

# LOCAL ONLINE COMMUNITY MODERATION

A Research-Based Guide for  
Digital Community Leaders



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# What's Up With This Zine?

This booklet hopes to encourage individuals to engage in effective moderation of local online communities. It also aims to provide possible tools, solutions, and ideas for overcoming some of the common challenges that local moderators face.

## What This Zine Does

This zine will introduce you to:

- 👤 How to become a moderator
- ❤️ Ways you can serve your community
- ⚠️ Some challenges you might face while moderating a community
- 💡 Possible ways you can address these problems

**🏡 Local Focus:** These strategies are written for online community groups tied to specific localities like neighborhoods and cities.

## What This Zine Doesn't Do

This guide doesn't provide step-by-step instructions for:

- ✗ Setting up a local group from scratch
- ✗ Platform-specific technical tutorials
- ✗ Legal liability and policy compliance
- ✗ Professional social media management

### Why No Step-by-Step?

Not including detailed tutorials was intentional! Volunteer moderators told us that moderation is constantly changing—based on what's happening in their online community, their offline community, local politics, and on platforms.

## Introducing Local Moderation

### What is Local Moderation?

At its most basic, local moderation is the practice of creating and managing a place-based online community. What the group does and how it looks can vary, but helping neighbors connect, sharing information, and supporting each other's needs are common goals.

### What Makes a Group Local?

In this context, local means a groups' attachment to a specific geographic area or connection to a specific location and interest. Below are some fictional examples of a local online community:

#### PLACE-BASED

- "Hill Country Events"
- "Northside News & Views"
- "Riverside Neighborhood Chat"
- "Lincoln Lane Happenings"

#### INTEREST + LOCATION

- "Austin Dog Walkers"
- "Portland Plant Swaps"
- "Chicago Bike Repair"
- "Denver Parents' Network"

### Why Local Community Groups Matter

**3200+**

local newspapers closed since  
2005

Across the country local newspapers have been collapsing due to a complex set of factors like declining ad revenue and changing news habits. This has created a massive barrier to accessing information about local politics, economy, and civil society.

**Filling the Gap:** Many local online communities on social media platforms have emerged to fill this information void. These communities—and the moderators who manage them—have become crucial resources for information and resource sharing. People now rely on these groups to stay informed and take action to help their community.

## What Do Local Groups Actually Do?

Local groups create spaces for residents to:



### SOLVE PROBLEMS

Address community issues together



### MAKE CONNECTIONS

Facilitate local belonging



### SHARE INFORMATION

Find, share, and organize local info for daily life

## Types of Information Communities Need

Moderators identified many kinds of local information they felt were important to their communities:

### Environment & Planning:

- Sustainability efforts
- Air & water quality
- Environmental hazards

### Economic Development:

- New openings/closings
- Job postings
- Service recommendations

### Education:

- School board meetings
- Educational opportunities
- School performance assessments

### Transportation:

- Public transit times
- Road closures
- Construction progress updates

### Civic Life:

- Non-profit services
- Cultural & art information
- Community events

### Healthcare:

- Housing & rentals
- School information
- Lost pets & found items

### Public Safety:

- Weather warnings
- Crime updates
- Emergency information

### Political Life:

- Local election information
- Local policy impacts
- City council meetings

## Who Are Moderators?

Online moderators are often the subject of negative stereotypes, perceived as power-hungry or narcissistic. In reality moderators are more often like any other local volunteers, people who see a need in their community and work to fill it. Ideally they are servant leaders, dedicated to making their neighborhood a better more informed place.

*One or two people were like, "Hey, look for Tina. She gives out free plants. She helps people with stuff." And I'm like, "I'm just a regular person. I'm not a community leader. I don't think of myself like that." So maybe I am now.*

**TINA / Freecycle Group**

*I enjoy allowing the space. What keeps me going is the people...What got me to this point with my group now is I made something for my community. I made a huge impact on my community.*

**ERICA / Community News Group**

*When you publish something and people react to it positively or negatively...It feels like that makes a difference, just getting people talking...if I hadn't put that comment out there, nobody would even have thought about this issue.*

**JACK / Climate Change Project**

## Types of People Who Step Up

### THE ORGANIZER

Sees gaps and steps up to fill them

### THE CONNECTOR

Loves bringing people together

### THE CARETAKER

Motivated by protecting community members

### THE INFO KEEPER

Passionate about keeping community well-informed

# How Do Moderators Serve?

• Moderators and their groups serve communities in a variety of ways depending on the locality's context and the focus of the group. They facilitate accurate on-the-ground information and coordinate the flow of resources.

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Moderators promote and create events for community members to participate in, such as potlucks, cultural festivals, or local clean-up days.

## CONNECTING NEIGHBORS

Community groups can help build connections between neighbors in an increasingly isolated and polarized world.

## HELPING OTHERS GET INVOLVED

Moderators and their communities can help spread awareness and promote discussion about addressing local issues.

## RESOURCE SHARING

In the age of disappearing social services, moderators can help promote the exchange of resources for those in need.

