

Professional Journalism, UGC, and Freedom of Expression

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Introduction

The Internet enables journalists to communicate directly with their readers on a scale previously unheard of, but few journalists see this as something to cheer for. This analysis of how Norwegian newspapers have dealt with the problems and opportunities of user generated content (UGC) will explore how considerations of media management and the professional norms of journalism are aligned in a joint interest in not using the new opportunities to their full extent.

A main object of Norwegian media policy is to '*facilitate freedom of expression and public debate in society*'ⁱ, and the press subsidies are one of the measures to achieve this, along with public service demands in broadcast licenses, and media ownership regulations (Ministry of Cultural and Church Affairs, 2001).

Norwegian press subsidies were introduced in 1969. This measure did not prevent the death of second position newspapers in a number of markets, however new ultra-local papers have been established, and Norway is still among the countries with the highest number of newspapers per capita in the world.

The Norwegian online industry is also unusual because it is dominated by newspapers. Of the top ten national sitesⁱⁱ, five are traditional news organizations affiliated to newspapers and broadcasters, with the online newspaper VG.no as the market leader. The other five are portals and search sites. Norway was among the first countries to connect to the network we know today as the Internetⁱⁱⁱ, and according to Jupiter Research^{iv} it is one of the most digitally sophisticated markets in Europe. 90 per cent of the population over 12 years of age has access to the Internet and 74 per cent are daily users.^v (Ottosen & Krumsvik, 2009).

Online media do not receive press subsidies, but the 2008/2009 financial crisis has affected both new and traditional media and led to a debate about the legitimacy of

press subsidies supporting newspapers only, not news sites. The legitimacy crisis of the traditional system of press subsidies in Norway due to how diversity of opinions increasingly are expressed in online media, might also be applicable to similar systems in other countries.

Studies of early computer-mediated communication looking at Internet Relay Chat and USENET interaction found that “[t]his discourse exhibits many characteristics of an oral culture”, even though the orality is exhibited in “literate forms.” This recreated the “immediacy of pre-literate cultures”, while “adding on space- and time-independence” (December, 1993)¹. As the World Wide Web became the dominant channel of Internet publishing, similar communication technologies were developed for mainstream media publishers to adapt as part of their World Wide Web product offerings. Technology allowed for more user intervention in the communication process, and new issues of ethics and brand identity arose as these vehicles of free speech from the “anarchistic” Internet culture converged with traditional publishing traditions.

The promise of this new opportunity became linked to the American Civic Journalism movement (also called Public Journalism), aiming to reform print and television journalism. Followers of this movement had used town meetings to involve the public in the journalism process. Now new technology made it possible for more users to participate. The labels of Citizen Journalism and Responsive Journalism are also used in the analysis of the different aspects within the general phenomenon of Participatory Journalism.

¹ December uses Walter Ong's (Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word,) characteristics of orality in his study, including: 1) additive oral speech patterns, 2) aggregative speech patterns, 3) redundant, copious discourse, 4) conservative, traditionalist usage, 5) the use of analytic categories to structure knowledge (to facilitate "apprenticeship"), 6) "agonistically" toned, or running high on emotion, 7) emphatic and participatory, and 8) situational rather than abstract view of things.

This journalism movement addresses the issue of detachment rooted in professional norms of objectivity and credibility. They state that this traditional detachment has created a “disconnection” between journalists and the communities they cover, with accompanying losses in the public life of those places. Traditional journalists counter that public journalism's willingness to weaken professional norms of detachment puts news media credibility at risk.

The roots of this evident disconnection between journalists and their readers are traced to the 1920s' philosophical debate between John Dewey (1859-1952) and Walter Lippmann. Lippmann asserted that modern life was too complex for the average American to understand, and he advocated governance by a technocratic elite whose actions were transmitted to the public by a press practicing a professional code of objectivity. Dewey responded that democracy's promise could only be kept by reviving the power of the public, by strengthening community life, and by informing and educating the public to this purpose. To Lippmann, the press function was dispensable. To Dewey, the press function was vital to this purpose and to the survival of democratic society (Bybee, 1999; Loomis, 2001; McMillan, Guppy, Kunz, & Reis, 1996). The civic journalist movement has redrawn Dewey's links between the ideas of press, democracy, and community.

