

Eat Sleep Publish presents:



The Ultimate Guide to Newspaper Curmudgeon Talking Points

by Jason Preston, with help and submissions from:

Mónica Guzmán, Tim Windsor, Howard Owens, and Kyle Geissler

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1: “Comments are worthless vitriol and they degrade the work of journalists.”

This can be a tough one. It doesn't take long to find a comment thread gone awry on a newspaper's web site. Unfortunately for the curmudgeon, there is a wealth of evidence to prove them wrong.

The catch? These counter-point comments are often found on well moderated blogs that aren't at major newspapers. Which leads to curmudgeon point number...

1B: “Newspapers are totally different than blogs, so you can’t use successful blogs as examples for how comments have value.”

Step one is to point out the absurdity of their basic assumption: the people who read and comment on blogs are an entirely different group of people than those who read and comment on newspaper websites.

There are a lot of people online, sure, but there’s considerably more overlap than you might think. Often a blog that boasts a healthy, respectful, and intelligent troupe of commenters is different from a newspaper’s web site in ways that are far more significant than simple “blogginess.”

In my time helping clients craft social media strategy and engage with communities, these are some of the factors I’ve seen playing a large part in the civility of the comments section:

- **Hoisting comments**
- **Comments of the moment** (similar to hoisting)
- Bloggers regularly participating in their own comments
- Reputation systems
- Good spam filters
- Requiring users to register

1C: “Newspapers don’t have the resources to moderate comments.”

Yes you do. It’s called your readers. If you have an active and engaged community, and you have easy-to-use tools, your readers will alert you to comments which have gone off the rails.

When a post is flagged, that email should go to all your on-duty producers, one of whom will handle. It’s not perfect, but it will catch the most egregious problems 99% of the time.

Response contributed by Tim Windsor

1D: “Moderating comments opens newspapers up to legal problems that blogs don’t have to worry about. We will get sued.”

The general legal consensus is that moderating’s no problem. Editing, however, could bring legal exposure. So the answer is: don’t edit, moderate. Kill problem posts, don’t try to fix them. Boot problem users, don’t try to rehabilitate them.

Response contributed by Tim Windsor

2: "The internet can't replace the work of paid newspaper reporters! If newspapers die, so does democracy!"

The fundamental flaw in this logic is the assumption that citizen journalists are all unpaid. Many digerati forget to explain, in their rush of cyberenthusiasm, that when we talk about citizens worldwide effectively replacing newspapers, we are talking about thousands of entrepreneurs.

Sure, there are tons of people the world over who snap news photos with their cell phones and send them in to publishers, or occasionally volunteer their time in exchange for what amounts to cheap publicity, but the people that will be replacing the existing establishment are the journalistpreneurs who are willing to aggregate, edit, produce, and publish, in order to run a successful online business.

3: “Never link to your competitors, you’re just giving them traffic!”

In the old world of either-or, this made a lot of sense. Any time you promoted your competing paper, you were essentially encouraging your subscribers and readers to go pick up their daily instead of yours. Which is, of course, completely irrelevant online.

One of the largest problems that people have on the internet is finding things. People love it when you help them get to the good stuff, regardless of who produced it.

This is the logic behind many successful portals such as [Digg](#), [Metafilter](#), and many successful bloggers like [Robert Scoble](#) (geek tech blogger) and [Fred Wilson](#) (VC & technology blogger). How interesting would Fred’s blog be if he only wrote about his portfolio companies? Not very.

Consistently linking to your competitors best stuff is a great way to become recognized as the leading authority in your space. Ironic, isn’t it?

4: “Social media is a fad. Investing in it now will be a waste of time and money when it all goes bottom-up.”

Get the name of the person saying this. Chances are you can find an email authored by him in 1995 arguing that “cyberspace” was a fad, too.

Contributed by Tim Windsor

“Social media” is just the latest buzz term ... but online communities go back to the 1980s and and BBS systems. If “social media” is a fad, it’s a 30-year-old fad. As long as there have been digital communications, there have been communities of “friends” who connected through it.

The curmudgeon meme also ignores reams of demographic research that shows that millennials are more socially aware and connected than not only GenXers, but even Baby Boomers.

Contributed by Howard Owens

5: “There is no online business model.”

While there isn't a profitable online business model for newspapers yet, there are a whole lot of companies that are building big revenue streams online, many of them doing content production.

TimeWarner is making big moves to be in the content business, not in the distribution business.

Newspapers may not have hit the holy grail yet, but there are a number of **valid business models** being explored, and sooner or later one of them is going to start working.

There are more eyeballs reading your work now, more than ever before, thanks to the Internet. Your work has tremendous value.

There is a business model. The Web site is making money. With all of the people interested in reading your work, there will always be a way to monetize it.

