

# Everything in moderation: new Polis research project on online journalism (guest blog)

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/09/30/everything-in-moderation-new-polis-research-project-on-online-journalism-guest-blog/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/09/30/everything-in-moderation-new-polis-research-project-on-online-journalism-guest-blog/)

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*Sanna Trygg is a Swedish journalist who is coming to Polis for a [Jornalistfonden](#) fellowship in November to investigate policies in online newspapers both in Sweden and the UK. She will use these policies concerning moderation of comment fields to make a wider analyze of the power relation between readers and journalists. The report will also discuss the concept of freedom of speech in modern media ( especially in Sweden and the UK).*

. Details of Sanna and her project at the end of this article where she explains her investigation:

There was a time when it would have been unthinkable but it's now routine for newspapers to give their readers the opportunity to comment on articles by journalists.

When it began some optimistic editors thought that they were entering a unique historical phase, enabling an unprecedented participative public debate. The willingness of the media to open up its space, traditionally given only to journalists, was a chance to enter a pure democratic press paradise.

So readers were invited and encouraged to participate in the debate, to comment and discuss scoops, columns and news in public. Participation was mainly enabled either through Comment-fields underneath for example the articles, video clips and columns or by linked blogs.

The open comment-fields and the linking blogs gave the readers a new opportunity to officially question editorial decisions (such as not publishing the name or ethnic background of an antecedent rapist).

It also made it possible for the web-visitors to criticize the journalists themselves as well as their work.

The comment fields were wide open and the linking blogs were without any formal restrictions.

Today – things have changed. In 2011 almost every western national newspaper has started to moderate the comments and select which blogs are approved to link to a certain article.

The idea of a open, virile and viral public online comment sphere as an opportunity for democracy and more active readers, has been severely compromised.

Today, a majority of the national European newspapers are deleting comments and de-linking blogs on a daily basis.

Some newspapers, radio stations and broadcast-companies ask the online journalists and web-editors to edit comments. Others are hiring external employees to do the administrative job, which mainly consists of reading, deleting and correcting the civic activity. The restrictions depend on the policies set up by each newspaper and they vary a lot – not only from country to country but also from newspaper to newspaper.

The administration of the visitors' activities might seem harmless and irrelevant. Is it really the responsibility of the media to give the public unlimited commenting space, when there are so many other digital spheres to use? The readers that are banned from any newspaper because of breaking policy rules could all turn to another on line chat room if the newspapers policy excludes their views. In Sweden, for example, there is a forum called "Flashback" open for all views and opinions.



Maybe the on-line space, connected to a newspaper, is not the ultimate place for an unlimited and uncensored civic debate?

News media is not alone in trying to manage Internet activities. YouTube deletes movies that the site thinks are too daring. Facebook spends lots of resources to weed out images with sexual content that members have posted on their pages. And the Swedish music service Spotify does not show the original cover of Kanye West's latest album, but uses a pixilated version that the record company sent them.

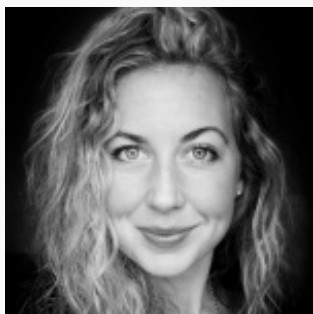
My fellowship at Polis will be spent partly trying to put this in a wider context. What's wrong with limiting freedom of speech to a degree? Perhaps we should see freedom of speech as something that can be given to you – not something that you automatically have? If we accept moderation, is it then possible to say that the newspapers offer a free debate? Is the idea of moderation as restrictive as critics claimed that the traditional media has been in the past?

My ambition is to investigate if the policies in online newspapers differs in Sweden and the UK. My research will try to answer the following questions:

- How are the policies formed and upon what arguments?
- Which opinions are accepted and why?

My aim, in a wider perspective, is to examine the relation between the media and the reader in 2011.

About Sanna Trygg:



Sanna Trygg

In 2007 Sanna was offered a job as a web editor to start up a website for the Swedish newspaper Skånska Dagbladet. This site eventually became one of the fastest growing news sites in the country. Today she currently combines the daily tasks of being a web editor and columnist with master studies in journalism at Lunds University.

In 2009 Sanna Trygg received the Schuman-scholarship at the European Parliament. During the US presidential election campaign she ran her own blog reporting from New York. Sanna Trygg started her journalist career at the age of 23, and has worked in several Swedish newspapers since then.

Sanna is with Polis in London throughout November on a fellowship from the Swedish [Journalistfonden](#). She would love to hear from anyone with experience of online news moderation. We will be holding a research seminar at LSE with Sanna on November 23rd at 5pm Contact: [sanna.trygg@skd.se](mailto:sanna.trygg@skd.se)

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