The explosion in use of social media gives rise to new expectations among media users. They expect to be able to ask questions, and get answers. To be able to exchange opinions directly with representatives of the various media organizations. To be consulted on expert matters, and that information is updated and improved as soon as new knowledge emerges. However, journalists and commentators are skeptical. Basically, they seem none too thrilled by the prospect of being directly involved in

exchanges of opinion with the general public. What is published is published and new deadlines loom.

In the same way as newspapers struggle to transfer their old business models to new media channels, they are facing an increasing opposition to the communication methods of the old media. The electronic newspaper has served well enough as a transitional model, from old to new media, but the users have increasingly come to expect that journalists also make use of what the internet has to offer. Readers have come to expect interaction, and if news sites remain digitalized versions of old media, users will just move to other sites which make better use of the social web. This is the consequence of the transition from a supply managed publishing economy to a demand managed one. News and information are no longer a limited resource. And old branded goods are not necessarily as valuable as many people think.

The publishers of Store Norske Leksikon, a Norwegian encyclopedia, were sure that their branded goods and stable of experts were enough to oust the collaborative non-profit project Wikipedia with all its shortcomings and flaws. But that did not happen. This dynamic and constantly changing encyclopedia has lived up to user expectations in a better way than what the one put together by yesterday's authorities did.

Traditional media are increasing the use of commentators considerably. This is a relatively cost-efficient way of offering perspective on the news. However, this fast growing occupational group seems to a much greater extent to prioritize discussions with each other on prime time TV – or on Twitter, a social network still dominated by a small élite – than to take an active part in the web conversations and debate their articles spur.

Research question

This analysis of how Norwegian newspapers have dealt with the problems and opportunities of user generated content (UGC) when meeting the professional norms of journalism and considerations of corporate publishing strategy, and explores reasons for why traditional newspapers are not using the new opportunities to their full extent.

Literature review

As traditional newspapers and broadcasters are being analyzed as cross-media institutions (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2004; Moe & Syvertsen, 2007; Petersen & Rasmussen, 2007; Singer, 2004), and interest in technology and journalism practices have increased (Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Lund, 2003; Pavlik, 2001), a recent stream of research analyzes the “gap between, on the one hand, online journalists’ perceptions of the Internet’s potential and, on the other hand, the actual use of interactive features” (Deuze, Neuberger, & Paulussen, 2004). The network features and interactivity capabilities of the Internet were seen as triggers for a revolution bringing “a fundamental transformation” of journalism back to its original public service rationale (Pavlik, 2001, p. xi). However, surveys and comparative content analysis have demonstrated the lack of interactivity, multimedia, and participatory journalism (Kenney, Gorelik, & Mwangi, 2000; Matheson, 2004; Schroeder, 2004; Van Der Wurff & Lauf, 2005) in online news media.

Investigating how online journalists deal with interactivity in their daily working routines and the rationale behind the development of interactive options on online news sites, Domingo (2008) argues for the need to understand the underlying “technological utopianism” as a natural historical coherent to innovation. His case study of five Spanish newsrooms shows that the myth has proven to be very pervasive and constant.

Furthermore, news workers across the cases had a very homogeneous justification as to why their products had not yet developed all the promise of interactivity, blaming their lack of resources. The inertia of the traditional newsroom culture giving priority to immediacy shaped a production model unlikely to change despite being given more resources. Audience participation was perceived as a problem rather than as a benefit for the news product. The innovative edge of the online news operations was found in special coverage of events, outside the daily rhythm of work.

