

Discussion of moderated forums for news websites

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## **Introduction**

Researchers are trying to understand by what methods and how people access news. Academics desire this knowledge to maximize the effectiveness of their mass communication research. News practitioners want to know how they can get people to see their output and generate revenue streams using the Internet and new media.

Today, people are using the Internet for mass and interpersonal communications. People communicate via social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, with a non-geolocated social circle, sharing information synchronously or asynchronously. Journalists can use some of these channels both to talk to the audience and to provide an outlet to interact with one another. Newspaper organizations are integrating their day-to-day print product with their online efforts. Because of this, they are able to reach a wider audience and provide opportunities to allow community members to participate as well (Fortunati and Sarrica, 2010). The public can engage in the news process, whether it's by leaving a comment or contributing stories and videos about events as they happen (Fortunati and Sarrica, 2010). By embracing the new technology, users "break out of their traditional subordination and change their relationship with information, culture, and education" (p. 251). A problem that arises is determining how news organizations, traditionally acting in a gatekeeping role, can control these contributions (Donohew, 1967).

As news organizations build bridges between readers and journalists, community managers — operationalized as employees who monitor, moderate, and participate in a website’s discussion or comments section — can play a large role in the success of a news organization’s participation efforts. While communities and community managers outside the news industry often include more interaction and interactivity, news organizations need someone to oversee the interactions taking place, lest the community devolve into the type of negative environment that some associate with Internet commenters. A community manager is the referee, stepping in as necessary to moderate the discussion, keeping it respectful and on topic.

When moderated properly, online discussions can be productive, providing an outlet for people to interact and offer differing perspectives on a topic. These online spaces can become an area for people with strong feelings to debate in a meaningful way, challenging one another in a civil discourse. Users return to continue the conversation and start new ones on other stories that pique their interest. The difficulty is that there are few formal frameworks that guide how communities should be moderated online. News organizations try to interpret existing methods and implement them but are doing so without certainty.

Before formalized frameworks can be developed for community management within the newspaper environment, it’s important to examine how communities are managed within the news environment. This paper will look at community managers and news website participation in three ways: the prevalence of community managers as a position at newspapers, self-reported descriptions of what the managers think about their

jobs, and self-reported analysis of what the managers think of the practices of the website they monitor.

## **Literature Review**

Online communities started forming at newspapers because the Internet provided opportunities for user participation that had not previously existed. In doing so, organizations are potentially able to make money off this new audience — whether it is composed of new users to the product is irrelevant; they are new users to the medium (Mensing, 2007). Along with the increase of Web-based outlets for newsgathering has been a decrease in the usage of newspapers and other forms of what has been referred to as old media (Young, 2010). News organizations are feeling that decrease where it hurts the most — their financial numbers. Print advertising revenue is declining, dropping 26 percent in 2009 (Pew, 2010). In total, news organization revenues have decreased by 41 percent from 2007 to 2010 (Pew, 2010). While the numbers could level off, news organizations are going to have to learn to make ends meet with smaller revenues. They will have to be more efficient with a smaller staff, producing the same quality of content that readers demand while trying to be timelier through the use of their websites and other online tools.

One place that news organizations are looking to generate revenue is online, searching for a model that will monetize the increasing number of clicks they are getting (Farhi, 2008). News websites are concerned with a term Weinberger (2002) calls stickiness, which refers to the amount of time a user will spend on a site. If the news site

can get users engaged in conversation, they will stick around longer and that time-on-site number will rise. News organizations have an enormous reach in terms of unique visitors, and they are increasing each year; approximately 71 million people, averaging 287 page views each, went to news websites in 2009 (Mersey, 2010). From Farhi's (2008) report:

The typical visitor to nytimes.com, which attracts more than 10 percent of the entire newspaper industry's traffic online, spent an average of just 34 minutes and 53 seconds per month, or about 68 seconds per day, online. Slim as that is, it's actually about three times longer than the average of the next nine largest newspaper sites. And it's less than half as long as visitors spent on the Web's leading sites, such as those run by Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft. (p. 2)

Another study found that self-reporting increased that time from 41 minutes in 2007 to 53 minutes in 2008 (Mersey, 2010). Increased clicks and time on the site can create interest from advertisers.

A person interacting with news organizations is not a new concept. Readers have been submitting letters to the editor and calling into the newsroom for years (Brown, 2011). And discussion forums trace their roots to the beginning of the Internet. Notess (2009) marks the 1970s as a time when people used their phones to dial in to the bulletin board system and engage in conversation with other users. "...discussions have been occurring online for decades. Web 2.0 did not invent it" (p. 41). Online communication is different, though. Users can interact with the news organization instantaneously and, usually, as frequently as they want (Brown, 2011).

In virtual communities, three factors drive users to share: self-esteem, absorptive ability (the amount of knowledge the user believes he or she can get from the community), and trust (Shu and Chuang, 2011). Sharing can take the form of personals blogs, knowledge-sharing communities such as Yahoo! Answers or answers.com, or in

the interactions that could take place on a news community. Previously placed barriers are not as difficult to scale, and users can get the answers they're looking for from the organization or at least have their voice heard.

Along with trying to make connections with the news organization, the users can start to interact with one another as well. This makes the discussion not only vertical (users to journalists) but also horizontal (Smith, 2008). Funder (2010) argues that it's important to pay attention to the ways members affect one another's participation. The kinds of groups that can emerge from these interactions vary, but over time as these influences are exerted, bonds are formed, and the group comes together to form a closer-knit group — a community (Komito, 2007).

