Everything in Moderation:
A case for the balanced moderation of user-generated content on news sites

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Abstract

Moderation of user-generated content on news Web sites is an increasingly relevant and pertinent topic for online news entities. The quality and quantity of user-generated content can either help or hinder the number of audience members a news outlet receives. Considerations such as the amount of resources that can be given to moderation, the types of moderation, the types of user-generated content allowed and the wording of the Terms of Conditions page all account toward the meaningful and responsible use of moderation to create a community space dedicated to furthering the conversations that inevitably arise with the news of the day. Too much moderation drives users away, but too little leads to inappropriate content. Terms and Conditions should be clear and concise. The allocation of resources should be assessed for every publication’s wants and needs. Publications should decide what mediums for user-generated content will work best with their platform. For example: Polls, blogs or simple comment areas. Fair and consistent moderation also should be practiced in order not to leave users feeling frustrated.

Many considerations should be taken before adopting a moderation system at an online news publication, but doing so will ensure a better overall product and experience for both the user and the publication.
Introduction

Audience participation has always been an important aspect of journalism, from letters to the editor to reader-submitted photos to family-created obituaries. (Anderson, 2007, p. 1) User-generated content on news Web sites is a modern incarnation of that participation. (Anderson, 2007 p. 1; Deards, 2009) “While there are some pessimistic attitudes towards user-generated content and its effect on mainstream media, many publishers view user input as a helpful contribution in shaping coverage and addressing community issues” (Deards, 2009). With the advent of user generated content on news Web sites, the right way to moderate this content has been a heated and sometimes divided topic of discussion amongst the leaders of today's news rooms (Wiggins, 2008). “Media operators are wondering how they can enhance both the quantity and quality of the traffic they generate,” writes Earnest L. Wiggins in his article “Moderation a Virtue? How 10 Top Sites Handle Online Comments” (Wiggins, 2008). A cyber area for open conversation, which is what most news Web sites are attempting to create with the allowance of user-generated content, is only as successful as its moderation (Wiggins, 2008). Too much moderation clouds the air of open discussion, marginalizing some voices and discouraging users to present their opinions if they feel that those opinions might not be featured for whatever reason (Thurman, 2008). If there is too little oversight, however, trolls, uncivil discourse and irrelevant and sometimes cruel postings will inevitably overrun the boards, community listservs and comments pages that are the backbone of democratic discourse on news sites (Wiggins, 2008). Striking a balance between playing the tough cop and the eager listener is difficult business, and many times a news site will fall flat on its face. But that does not mean a site should not strive to meet that balance. It can be obtained with a system that sets stringent mechanisms to screen user-generated content but at the same time invites users to contribute to the discussion (Wiggins, 2008).

Literature Review
The pros and cons of user-generated content are varied. Some believe that citizen journalism and weblogs will eventually bypass the mainstream media to become people's first choice when considering where to obtain information and news (Lanchester, 2006, pp. 21-22). Others think that the vast majority of user-generated content is not on par with what can be seen in the mainstream media, and it will continue to be that way (Lanchester, 2006, p. 22; “Pros and Cons of User-Generated Content,” 2007). In any case, the Internet has ceased to exist as it once did: simply as a conglomerated advertising entity; It is now a domain for people to create, a space for user-generated content (Lanchester, 2006, p. 13).

According to some reports, it is predicted that 55 percent of all online video viewed in 2010 will be user-generated (“Pros and Cons of User-Generated Content,” 2007). With the exploding popularity of YouTube and others sites devoted to user-created content, that statistic seems as plausible as ever. Because of this, news sites should embrace the reality that users will now have a more direct and consequential link to the content they see, hear and read. This should be considered a unique opportunity. News sites can learn to utilize “user-generated content channels to raise awareness of existing, forthcoming and archive material, grow market share, [and] engender loyalty...” (Lanchester, 2006, p. 23). Breaking news can first be disseminated by users who post videos, photos and eyewitness accounts online, and according to some, this is becoming an increasing trend (Anderson, 2007; Thurman & Hermida, 2007, pp. 2-3). Such was the case with the London bombings in 2005, and more recently the crash landing of US Airways flight 1549 into the Hudson River (Anderson, 2007, p. 1; Deards, 2009) “User-generated content has the potential to serve good journalism, which at its core seeks to broaden the marketplace of ideas, deepen our understanding of issues and events, and connect people with like interests” (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). “User-generated content is an essential component for building community and realizing the interactive potential of the Internet” (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006).
Although user-generated content is becoming increasingly necessary for online news sources, it can create, among other things, “concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues” (Thurman & Hermida, 2007, p. 2). News sites are not willing to stake their hard-earned reputation with their audience and possible legal qualms in the name of user-generated content (Thurman & Hermida, 2007, p. 3). One of the most increasingly popular remedies to those concern is the moderation of user-generated content that is submitted to news sites (Thurman & Hermida, 2007, p. 3). This suggests that news sites prefer filtering user generated content so that it is “clearly identifiable with [a site's] brand and perceived as valuable to readers” (Thurman & Hermida, 2007, p. 23). Moderating a news site, however, is easier said than done. Moderation can be expensive, and only the publications that have a treasure trove of financial backing are allowed to spring for the resources needed to actively moderate comments, videos and photos before they are posted (Thurman, 2008). But if too little attention is paid to the moderation of user-generated content, the anonymity of the Internet can, according to David Pogue of the New York Times, “bring out the worst in people” (Goodale, 2008). Individuals who are online do not act the same as they do offline, Pogue explained (Goodale, 2008). This anonymity causes people to post irrelevant comments, abusive content and conduct spam attacks on Web sites, devaluing the name of the publication and driving away those users who do practice proper online etiquette and have something of value to say (Goodale, 2008).