Boczkowski (2004) also states in his study of US online newspapers that materiality matters in online newsrooms. He found that they had merged old ways of print with the Internet's new potential in an ongoing process in which different combinations of initial conditions and local contingencies led to divergent trajectories. The online news ventures of traditional newspapers tended to proceed more slowly and in a more conservative fashion than in organizations less tied to traditional media. However, the cumulative transformation over two decades was found to be remarkable.

He highlighted the value of history, locality, and process in the study of new media, and emphasized the need to pay attention to the production process in order to avoid the risk of attributing either cultural or technological necessity to locally contingent outcomes. Remediation and interactivity were found to be enacted to varying degrees across three cases as a result of different combinations of the local contingent factors.

Organization and access to resources are also a central theme of other studies. Hjeltnes et al (2007), referring to Dailey et al's (2005) "continuum", found the online and print newsrooms in Norwegian media organizations to be integrated to varying degrees. Through case studies of four media organizations, Singer (2004) argues that cultural and technical differences and a lack of necessary training block convergence, while

Quinn (2005) argues for a “fundamental dichotomy” inherent in convergence journalism, whether news executives and journalists are embracing convergence for business reasons or to improve journalism.

A study of multimedia journalism and the role of online journalists at Cable News Network (CNN) and the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) demonstrated similarities in embracing the potential of the online platform. The main focus in both cases was the cross-platform distribution potential; the second focus was to create multimedia news packages containing several media elements. The latter may be a part of broader cross-media efforts in collaboration with TV. These roles do not challenge the self-understanding of what it means to be a journalist. However, when it comes to external links and online communities, this potential may be in conflict with the ideals and values of the journalists that give meaning to their work.

Despite the contextual dissimilarities of CNN and NRK (public service vs. commercial, Scandinavian vs. American, national vs. global, traditional terrestrial vs. cable and satellite, online pioneer vs. late starter, etc.), a strong degree of similarity in the findings indicates some level of decontextual general coherence (Krumsvik, 2009).

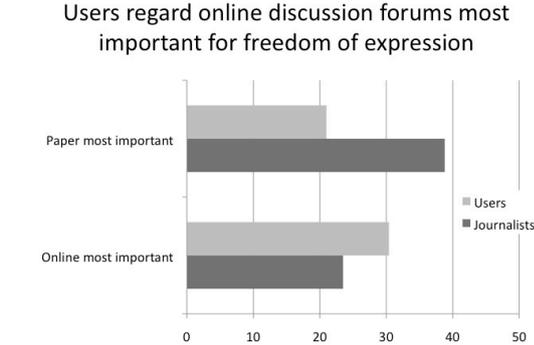
Methodology

Executives, journalists, and users of Norwegian online newspapers have been surveyed in 2005, 2007/2008 (See Krumsvik, 2006; Krumsvik, 2007; Krumsvik & Wang, 2008; Ottosen & Krumsvik, 2008, 2009), and 2009 as part of the Norwegian Online Newspaper Survey Project in cooperation with press organizations. In this paper the August 2009 results from a survey of 209 newspaper executives, and the July 2008 results from the survey of users of 20 local and regional news media and their journalists are the main basis for the analysis. 2,536 users and 282 journalists participated in the web surveys.

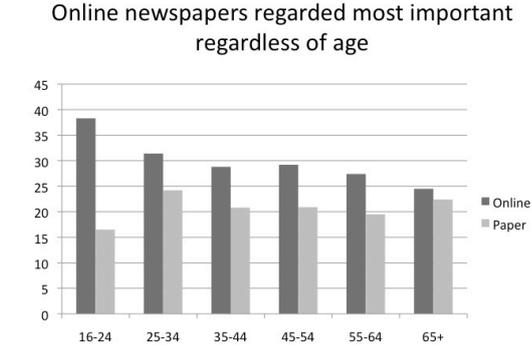
Data was collected by use of the Quest Back web survey service. Employees in media companies were recruited using e-mail, while users were recruited mainly from the online newspaper sites.

