Member Comments on a Local Newspaper Website: The Challenge of Moral Action in the Mediated Public Sphere

Eric E. Peterson and Kristin M. Langellier

(peterson@maine.edu, kristin.langellier@umit.maine.edu)

In a time of globalization and technological change, there are renewed calls for consideration of what constitutes moral action by communicators in the mediated public sphere. The "comments" section found on most local newspaper websites is one example of how the mediated public sphere can serve as a kind of "communication commons" for a community. The often volatile and vociferous nature of such comments illustrates the challenge for moral discourse posed by online interaction. Roger Silverstone (2007) describes three obligations for communicators in a mediated public sphere. The communicator, he argues, is responsible to construct a proper distance which does not reduce the other to a spectacle and that recognizes the other in oneself as well as in the stranger. Second, communication involves the responsibility to listen and welcome the stranger – what he describes as a freedom to be heard which complements a freedom to express. Third, moral discourse obliges the communicator to be truthful.

In this essay, we discuss each of these three responsibilities for communicators and then illustrate them by analyzing a recent case of reader comments posted to a local newspaper website hosted by the Lewiston *Sun Journal,* sunjournal.com, regarding the deportation of a local Somali resident. In the news story, "Lewiston Cafe Closing Due to Owner's Pending Deportation," staff writer Bonnie Washuk (2012) reports on the upcoming closure of a popular Lewiston restaurant, Three One Café. The owner of the café, Mahamed Mahamud, faces deportation because he was not granted asylum and his temporary work permits are no longer being renewed. The news story describes Mahamud and his family and their citizenship status (the two youngest children were born in the U.S. and are citizens, while he and his wife and oldest child are not), the difference between refugees and asylum-seekers, comments from community members on the popularity of the café, and reflections by the owner on his situation and future plans. There are 25 reader comments following the online story; all but one posted in the first two days of its publication. In addition, the news story was picked up and posted under Washuk's byline to the *Bangor Daily News* website, bangordailynews.com, where it drew 146 comments in the first two days of its publication.

Proper Distance

The first moral obligation for communicators is to construct what Silverstone calls "proper distance." Silverstone (2007) takes a phenomenological orientation to the concept of distance by defining it as that which "separates one being from another in the face-to-face encounter" (118). At first glance, newspapers appear to be an obvious illustration of the way in which mass media are understood to transcend distance and bring the events of the world within view. By reading the newspaper, we learn about actions, events, and people outside our immediate situation and local community. The Internet surpasses broadcast media in this area, as common argument would have it, because it reduces barriers of access and physical distances between individuals, communities, and societies.

However, Merleau-Ponty (1964) reminds us that the lived-experience of distance is not unique to newspapers and mass media, but inherent in the operation of perception. As Merleau-Ponty comments, "the taste for news items is the desire to see, and to see is to make

out a whole world similar to our own in the wrinkle of a face" (311). Our vision, whether in making out the wrinkle in a friend's face across the kitchen table or a wrinkle in diplomatic relations around the world, both renders us present and keeps us distant. In order to see something, in other words, we cannot be positioned too close to or too distant from it; in such situations the subject of our interest will not come into focus and eludes our sight. Merleau-Ponty summarizes the operation in this way: "Seeing is that strange way of rendering ourselves present while keeping our distance and, without participating, transforming others into visible things. He who sees believes himself invisible: for him his acts remain in the flattering entourage of his intentions, and he deprives others of this alibi, reducing them to a few words, a few gestures" (311). When readers look at strangers and events in news items, they join with the efforts of reporters and editors to bring something into view, to make a collection of facts into a story, and to understand what happened. The simplicity of the news item masks the complexity of its operation in making something visible. As a consequence, Silverstone argues, news reports most often result in "an absence of context, an overdependence on the immediate, a collusive oversimplification of the complexity of the event" (120). Silverstone focuses on the importance of context as a key component in constituting a proper distance that is at the heart of our relations with others.

