"What we write is used against us": The participants' views on tightened control in online debate after the Oslo terrorist attacks

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Abstract

This paper investigates the participants' experience of changes in the editorial control with online debate after the 22 July 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway. Through a large-scale web survey and in-depth interviews with a small group of respondents it is uncovered that a majority of the respondents experience a tightening of editorial control, and a reduction in their freedom to participate in the debate. The participants express suspicion and a lack of understanding of the moderation policies of the newspapers, indicating a need for the media organisations to improve the transparency of moderating practices towards participants. Furthermore, participants express a strong preference for being able to comment anonymously, and fear of potential repercussions if being forced to use their real names when commenting, indicating that taking away the possibility to be anonymous may curb participation in online debate.

Keywords

online debate; participation; moderation; editorial control; press ethics

The 22 July 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway constituted an exceptional national crisis, characterized as the worst incidence of violence in the country since World War II. This tragic episode led to a public debate about online discussion forums due to the perpetrator's internet activities and his distribution of a political "compendium" that was comprised of material written on extremist websites. The controversy brought forth a public re-examining of the core dilemmas regarding new forms of public deliberation and how they should best be administrated.

The starting point for our paper is that the media actively invites the public to participate in a number of services ranging from playful activities to journalistic content and online deliberation (Larsson, 2012; Singer et al. 2012). The dramatic increase in participatory services and deliberative forums has been followed by discussion, both among the general public and the media sector, about the level of and need for editorial control. On the one hand there is a participatory ideal that emphasizes 'openness' and 'democratization' and that indicates a low threshold for participation. An important reason for this is the belief in empowering the public to participate in the public debate, and particularly ordinary citizens who have largely been excluded from this arena. On the other hand there has been a competing argument that criticizes the decreasing degree of legitimate editorial control because it leads to a lowering of the quality of public debate (Barber, 2004; Bruns, 2008). Several studies have explored how different forms of intervention can be applied to impact the debate in a positive direction (Coleman and Moss, 2012; Edwards, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Kies, 2010; Wright, 2006; Wright and Street 2007).

The particular contextual contingencies in the aftermath of the terror attacks challenged normative ideals for participation and put established editorial practices under pressure. It presents a highly interesting case for the study of the conditions for online political debate. In an ongoing research project we have been investigating how four central Norwegian newspapers (*VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Vårt Land*) have handled these controversies after the attacks. Elsewhere we have shown how the three largest of these newspapers have moderately tightened the editorial control over their online debate systems, moving from what can be described as an 'anarchic' regime for debate in the direction of a more 'interventionist' regime (Ihlebæk, Løvlie and Mainsah, forthcoming). In this paper we investigate how the participants experience the online debate forums one year after the terrorist attack, and their view on editorial control. We have been particularly interested in exploring

participants' opinions on anonymity and moderation practices, the level of dialogue between the facilitators and the users, and the expectations of transparency in editorial decisions-making processes.

These questions have been examined through a web survey with 3470 respondents among participants in online debate forums, as well as in-depth interviews with 10 of the respondents. These data supplement earlier information gathered through interviews with editors and moderators in the four newspapers in our study. Our findings suggest that while editors and moderators claim that moderation policies have not changed significantly, participants disagree. A large majority of the respondents in our survey believe that moderation of online debate has become stricter, and that participants are less free to "say what they want". Furthermore a majority of the respondents feel that the limits for what they are allowed to write in the online discussion forums where they participate are too strict. This finding indicates a conflict between the participants' desire for greater freedom and the facilitators' need to comply with ethical standards as outlined in the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press, legal restraints based on editorial responsibilities and the limits of freedom of speech, as well as the newspapers' internal normative evaluations concerning acceptable online utterances.

Earlier research into Norwegian online debate (Ihlebæk and Ytreberg, 2009) has concluded that debate moderation is to a large degree carried out based on individual judgment and lacks transparency towards the participants. While one can argue that having moderators remove or edit contributions that do not conform to the guidelines of the discussion sites is a necessary requirement in order to make sure that the online debate meets the legal and ethical standards that the press is obliged to follow, it is not fortunate if this is done in such a way that the participants do not understand what contributions are removed, and why. Data from both the survey and the in-depth interviews confirm that this is a problem for the discussion sites in our study, suggesting that participants carry a large degree of misunderstanding and distrust against the moderators and editors. Of the 40% of the respondents to our survey who have experienced having their contributions deleted or edited by moderators, 84% claim that they could not understand why this was done. In both the survey and interviews respondents express suspicion that the moderation of online debate is motivated not only by neutral guidelines, but also by "political correctness" and censorship of controversial political views.

It is reasonable to believe that most participants, if they knew how, would prefer to phrase their comments in such a way that they avoid having them removed or edited by moderators – since the opposite would result simply in having their comments redacted. These findings therefore indicate that online newspapers that wish to reduce the amount of debate contributions that is in breach of their guidelines, and to improve the general climate for discussion, should try to improve the ways in which the practice of the moderators is made transparent and clear to the participants in the debate.

After the 2011 terrorist attacks it has often been argued that media organizations should curb the possibility to make anonymous comments in online debate, based on the belief that writing under one's full name would discipline participants into sticking to legal and ethical norms and reduce hate speech. A large majority of the respondents to our survey prefer to comment anonymously, and free-form answers indicate that many respondents fear that what they write in only debate can be used against them in other contexts. A small, but significant minority consisting of 10% of our respondents claim to have experienced "problems in everyday life" as a result of their participation in oline debate. The phenomenon is more prevalent among the more active participants, and free-form answers indicate that the problems experienced may range from "uncomfortable confrontations" in outside contexts like the workplace or other social settings, to threats of violence and criminal cases. These data indicate that removing the possibility to comment anonymously is problematic from the participants' perspective, and may need to be weighed against the danger of curbing participation in the debate.

Acknowledgments

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