The results

The results from the surveys indicate that while users acknowledge the value of online discussion forums over traditional letter-to-the-editor sections of online newspapers, they are more skeptical to the journalistic content on the new platform. And the journalists producing the content are even more skeptical than their readers.



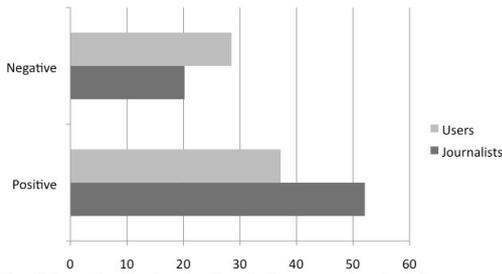
Question: How important do you regard the online newspaper's discussion forum is for freedom of expression (compared to the letters-to-the-editor section in the paper edition)?



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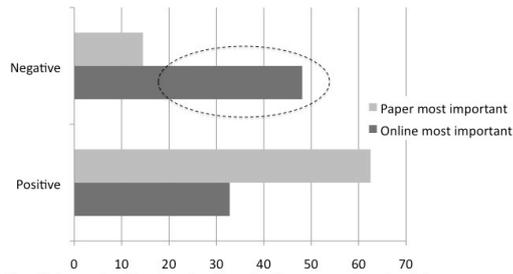
Users consider the online newspaper's discussion forums as a more important arena for exercising freedom of expression than traditional newspapers. This is true for all age groups, but especially younger users. The journalists regard the traditional channel as most important.

More users and journalists think pre-moderation is positive



Question: Today most postings in online discussion forums are not moderated before publishing. Will a change of this affect the importance of online debates in relation to freedom of speech, or will there be no difference?

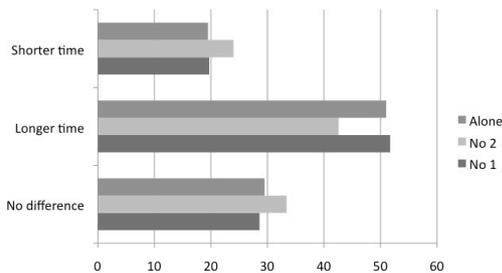
...however users viewing online as most important, regard pre-moderation as negative



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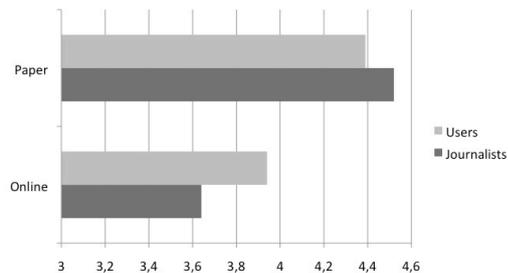
52 per cent of the journalists and 37 per cent of the users would welcome pre-moderation of online debates, while 20 per cent of the journalists and 29 per cent of the users were negative. However, among users regarding the online newspaper's discussion forums a more important arena than traditional newspapers for exercising freedom of expression, 48 per cent of users were opposed to pre moderation, while 33 per cent per cent were positive.

Second positions newspapers are less successful in increasing total time spent



Question: How have your use changed? Using shorter time/longer time/no difference on both versions in total compared with time spend on paper earlier.

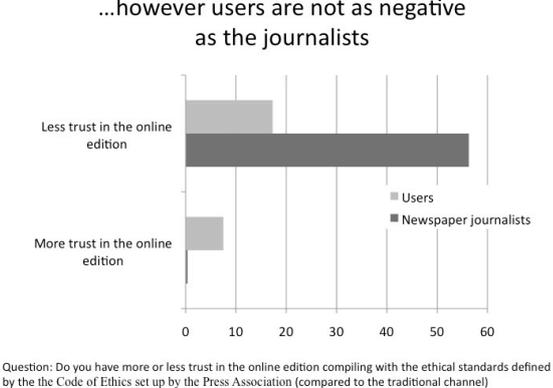
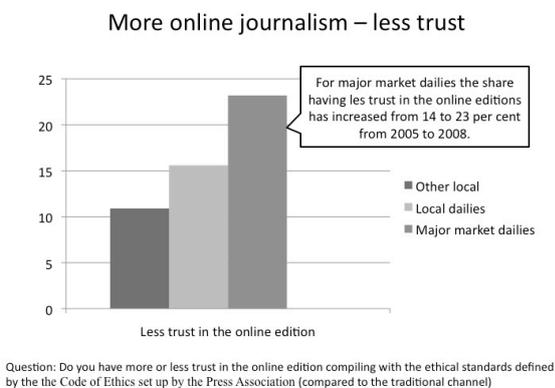
Journalists more content with the traditional channel