So what changes a group of individuals into a community? “Community is a key concept that shapes how we approach our relationships with other individuals and groups” (Agbe-Davies, 2010, p. 373). The term community was first introduced to distinguish between groups united by political state or shared language. It was originally thought of as a small-scale group of direct relations, but there is currently no consensus definition of community (Agbe-Davies, 2010). By the 1950s, more than ninety definitions existed without significant connections in their meaning. Redfield (1955) tried to identify four aspects that existed in all communities: a distinguishing feature from other communities, smallness, similar activities or attitudes, and self-sufficiency.

While Redfield's definition was the standard, over time this has been challenged. That definition is seen as isolating members of a community from the outside and assumes that the members have the same worldview (Agbe-Davies, 2010). Now most definitions include aspects of shared common interest, common locale, and common

social structure (Agbe-Davies, 2010). Their interests and ties might be similar, but they are not as overbearing as Redfield's original definition implies. Communities, by their nature, are based on the opportunities for people to interact with one another, as they observe, notice, connect, perform, and engage through participation (Andrew, 2011).

In the 21st century, online communities have the potential to be just as strong as more standard definition of the term community (Brown, 2011). "Relationships made in virtual space can be just as powerful and meaningful as those formed in the real world" (p. 30). Virtual communities are also easier to create, as there are more than 500 million broadband users worldwide (Brown, 2011).

Forums, which Notess (2009) refers to as the web's communication medium, can be completely open to everyone, giving the users free rein to participate as they see fit. The boards that are free to read without registration are frequently excellent information sources where multiple viewpoints on an issue or solutions to a problem can be found (Notess, 2009). Forums can also be closed networks, limiting their membership to a select few, whether that is the members of a company or a specific shared interest. The asynchronous nature of the Web means that conversations take place over time, with users coming back at their convenience. The small interactions — emails, debating through posts and comments on a website, and using chat rooms or instant messengers — are the basis for a web-based community (Mersey, 2010).

When evaluating a forum before deciding whether to join, Notess (2009) advises the user to browse the top subjects, to see how recently posts have been added — Is this an active community? — and to determine the experience of the community. "...a quick critical evaluation of a board helps in determining how useful the information within the

forum may be” (p. 42). Problems that forums can have include occasional or no activity for long periods of time, too much spam, and off-topic content. “The best of the boards have frequent postings, good spam filtering, and a sufficient quantity of active posters to keep content flowing” (Notess, 2009, p. 42).

Through a sense of inclusion, communities can be created through the use of forums (Smith, 2008). “Advocacy and inclusionary community-building practices allow the voices of socially excluded groups to be heard, even when they are not present online” (p. 371). If the group is welcoming of contradictory opinions and willing to treat those ideas with respect, then users will feel more comfortable participating. In doing so, they develop a relationship with their peers through this sense of belonging (Smith, 2008).

In many cases, forums attempt to be inclusionary, but that goal does not play out in practice (Smith, 2008). Even though cyberspace is largely unregulated, people may feel uncomfortable entering a new virtual community, much like an outsider interacting with someone face to face (Belton, 2010). It is important to let users get their bearings when entering a new forum, welcoming them and allowing them to adapt to the environment. People will become comfortable with the situation in different ways. Initially a member of the community through observation, he or she eventually leaves the periphery of the group and become involved in its actions. Accepting and encouraging that aspect will help the forum grow over time (Smith, 2008).

The effectiveness of forums is dampened by the computer-based communication that is being used. Non-direct forms of communication present challenges, largely dealing with interpretation (Kock, 2001). The communicators have to put more effort into

understanding each other due to the lack of nonverbal cues that play a large role in face-to-face dialogue (Simon, 2006). Users adapt to the requirements of working together online and find ways to use the new system to their advantage. Familiarity over time has a major effect on equalizing the two forms of interaction (Simon, 2006). An additional aspect to consider is the effect the network's members can have on one another. Siegel (2009) found that the size, number of weak ties, and presence of elite members in a network affect the group. Siegel's research worked with political action, but there are some correlations that can be made to online networks.

Computer-mediated communication provides new types of interactions between individuals as well as groups (D'Ambra, Rice, and O'Connor, 1998). Xia, et al, (2009) identify four types of online communication. Working on parameters of individual to aggregate and low-to-high interactive, the four types of interactivity are many-to-one (low aggregate), many-to-many (high aggregate), one-to-many (low individual), and one-to-one (high individual). Many-to-one interactions include ranking, voting, tagging, and search. Many-to-many refers to wikis, online forums, and listservs. One-to-many examples are professional reviews and blogs, and one-to-one communication includes email and instant messaging (Xia, et al, 2009).

The type of communication taking place online mirrors that of other one-on-one interactions (Perry and Gonzenbach, 2000). Even though many online conversations occur through typing and reading screens of text, people think of online communication not as writing but rather as talking (Perry and Gonzenbach, 2000). This form of interaction is more closely related to communication via telephone than anything else. Due to the limited personal connection users have to one another, the interactions tend to

be more uninhibited, creative, and blunt (Wellman, et al, 1996). The researchers noted such social networks are typically narrowly focused, as users develop relationships more on common interests than similar demographic characteristics. “Despite their limited social presence, CSSNs [computer-supported social networks] successfully maintain strong, supportive ties with work and community as well as increase the number and diversity of weak ties” (Wellman, et al, 1996, p. 231). The greatest strength of CSSNs is their ability to retain a link between people with intermediate ties (Wellman, et al, 1996). The computer becomes a simple tool for reaching out to someone you may not have the ability to call or meet in real life. The relationship continues even if it is not as strong.

An example of computer-mediated communication and the communities that news organizations are looking to develop can be found through massively multiplayer online role-playing games, such as “World of Warcraft” or “Ultima Online.” According to Bates (2009), five factors that influence computer-mediated communication are external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics. Also, while many attempts to define community are based on location, this is not possible online. The identities of the users are what define the group (Bates, 2009).

