



Revisiting the comments section: Can it be fixed?

by Benjamin Lyons

When technological optimists began talking about the Web's democratizing potential in the 1990s (and earlier), they were excited about not only bringing more diverse information to wider audiences at lower costs, but crucially, the Web as a "writeable," many-to-many medium.

Although there is a certain amount of myth to that outlook, the comments sections of news sites have become a pillar of the wide-open communication space that emerged over the past 15 years. Allowing a space for readers' comments below news articles served both a democratic narrative and economic logic: it would keep audiences on the page longer, a valuable metric in leveraging ad revenue.

Today, comments sections are often seen as a joke – notorious for flaming, trolling, spamming, and generally showing

the worst side of humanity.

Research now suggests they may pollute the communication environment, negatively affecting the way audiences perceive news stories. Sensing this, some organizations have decided to scrap them entirely, while others hope to re-imagine comments to add substance to the news, but disagree on how.

Why did comments emerge in the first place?

In theory, comment sections allow news sites to engage their audience in a relatively easy way. Such a forum for reader reactions has a forebear in the letter to the editor; it differs in its more porous vetting. It is also more focused on reader-to-reader conversation as they respond to the story together. This

might prompt commenters to stay on pages for longer periods, and to return more often.

But comments are also part of the mythology of professional-amateur collaboration, in which London School of Economics professor Charlie Beckett sees journalists and readers “working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas [and] perspectives.”

This hopeful imagining is also found in what NYU Jay Rosen calls the “people formerly known as the audience.”

Challenges to the comment section

What became of this ambitious aspirational state of commenting? “It didn’t happen,” said Gawker Media founder Nick Denton, speaking at South by Southwest Interactive in 2012. “It’s a promise that has so not happened that people don’t even have that ambition anymore. The idea of capturing the intelligence of the readership – that’s a joke.”

Far from their lofty deliberative ambition, comments sections have become sites of verbal chaos and home to vile attacks, racism, sexism, ignorance, reductionism and worse. This is bad news for organizations as well as readers.

The tone of comments may be yet another obstacle to scientific literacy, according to research conducted by a group of communications scholars at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In their study, 1,183 people read a balanced news story on nanotechnology — the same across conditions — with an adjoined section of invented comments. These were either tilted toward name-calling and other rude remarks or toward a more civil tone.

“Disturbingly, readers’ interpretations of potential risks associated with the technology described in the news article differed significantly depending only on the tone of the manipulated reader comments posted with the story,” wrote authors Dominique Brossard and Dietram Scheufele.

“In other words, just the tone of the comments ... can significantly alter how audiences think about the technology itself.”

The researchers suggest uncivil comments may have caused polarized views of the technology’s risks because sensing hostility can reduce readers’ openness to new information, instead spurring them to come to conclusions using their pre-existing attitudes. Fittingly, this has been termed “the Nasty Effect.”

In response, Popular Science shut down its commenting space in September 2013. The editor, Suzzane LaBarre, wrote that “[t]he cynical work of undermining bedrock scientific doctrine is now being done beneath our own stories within a website devoted to championing science.” While her de-

cision was context-specific, a few other sites have done the same, including National Journal.

When National Journal changed its commenting policy this year, it had some counter-intuitive results. Pages viewed per visit increased by more than 10 percent. Page views per unique visitor increased 14 percent. Return visits increased by more than 20 percent. Visits of only a single page were down, and visits to multiple pages increased by nearly 20 percent.

Adam Felder of the Atlantic explored one theory for this outcome: that “by cutting out comments, the site is better able to draw attention to its most deserving content — the articles themselves.”

In a small trial of this hypothesis, he found that readers who saw an article with comments rated its quality as significantly lower than those who read the article without them. “In other words,” he said, “authors are judged not just by what they write, but by how people respond.” The small, negative effects of comments can affect reputations as well as traffic.

Is all lost?

A recent study by the Engaging News Project of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin found that having a political reporter interact with commenters can reduce incivility in a news organization’s online comment section.

The researchers, led by Natalie Stroud, teamed with a local news station affiliate. In their experiment, one of three things happened: a prominent reporter interacted with commenters, the station interacted with them using a generic logo or no one interacted with the commenters.

The reporter’s presence significantly reduced obscenity, name calling, the use of stereotypes and hyperbole. Posts that included a yes/no question also drove down incivility in comparison to open ended ones. “One explanation for these results is that people appreciate being heard by a recognizable person from the news,” Stroud said.

This makes sense, since “the typical Web page presents a hierarchy,” according to Michael Erard of the New York Times. Although it now seems natural, comments are always below the news content, and poorly integrated at that.

“Having the comments at the bottom of the page — people feel that; they feel they’re not as legitimate a voice as the original post,” says Travis Nichols, a veteran blog moderator who crafted a novel, “The More You Ignore Me,” based on those experiences.

In other words, the technical constraints under which the Web evolved — the basic top-to-bottom organization of independent lines of remarks — influenced the culture of commenting.

Perhaps, in response to this, there will be a move toward “the annotated Web.” The New York

Times, for instance, began inserting select comments into the bodies of news stories in 2013, elevating them from the basement below. Quartz, a digital-only business news site, started placing comments in paragraphs adjacent to story text in the same year, taking their cue from Medium, which calls such contextualized feedback “notes.”

This shift might worry journalists, whose copy would be put on equal footing with that of readers’ kneejerk reactions. As Erard points out, though, it might at least prompt audiences to actually read what they wrote, since annotations are in reference to specific text and not the general article.

Gawker’s Denton likewise favors some experimentation to address the issue. While he says having authors moderate, as Stroud and others recommend, is a waste of their time, he suggests tiered commenting may be an answer. Some sites enact this by enabling reputation ratings for commenters. Gawker, though, has some stories on which only pre-selected people may comment. “What I want is, I want the sources – I want the experts to be able to comment in these discussions,” Denton said.

Other options are being explored. ESPN and others are doing away with anonymity, requiring a Facebook account to post. Some sites make comments harder to find, hiding them under a mouse click. Stroud’s newest project replaces a “like” button with a “respect” button.

Gateway Journalism Review conducted a reader survey on the topic last March. GJR readers were overwhelmingly in favor of comments sections and most read them. Our readers also favored of posting with real names, as well as moderation. They were ambivalent about the influence comments may have on their perception of an article.

The tradeoff

As Nikki Usher found in her ethnography of the New York Times’ newsroom, many news organizations now conceive of reader participation not as commenting (or real interaction with journalists that could shape a story), but as something to occur primarily in social media. However, the same toxic free-for-all is likely to occur in the Facebook comments on an organization’s links.

The ability of users to re-frame a story might be heightened on Facebook. Rather than dwelling in the subterranean cage at the tail end of the article, comments are wrapped around the headline, with the most popular (and possibly negative) ones bumped to the head of the line. Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

We may never tackle the tradeoff between engaging readers on their own turf and preserving control over product in a fully satisfying way, but experimentation with design and journalist conduct may move us away from the abyss at the end of articles. ■