What kind of context is created in the online comment section that follows a news story? Traditionally, newspapers in the U.S. have described themselves as part of "the marketplace of ideas" that stimulates public dialogue at the heart of democratic process. The letters to the editor section of newspapers are a key part of this claim to foster an open public forum that serves the ideal of a deliberative democracy. With the move to the Internet, where there are few limitations on the number of reader letters that can be published, newspapers celebrate online comments as furthering the democratic ideals of free speech and free assembly. For example, in a column introducing the new requirement that as of February 1, 2011, all online comments must be accompanied by real names, *Sun Journal* Executive Editor Rex Rhoades (2010) claims "both our website and print newspaper are, in fact, like a town meeting or community

gathering." He opens his column by describing the well-known Norman Rockwell painting, "Freedom of Speech" (published in *The Saturday Evening Post* issue of February 20, 1943), which depicts "a man wearing a flannel shirt and a worn jacket standing among a group of seated adults." Rhoades continues: "It is a classic New England town meeting, the purest form of democracy, one man, one voice, one vote, citizens debating other citizens." The online comment section, from this perspective, enlarges the possibilities for democracy by creating, as stated in the subheading for the column: "a bold, new electronic community."

The metaphor of a "town meeting" or "community gathering" implies a specific social context with particular communication relations. These meetings and gatherings take place in familiar settings, typically in public buildings, with a shared history of use and care by community members. There are formal and informal rules regarding who can speak at these events, on what subjects, in what order, for how long, how frequently, and so on. If a participant fails to abide by these rules, then a host or meeting chair will intervene, such as when a town official reminds a speaker to limit their time or to restrict their comments to the issue at hand. The real name requirement for commenting on the *Sun Journal* website can be seen as moving toward the regulatory rule of speaker identification found at community meetings and gatherings whether practiced formally (such as the requirement for speakers to identify themselves and their place of residence at a town meeting) or informally (such as a participant at a community gathering who asks her neighbor to identify someone she does not recognize).

But in other ways, the online comment section of the *Sun Journal* website can be seen as moving away from the proper distance and obligations of hospitality found in a town meeting or community gathering. For example, in the statement of the *Sun Journal*'s "Commenting Policy," Web Editor Patti Reaves (2012) asks commenters to "keep your conversation respectful and on topic," a discourse expectation that is shared by town meetings and community gatherings. However, after listing problematic types of discourse that commenters should avoid (such as libelous, abusive, vulgar, racist, and threatening statements), she concludes by stating "because we cannot and do not monitor every comment, we rely on other members of

our community to speak up when a user violates this policy." Thus, unlike the prototypical town meeting and community gathering, the online comment section has no host. This lack of a human moderator leads Silverstone to conclude that the Internet, despite its language of home-pages and hosting, substitutes the technological for the human and "fundamentally undercuts the humanity of the relationship of self and other, without which hospitality in any of its forms cannot be considered as effective" (142). Silverstone takes up Derrida's argument on ethics when he states "there can be no hospitality without a home, a place of welcome and in it someone who welcomes" (142).

Silverstone is making two interrelated points about proper distance here; for action to be moral, as well as just, requires 1) that action be about the person and not relegated to an institution (the newspaper) or a collective (such as other newspaper readers) and 2) that action cannot be regulated by procedural rationality alone (such as cultural expectations for dispassionate debate, reason, and civil discussion). Moral action, Silverman argues, cannot be

> displaced onto the institution, onto procedure, into regulation [for] then the connection between person and person becomes disturbed and attenuated, and it loses its force. This is the argument behind my sense that the internet cannot in an uncompromised way be a host. [. . .] In each case this is not just a matter of the inevitability of loss, the impossibility of perfection, but the intervention of technology and procedural rationality into the process, and its capacity to undermine what it protests it is protecting. And above all, it is the problem of distance and distancing: the material distance of spatial separation and the political distancing of procedural rationality. (151)

An example of how this displacement fails to constitute moral action is illustrated by a pithy exchange in a comment "thread" that takes place on bangordailynews.com following a "guest" post (March 14, 2012) that states, "There will be some culture shock for sure... Pirates could use a few strong hands... As michelle obama once said Somalia is right next door to Obama's home country, Kenya.. (-;"[sic]. After two more posts in a similar vein in the thread

(one of which was removed as "flagged for review"), Alyce Ornella posts the following comment: "Seriously BDN, seriously? Are your moderators on coffee break?" This thread of comments illustrates the problem of institutional hosting as well as Silverstone's concern for the second obligation of responsible listening.