Examples

There are innumerable examples of this phenomenon scattered in every corner of the online world, but one noticeable example comes from the BBC Web site. In 2007, 18 months after launching its “BBC Blogs Network,” the BBC ran a story chronicling the tribulations of hosting a community space on its online domain (Hamman, 2007). Since its inception, the site had been experiencing technical difficulties with its commenting system, which allowed users to post comments on BBC blogs (Hamman, 2007). Robin Hammon, a senior community producer at the BBC, chalked the
malfunctions up to continuous spam attacks that overwhelmed the server, causing it to run hot, sometimes as high as 100 percent of its maximum capacity. “Worryingly, the amount of spam comments submitted is on the increase and, across the network, we can now get as many as 50,000 spam comments per week,” Hammon wrote. “In one particularly bad day last week, the comment cgi was hit well over 30,000 times” (Hamman, 2007) It is important to note that the blogs were customized by the BBC from the original software, which meant that it was difficult to implant certain types of software, leaving the blogs severely under-moderated as well as allowing anonymous posting. (Hamman, 2007) That was a mistake on the BBC’s part, and they have since restructured their moderating systems so that users can submit content freely but under the watchful eye of the BBC. (Hamman, 2007) This is a perfect example of the trial and error that has to take place before a site can “perfect” its moderating system, although in reality it will never be completely perfect.

On the other side of the argument, over-moderating creates a tangible disconnect between users and the news institutions who are supposed to cater to them (Pascucci, 2009). In general, the attitude of the press toward user-generated content can be defined as an “aggressive-defensive culture,” where publications ferociously guard their brand from being tainted by outside content, although that sentiment is waning (Thurman & Hermida, 2007, p. 5). "The BBC has a dirty little secret: the vast majority of comments are never even looked at," Daniel Mermelstein, a project manager at the BBC, said in 2005 (Kiss, 2005). "It's a bad user experience. It's arbitrary, unpredictable and users get frustrated because their comments aren't being published" (Kiss, 2005). Mr. Mermelstein was referring to the BBC's reader comments system before a ground-breaking overhaul took place in 2005 (Kiss, 2005). The overhaul, which allowed users to post comments that would appear live on the site, was an improvement on the previous system, he said (Kiss, 2005). Although the caveats of an under-moderated comment system have been discussed, the previous system required comments to be individually approved, with only an estimated 10 percent of the nearly 20,000 comments on a busy news day to be
displayed on the site (Kiss, 2005). That sort of over-moderation will frustrate users more than a comment system that goes down occasionally, which, in this case, is overall a more desired system than the previous one (Hamman, 2007).

Considerations

The previous few paragraphs all beg the question: How can a news site achieve a balance between providing enough moderation to stop volatile content from entering the online discussion, but allow enough user freedom to keep the audience coming back for more?

One important concept to recognize when first designing a user-friendly site is what is called the “90-9-1 Theory” (Nielsen, 2006). According to this theory, “All large-scale, multi-user communities and online social networks that rely on users to contribute content or build services share one property: most users don't participate very much” (Nielsen, 2006). Instead, the overwhelming majority – the 90 percent of the “90-9-1” – simply lurk, or skim, through the pages, looking at other user's contributions and never contributing themselves (Nielsen, 2006). The theory then goes on to dub the next nine percent “intermittent contributors,” those who only contribute content from time to time, and the final one percent as “heavy contributors,” or those who contribute on a daily basis, and contribute most of the content that can be seen (Nielsen, 2006). One of the obvious downsides to this voluntary inequality, and one that is especially pertinent to news sites, is that most of the content being posted to a site will come from a very small minority of individuals, and yet because those are the only opinions being aired, the perception is that those opinions are the consensus of the entire community (Nielsen, 2006). But alas, I am here to report that, although the inequality is unfortunate, it will, according to some, be around forever (Nielsen, 2006). The phenomenon has “existed in every online community and multi-user service that has ever been studied” (Nielsen, 2006). The only thing that a site can do is to improve the participation curve (Nielsen, 2006). Instead of “90-9-1,” a news site's visitors could skew more toward an 80 percent lurkers, 16 percent intermittent contributors and four
percent heavy contributors, or “80-16-4,” ratio (Nielsen, 2006).