Bartle (1996) argues that there are four types of users in online communities: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers. Bartle’s analysis dealt with game culture, but these roles appear throughout online interaction. People don’t always stick with one role (Bartle, 1996). They may drift among the different types depending on their mood, but typically there will be one role whose attributes they display most frequently (Bartle, 1996).

Achievers give themselves goals and seek to accomplish them. In a game setting, this means accumulating as much as possible and winning the game. Explorers try to learn as much as possible about the community they are in. These users want to explore the breadth and depth of the environment as they participate. Socializers are interested in the interactions they can have. The game or network is a place for connections to be made. Killers seek to disrupt the system they exist in. They seek to be an irritation and hindrance to other users. They can be chaotic to the system (Bartle, 1996). A balance of the four types is important. If there is an excess of one, it will drive off the other three. This balance can be subjective to the creators of the content, and they can define what the equilibrium is (Bartle, 1996). However, once a balancing point is found, it is ideal to maintain it as not to throw off the group dynamics (Bartle, 1996).

The interactions among the different types of users are also important to understand. Bartle (1996) asserts that the most divisive relationship among the four types is between socializers and killers. While the killers' antics can be disruptive to socializers' attempts to interact, socializers are particularly driven off by killers because the latter have no social motives. If a manager wants to increase, or decrease, the number of a certain type of user, Bartle (1996) provides tips on how to do so by changing the population of the other groups. More achievers will show up if the number of killers is reduced slightly or if there are more explorers to make up for an excess of killers. Achievers can be decreased by increasing killers or reducing explorers. More explorers will cause additional explorers to come to the community, while more killers will have the opposite effect. Socializers will arrive if killers decrease slightly or if there are more socializers to interact with (Bartle, 1996).

The online component of a news organization has to be capable of handling the difficulties that can extend from computer-based communication. Users tend to interact differently when they are behind a keyboard, causing additional trouble for a manager who is trying to promote a civil conversation. For example, users may not always be who they say they are (Weinberger, 2002). People develop a persona online that can be drastically different than their real-life characteristics. The anonymity of the Internet allows them to act as and even become whomever they want to be (Weinberger, 2002). “The real problem we face with the Web is not understanding the anomalies but facing how deeply weird the ordinary is” (p. 18). People can alter their names, appearance, and any other details that they are self-conscious about (Lea and Spears, 1995). Brown (2011) refers to this as the difference between a found identity (characteristics determined by circumstances, such as ethnic background, sex, and other external factors that people use to describe someone) and made identity (the characteristics one creates for himself or herself). People who formally wanted to change their identity had to make adjustments to their appearance or take on a new name. Online this is as easy as a few clicks of the mouse, making it possible to be whomever you want to be (Brown, 2011).

The hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication has been used to understand the actions of users in an online forum. The idea is that a person will develop an attachment to an online relationship more quickly than one that was created face to face (Anderson and Emmers-Somer, 2006). This closeness is based on the user’s ability to carefully represent himself or herself; the ability to edit messages before they are sent; a tendency to create idealized, positive attributions toward others; and the level and intensity of disclosure (Anderson and Emmers-Somer, 2006). A community manager can

deal with the people only as they are presented, reacting to the observed behaviors. It is worth remembering that a community manager may be dealing with someone playing a role or exaggerating certain aspects of his or her personality.

Although they share the qualities of a community, online communities are different in that, while the social aspects of community are similar, the usability of the group differs (Byoungho, Park, and Kim, 2010). “If a firm develops better OC features that facilitate human-to-human interaction (i.e. sociability) and human-to-computer interaction (i.e. usability), then the members will receive higher social and functional benefits from OC participation” (p. 596). In many cases, users come in to an online community with a similar standing. Social differences that may be more apparent in face-to-face communication, such as income, are lessened online (Byoungho, Park, and Kim, 2010).

An online community can be identified by five characteristics. According to Byoungho, Park, and Kim (2010), these are purpose, place (i.e., how the community is arranged), platform, population, and profit model. For news organizations, the online community is developed to meet a specific goal. It’s organized at their websites and typically welcomes a population that has a connection to the geographic area they cover. The profit model of most news organizations’ communities is based on keeping users on the site and getting them to click between links or return to the site, thereby making it possible for the organization to sell advertising and generate revenue.

Online conversations can result in conflicts among the members over a contentious topic. These are often referred to as “flame wars,” which Goldsborough and Page (2005) call “angry, epithet-strewn arguments” (p. 23). They can be the result of the

anonymity associated with computer-mediated communication, as there is not much keeping someone who wants to spew vitriol from doing so. As Weinberger (2002) puts it, “We don’t talk so nice on the Web. Not nearly” (p. 91). Many times, a user could be banned, but if there is no barrier to entry, there is also nothing stopping the person from creating a new account and continuing the same actions.

So how should people react to the negativity and hurtful comments?

Goldsborough and Page (2005) recommend against stooping to their level, saying it often encourages the user’s actions. They say the person should try to engage in a dialogue with the negative person. “...online debate can sometimes be akin to sport, with participants engaging in ritual battle. But instead of name-calling and personal attacks, your weapons of choice should be logic, wordplay and witty repartee. The focus should be on the substance of the subject matter under discussion” (p. 26). In many cases, community managers will look to remove people who are being inflammatory. While it is certainly important to avoid inappropriate material, particularly if it is directed at specific users, many times it can actually help to interact with the troublemaker. The community manager could challenge their ideas and force the user to defend himself or herself. It may lead to the user becoming part of the discussion, presenting contradictory viewpoints but doing so in a way that moves the conversation forward rather than stopping it in its tracks. Not everyone will be happy about every story or every comment, but talking about it may help alleviate some of those negative feelings.

