

Comments Policy Project

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How does our comments policy compare to what other publications and sites use? Find a range of policies to study.

1. The Missourian

- a. <http://www.columbiamissourian.com/p/missourian-comments-policy/>
- b. Why do we delete comments?
- c. When should people be able to be anonymous?
- d. What exactly is a personal attack?
- e. What obligation do reporters have to respond, and what is the suggested content of their response? Vs. When is it the responsibility of the Missourian?

Our policy is pretty transparent. We say that users need to register, and we explain what registering will entail. Many sites just expect you to register, but you don't know from the get go if that means a name, email address or just a user name. As far as discouraging and basically prohibiting personal attacks, derogatory remarks, offensive content, we don't differ much from other papers. The biggest difference is our requiring a first and last name that shows up with each post. There is no comments option on obituaries.

A conversation that we had with Executive Editor Tom Warhover indicated that there were strongly held beliefs on why a real first and last name was required of users. We posed the question, are there instances where allowing users to be anonymous would be a good thing? Even with hypothetical situations such as women in domestic abuse situations or union workers complaining about their unions, both of whom would prefer to be anonymous in order to express their opinions, the benefit afforded to those people would be overshadowed by the negative consequences of letting all users be anonymous. Using anecdotal evidence, Tom said that he believed that users that used their real names had a tendency to be more respectful in their comments than those with made up user names. He stated his opinion - as he has in columns in the past - that the comment section of a publication is a public forum, and people should conduct themselves as they normally would in the public eye. Accountability is key. Real people should be held accountable if their comments are offensive or derogatory in any manner.

2. The Columbia Daily Tribune

- a. <http://www.columbiatribune.com/help/comments/>
- b. <http://www.columbiatribune.com/comments/faq/>
- c. **Why do you allow anonymous comments?**
 - i. We encourage people to use their real names, but we realize that many people simply won't comment if that's a requirement. Besides, it's virtually impossible to guarantee people are using their real names, anyway. The vast majority of the anonymous comments make a significant positive contribution to the public dialogue, far outweighing any perceived harm done by allowing them. Removing them would greatly diminish the rich debate they spark for negligible benefit. In fact, we've found that when anonymous criticism pushes the boundaries of good taste, it provokes other people join in with equally vigorous counter-arguments,

leading to an overall positive outcome.

The Tribune takes an approach similar to ours; they require you to register under an account and have the same basic courtesy policies we have. Their biggest difference is their recognition that using a first and last name might discourage certain people from commenting. They are mostly concerned with not limiting contributions to the conversation, even if those contributions are not necessarily transparent.

3. The New York Times

- a. <http://www.nytimes.com/content/help/site/usercontent/usercontent.html>

The NYT includes a pretty lengthy FAQ about comments (“reader reviews”). They never explicitly say you need to use a specific type of name, but they do strongly suggest that users use their real name. It was like they were trying to guilt trip users into it. It is apparent that a registration process involving a viable email address is necessary. Like the Tribune and like The Missourian, they caution against and will remove comments in cases of libel, racism, offensive remarks and personal attacks.

4. The Huffington Post

- a. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/p/frequently-asked-question.html#moderation>
 - i. Personal identifiable information should never be posted to the Huffington Post comments section. It never turns out well for anyone.

This addition is a departure from other policies, and comes in direct conflict with our policy. While readers are encouraged not to misrepresent themselves or act as someone else, they are discouraged from revealing anything personal, which could be interpreted as a case for anonymity.

Mandie: I really LOVE that the Huffington Post has an option to “Fan & Favorite” comments and commenters: “On every comment, you can “Fan and Favorite” (F&F) users who are posting great content.” “**Q: What is the “Follow” link?**

A: When you find a commenter you like, you can press the Follow link next to the commenter's name. Your vote will appear on your profile page and on the profile page of that commenter. This way you can keep track of the commenters you like and those who like you. We are working on a way to alert you when your favorite commenters post new comments on the site.

Q: What does the “Favorite” link mean?

A: If you think a comment is particularly great, you can select it as a favorite. This will help us track the best commenters on the site.”

5. The Kansas City Star

- a. http://www.kansascity.com/terms_of_service/

The Star’s comments page was very hard to find, and labeled as a policy. Rather, it was under their terms of service, which is at the bottom of the site in very small type. The part about user conduct is surrounded by legal jargon, which does not really encourage anyone to read it. Once again, no requirement for a name or identifying information that would be shown to the public.

6. Indianapolis Star Tribune

- a. <http://www.indystar.com/section/communityrules>

Once again, this was buried in their terms of service which is almost invisible on the page, at the very bottom. Too much legal jargon, and the actual “communityules” are on another page entirely. You need a user name and password for an account, and you cannot act as someone else, but no need for a full name to comment or participate.

