has not used at least two of those words while forming their future media strategy. Inviting the reader to a platform that traditionally has mainly been exclusively for journalists has been considered a way to equal the gap between those in power (as journalists and politicians) and civic society (as in the consumer/reader). It seems to me that this is a pretty good thing.

However, the question might not be if the Web 2.0 has equalized the relationship between the media and its consumers but instead as it was expressed by one of the participants:

“Is it desirable to have such an equal relationship?”

During the seminar it was clear that journalists, moderators quite often discuss reader comments amongst themselves in the newsroom. In that sense they might even influence editorial policy. But interestingly, it seems that they never informed the reader.

One of the seminar participants claimed that the voice of the reader was interesting, but the lack of resources made it impossible to actually incorporate the massive material. As one participant put it: “Newspapers want the hits, the online traffic – reader response on the Net is a secondary focus.”

So it is mainly practical reasons given for not taking the readers’ voice seriously, right? I would argue for the opposite.

It may well be partly a matter of resources but it is also a strategy choice. It might be that some journalists are reluctant to inform the public that they discuss the comments and that it might have an impact on news production. They might fear it compromises their authority. The risk is that if you invite readers to make comments and then don’t handle them properly, you are raising expectations unfairly.

4. Does the media create a certain agenda by moderating in a particular way?

Do the media create a certain agenda (by forming policy in a certain way)? Well, yes. The Guardian’s policy is much more explicit than the one of [Svenska Dagbladet](#). The Guardian is very precise in terms of what their intention is – to have an “[intelligent discussion](#)”. You might want to ask yourself what is an “intelligent debate”? And even more interesting, what is not intelligent enough?

This week is my last at Polis and this [research project](#) is fast reaching its close. The report will be published in early next year and will be found on the Polis website. The research will also be presented in Sweden. If you have any questions, concerns, reflections or further ideas, do not hesitate to contact me (sanna.trygg@skd.se). Or just post a comment here. I will leave you with some quotes succinctly summing up the discussion during the seminar. I will reflect on these ideas in my forthcoming report.

“The mainstream media has a monopoly over conversation.”

“Comments reflect the way news organizations want their audiences to be perceived.”

This article by Polis Visiting Fellow Sanna Trygg.

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Find out more about her research [here](#)

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