Question: In total, how content are you with the <newspapers> editions? Score 1 to 6 + not relevant

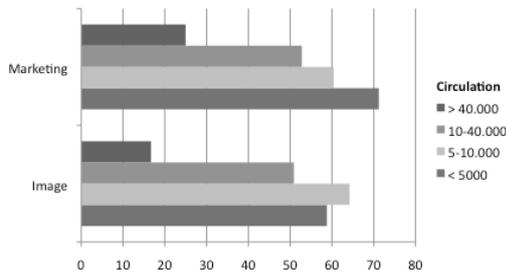
From 2005 to 2008, the number of users claiming to spend more time on the two channels combined than they spent previously on the newspaper alone has increased from a third to a half of the online users of local and regional online newspapers.

On average, the online product was regarded as inferior to the paper edition. In 2005, when readers were asked to grade general satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 6 (where 6 is the best score), the paper edition received an average of 4.2 and the online edition 3.7. Three years, later the paper edition was graded 4.5 and online 4.0. The differences were unchanged. And the critical group of young adults was least satisfied with the online newspapers.



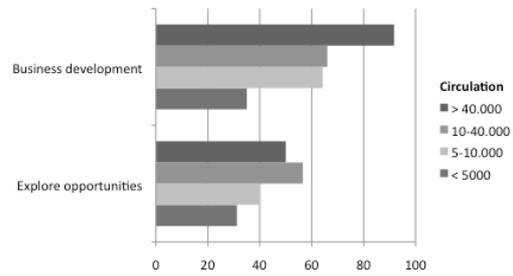
Findings suggest a correlation between resources used to develop the online edition and the perceived ethical standards of the content. More online journalism leads to a higher degree of skepticism among readers. For users of city dailies, the share of skeptics rose from 14 per cent to 23 percent between 2005 and 2008. And journalists are even more skeptical towards their own online product – while 17 per cent of users on average perceived the online standard as inferior to the paper edition, 56 per cent of journalists had the same opinion.

Smaller newspapers use the online newspaper for marketing and brand building



Question: What are the roles of the online newspaper?

Larger newspapers focus on business development online



Question: What are the roles of the online newspaper?

While larger newspapers want to explore the opportunities of the new platform, smaller newspapers view the online edition primarily as a place to promote the paper edition.

Managers in favor of pre-moderation are less content with the newspaper's online ventures, regression analysis reveals. Statements explaining how content newspaper executives are with their own online products are 'The use of the Internet represent an opportunity for the newspaper industry' (beta=.337), 'User created content should be moderated before publishing' (beta=-.228) and the opportunity to reach young users (beta=.160).

Discussion

Newspapers have been successful in developing the breadth of market service towards readers and advertisers through a portfolio of publishing platforms^{vi}. However the market leaders seem to have achieved the goal of increased total time spent on the brand to a higher degree than second position newspapers. This indicates the need for a solid resource base in order to develop the media portfolio for the future. It might however not be the only explanation. The press subsidy system also gives strong

incentives to put most efforts in the traditional channel, as the recipients piece of the pie is based on the circulation of the paper edition. Hence it becomes especially important for subsidized newspapers to avoid cannibalization by an online edition, and the role of online products in the portfolio of smaller newspapers tends to be promotion of the paper edition.