To build communities, there needs to be a person who can organize and moderate the conversation. News organizations have turned to community managers to facilitate the development and maintenance of these news arenas. Weinberger (2002) states that

control on the Web can be tricky, since the system was designed to be open. The manager needs to encourage discussion, not shut it down. People want to congregate together and discuss things (Weinberger, 2002). "... We can be individuals only because we are members of groups" (p. xi). Reasons that users may not participate include a lack of motivation, commitment, and time (Baran and Correia, 2009). One way that a community manager can help users with this is to make it easy to participate. The fewer barriers between the users and the opportunity to contribute there are, the more likely that they will put their voice into the conversation.

A community manager is an employee of the organization who monitors and moderates discussions and interactions among a population. In news organizations, this largely means working on the discussion forums or comment threads that are connected to news stories. When a user submits a comment, it is typically filtered into a queue that only the community manager (or other newsroom employees) can access. The community manager then has the opportunity to review the submission and moderate it. Many times, moderation will take place once the community manager identifies content that is offensive and deletes or otherwise edits it (removing inappropriate terms, for example). Inappropriate content can take the form of vulgarity, personal attacks, or off-topic comments to name a few. Some managers will also participate in the discussion, adding the organization's voice to the conversation.

Heeter (1989) mentions six dimensions of interactivity that community managers should be doing to engage users: responsiveness, ease of adding information, facilitation of interpersonal communication, complexity of choice, effort users exert, and potential to monitor system use. Ha and James (1998) had five areas to focus on: playfulness, choice,

connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. Many of these concepts would need to be implemented by the news organization when the comment system is developed, but there are also day-to-day actions that a community manager can take to promote and grow the community. By being responsive, the community manager provides a voice from the news organization. It makes the users feel as if they are interacting with the newspaper staff and that they are being heard (similarly with reciprocal communication). Monitoring system use is important, as the community manager wants to patrol the submissions to ensure that content is appropriate and moves the conversation forward. Playfulness can be tricky, in that the community manager wants the comment system to be enjoyable, but the conversations should still stay relevant to the tone of a news organization. One way the community manager could encourage playfulness is by displaying a sense of humor on stories in which it is appropriate to do so.

Betancourt (2009) offers 10 rules for better engagement of the community:

- Make it easy to participate
- Be a leader
- Interact with the community
- Welcome newbies
- Identify and nurture power users
- Showcase and cross-promote user-generated content
- Reward contributors
- Be timely about posted user-generated content
- Allow profile creation
- Engage with popular existing communities

Regarding ease of participation, the more barriers that are put up, the more likely users are going to decide that it isn't worth the effort. Beyond barriers, there also needs to be information pointing out how the users can participate. "Create multiple entry points and

ways to access the online community and use actionable language to turn observers into contributors” (Betancourt, 2009, p. 1). Prompts are one way to encourage discussion or participation.

Betancourt (2009) writes that the managers should interact with the community as well as welcome newcomers to the conversation. “Interacting with the community lets them know someone is listening” (p. 2). New users may feel as if they are intruding, and it is up to the manager to make them feel welcome and thereby grow the community.

Research has shown the types of users that exist online and how they interact, but how exactly does this play out in a news community? By outlining three research topics, a better understanding of what community managers do and whether they believe there are best practices can be found. This will help with the development of new communities online while also ideally improving the ones that already exist.

*RQ1. How many community managers are there?*

*RQ2a. How do community managers perceive their job and the aspects that go into it?*

*RQ2b. What do community managers think could be done differently in order to better promote conversation?*

*RQ3a. How do community managers handle the four different types of online users — achievers, socializers, explorers and killers?*

*RQ3b. Does one category get more attention than the rest?*

## **Methodology**

To study the prevalence of community managers in news organizations, a seven-question survey, including multiple-choice questions and short answer questions (which were used for gathering contact information), was sent out (see Appendix A). The population of the survey was based on a list of publications from the Audit Bureau of Circulations<sup>1</sup>. All organizations on the list were contacted for the survey (N=617), giving a census from which to work. The researcher went to the websites connected with each news organization to find contact information for the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. The editor-in-chief of each news organization was contacted via email to take the survey, which was distributed using Survey Monkey. If an editor-in-chief's contact information was not available, managing editors were contacted instead.

The survey was intended to gauge how many community managers there are. It helped to identify whether the term "community manager" was the prevalent job title or if the same tasks were being handled under a different name. Additionally, the survey gives a brief overview as to how the managers are used at each organization. Would managers participate in the discussion or were they simply moderators, overseeing the action and taking out unruly participants?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newstitlesearchus.asp>

After the number of community managers was found (contact information for 28 community managers was received through the survey), the second part of the research determined how community managers feel about their job. As part of the survey, contact information for the organization's community manager was provided to the researcher. From that list, ten managers were selected by a simple random sample (see Appendix D). A structured interview assessed their perception of how the community operates and what they feel works and does not work on their site.

The purpose of the structured interview was to find the similarities and differences in how managers operate. It checked to see if the basic rules are similar as well as how different people at different organizations handle similar situations. Do they have the same threshold before they ban content or a user or are they making decisions based on different criteria?

The interview has 11 questions, along with follow-ups that were used as needed (see Appendix B). The interviews were conducted via telephone, taking between 15 and 20 minutes each and scheduled over the course of two weeks to accommodate the participants' schedules. After the interview, the content was transcribed and analyzed for patterns, noting similarities and differences among the community managers.