Responsible Listening

The second obligation, responsible listening, emerges from Silverstone's conception of hospitality. For Silverstone, "welcoming the other in one's space, with or without any expectation of reciprocity, is a particular and irreducible component of what it means to be human. Hospitality is the mark of the interface we have with the stranger. [. . .] Hospitality then becomes intertwined with the requirement not just to let the other speak but the requirement that the stranger should be heard" (139). Freedom of speech, therefore, must be accompanied by responsible listening (Geissner, 1995). As Silverstone clarifies, rights-based approaches "protect the individual's rights to express an opinion but not necessarily to communicate. They do not require an audience, do not address the conditions under which someone who speaks can be heard. This is the nub of the issue. The rights to self-expression, vital though they are, do not need to take into account the social context which may or may not make them possible; they are only concerned with not violating someone else's similar right to freedom to communication" (156). Following Silverman's argument, we can ask two kinds of questions about the nature of the social context for online comments: first, what is the nature of the audience and, second, how well or responsibly does the audience participate?

Existing research on letters to the editor in print newspapers suggests that the letter writers themselves are not characteristic of newspaper readers as a whole. Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) summarizes this research by characterizing the views of citizens who submit letters as "both more extreme and more strongly held than those of the population as a whole." As a result, she concludes that "the letters section, far from being a microcosm of a diverse society, and a forum for the voiceless, appears to be dominated by groups with relatively narrow range of interests" (91). Unfortunately, there is little research on the audience for online comments. However, what evidence there is

would suggest that this asymmetry of participation extends to the Internet as well. The so-called "1% rule" of Internet participation, for example, suggests that most people are readers (or "lurkers" in Internet terms) and not part of the 1% that create content. To put this issue in context, 15 writers posted the 25 online comments to the *Sun Journal* story and of those, 40% were posted by two writers. Contrast that number with the overall readership of the *Sun Journal*: the newspaper reported a print circulation of 31,162 in 2011 and an average of 650,000 (non-unique) visitors to the website each month (by comparison, siteanalytics.compete.com reports a monthly average of 167,245 unique visitors for the last year, as of June 2012).

Despite the *Sun Journal* claim that "the advent of the Web has given us powerful new ways to connect people and allow anyone to become an active part of every discussion" (Rhoades, 2010), few readers participate. The lack of participation suggests there are multiple constraints that keep audiences from becoming active contributors. Some of these constraints are particularly salient for immigrant groups such as Somali Americans living in Lewiston: these include, for example, access to computers and the Internet, the discursive competence and cultural capital needed to participate, adequate time to read and respond to newspaper stories, the amount of effort with respect to perceived benefits, and fears of retaliation by extremist members of the majority population. Reader (2005) describes the ethical situation in blunt terms: "the 'New England town meeting' editors claim to provide their letters forums is a myth, and in reality the forums have become places where only those comfortable enough to sign their names may stand up and be heard and where the voiceless can only watch in silence" (74).

The second question on the quality of participation – do online comments demonstrate responsible listening? – is equally complex and troublesome. Again, there is little existing research that describes how readers experience and understand online comments. What research does exist tends to focus on journalists and contributing readers (the active 1%) but it suggests that most people do not view online comments as civil and thoughtful discussion. In a survey of reporters, Santana (2011) points out that "most (64.8 percent) reporters either

'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that the online comments promoted civil, thoughtful discussion" (75). This research is consistent with the results of interviews Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) conducted with newspaper editors in the San Francisco area about their print editions: "When you ask editors, the problem of securing a diverse and polite discursive environment is one of their worst headaches." She continues, "the main problem editors face is simply that of getting everyone who wants to argue to speak their opinions politely and respectfully" (93).

Rhoades (2010), in describing the problem with anonymous comments on sunjournal.com, points out that "some comments have been factually incorrect, reckless and mean-spirited." However, even the move to require commenters to identify themselves does not eliminate problems with so-called mean-spirited comments. Consider these two comments from "verified users" of sunjournal.com. The first comment is from Gary Savard (March 14, 2012), who builds on an earlier post by another commenter and goes on to state that "Our office used to be in the Dube Travel building next door to Mahamud's establishment, and he is a personable, apparently self-supporting man. He gets bounced out of the Country, while we keep our doors open to folks that are only here because we are stupid enough to support them." A similar sentiment is expressed by Brian Allen Small (May 30, 2012): "If he was here collecting benefits every bleeding heart organization would spring into action to help him This is the end result of what happens when a man wants to work and pay bills Hows that Hope and Change working out for you all?" [sic]