15 years after the introduction of online newspapers, they are still inferior to the paper edition both in the eyes of the users and the producers. The tendency to increased skepticism as more resources are used on online content should be worrying publishers.

This may have something to do with the fact that young and inexperienced online journalists, by having readily available access to statistics on how much web traffic each news article generates, can be tempted to produce articles that generate lots of traffic at the expense of both the story's and the brand's credibility. As Internet usage has reached critical mass, it is time to take the online edition seriously and implement quality standards in line with the brand values of the media house. This might affect both structures and processes of online news production, based on the strategic role of the online channel (Krumsvik, 2009). The even stronger skepticism among journalists indicates a need to improve the relationship between strategy, organizational structure, and the production processes. The outcome of the new press subsidy commission will tell us if the online channel still is seen as inferior even by the regulators.

The surveys also show that the user contributions in connection with online products are what worry the professional news producers the most. What stops journalists from taking active part in debates around the stories they themselves cover, is the professional norm of distinguishing between commentary and reportage. The journalist is afraid that by taking part in the discussion he will find himself in a situation

where this distinction is erased and as such the professional quality of the product is lowered and his objectivity is questioned.

The same deviation from professional standard may contribute to making journalists more skeptical to the media companies' own online publications than what the users are. The fear of cannibalization also plays a part here. Support for traditional channels such as print is in decline, and web distribution often gets more than its fair share of the blame for this.

While newspaper managers, editors and journalists worry primarily about how the professional content published online could cannibalize existing products such as print, they ignore the significant change in public attitude to the different channels' importance as debate forums. The professionals still regard the print publication as the most important arena for reader opinions. Here, they are completely out of step with the public: this study shows that the majority of online newspaper users, across all age groups, think that online debate is more important for freedom of speech and expression than what the letters to the editors print are. In the long run, this could threaten the legitimacy the print media privileges are based on.

Of those who think that online newspapers offers the most important forums for debate, there is a clear majority who think that the debate should not be moderated, i.e. the writings should be published as they are, without first having been read and approved by an editor. The majority of editors and journalists would prefer advance control, and tried to introduce this in connection with revision of Vær Varsom plakaten (the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press) in 2005. The revision committee proposed that to publish a comment without prior approval by the editor was to be regarded as a breach of press ethics.

Even if the proposal had been adopted, it would not have survived for long. The proposal did not get the amount of support required to alter the ethical code of practice for the press at this time of struggle between traditional press ethics and the established web practice. The main problem was, in regard to the press ethics, that the proposed practice would probably not be followed, and complaints would be ignored. That would weaken both the Code of Ethics and the self-regulating system and thus not benefit the industry.

The reason behind the proposal was a ruling by Pressens Faglige Utvalg (PFU), the Norwegian equivalent of the Press Council, criticizing Stavanger Aftenblad for waiting up to 48 hours at the weekend before removing a comment posted to its news site. The criticism was based on the following wording in the Code of Ethics: "Should the editorial staff choose not to pre-moderate digital conversation, this has to be announced in a clear manner for those accessing the pages.

The editorial staff has a particular responsibility, instantly to remove comments that are not in compliance with the Ethical Code."

In the Aftenbladet ruling PFU emphasized that comments in newspapers' debate forums fall under the editorial responsibility all Norwegian newspapers have agreed to uphold, and that the editorial staff must follow digital conversations closely. PFU's resolution thus transferred the handling of online debate initiated by the media from an established web industry practice to a legal minefield.

Anyone organizing debate groups and chat rooms on the Internet has primarily three options: moderated or not moderated – with or without active monitoring. One is, in short, either sender or organizer. For legal reasons it is not recommended to mix the models, and the users should be informed explicitly what regime applies. This is also reflected in the present Ethical Code.

A debate which is neither moderated nor monitored usually has a complaint button, thus enabling the users to call attention to undesired content. When this happens, closing the debate or deleting it must be considered, and if necessary implemented, for the newspaper to avoid being held responsible. This is the model used by the majority of online newspapers today.