With that theory in mind, the next step is to create a space that appeals to users and encourages conversation so that more users are willing to voice their opinions (Wiggins, 2008). Most news sites that allow user-generated content allow so under certain, and sometimes stringent, rules (Wiggins, 2008). These rules, if harshly worded and accusative in nature, can create an air of hesitation for users before they even consider posting anything (Wiggins, 2008). “WARNING: A VIOLATION OF THESE POSTING RULES MAY BE REFERRED TO LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES,” reads the Los Angeles Times' “user content posting rules” (Wiggins, 2008). When threats are used as a deterrent to inappropriate content, other users see the threats as hostile, even if the threats are not directed at them (Wiggins, 2008). Instead, a more cordial tone is taken in the New York Times' FAQ section: “Our goal is to provide substantive commentary for a general readership. By screening submissions, we have created a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of our news and information” (Wiggins, 2008). Unlike the LA Times, the New York Times gently persuades users to stay civil, without chastising them for something they haven't even done (Wiggins, 2008).

Another important part of a vibrant user-generated environment is the type of medium used (Thurman, 2008, p. 2). Thurman, in his study entitled “Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media,” took a look at ten UK news Web sites – which included the following: The Guardian, The Daily Mail, This Is London, FT.com, The Telegraph, Independent, The Sun, Times Online, The Scotsman and BBC News – and analyzed their use of user-generated content (Thurman, 2008, p. 2). Thurman also interviewed editors from multiple news sites to get their reactions, sentiments and feelings toward user generated content. In his study, Thurman quantified the usefulness of certain mediums that are often used by users to create their own content on Web sites (Thurman, 2008, p. 2). These mediums were grouped in to seven formats: Polls, Have Your
Says, Chat Rooms, Q&A’s, Blogs with Comments Enabled, Pre-moderated Message Boards and Post-moderated Message Boards (Thurman, 2008, p. 2). There was also an “Other” section that included formats that could only be seen on one of the ten sites, which made cross-publication comparison impossible (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). Q&A’s, where audience members could submit questions to an interviewed guest, were the most popular medium, used by seven out of the ten publications (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). Half of the publications used the Polls medium (Thurman, 2008, p. 3) Have Your Says, in which topics were presented to audience members and the audience members would then send in written replies, were used by four of the ten publications (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). Post-moderated Message Boards, where posts are screened for quality after they are displayed on the site, were used by three of the ten sites, and Pre-moderated Message Boards, where posts are screened for quality before they are displayed on the site, were used by only two of the ten sites (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). The final three mediums, Blogs with Comments Enabled, Chat Rooms and Other, were all used by only one of the ten sites (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). An interesting and rather telling note is that “80 per cent of the twenty-five textual formats for reader participation were edited or pre-moderated” (Thurman, 2008, p. 3). “A belief in the need to control, moderate or sub users' submissions so that they met the standards of professionally produced output was strongly held [by the editors that were interviewed]” (Thurman, 2008, p. 7). Although there are no immediate and concrete answers in Thurman’s findings, news sites at least have a platform from which to begin their assessment on what types of user-generated content systems will work for them and their audience members.

Conclusion

The moderation of user-generated content is a complex undertaking with many specific considerations to be accounted for (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). Every news site must look at its own specific situation – how much money can be spent on moderating content? What types of mediums would appeal to a given audience? How much freedom should be given to users? Etc. – and
quantify the level of user participation that can be shouldered (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). But taking into account all of the information in the body of this paper, news sites can craft a system for managing user content that is built around the amount of resources that can be rendered to such a vast undertaking.

Because of this case-by-case approach to moderation, there is no one golden formula that every site can follow to create a space where user content can be both plentiful and meaningful (Wiggins, 2008). But models can be drafted as a broad guideline for news sites, which can then be customized according to a publication's situation.