While a detailed content analysis of these comments is beyond the scope of this essay (but see Atkin & Richardson, 2007, for an example of such work), they do provide support for Wahl-Jorgensen's (2001) conclusion that the letters section is not so much a site for dialogue or debate about public issues but, instead, privileges "an exhibitionist mode of interaction, as a site for individual display" (312). Hlavach and Freivogel (2011) concur that such discourse functions divisively "to build isolation and disunity, creating a sense of 'me/us' versus 'them'" (30). The justification for this exhibitionist mode of discourse comes not in the normative claim of contributing to the health of the public discourse. Instead, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) locates the justification as primarily

economic. That is, the letters to the editor section in print newspapers – and, we would add, in online comments – enact "the twin strategies of enhancing credibility in the eyes of readers and increasing circulation" (129). Online comments, in other words, do not demonstrate a moral commitment on the part of newspaper organizations to public discourse. Rather, they provide a way to profess a "sincere interest" in the opinions of its readers by allowing them space for commentary and, at the same time, to use these online comments as a "hook" to encourage readers to visit the site and thereby increase site traffic and its attractiveness to advertisers.

Truthfulness

The third obligation of moral discourse concerns the production of truth. Silverstone describes the obligation in this way:

> The production of truth is a matter of both accuracy and sincerity. It involves a commitment to make sense of the world, and notwithstanding the cultural variation between what that might mean, as well as cultural differences between what truth itself might mean as well as might be, this making sense is a common, perhaps universal, component of truth telling. [. . . .] And when it comes to the internet the challenge is the familiar one of how to distinguish truth from falsehood, to separate sincere and accurate reporting from gossip, and how to break free from the solipsism of the private conversation. (159-160)

The focus on truth telling has been a central concern for practicing journalists and associations of professional journalists. For the most part, this concern has focused on issues such as representation, objectivity, fairness, and accuracy of reporting. While most participants in online comment sections do not have training in journalism, their discourse does show evidence of a concern for truth telling. For example, in the comments following Washuk's article on sunjournal.com, readers raise questions about the meaning of specific terms used in the news story (such as asylum, undocumented, refugee, and immigrant), legal process, public policy on immigration, and social support programs. Such discussions can be seen as attempts to correct the problem of an absent or abbreviated context that typifies news reports, as described by

Silverstone's discussion of proper distance. Reader comments often call for more information. For example, in the discussion of the sunjournal.com story, Mike Lachance (March 15, 2012) adds the following caveat to his agreement with another post on immigration policy: "it would still be good to know the details though; the article is lacking in substance in this area." This type of discussion suggests one way in which online comments can be seen as contributing to improvements in practice of reporting and editing by making explicit the problems of comprehension and interpretation among actual readers. Santana (2011) describes this impact on journalistic practice: "Reporters speak of how readers have essentially made them work harder and be more accountable. From seeking out more sources and facts to heeding word choice and sentence construction, reporters are changing the way they do their jobs. Just over half of the reporters who responded said the forums have prompted them to change something" (77).

There are a range of established procedures and practices among journalists to address the problem of distinguishing truth from falsehood in news stories. However, as the above quote from Silverstone suggests, these practices and procedures do not necessarily carry over to the online comment section where readers may assert rumor and second-hand accounts as self-evident truths. The extent of this problem is demonstrated by the large number of posts made to a 2007 incident involving Somali American students at the Lewiston Middle School. Judith Meyer, the Managing Editor of the Sun Journal, took the unusual step of posting a column to address the problem of circulation of "rumors and myths" in online comments following the news story. Meyer (2007, April 29) describes the problem in this way: "the preference of a small, but vocal, group of people to latch onto fiction instead of relying on fact has been a constant frustration for city officials, educators, business owners and others in the Twin Cities" [of Lewiston/Auburn]. She goes on to list and refute a series of unfounded assertions or "myths" taken from these comments. These myths include claims that Somali immigrants get free food, free cars, free drivers' education, special welfare treatment, extra school funding and housing, to name just a few. Another example of an attempt to address the problem of truth telling is found on Catholic Charities of Maine website where

Ahmed, Besteman and Osman list "The Top Ten Myths About Somalis and Why They Are Wrong." The obligation to be truthful, Silverstone cautions, is not an assertion that there is a single, simple, or unambiguous truth, but rather a commitment to truthfulness in our accounts of the world.

