

How effective curation of interactive spaces can bring readers together

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There are several ways of bringing and keeping a community together, especially of fostering communities around journalism and managing them through human interactions or automation. These were the focus of discussion at the panel “[Creating Community: How Effective Curation of Interactive Spaces Can Bring Readers Together](#)”.

What makes a community and what fosters it

[Greg Barber](#), director of digital news projects at the [Washington Post](#), defined the concept of community as “interaction among people, sharing of information, sharing of personal history and personal anecdotes.” “When connected to journalism,” Barber added, “we found out that this can be very powerful.” According to him, communities have been shaped by the mutual efforts of people as well as by journalists.

Algorithms can help fostering communities, said [Nicholas Diakopoulos](#), assistant professor at the [University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism](#). This happens in four ways. First, journalists should identify the automated tools that can help. Second, moderators should

apply very strict criteria when checking readers' comments. Third, experts should quantify the context of the users' stories – for example, how often they blog, or in what

sections they have written so far. Such quantifying context can give important information to the moderators in terms of what kind of people their users are. Last but not least, moderators should pay attention when users change their names when commenting on a certain article and think what this might be a signal for.

Community means being together, but not always

[Mathew Ingram](#), writer for [Fortune Magazine](#), explained that everyone aspires to “this sort of platonic idea of the community you want, a fictitious perfect community with perfect human beings that say things that are valuable.” But this never happens, he added. However, Ingram does not consider this as a drawback since in this way things can be seen from a different perspective. “We should be realistic when it comes to communities,” he concluded.

The interactive community

[Mary Hamilton](#), executive editor of audience at [The Guardian](#), explained that the interaction of communities lies in organizing relationships not only between the news organization and the users, but around the whole community itself. She also expressed how interesting it is for her the way communities drive interaction – how people build relationships there while they build their identity through this community.

Barber furthered that no matter the kind of community – long-term community, short-term community, or small community – they are all valid because “people get together for a moment”, they share the same space, know each other, and have already shared experience. They go there because they want to share their view on something or just oppose someone else's opinion, thus, creating different sorts of interaction.

Diakopoulos also explained that there are two main types of people in the space: those, around 80%, who want to engage but do not point at any specific data, and the other 20% who want to discuss the particular topic of the article, focus on data, and write specific and critical comments. Platforms have to give room to both types.

The relationship with the user

All guest speakers reiterated the necessity of journalists to communicate the value of the users' contribution. Even those people who only consume but never comment are valuable, Ingram explained. He furthered that the journalists' relationship with their audience is essential.

Journalists should be aware of what their readers want – they can do this by polls but the best way, according to Barber, is by open field comments. Another important issue in this journalist-user relationship is the avoidance of checking of comments on controversial topics – media outlets find it much easier to monitor comments on topics that no one cares about but “we don't achieve anything in this way,” Ingram explained.

Yet, the biggest problem according to him is that many journalists think that engaging with their readers is not part of their job – they believe that the moment they publish their article there is nothing more to be done. However, this is the stage where they should actually spend time reading comments – journalists should not forget that the relationship between them and their readers is the most important thing they have.

Diakopoulos furthered that more engagement can also lead to more subscriptions which can become an important incentive for cultivating business.

Barber added that it is even better when careful moderation practices are applied and journalists know their readers' behaviours so that they can predict what to do in the future.

“Moderating and engaging is fundamentally messy,” stated Ingram, “you have to put time and effort to do this, but it’s valuable to do it.” Barber agreed and highlighted that the solution is human participation – software helps, but it is connecting organisations with communities that matters.

Encouraging users to speak out

Hamilton stated that when it comes to people being anonymous on platforms, it is fine as long as they know what the consequences might be. For example, it is not acceptable when users “throw abusive comments on Facebook and Twitter.” Ingram continued that people tend to use fake names and there is no way for journalists to verify their real name unless they ask the people to send their passports. Diakopoulos furthered that when journalists force people to use their real names, they cut down readers.

People do not feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics, such as religion, with their real names since this can affect their lives – they can be ostracized by their religious community, for instance. In this case, journalists lose the most interesting people from the discussion, those who make it thrilling.

The effect of Facebook

All speakers agreed that Facebook cannot be ignored. Facebook, Ingram stated, has done a great job in creating a community where people desire to interact. Small media organisations have to make their communities, too, and make their sites more appealing to their users.

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