

NYTimes.com friends Facebook in revamp

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Traffic moves along by The New York Times headquarters building in New York City in April 2011. The New York Times is revamping reader comments on its website and joining a growing number of US newspapers in integrating Facebook into its commenting system.

In a bid to elevate the debate, The New York Times is revamping reader comments on its website and joining a growing number of US newspapers in integrating Facebook into its commenting system.

Jill Abramson, who took over as executive editor of the Times in June,

announced the changes on NYTimes.com and in a note to readers in Thursday's edition of the newspaper.

The "enhancements" to the comment system are intended to "improve the community experience across NYTimes.com," which receives nearly 50 million unique visitors a month, Abramson said.

US newspapers have long debated how to bring greater civility to their comments forums, which are frequently populated by insults and off-topic ramblings by "comment trolls" cloaked in [anonymity](#).

The new commenting system at the Times creates a category of "Trusted Commenters" -- NYTimes.com readers with a history of "posting outstanding comments."

The Times said trusted commenters will be allowed to submit comments on news articles and blog posts on NYTimes.com without moderation.

Trusted commenter status will be offered by invitation only and to be granted the privilege a reader must agree to connect their NYTimes.com commenting profile with their Facebook account.

The Times said the name obtained from a Facebook profile will be used as the display name on a trusted commenter's NYTimes.com commenting profile along with their photo.

Facebook requires its more than 800 million members to use their real names and a number of US newspapers have begun using a comment platform built by the social network in an effort to improve the conversation on their sites.

"We have found that people who use their names carry on more engaging, respectful conversations," the Times said.

NYTimes.com commenters can still choose to remain anonymous but their posts will be screened first by moderators for personal attacks, [obscenity](#), vulgarity or other violations of the newspaper's policies.

The [New York Times](#) is using Facebook profiles for trusted commenters only but some major US newspapers have gone even further, only allowing comments from readers who link to their Facebook accounts.

Among the US newspaper publishers using the Facebook platform for comments is Gannett, the largest US newspaper chain and the publisher of USA Today.

Dan Kennedy, an assistant professor of journalism at Boston's Northeastern University, said the comments revamp by the Times should help encourage more "civil and substantive conversation."

"Comments have been one of the great, you almost might say, unexploited ways that news organizations can build communities with their users," Kennedy told AFP. "Way too many news organizations don't take comments seriously and just kind of treat them like the nuthouse."

"You go to any newspaper website that does not take comments seriously and it's a cesspool," he said. "You end up with just scores of anonymous and pseudonymous commentators, many of them the same people over and over again, engaging in hate speech or racist speech."

Kennedy said some Times readers may be wary about the integration with Facebook but the social network "does bring some things to the table that you almost can't get anywhere else and that is they require real names."

"People are accustomed to behaving a certain way on [Facebook](#)," he

said. "It is a community. It seems to be very different from the anonymous, anti-social behavior that we often see in newspaper comments."

Kennedy said a case could be made for allowing anonymous comments and cited an example of someone who could potentially get in trouble with their employer if they are identified.

"But we don't allow anonymous letters to the editor in the paper," he said. "There's an argument to be made that we shouldn't be treating online [comments](#) any differently."

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