To say that the circulation of rumor and "myth" is fiction, as Meyer's column does, mistakes and misstates the problem of the obligation to be truthful. The obligation to be truthful cannot be resolved by opposing fact and fiction – although these "fact-checking" efforts are to be strongly commended. What readers are attempting to do by circulating these "fictions" in their comments – whether well-intentioned or not – is to situate the news story in a larger context. They are not acting as "citizen journalists" but as interpreters of the news story. If asked, it is likely that they would claim to be speaking a larger truth. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) reminds us by contrasting the truth of the novel ("fiction") with the truth of news items ("facts"), "The novel gives us the context. The news item on the contrary strikes us because it is life's invasion of those who were unaware of it. The news item calls things by their name; the novel names them only through what the characters perceive" (313). Commenters to online news stories, therefore, are less like journalists and more like the characters of a novel in that their discourse approaches "truth" through what they perceive. Merleau-Ponty concludes that "the novel is truer, because it gives a totality, and because a lie can be created from details which are all true. The news item is truer because it wounds us and is not pretty to look at" (313). The effort to separate sincere and accurate reporting from rumor in online comment sections cannot be resolved by classifying it as true or not. Instead, the challenge to articulate the truth of both facts and fictions is an ongoing and continuous responsibility to establish both the details and the context. Meyer is right to challenge the perceptions of reader comments – but not only because they are "false" as news, but also because such willful blindness to the "facts" about Somali immigrants in Lewiston demonstrates the failure of a sincere and accurate understanding of the context.

At present, the comment section found in an online newspaper is often ugly because – to use Merleau-Ponty's words, "it wounds us and

is not pretty to look at." If such websites are to become a new form of "communication commons" in the mediated public sphere, then they need to take up the obligations of moral discourse. Communicators, to summarize Silverstone's argument, are responsible to construct a proper distance for perceiving the other in oneself as well as the stranger, to listen and welcome the stranger, and to be truthful.

References

AHMED, I., BESTEMAN, C., & OSMAN, R. (n.d.). The top ten myths about Somalis and why they are wrong. Catholic Charities Maine, Refugee and Immigration Service. http://www.ccmaine.org/docs/158.TheTopTenMythsAboutSomaliswRISedit.pdf

ATKIN, A., & RICHARDSON, J. E. (2007). Arguing about Muslims: (Un)Reasonable argumentation in letters to the editor. *Text & Talk, 27*, 1-25.

GEISSNER, H. K. (1995). On responsibility. In J. Lehtonen (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on communication research and pedagogy* (pp. 17-29). St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag.

MERLEAU-PONTY, M. (1964). On news items. *Signs* (R. C. McLeary, Trans.) (pp. 311-313). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

MEYER, J. (2007, April 29). Fiction vs. fact. *Sun Journal*. http://www.sunjournal.com/node/76264

REAVES, P. (n.d.). Commenting policy. *Sun Journal*. www.sunjournal.com/policy

RHOADES, R. (2010, December 22). Sun Journal changes rules for online commenting. *Sun Journal*. www.sunjournal.com/commenting/story/956149

READER, B. (2005). An ethical "blind spot": Problems of anonymous letters to the editor. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 20*, 62-76.

SANTANA, A. D. (2011). Online readers' comments represent new opinion pipeline. *Newspaper Research Journal, 32*(3), 66-81.

SILVERSTONE, R. (2007). *Media and morality: On the rise of the mediapolis.* Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity.

WAHL-JORGENSEN, K. (2001). Letters to the editor as a forum for public deliberation: Modes of publicity and democratic debate. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 18*, 303-320.

WAHL-JORGENSEN, K. (2002). The normative-
economic justification for public discourse:
Letters to the editor as a "wide open" forum.
*Journalism and Mass Communication
Quarterly, 79*, 121-133.

WAHL-JORGENSEN, K. (2004). A "legitimate
beef" or "raw meat"? Civility,
multiculturalism, and letters to the editor.
The Communication Review, 7, 89-104.

WAHL-JORGENSEN, K. (2007). *Journalists and
the public: Newsroom culture, letters to the
editor, and democracy.* Cresskill, NJ:
Hampton.

WASHUK, B. (2012, March 14). Lewiston cafe
closing due to owner's pending deportation.
Sun Journal.
www.sunjournal.com/news/city/2012/03/14/le
wiston-cafe-closing-due-owners-pending-
deportati/1166547 [Republished in *Bangor
Daily News.*
http://bangordailynews.com/2012/03/14/news
/lewiston-auburn/lewiston-cafe-closing-due-
to-owners-pending-deportation/]