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# Love them or hate them, BTL comments have changed journalism forever

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Take that! Are trolls ruining journalism? Shutterstock

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Interviewed recently in *The Observer*, comedian David Mitchell revealed that he never reads the below the line comments on his online articles any more. He said:

*The presence of that community of commenters and the attitude that the Guardian website takes – which is that that's as valid almost as the initial contribution that they've commissioned – is, I think, very dangerous to interesting writing.*

Although Mitchell hasn't been pushed on what constituted "interesting writing", what was clear was how personally he took the criticism. To remain sane, he said, you had to hope that if "you were really as shit as people say you are, you would be fired" and that continued employment is evidence that "you are not absolutely loathsome".

Mitchell isn't the only journalist to feel this way. His sometimes television colleague and fellow Guardian writer Charlie Brooker said in 2013:

*I keep wanting to ask to have all comments turned off. I think every columnist in the country would then applaud me ... I'd say that enabling reader comments is the worst thing to have happened to newspapers since ... since the last worst thing that happened to newspapers. I think there's a Letters page for a reason. There's plenty of room on the internet for people to say what they want, and where that isn't is tacked on the end of something somebody else has written.*

There is no doubt that "below-the-line comments" as a form of participatory journalism have transformed the relationship between reader and journalist. As Alfred Hermida has pointed out: "Journalists who have long cultivated a professional distance from their readers and sources find themselves integrated into a network into which the distances have collapsed."

## No more captive audience

For most of the 20th century, the journalist's position was unassailable: he or she collected and distributed information to the audience largely unchallenged. Now, the developments in technology mean that readers, either singularly or collectively, have the agency to comment upon stories and writers and to determine the flow of discussion. Put simply, the reader's role is no longer necessarily passive. The opportunity has emerged for the audience to engage with the traditional opinion makers and this engagement has clearly had both a positive and negative impact.

On the plus side, we can see that journalists are held to account. The once-omniscient columnist, so confident in his opinions and judgements, may have his arguments roundly supported, disputed, or critically examined by commenters.

They may expand upon a thread of the narrative: offer links which corroborate or contradict. Below the line we can see evidence of intellectual stimulation and the discussion of ideas: online posters do on occasion debate directly with authors, connecting and communicating in a constructive manner.

On the flipside of this are the spiteful, ill-considered and vindictive personal attacks that so many journalists face on a daily basis. Women such as Laurie Penny and Yasmin Alibhai Brown, who have written about their horrific experiences online, are the targets of sustained, it seems to me organised, abuse which appears below the line on almost every article to which they put their name.

Studies are beginning to emerge offering theories as to why people are capable of behaving in such a way. In the New York Times in March 2013, professors Dominique Brossard and Dietram Scheufele

argued that our emerging online media landscape has created a new public forum without the traditional social norms and self-regulation that typically govern our in-person exchanges.

This fits in with the “online disinhibition effect” developed by US-based psychology professor John Suler. This is a detachment from reality that some people achieve online that they consider to be distinct and separated from their obligations in their offline world. This “dissociative identity” is an enabler for people to go online and behave in a way that completely contrasts with their “real lives”.

## **Avalanche of vitriol**

So how do the editors cope with the avalanche of vitriol that seems to meet the publication of anything written by women or about feminism? Chris Elliot, the Guardian’s reader’s editor says that moderators spend a lot of time “weeding out” either off-topic or offensive comments in threads attached to any article loosely related to feminism or women’s issues.

*There seems to be a huge backlash against the Guardian’s increasing coverage of feminist issues, from more frivolous pieces (body hair, sunbathing topless, anything to do with Beyoncé) to pieces on domestic violence, FGM etc. WATM (what about the men) is now something we look out for on any piece about women as standard.*

To be fair to the Guardian, the terms and conditions to register for comments are spelled out quite clearly. Each commenter must: “warrant that the content you submit to us is not obscene, threatening, harassing, libellous, deceptive, fraudulent, invasive of another’s privacy, offensive, defamatory of any person or illegal”.

This being the case, what to make of this comment (posted during the writing of this article) concerned with an article arguing the killer of Ann Maguire should never have been named in the media?

*Somedays i think the Guardian can’t sink any lower then a young man kills a woman in a savage knife attack and planned to kill two others including an unborn child and they are on the side of the killer. He should just be thrown in a dungeon and left to rot.*

*The woman who wrote this piss poor article would soon change her mind if her mother was stabbed to death. It’s easy for these pathetic woolly minded Guardianistas to pretend how liberal they are by taking the side of a murderer but in real life he is nothing but a piece of shit to be forgotten by everyone.*

Whatever the debates about commenters and how best to ensure fair and balanced discussion, the genie cannot be put back in the bottle. For one thing is certain – while newspaper sales in hard copy continue to fall, visits to online news sources such as the Guardian and the Mail Online continue to rise. The latter has an average daily unique browser figure of nearly 11.8m and in 2013 it overtook the New York Times as the web’s most visited newspaper.

The point is, the more traffic which can be drawn to an article the more likely it is to attract advertisers and therefore generate revenue. The amount of reader's comments on any given article is a great (but not the only) indicator of audience interest and of what is going to attract advertisers.



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