To develop the interview questions, Bartle's taxonomy (1996) was used as a guideline, based on the four types of users: achievers, socializers, explorers, and killers. Some of the questions in the interview were intended to get the community managers' thoughts on each type of user. Does any type of user require more management than the others? Similarities would be the start of a pattern of practice that could be extrapolated.

Differences would raise questions about which way would be the preferred method or if certain types of sites should be doing things their own way.

## Results

### *RQ1. How many community managers are there?*

The survey was sent to 617 people at newspapers across the country. Of them, 71 participated for a response rate of 11.5 percent. (Full results can be found in Appendix C.) 67 respondents (94.4 percent) said their websites offer a section for users to participate in the discussion, but only 25 of them (35.2 percent) said there is someone identified as a community manager.

This position manifests itself in different ways. The community manager position is handled by a number of different titles, including community engagement coordinator, webmaster, community engagement editor, web manager, multimedia editor, web editor, online editor, interactive media team leader, social media coordinator, and online content manager. Whatever the name, someone is handling the moderation, as 46 respondents (64.8 percent) said that comments are removed or monitored on the news organization's website. Interaction between a community manager and the audience is even less frequent. Twenty-seven (38 percent) respondents said that a community manager will respond directly to the readers (examples used in the survey question mentioned moderator comments or a live chat). It is possible that some confusion may have persisted over the definition of the term "community manager," but Questions 5 and 6

indicate that more than 30 percent of newspaper websites (23 respondents) do not have a community manager focused on moderating user comments.

*RQ2a. How do community managers perceive their job and the aspects that go into it?*

The interviews were conducted with community managers at news organizations across the country and representing various-sized outlets — local newspapers, media groups combining several papers, and large-city publications. In the discussions, the community managers mentioned the ways their sites organize and manage content as well as what has and hasn't worked in their efforts so far.

Among the interviewees, one difference was in the types of content they have to moderate. While the original scope of the research assumed threaded comments at the end of articles on news websites, some community managers dealt with open-thread forums, where the users would start topics based on what interested them and the discussion would follow. Of the interview subjects, six worked with embedded comments, one handled the message board-style system, and three used both, allowing for comments connected to specific articles along with a message board for open discussion. (The community managers said politics, religion, and sports were the primary topics discussed on these boards.) Additionally, three organizations allowed direct, private messaging between users, which added another layer of problems, especially when they didn't have direct oversight over those communications, as was the case for a community manager from Indiana.

Moderation is just one part of their day-to-day tasks, so the community managers also rely on others for assistance in doing their work. Nine community managers said other employees help monitor user submissions. In order to do so, they try to make sure guidelines are set down so that anyone helping with the moderation knows what to do. When there are questions, the community managers try to act as a guide. “We all talk about what we will allow and won’t allow,” a California-based community manager says. “The reporters are really good about monitoring the comments on their stories. People will ask questions or want clarifications and the reporters will jump in and answer those questions. Or they’ll give a heads-up and say, ‘This person has kind of gone off the deep end. What do you think?’”

Another strong guide for community managers is the Terms of Service for their site. Each interview subject said that a TOS was part of the system in place to protect the news organization and give it a guideline for what user content was and was not acceptable. They all said that the TOS was intentionally left open-ended so they can have the freedom to make judgment calls as necessary rather than feeling tied to a specific reaction. The California community manager said her company recently redid their TOS. “It’s basically just, ‘Here’s what we want our site to be,’” the community manager says. “I tried to put it in as plain language as I possibly could. Then it had to pass the lawyers. It got a little more technical. But it’s still better than what it was.”

Most TOS across the sites had similar listings for what was deemed unacceptable content. Personal attacks, hate speech, foul language, threatening comments, and spam are against the rules on most of the sites. “I think it definitely covers everything, because

the categories are so broad, a comment will eventually fit under one of these headings,” a community manager of a large newspaper in New York says.

Relevance to the topic was another judgment call of the community managers. Four respondents said relevance was evaluated when they were moderating. If a post was deemed to be irrelevant, the community managers said they often would delete it. Context will play a big role in this. While a comment may seem off-topic, it could make more sense when seen within the flow of the conversation. “If there’s ever a question, I’ll link to the story and call it up in context,” the Texas-based community manager says. “Sometimes that does make a difference. I can see what it’s an answer to and decide if it was appropriate to be phrased in that way.”

One discrepancy among the community managers and their sites came from how links were handled. Seven said their sites allow the use of links. Of those seven, four said links were limited either by their number — two per post in one case — or flagged for additional moderation. Another help in the battle against inappropriate comments was aid from the users themselves. Each of the websites involved in the study offered some sort of “Report Abuse” button that users can click in order to highlight inappropriate comments to the community managers, who then take action as deemed necessary. One site relied on this help entirely, only moderating comments that had been flagged by the community. “We really have depended on the users because we have so many other things we have to do,” a community manager of a high-volume website says. “Full-time moderating of comments really isn’t an option.”

This isn’t a foolproof strategy, as sometimes users would flag comments that they disagreed with. “We get a lot of comments reported as abuse that should not have been

flagged,” one community manager says. “People will disagree with someone’s political position or disagree with their thoughts on a sports team. We get a lot of false reports like that, but we do get most of the real ones. I think the users do a good job.” Some inappropriate comments could slip through if no one ever reports it to the community managers. “You need to pay attention to what’s going on with your site,” a community manager says. Most of the interviewees did not believe that was much of a problem, however.

Gaps in coverage also take place. Seven sites allow all comments initially, and they are moderated at a later time. Three community managers said they would check the moderation queue at different times to approve the comment. One community manager said she checks the comments at three intervals during the day (morning, late afternoon, evening). Another checks the comments in the morning only. Until then, the comment is posted and could derail a thread. Conversely, three sites do not allow the comments to be posted until they are approved. One community manager said he checks the comments each morning. This can make having a conversation on a topic related to the connected story difficult, as they have to wait until the next day to see what was said or what a response was.