In order to comply with PFU's demand to monitor this activity, the monitoring will in practice have to take place on a 24-hour basis. This demand was not followed up by the industry, and that led to the proposal of establishing a traditional editing regime:

“Digital expressions of opinion are subject to the same editorial responsibility as all other debate. Comments shall primarily be edited prior to publication, when technically feasible. Online discussions must be monitored on a continuous basis, and offending content must be deleted or blocked as soon as possible.”

The reservation of what is technically feasible refers to chat groups whose primary characteristic is that they take place in real time. They can be compared to live broadcasting.

In other words, press ethics have previously adapted to technical innovations, such as the possibility to broadcast in real time. Accordingly, it was intended that this exception from the requirement of pre-approval would continue, even though it is both technically possible and to a certain degree also practical to delay live broadcasting a minute or two in order to be able to interrupt the broadcast if anything untoward happens.

However, this pragmatic approach to technical innovations is brought to a standstill in the face of new media. The model behind the reasoning of the committee is that there is one sender, i.e. the editor, communicating with a number of recipients.

The communication potential introduced by internet technology is many-to-many conversations and one-to-one conversations.

Chat rooms are perhaps be the best example of this. These are open chat rooms where everyone can take part while at the same time conducting a private conversation with other chatters. The one-to-one conversation hardly comes under the editorial responsibility even if it does take place within the online newspaper. But where three or more are gathered together, the editor should be in the middle.

Pre-moderating these activities would, however, result in a delay unacceptable to the users, and the websites of the newspapers could be reduced to the classic one-to-many model. This was not a major problem for the revision committee arguing in favor of the proposed revision, saying that most of the “decent” newspapers have strict rules regarding online debates, that editors have not normally regarded themselves as café hosts, but have, on the contrary, been “society’s most influential moderators”. They do not wish to hand the publishing business over to a “street parliament”.

Norsk Journalistlag (Norwegian Union of Journalists) was in favor of the revision, Norsk Redaktørforening (Association of Norwegian Editors) was opposed to it. The lack of consensus for the proposal was largely due to practical and economic considerations.

Pre-moderating is costly and impairs the loyalty-generating effect. However, the current practice is not accomplished without due loss of sleep for many a responsible publisher (Krumsvik 2005; Lindholm 2006; Ottosen and Krumsvik 2008).

Why is this? One explanation may be found in how the journalistic role is defined. Nygren (2008) has defined the journalistic role by splitting it into four levels to clarify the concept. The most basic level is what journalists actually do in their everyday work. Then comes the silent knowledge based on newsroom codes and routines which can be

explicit or implicit. On level three we find the professional norms of the industry which are often formulated in a code of ethics to aid and guide journalists in their work. And finally we have the fourth level which is about the journalists' role in society as narrators of our times.

Communicating openly with the users is something else entirely. Journalists do not wish to do voluntary work for the further development of a dynamic story which is never going to be completely finished. Naturally, the story does develop, but the journalist wants to start his next work shift with a clean slate when the latest news is to be disseminated. The debate section can take care of public opinions. Direct communication with the users does not give the journalist a high standing in the newsroom unless it involves a tip which he or she can communicate to the world as a scoop. And unedited debates and other user-generated content are problematic in relation to the ethical codes of the press.

Although the café-host role might work well in creating a good atmosphere in virtual space, it is still not understood by editors and journalists as being a part of their professional role when dealing with the people formerly known as the audience.

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Notes

ⁱ Chapter 1.4.1. My translation.

ⁱⁱ International sites are not part of this ranking.

ⁱⁱⁱ NORSAR (Norwegian Seismic Array) at Kjeller was one of about 50 nodes of ARPANET in 1975. (Rasmussen, 2007)

^{iv} Jupiter Research: 'European Digital Life Index, 2005', EUH05-C01.

^v TNS Gallup, Consumer & Media 2009.

^{vi} For a discussion on media portfolios, see Picard (2005)