7. The Daily Herald

- a. <http://my.dailyherald.com/nfo/tos/#conduct>

Very much the same as the Star Tribune and other papers where the policy is in their terms of service. User name and account are required, but that’s all.

General Findings:

- **All policies discourage misrepresentation, but aside from moderation or active referral by another user, I’m not sure how they could keep up with this to monitor it.**
- **All the policies also warn against using profanity, libel and personal attacks. Interaction privileges can be revoked by most sites if people do not comply.**
- **Many policies, excluding ours, are almost completely hidden on the site in the Terms of Service, which I doubt any user would actually take the time to read. A pro to our policy is that we more clearly display ours, though it could still be more prominent on the site, especially given the importance we put on it.**
- **We are the most strict on the policy of using one’s own name. Some newsroom policies run directly contrary to this.**
- **Generally speaking, according to Sandra Davidson, lawyer for the Columbia Missourian, we are not liable for third party comments on our site. We are only legally held responsible if comments left by our own employees are crossing legal lines (such as being threatening or libelous), or our comments section is deliberately designed to illicit offensive comments, which it is not. All other commenting guidelines on a publication’s website are based off of the ethics of the institution.**
- **As far as following the policy, many users do. However, there are always some who get away without posting real names. Unless we are very vigilant, this is hard to keep up with. Just today (Wednesday) we received an email from a reader flagging another reader for not using a real name. Who’s responsibility is it to deal with this issue, and is it addressed regularly?**

Notes from Joy, 9/11:

Thanks, guys. This is a good start. So do you recommend we continue using the real names policy (I’m not sure that’s up for negotiation) but be more transparent about the fact that we

can't always know? Or continue on the way we are?

The second part of this will be figuring out what role the staff should play. We need some guidelines for our staff. Best practices. Good examples of jumping in, from us or from others. Also, should we post to or link to this on our Facebook wall? **NEXT PHASE DUE: MONDAY, OCT. 3**

Please read and chew on these posts:

<http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/digital-strategies/121664/a-5-minute-framework-for-fostering-better-conversations-in-comments-sections/>

<http://dashes.com/anil/2011/07/if-your-websites-full-of-assholes-its-your-fault.html>

<http://registercitizen.com/articles/2011/06/23/opinion/doc4e033c1f95474869823232.txt?viewmode=fullstory>

As a side note, check out how comments [contributed to the storytelling for us here](#).

REVIEWERS, START READING HERE

Mandie Kelly

Part 2

What should staff do?

For many of us, we think our jobs end once the story publishes. In an effort to help reporters not only lose this mindset, but also play a more active role in helping the community understand their content, they should be checking comments on their own.

- *****NEW***** All reporters should look at their stories and check the comments at least once a day for the first 48 hours after that story is published. If it is a more controversial issue, they should be checking more often and responding when necessary.
 - If the story is getting many comments over a longer period of time, reporters should definitely be monitoring more often.
 - Any time a staff member (and definitely a reporter) interacts in the comments, he or she should leave his or her name and position in the newsroom.
- Before a reporter responds, he or she should check with someone else in the newsroom to discuss their strategy (what do you mean by “strategy”? Is that about how to get what kind of conversation?) — be it a copy editor, city editor, ACE or member of the outreach team. More than one set of eyes should see the comment before action is taken. **These are a must for sure!**
- When to jump into the conversation:
 - When a reader (reasonably) disputes the facts of an article.
 - *****NEW***** Response: fact check, and then either correct the article if it

was wrong, or if the commenter was wrong, respond to them with the correct facts and how you got the information. Make sure reporters follow up when they've (the user?) responded. **Will we denote at the top of the article that we have changed it?**

- When a commenter mentions a piece of local news that we have not yet reported on.
 - The reporter should thank the user for the contribution and let them know they will follow up. We should always let users know we appreciate the information they give us. **But not just to say it...make sure we really do something before we promise it. The Syncare employees update for Tyeisha White on Facebook was REALLY embarrassing because we did not do anything for three weeks after she asked us about it. We need to be truthful not fake about what we're doing or not doing.**

Thursday or Friday (10/6 or 10/7) two reporters had worked on a story about the Occupy CoMo movement. They were receiving a lot of comments on their story, and while none of the commenters were disputing facts or mentioning news we hadn't reported yet, the reporters felt the need to respond. After discussing with Melanie, this was the result:

[Alison Matas](#) October 7, 2011 | 11:50 a.m.
Hi, my name is Alison Matas, and I am one of the reporters who worked on this story. I'd like to thank you for keeping the conversation going and invite you to share what this movement means to you by sending us an email at news@ColumbiaMissourian.com.

[\(Report Comment\)](#)

Do you think it's okay to encourage more conversation and comments and to thank them like she did? I think it is good but a little problematic that we were asking them to take their conversation elsewhere...if it's going on in the comments, let it live there.