*RQ2b. What do community managers think could be done differently in order to better promote conversation?*

Anonymity was a cause of problems for the community managers, cited by eight of them. The freedom of expression largely without consequence — “keyboard bravery” as one community manager called it — leads to commenters who will push the

boundaries of a website's rules. To avoid this problem, seven community managers said their sites are considering a switch to a system that uses Facebook, which incorporates users' real names, into their systems. Four community managers expressed a preference for the names-attached Facebook system. "You have a name and a reputation," a Wisconsin-based community manager says. "Your personal information is attached. It's rare that you see really inflammatory content there."

The same community manager defended the value of anonymous-based commenting, though. "I feel there is some value there, although sometimes it can be discouraging and people can be 'braver,'" the community manager says. "It also allows them the freedom to say things that may otherwise be restricting them from sharing their points of view."

In suggesting changes, community managers had a few tweaks they would like to see. One said that having a feature to block specific users would be helpful. "They get into such a bickering match from a personality conflict," the community manager says. "That's where a lot of our problems come from. I would love that feature." Another just asked for more help with moderating: "I wish had a big enough staff to help with moderation. We're asking reporters to keep an eye on their threads, but there's not time to go back to old ones. There can be a huge time gap before it's checked."

One website said that it relied on the assistance of users who were designated as "trusted users." These users, who had been part of the community for a long time, are allowed to moderate comments on a message board in the same way that the community manager does.

*RQ3a. How do community managers handle the four different types of online users — achievers, socializers, explorers and killers?*

In dealing with users who are causing problems — typically killers — all 10 of the community managers will use some of ban to punish the rule breaker. Bans can vary from short suspensions, such as one day, all the way up to a full ban of the user's account. (The longest suspension mentioned by a community manager was a month.) These bans can take several forms, such as deletion of the username or blocking the email address. These steps often act more like irritants than anything else, since the user can return somewhat simply. "If they're taking the time to go around that layer that we have in place, obviously I'm not going to catch them," the California-based community manager says. "If they really want to take that much time and effort into it, then good for them."

"There are people we have banned in the past, and there's some gameplay with them where they keep trying to go in. If I'm 99 percent sure who that is, then I'll ban them. I'm not going to wait around for 100 percent when every sentence structure is the same. The tone is the same. The attacks are the same," another community manager says. "They'll just keep coming in under usernames, but they always reveal themselves in the end by oversharing."

Communities have tried banning IP addresses (three mentioned trying it, and a pair of those respondents said they still use that method), but one stopped that practice after it had unforeseen consequences. "We had a case where we had an IP address only to find we had banned the IP address of a large building downtown and had banned everyone from commenting," a community manager says.

*RQ3b. Does one category get more attention than the rest?*

The frequency of problems varies, largely dependent on the volume of submissions received. A former community manager at a large news organization in Pennsylvania said the website deals with inappropriate content continuously, while community managers at smaller outlets said more than one or two problems per week was troubling. The size of the organization had a major effect on how often they said they had to deal with problems. One news organization eliminated most of its moderation needs after going behind a paywall. Once the users were subscribing for the privilege to read stories and participate in the discussion, most of the inappropriate comments disappeared altogether.

The vague rules can include the freedom to remove comments or suspend a user. “If it’s the first time that person has had a problem, I will warn them,” the California-based community manager says. “But if it’s kind of a flagrant violation — like foul language or personal attacks — I’ll just delete it. If it’s kind of borderline, I’ll make the call that ‘This person’s been a problem across the board in the past, so let’s just go ahead and bounce them from the site.’”

“I try not to overmoderate,” a community manager from Texas said. “I don’t want to totally censor, but at the same time I want it to be a community conversation. I don’t want it to be a horrible place where people are afraid to come on. We have a lot of people that come on for individual stories and may or may not come back on depending on how they’re treated.”

## **Discussion**

This study intended to show that while commenting systems are in place on the websites of news organizations, not enough has been done to put people in positions to monitor and moderate user contributions. The survey largely served to confirm that, demonstrating a gap in coverage by many companies. In building a news forum, having people in place to help when there are problems will lead to a better community environment — something that is not happening on many sites.

In the interview, community managers were asked to share what goes into their job, including what they are focusing their attention on as well as what measures are in place to help them do this. The community managers interviewed seem to have regulations in place that help them prevent trouble, but not as much is done to actually encourage conversation. As the community managers indicated, killers, per Bartle's definition, get the majority of their focus. The community managers are so concerned with removing users who are breaking the rules that many of the other things they could be doing to encourage conversation and develop a community are going by the wayside.

There seems to be no standardized title for the people who fulfill the obligations of a community manager. On top of that, many new organizations do not appear to be taking an active role in their site's comments section. While this system could work in

some cases, it has the potential for problems, especially if spammers or other malcontents attack the site.

The survey and interviews give some generalizations about how communities are operating and how the moderators deal with them. Two concepts emerged:

1. the reliance on the community monitoring itself;
2. the overly focused battle against spammers and killers.

While this setup may have some success, it doesn't seem to maximize what the community could be. Vertical communication between the news organization, through the community manager, and users isn't used, and the community manager can stifle horizontal communication by turning the comments section or forum into a witch hunt, focused solely on the removal of members and comments. It hurts the trust of the community, because the users do not feel that the news organization is facilitating discussion. If a user does not trust a community, he or she is unlikely to share (Shu and Chuang, 2011).