**How to ensure balanced moderation**

First, every site should draft a clear, concise Terms and Conditions page that outlines specifically the expected standards of a given site's user-generated content (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). These terms and conditions should touch upon “Taste and Judgement,” “Linking from user-generated content to external sources,” “Anonymously posted user-generated content” and “Moderating” (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). The Terms and Conditions also “must establish and clearly communicate the consequences for members of the user community whose actions violate the publisher's terms and conditions. Such consequences must be enforced consistently in order to be fair” (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). It is also integral to word the Terms and Conditions in a strong but non-accusatory fashion that gets the point across without sounding harsh or off-putting, needlessly driving users away (Wiggins, 2008).

The “Taste and Judgement” section of a site's Terms and Conditions should include decisions on the following: obscenity, personal attacks, witch hunts, privacy violations, ethnic or racial slurs and copyright and trademark infringements (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006).

If a news site decides to allow links from user-generated content to outside sites, which most sites do allow, there should be rules governing this action (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). The
“Linking from user-generated content to external sources” section of the Terms and Conditions should consider the following questions from The Poynter Institute's Web site:

• Should outside links conform to your site's Terms and Conditions?
• Should users who post outside links provide a description of the link's destination site?
• Am I responsible for the content of a link that is posted on my Web site?
• Have I explained in my Terms and Conditions page whether or not I assume responsibility of outside links' content?
• Are the rules pertaining to outside links clearly stated in my Terms and Conditions page?

Although anonymous posting is an option for news sites, it is not recommended (Crosbie, 2008). As mentioned earlier in this paper, “the more anonymous the participants, the less quality the discussion” (Crosbie, 2008). Anonymity means that users do not have to take responsibility for their actions (Crosbie, 2008). This leads to a deluge of pointless bickering, trash talk and possible legal entanglement (Crosbie, 2008). To remedy this, a site's Terms and Conditions page should first describe why anonymous posting of content is not allowed (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). Site administrators should then outline the steps necessary to register, which will then allow users to post content under a user name that can be tied to tangible information such as an e-mail address or a real name (Crosbie, 2008). “Those [sites] that don't allow anonymous postings almost always have much higher quality discussions....Those newspapers [that allow anonymous content] would never allow anyone to post something anonymously in a printed edition, so why are those newspapers allowing anyone to post something anonymously in an online edition?” (Crosbie, 2008).

The moderation of user content can be broken down into two general types: active and passive moderation (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). If at all possible, active moderation should be practiced by news sites to achieve a cooperative and productive community environment of user content that furthers, rather than hinders, the discussion (Pascucci, 2009). Active moderation entails mandatory
registration for anyone who wants to post content, pre-moderating content before or soon after it appears on a site, utilizing a foul-language filter that automatically catches inappropriate language, and a spam filter (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). Remember that in Thurman’s paper, he found that 80 percent of the textual user-generated content was edited or pre-moderated, both of which are commonly used forms of active moderation (Thurman, 2008 p. 3). Of course active moderation also entails a huge amount of resources that today, with many publication's financial base crumbling under mounting strain, are becoming more scarce by the hour (Pascucci, 2009). So, for most publications who do not have the resources necessary to provide a fully-active moderation workflow, a hybrid of active and passive moderation is suggested (Pascucci, 2009). As stated earlier, registration should be a mandatory prerequisite before a user can post content, as the first barrier of quality control (Goodale, 2008).

Instead of pre-moderating content and using filters, which can lead to inefficient posting and frustrated users, news sites may choose to employ users to self-police the site by flagging inappropriate posts, pictures, links and other content (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). These flags are then sent to the site's administrators who make a decision on whether the content breaches the site's Terms and Conditions (Buckminster Fuller Institute, 2007). In other words, it is a primitive type of post-moderation.

News sites must also practice fair, consistent and balanced moderation (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). If users perceive a site's moderation as unfair and inconsistent (i.e. deleting an inappropriate post from one user and not deleting an inappropriate post from another) they will navigate away from the site and, in many cases, never return (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). Again, the Terms and Conditions must be easily understood by all users, and the consequences for breaching those Terms and Conditions should be prominently displayed and consistently enforced by the site's administrators (Arrieta-Walden, M. et al., 2006). Clear, concrete and cordial Terms and Conditions will not push or scare people away, but will invite them to contribute without fear of being arrested and jailed for voicing their opinions.
“We realize that we've got to change or die,” said Tom Callihan, editor and vice president of content and audience development at the Cincinnati Enquirer, while discussing the future of journalism (Swyers, 2007). User-generated content is part of that change, and a part that cannot be understated (Duran, 2009). With that change, however, comes the responsibility of providing quality content that users have come to expect from news sources everywhere (Crosbie, 2008). Appropriate, trustworthy moderation of user-generated content will be one of the driving forces that further propels journalism into the online realm, beginning a new and exciting era of journalism that pushes the boundaries of how this profession is capable of interacting with its audience and disseminating news that people want to hear.
References