- Example of a good contribution by a reporter:
 - <http://www.columbiamissourian.com/stories/2011/09/27/downtown-parking-task-forces-looks-parking-technologies/#c38741>
 - <http://www.columbiamissourian.com/stories/2011/08/25/school-board-approves-levy-adjustment/#c37612>
- Copy editors and members of the community outreach team are already instructed to view comments and remove ones that are inflammatory or violate our policy. Keeping the Django list of comments and commenters would help keep attention toward that. **What does this mean? I'm not sure I understand what you mean by a Django list of comments and commenters?**
- Anyone who deletes a comment should also remember to email that commenter and tell him or her why the comment was deleted and remind him or her of our policy. **Also, it's important to point out directly (words, phrases, etc), what about the comment was in violation of our policy. Many times when I have emailed a user to notify them their comment has been removed, I will pull out specific words that were in violation of the policy and direct them to which part it was in violation of.**
- Copy editors and outreach team members need to also be looking for commenters who don't use real names. Checking the Django file of registered users would help, as would just listening when readers chime in saying someone is not identifying himself or herself.
 - This has happened before, and the comments were not removed. **I think a lot of times, this goes back to the Django comments page in which the user**

name is what's displayed and not the person's name. And then when you click on the comment what we usually read is the actual comment and we don't pay attention to the name that's displayed in the top left corner of the individual comment until we look on it on site.

Comment Policy for users

Speak up and join the conversation! (<— LOVE THIS PART!) All you have to do is make sure to follow the guidelines outlined below and [register with our site](#). It's a great that we have a bit of personality and are more like a real person. I think it's encouraging to our users. Why can't the bare bones of our policy be below? How many people actually click and read through that meaty link? I'd rather have a summary right where I can see it so no one claims ignorance. That way it's in your face.

NEW

1. Avoid obscenity and lewdness We should define what exactly we mean by this. Or give a few examples and say here are some examples, but not it isn't limited to these. "Lewdness"=very Scarlet letter...is there a less stuffy way to say these words? I'm not sure...it sounds like we are living in the 1800s.
2. Use your first and last name on all comments As in...sign it? I think it is their username registry...but maybe clarify.
3. Avoid solicitation and promoting businesses I think it is important to say this! But, I wonder, we've had this a few times on Facebook in which someone posted something that was free and to benefit the community. So I am curious, what if it's something like that, I think it was a free gym class thing, and it's relevant to the story?
4. Avoid discriminatory language What does this include? Do we even need to say what we define this as?

We are not able to monitor every comment that comes through. If you see something objectionable, [please let us know](#). Our [full comment policy](#) is available if you have further questions or concerns.

...Wait, was the above part of your suggestion for what our policy should be like?? Because the link to our current policy kind of confused me. Also, you left out the part about "in other words, don't say anything you wouldn't otherwise say in public," and I am curious why it wasn't included and what you guys think about it? I know [Rick Gurley said something to this effect in his comment on Friday \(10/7\)](#). Also, the comments on this story may be of some interest to you guys in creating guidelines for comments.

- ***NEW*** While we both think the comment guidelines currently on each page are fine content-wise, they are displayed in a block of text that is not visually appealing. It doesn't really draw users to it. We liked how another site set theirs up by using larger numbers set off in a circle with the rules outlined clearly in a list. This would jump out at readers and alert them more fully to what rules they should be following. See example below. AHA! Yes...this is what I was talking about. I like.



Avoid obscenity, lewdness and personal attacks.



Avoid solicitation and promoting businesses.



Use first and last names on all comments.



Avoid discriminatory and racist language.

I really like this idea ^. I would be more willing to read this than I am with our current format.

*****NEW***** As far as Facebook, we both like the idea of being able to sign in with a Facebook username, but we realize this is not easily implemented [on the Missourian's website?](#) Our comment policy should remain consistent, and to remind users of this we should definitely link to this on our info page on Facebook. [Does this mean that our policy on our comments section on the Missourian site will also be implemented the same way and include the restrictions and limitations on the Missourian's Facebook page?](#) I'm curious as to why we would actually need a policy on our Facebook site? We have the ability to hide and keep hidden what we want at the click of a button. And, I thought the point of using a Facebook account as a means for commenting on the Missourian's website would be to discourage the exact things we listed out above because it would link back to the user's Facebook where all their friends could see what they were saying and would be discouraged to say anything they wouldn't want their friends and family to see. This kind of goes back to not saying "anything you wouldn't otherwise say in public." [Perhaps we can copy and paste facebook comments into Missourian comments. What do you think?](#)

I think we need to look over this a little bit more before we can move on with this, but I do like where it stands and where it's heading.

[Change some of the wording but, my goodness, this will make comments much better. Definitely the image thing. Move forward!](#)