Giving users different levels of power can also lead to a sense of inequality, hurting the community. It may make users less inclined to want to join or participate, intimidated by the existence of a power bloc of users that already exists. One of the benefits of online communities is supposed to be its welcoming of differing opinions, so anything that may intimidate a member from joining or participating would go against that characteristic (Smith, 2008). Community managers can't be everywhere, granted, so there is certainly value in having members self-police their community. The concern comes where there is an overreliance on that help from the users.

While killers can be a drawback in computer-based communication, it is also not helpful for community managers to place excessive attention on them. It prevents the community manager from being able to interact with other members and take steps to welcome new users and grow the community. Plans need to be in place, and many of the websites and community managers involved in this study have Terms of Service that allow them to deal with problematic users and comments as they arise. Many times, banning doesn't even work, as they can just return and cause the same problems under another username. One consideration to try would be to communicate with the killer; perhaps he or she has articulate points to make and just isn't doing so yet (Goldsborough and Page, 2005). An excessive amount of attention on just one portion of the audience doesn't help anybody in efforts to develop a community online.

A challenge the community managers mentioned was how to handle inappropriate, hurtful, or irrelevant submissions. They are perpetually on the defensive, leading to a more negative overall experience. It's also a difficult battle, as killers and spammers will continue to be a problem if left unchecked. As one community manager said, once he slacked off from monitoring, the tone of the discussion turned negative. Keeping an eye on users who break the rules will always be part of the job of a community manager, but if it's his or her only job, then the entire tone of the position has a negative connotation.

Another area where news organizations could improve is through a direct interaction between employees and the audience. According to the survey, the majority of news organizations do not have employees directly interact with users. They seem to be sticking to the more traditional many-to-one interactions that their print products provide.

If the news sites would do more to engage the readers, chatting with them, getting involved in the comments (more than just deleting submissions), and making the users feel like an active part of the news making process, readers could feel as if there was a reason for them to participate. It would give achievers more of a reason to want to get involved and socializers would enjoy getting to interact with the people who bring them information.

Most of the interviews tended to revolve around the negative aspects of comments rather than how the sites encourage users to participate. That's largely because little is done to entice users to join the discussion. None of the community moderators mentioned any sort of incentive program to encourage users to join the conversation. To most, the only possible reward for leaving a comment was the intrinsic satisfaction of discussion. While this may be enough for some people, achievers may not find any motivation from this. If there is no reward, achievers will not feel any reason to join in. Community managers could consider a rewards program – a drawing or benefits to users for continuous participation, for example – that could attract a whole new audience who looks for perks to entice their interest and participation. While research shows that replacing intrinsic motivation with extrinsic motivation could be problematic (Goodman, et al, 2011), it is an option that, if implemented correctly, could grow the community without becoming purely a chase for the incentive by the users.

The use of links is another area where news organizations can create a more in-depth experience for the audience. Links are the basis for citing one's work online, adding credence to an argument by backing it up with something resembling proof. Linking to other stories or to provide the source of the information that the commenter is

using to make his or her point can be valuable to a discussion. It provides a measure of proof that can help maintain the momentum of the dialogue. Unfortunately, spammers and killers can also use links to cause trouble, whether through linking to advertising, pornography, or something altogether irrelevant to the conversation. The news organizations discussed in the interview portion had different strategies to how links were, or were not, allowed. Links also act as an enticement for explorers, who will be looking to navigate beyond the information provided only in the conversation and story. The organizations that banned links took the easy way out to a problem. Links to viruses or pornographic content are problems that will have to be dealt with, but that just needs to be part of the job if a vibrant discussion is going to develop. Moderation of comments with links before they are posted is one way to alleviate this problem.

A system that keeps the capability for discussion to exist in real time is important as well. Using the community manager interviewed who doesn't allow comments until the morning after they are submitted as an example, it will be difficult for a community to grow if participants have to wait a day to respond to one another. Instead, the conversation will be disconnected reactions to the story rather than an actual dialogue developing among the readers and the news organization. In a fast-paced social media world where stories are fortunate to get a day of attention and more typically last for a few hours, this format seems ineffective for developing a community on a site. Perhaps the enlisting of help within the newsroom could allow the conversation to be more continuous. Most of the respondents indicated that multiple people are working together to handle community moderation, so it could be a solution to that problem.

Just having the presence of a community manager can cause an improvement in the overall dialogue. “Sometimes just monitoring it on a regular basis, where they know that you’re actively looking at content and acting on it, then it becomes sporadic,” a community manager from Wisconsin says. “If there comes a time where we’re not able to look at content, it becomes a free for all. You have to get back in there and clean it up a bit. Most of the times people are decent and respectful. If we can’t get to a comment right away, there are times where people get it back on track themselves.” The community manager also acts as the representative for the news organization, which could help users feel a connection to the outlet, make them feel like they have a voice, and believe they are part of the newsgroup’s output.

Using Betancourt’s (2009) 10 tips as an outline, it is possible to identify several ways in which community managers can improve their effort and improve the online community. If they do more to be leaders and interact with the community — rather than merely removing content — they could enhance conversation and make users feel that this is a discussion worth joining. More could be done to welcome new members; none of the community managers mentioned any effort to bring in new commenters. Showcasing content and rewards could encourage members to participate (with the caveat mentioned previously). And better timeliness about user content from the community managers would improve the situation on sites that are not currently doing this.

In future versions of a study such as this, one key aspect that the research must do is a better operational definition of “community manager.” The results of the survey show a discrepancy between the responders’ perceived existence of a community manager and the reality. Many answered “no” to that question but followed by indicating the name of

such a community manager — whether the title was community engagement coordinator, webmaster or some other designation given to the person who handle user-generated content. For example, one of the interview respondents had the generic title of associate editor. Therefore, an improved, clearer definition of the term for respondents should eliminate any confusion.

