RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: WHAT TERMS AND CONDITIONS MODERATING READER COMMENTS TO AUSTRALIAN ONLINE NEWS SITES SAY ABOUT TRUST IN THE AUDIENCE

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Reader comments to online news websites have become an important part of civic debate and engagement since the advent of Web 2.0. Audience contributions in the form of reader comments are encouraged by most online news providers, as a way of creating strong audience communities and sustaining audience engagement. However, the extent to which participants can express themselves through reader comment sections is often constrained by the terms and conditions news organisations use to govern reader comments. Such constraints indicate a lack of trust from news organisations towards their audiences. At a time when trust in mainstream media organisations is waning and readership figures continually declining, a mutually trusting relationship between news organisations and their audiences is essential to the future of mainstream commercial journalism. This study examines the terms and conditions used to moderate reader comments on five Australian news websites, to assess what these conditions of use imply about trust towards the audience within these organisations. Additionally, public statements from each of the five news organisations relating to public trust in their organisations or the broader institution of news are also examined, to understand the expectations of public trust that each organisation holds.

Initially, it was hoped that reader comments to online news sites and other participatory spaces would come to represent a new kind of democratic public sphere (Dahlgren 2005; Gerhards and Schafer 2010; Papacharissi 2002). Yet, the inclusion of reader comments alongside online news stories has long been a source of contention among journalists and news organisations. Early studies of reader comment spaces found that most journalists did not interact with readers "below the line" of their articles (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Viscovi and Gustafsson 2013). More recently, however, some journalists, contributors, and publications have made an effort to interact with readers

"below the line", in an endeavour to foster a sense of audience community. Hosting reader comments can benefit news organisations by establishing a sense of online community, creating a loyal readership (Conlin and Roberts 2016), and extending the amount of time users spend on the organisation's website (Brost 2013, p. 109). Yet, reader comments can also be problematic for news organisations, and many fear the legal repercussions and potential challenges to journalistic authority that come with letting the audience "inside the gates".

The moderation of reader comments to online news sites and their repercussions for both audiences and news organisations has been studied extensively (see for example Braun and Gillespie 2011; Hermida and Thurman 2008). However, there is limited research examining expectations of trust by news organisations from their audiences, compared to levels of trust in audience participation these organisations show when moderating reader comments. This study employs critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) to analyse the terms and conditions governing reader comments to five Australian news websites – the *Advertiser*, the *Age*, *The Conversation*, *Crikey*, and *Guardian Australia* – to determine how each organisation's moderation policies reflect the level of trust afforded to their audiences. Public statements from each organisation relating to trust in their organisation or journalism more broadly are also assessed, to explore how the level of trust each organisation expects of the public compares to the level of trust extended to the audience when hosting reader comments.

Four of the five news organisations examined in this research publicly state on their website or through other communications such as annual reports that they value a strong relationship with their audiences. This is demonstrated in statements encouraging audience involvement (*Advertiser* 2018), endeavours to 'strengthen community' (Fairfax Media 2018), or repeated references to the importance of 'trustworthy' journalism (*The Conversation* 2018). Yet, each of these organisations exercise substantial control over the contribution of reader comments to their websites. For example, *Crikey* 'reserves the right to choose which comments we deem to be appropriate to be posted and discussed, and which are not', and 'the right to close conversations which descend into inappropriate discussion' (*Crikey* 2018). Such statements are highly restrictive, and demonstrate a significant level of distrust towards the audience. Furthermore, each of the news organisations examined state that comments that are considered to be 'off-topic' or that 'do not add to the debate' will be rejected. These vague stipulations convey a strong desire to dictate the terms of audience participation on these websites, rather than encouraging audience engagement and the development of a strong reader community.

Other mechanisms constraining audience participation through reader comments are the requirement of all websites to set up an account with varying identification requirements – from logging in with email addresses and social media profiles (*Advertiser* 2018, *Age* 2018, *Crikey* 2018), to stipulations that real names are required to comment and that comments made under aliases will be removed (*The Conversation* 2018). Additionally, the *Advertiser* (2018) and the *Age* (2018) impose character

restrictions on the length of comments. These terms of use are highly restrictive, and in the case of comment word limit restrictions, serves to inhibit substantial audience contributions and stifle debate.

A relationship of mutual trust between commercial news organisations and their audiences is vital to the long-term survival of commercial mainstream media in Australia. Yet, in contrast to their public statements of valuing audience and community engagement (*Advertiser* 2018 and *Age* 2018), and trust (*The Conversation* 2018), it is evident from the terms and conditions used to moderate reader comments that the organisations examined in this research continue to deny audience contributors to varying degrees the same level of trust these organisations ask of their readers. Consequently, despite early hopes that online reader comments to news sites may facilitate greater democratic participation for citizens, the potential for substantial democratic debate on the websites of the five organisations examined in this research remains unrealised at this time.

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