Evolving Information Practices in News Media Content
Moderation: Fighting Online Hate and Transforming
User Interaction.

Amalia Juneström
PhD Candidate
Uppsala University, 75236 Uppsala, Sweden
amalia.junestrom@abm.uu.se

Abstract. This study explores the set of practices that news journalists who are
dealing with user-generated content moderation apply when assigned with the
task of conducting content moderation on news forums online. It focuses on how
aggressive user behavior occurring in comments sections plays a role in shaping
such practices. The findings of the study indicate that journalists respond to hate
speech by enacting certain practices which have evolved within a collective set-
ing. However, the practices that the journalists enact are also the product of so-
cial arrangements in a shared information landscape. The practices that the stud-
ied news outlets apply when moderating comments sections manifest a balancing
act between the ideal of maintaining an open discussion that enables free speech
and democracy and attracting readers and reaching a wider audience with their
articles.

Keywords: Information practice, News media practice, Comments sections, In-
formation behavior, Online hate speech, User interaction.

1 Introduction

The news media is an institution that, over the last decade, has deployed a range of
new techniques for presenting news (1). The fact that news outlets post news on social
media and the ease with which an article appearing in our Facebook or Twitter feed can
be accessed have contributed to reshaping the mode in which we digest news (2). As
much as the Internet has brought about new practices and standards for presenting and
consuming news, it has also induced new ways of discussing and interacting over news-
related topics (3). Today, it is common for news sites to offer some form of interactive
online platform where readers may comment or contribute with their view on news
articles. This interaction may take place on the news outlet’s website or on external
sites such as Facebook or Twitter (4, 5).

This study of work-related practices attempts to theorize certain ways in which peo-
ple engage and express themselves. In doing so, it draws on an extensive body of re-
search within the field of information science that is concerned with exploring the phe-
nomenon of information practices.
2 Context

By studying the way journalists deal with online hate speech and the practices they apply to prevent aggressive user behavior, new knowledge of the kind of power relations that have produced these practices can be gained (6, 7).

The aim of this study is to shed light on how routine practices of dealing with aggressive user behavior in a news media context are a product of power relations within a participatory news context. Through a study of how online hate is managed in a digital news media environment, it attempts to explain how such structures can, in turn, change and transform practices.

Posting comments on news articles online is, today, one of the most popular forms of audience participation in news journalism (4, 5). The potentially abusive users who post comments that are aggressive, rude, and in other ways antagonistic are generally unwanted, yet they are still a reoccurring phenomenon within the process of information exchange on interactive online news forums (6, 7). Like any other social and cultural manifestation, abusive comments have the ability to shape society and culture.

3 Theoretical Framework

By applying a practice-theoretical perspective, the interaction between social structure and human activity is explored (8). Practice theory offers a theoretical framework for studying practices as both the product and producer of other practices (9, 10). A turn to practice can highlight aspects that are useful for understanding the role that online hate speech plays when designing new solutions for user interactivity in a news media context.

Theodore Schatzki’s book The Site of the Social (8) and Annemaree Lloyd’s concept of information landscapes (11), as well as her notion of information literacy as information practice (12, 13), have been essential in the construction of this study’s theoretical framework. The newsroom constitutes a social setting, reinforced by a discourse of public dialogue, that contributes to the shaping of the information landscape (13).

Lloyd’s (12, 13) notion of information literacy as something that occurs within a social site and that facilitates the formation of practices has been used to explain how practices occur within a media setting where journalists, in order to know how to behave in particular situations, draw knowledge from a collective pool of understanding.

4 Methods

The empirical material of this study is based on interview material. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada who, in their daily work, deal with issues relating to user interaction and social media.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. They were all recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions of the interviews are literal. However, when quoting the
interviewees, a certain amount of linguistic editing was conducted. In an attempt to make the quotes easier to read, speech disfluencies such as fillers and non-lexical vocabulary have sometimes been edited out. The interviews that were not originally in English have been translated into English from Swedish, Danish and German.

5 Findings and Conclusion

News media editorial departments have undergone quite extensive structural changes in the last couple of years (1, 14), especially since Facebook came onto the scene. New teams have been created to manage the news outlets’ audience participation on social media. The introduction of Facebook facilitated the move of comments sections away from the news sources’ own websites, which increased the level of user interaction (4). The growing number of comments led to a need for new strategies for handling the aggression and hate that also existed in this new context.

All the news outlets followed in this study offered some form of Web-based platform for user comments before they went onto social media, and all of them had already conducted some form of content moderation before they had to adjust to the new environment. Although not all the news outlets followed in this study had the level of resources available to invest in content moderation that they think is necessary, they all agreed that there is a strong need to allocate resources to content moderation.

By looking at the practices that are enacted within the environment of online news journalism, the study concludes that they serve as a form of literacy from which the actors draw knowledge when acting on the problem of aggressive user posts online.

It appeared from the interviews that the shifting of comments sections from the news outlets’ own websites to social media sites had made the legislative pressure to monitor and moderate user comments (7) less driving. Instead, the internal moral responsibility harbored within the various news outlets became a more significant guiding force. All the news outlets studied conducted some form of content moderation. However, the amount of moderation very much depended on the resources that each news outlet had the capacity or willingness to invest. Those news outlets that conducted rigorous content moderation claimed that this had a positive effect on the climate of discussion. For example, strictly moderated discussions were more likely to engage participants from more diverse ethnic backgrounds, and women, who generally had been observed to avoid discussions where they risked being exposed to misogynist comments, had a higher participation rate.

The practices that have evolved for content moderation mirror the values fostered within a specific journalistic context. However, they also reflect the resources that a specific news outlet has at its disposal. The practices that the news outlets apply when moderating comments sections manifest a balancing act between the wish to maintain an open discussion that enables free speech and democracy (15, 16) but also to attract readers and reach a wider audience with their articles (7).
References