Many of the respondents involved in the survey as well as the interview stated that their websites use multiple people to handle the moderation of content. A study that presents sample comments then questions the participant — a community manager — as to whether he or she would accept the comment to be posted could provide some insight into the discrepancies that can take place and which sort of comments are able to slip by. Similarly, seeing how comments are handled both in and out of context could be another similar study.

The reaction of the participants to having a comment rejected could be another outlet for research. How do they feel when they see that their comment won't be posted or that it was taken down? Does it affect how they frequent that website in the future? Does it influence how they participate in discussions, measuring either frequency of involvement or the content they provide afterward?

If the ultimate goal is to measure participation, studying similar-sized news organizations — similar number of website hits and comments, preferably — and analyzing how their methods of moderation can affect participation. While this would be more difficult to set up, several of the interview participants mentioned that changes had been made within the past year to 18 months, so clearly there are opportunities to see the effects of new rules on a news community.

Limitations to the study were largely a factor of participation. While the responses allowed for some idea of how many community managers there are and how they are used, better participation would have served to improve that understanding. Similar comments could be made about the interviews. The number of interviews gave a brief overview of how community managers view their job, but additional interviews could have expanded that understanding. Additionally, a more detailed survey could have pinpointed exactly how these community managers are being used.

Participation in online communities is somewhat like the next step in user-generated content for news organization. What was formally a limited-space item in the editorial section has become a potentially limitless forum for residents of a community to discuss, debate, and interact about the news of their area and the world. Existing beliefs seem to have developed a set way in which news forums work and community managers operate. The big question raised, though, is whether this is the best way for it to be run. The future studies in this area should continue to address that question in hopes of creating an ideal situation for dialogue online. Several of the interview subjects in this project thought that removing anonymity would improve the atmosphere. And while it likely would make the tone of the discourse more positive, would it provide the best form of discussion possible? These are the things that need to be addressed by researchers and the community managers themselves.

## **Appendix A: Survey**

The following survey is intended to find out the number of community managers — a person who monitors, moderates and may participate in a website’s discussion or comments section — on news websites. Your participation in this survey will greatly help in measuring that number. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

No. 1: What is the name of your organization?

No. 2: Does your organization offer an area on its website where users can submit their thoughts on the stories posted (i.e., a comments section)?

No. 3: Does your organization have a “community manager” for its online forums?

No. 4: If someone is filling that role with a different job title, what is it?

No. 5: Does the community manager remove or moderate in any way comments on your organization's website?

No. 6: Does the community manager respond directly to readers (e.g., commenting, a live chat)?

No. 7: What is the name and contact information for the community manager?

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

- No. 1: How long have you worked there?  
No. 1a: How long have you been in your current position?
- No. 2: What is your title?  
No. 2a: Were you the first person with that title?  
No. 2b: If no, how have you done things differently?
- No. 3: Are there multiple people that manage the comments?  
No. 3a: If so, how many?  
No. 3b: What are their titles?  
No. 3c: How do their responsibilities differ from yours, if at all?
- No. 4: Tell me about the site's Terms of Service for audience participation.  
No. 4a: How were they developed?  
No. 4b: How have they changed over time?  
No. 4c: How satisfied are you with the Terms of Service?  
No. 4d: If you could change anything in your Terms of Service, what would it be?
- No. 5: How does your website organize its online discussions? Are there comments with each story or is there a centralized location where all discussion takes place?
- No. 6: What happens to content or language that is deemed inappropriate?  
No. 6a: How frequently do you deal with inappropriate content?  
No. 6b: Are there additional consequences for users who break the rules?  
No. 6c: If so, what are they?
- No. 7: Does your organization allow users to flag content it deems inappropriate?  
No. 7a: Why?
- No. 8: Are there any benefits or incentives given to users for participating?  
No. 8a: If so, what are they?
- No. 9: Are there ways for users to interact with others one-on-one?

No. 10: Are links or other tools, such as Facebook or Twitter buttons, implemented for the users to navigate to other information while on your site?

No. 11: Are there changes you would like to see made to your commenting system?

No. 11a: If so, what are they?

## Appendix C: Survey Results

Does your organization offer an area on its website where users can submit their thoughts on the stories posted (i.e., a comments section)?

Yes: 94.4%

No: 5.6%

Does your organization have a “community manager” for its online forums?

Yes: 35.2%

No: 64.8%

If someone is filling that role with a different job title, what is it?

Responses included: Community engagement coordinator, webmaster, community engagement editor, web manager, multimedia editor, web editor, online editor, interactive media team leader, social media coordinator, and online content manager

Does the community manager remove or moderate in any way comments on your organization’s website?

Yes: 64.8%

No: 2.8%

No community manager: 32.4%

Does the community manager respond directly to readers (i.e., commenting, a live chat)?

Yes: 38%

No: 29.6%

No community manager: 32.4%

## **Appendix D: Interview participants**

- No. 1: Online editor for mid-sized newspaper in North Carolina
- No. 2: Home page editor for large newspaper in New York
- No. 3: Former homepage editor for large newspaper in Pennsylvania
- No. 4: Online editor for mid-sized newspaper in Indiana
- No. 5: Online editor for media group (daily and weekly newspapers) in Indiana
- No. 6: Community editor for small newspaper in Alabama
- No. 7: Online communities administrator for newspaper group in Wisconsin
- No. 8: Web editor for mid-sized newspaper in Missouri
- No. 9: Community manager for mid-sized newspaper in Texas
- No. 10: Community engagement coordinator for mid-sized newspaper in California

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