Contributed by Kyle Geissler

5B: “People should pay; our journalism has value.”

Yes your journalism has value, and what’s more, someone is paying: advertisers.

The reality is, of course, that what people have always paid for is a physical good (paper in the hands, book on the shelf, magazine on the table). The fact that the publishing system managed to pay your salary was more or less a side effect.

Fortunately (yes, it is fortunately), you can’t simply scold consumers into paying for your journalism. If consumers think it’s not worth paying for, your options are: change the product until it is worth paying for, or find someone else to foot the bill. There’s no profit in moaning about how ungrateful your former customers are.

5C: “We’re trading analog dollars for digital pennies.”

Technically speaking, this is true. But it’s not necessarily a bad thing. Coinstar built a ludicrously lucrative business by taking a few pennies out of each transaction. PayPal works because every time money changes hands, they get a cut. Google makes bazillions (yes, I meant to say “bazillions”) of dollars every year by shaving a percentage from the cost of each ad they serve.

Advertising online is a **volume business, not a margin business**. Making “analog dollars” worked well when you had a captive advertising audience and you could justify it with high costs. Those conditions just don’t exist anymore, and that money supply is dwindling.

Personally, I’d rather have 20 million pennies than 100,000 dollars.

6: “Corporations have ruined journalism; newspapers should become charities.”

Corporations have done surprisingly little to ruin journalism. The only industry that is under as much scrutiny as the government is the news industry itself, and there are countless barriers that have been erected between editorial and advertising, doing a good job of preserving editorial integrity.

Corporate leadership is another matter. There’s plenty of blame to be shared by the strategic planners in the newspaper industry, but innovation is often spearheaded by the business world, and nobody on Wall Street is going to reward newspapers that continue to roll down the same dead-end path.

7A: “A blog is not a tool for journalism, it is for people in their pajamas writing about their cats from their basements.”

Whoever you are talking to is suffering from a very common misconception about **what blogging is**. They are conflating the content with the medium.

In other words, a blog is really just a publishing platform that makes it really, uncannily easy to share things on the internet. It can be used for journalism as easily as it can be used for talking about cats or for sharing tips on how to live well.

With the advent of blogging, the definition of a journalist has become rather murky. When anyone can commit an act of journalism at any time, do you really need to be employed by a news organization to be a journalist? Of course you don't.

That might rankle you a bit. But it won't go away if you ignore it.

7B: “Citizen journalists suck. They NEVER do any reporting.”

To conveniently counter this claim, you need to rely heavily—oh hell, you need to simply print out—Rosen’s piece from the LA Times titled **The journalism that bloggers actually do**. At the tail end of that article you’ll find a convenient and lengthy set of links that point you to all kinds of journalism happening in the citizen-blogsphere.

Of course, citizen journalism isn’t all about reporting and fact-gathering, either. I don’t think that citizen journalists are out to get traditional journalists; in fact, the vast majority of citizen journalists are probably better at interpreting news than uncovering it.

Reporters who are well paid to do the difficult digging should see citizen journalists as a resource and a boon, not a threat.

7C: “Citizen journalists suck. They’re biased! They have opinions and everything. Act like they own politics.”

What? Opinions? How dare they! The advent of blogging has allowed—probably encouraged—the conflation of factual reporting and opinionated pontificating.

The internet is a far more personal publishing platform than its standard ink-and-paper predecessor in that an unedited writer is free to provide both their reporting and their opinions.

Columnists often mix their reporting in with their opinions. It’s their job, after all. Citizen journalists are successfully challenging the notion that an accurate reporter needs to be publicly unbiased.

Everyone has opinions, and no matter how hard anyone tries, it is virtually impossible to prevent those attitudes from having an effect on their writing. One might argue that publicly stating your opinions acts as a helpful and appreciated disclaimer for the increasingly skeptical consumer.

8: “I don’t need to learn anything about online because the fundamentals of journalism are about good reporting and good writing, not which social networks I join.”

Good reporting means good listening. And good listening means being connected online. Real world engagement without online engagement is no engagement at all.

The online conversation is not limited to certain areas or certain people. It is not inferior. It is illuminating. Ignore it, and as journalists we secure our path to antiquity and irrelevance.

Contributed by Mónica Guzmán.

The Contributors

I did not build this e-book on my own. It started as a collection of talking points inspired by some [tweets from Jay Rosen](#). I posted the ones I could think of, and I answered the ones that I could, but this list would not be complete without the help of everyone who sent in contributions to the original post:

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Jason Preston writes about the future of publishing at [Eat Sleep Publish](#), a blog dedicated to exploring the challenges and opportunities facing the publishing industry.

You can learn more about how newspapers, books, and magazines are adapting to online publishing by signing up for the [Eat Sleep Publish RSS feed](#).

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