All These Functions Support



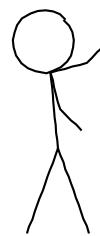
Strong, Connected, Informed Communities

I organized a weekly board game night for queer residents of my city



PLACE-BASED GROUP MOD

I brought awareness to over-policing in my neighborhood



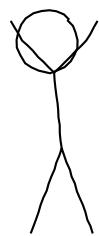
LOCAL INTEREST GROUP MOD

I connected families who lived nextdoor but had never spoken



LOCAL INTEREST GROUP MOD

I helped a family get new belongings after they lost their home to a fire



PLACE-BASED GROUP MOD



CIVIC  
PARTICIPATION



HELPING OTHERS  
GET INVOLVED



CONNECTING  
NEIGHBORS



RESOURCE  
SHARING

## More Ways Moderators Serve

### ⚠ DISASTER RESPONSE

During and after a disaster, moderators and their communities connect people with aid, services, and up-to-date information.

### safezone

Marginalized people often struggle to find safe spaces to socialize; online groups can help build community by fostering connection.

### 🗣 CONNECTING LOCAL LEADERS

Discussions about local issues can be powerful launching points for connecting with local leaders to solve shortcomings in the community.

### ❤ PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

Many moderators reported personal joy and fulfillment from serving their community, encouraging proactive engagement.



## How Can You Serve?

### Look Around Your Community

When you look around your city, town, or neighborhood, do you see a need that hasn't been met? Big or small, creating and moderating a community can begin the process of helping your local community grow stronger and better connected.

## Common Challenges You Might Face

When moderating, conflicts and challenges are bound to arise. It's important to be aware of what types of issues you might face and how you can address them. The list below covers the most common challenges reported by moderators, but is not meant to be exhaustive.

### Challenge #1: Scams & Spam

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"Scammers and hackers come at the top because they pose the biggest danger to members... These posts are often inaccurate, misleading"*

— LENA

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

Develop screening questions specific to your locality. Ask new members to identify a local landmark or recent community event to make sure they are from or know the area. Set up auto-filters for common scam keywords.

### Challenge #2: User Conflicts

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"Folks will attack another post for violating a minor rule... They view themselves as vigilante justice but they actually make the page quite hostile"*

— ANNA

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

Establish clear rules about member-to-member correction. Create easy reporting systems. Encourage members to tag moderators for rule enforcement.

### Challenge #3: Platform Friction

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"My goals are almost constantly in conflict with the goals of the platform, which only seem to be spreading and monetizing low quality content"*

— TINA

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

Pin important posts. Create recurring weekly threads for common topics. Use platform-specific features like Facebook's "announcement" posts strategically.

## More Common Challenges

### Challenge #4: Off-Topic Posts

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"Members don't understand the assignment. These are legitimate members who think the group is a place for lost cat ads"*

— ANNA

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

Regularly post examples of ideal content. Create a pinned post explaining the group's purpose with specific examples. Redirect off-topic posts to appropriate groups and gently remind community members of the scope of your group.

### Challenge #5: AI Users & Content

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"AI...doesn't filter the posts correctly most of the time and I have to personally check and manually approve or decline them and that takes a long time."*

— DAISY

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

While AI can sometimes be a time-saver, it doesn't always understand humor or context. Expect mistakes and maintain close oversight to keep a human in the loop.

### Challenge #6: Burnout

#### ⚠ THE PROBLEM

*"A lot of moderators are volunteers and have full-time jobs like me... people don't really think about the fact that I am not just this Facebook moderator."*

— LENA

#### 💡 THE SOLUTION

Depending on the group's size, building a moderation team of 2-3 people can reduce stress from burnout. Take breaks and set clear boundaries on your time—for example, only checking in during certain hours.

# The Value of Moderators' Work

**\$3.4M+**

Annual value of unpaid moderation work on Reddit alone.

## Moderators' Contributions

### INFORMATION HUB

Moderators serve as real-time neighborhood newsrooms, filtering and organizing information that helps people navigate daily life.

### COMMUNITY GUARDIAN

Moderators can help protect community members from scams, harassment, and deepfakes while fostering positive connections.

### CONNECTION FACILITATOR

Moderators help neighbors find each other, share resources, and build the social bonds that make communities resilient.

### DEMOCRACY ENABLER

Moderators create spaces to discuss local issues, share civic information, and participate in community decision-making.



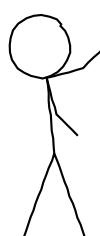
I enabled my community to reduce waste and save money through free-cycling!

I helped people with disabilities in my community find good doctors and accessible jobs!

I assisted elderly and disabled folks get COVID-19 vaccine appointments!

I make sure scammers and bigots can't harm my community online!

I keep my neighbors informed about local events and shows!



## If Moderating is Hard, Why Do It?

While moderators talk about challenges, most also highlight how rewarding it is to help their communities stay connected, informed, and supportive.

### What Keeps Moderators Going

*"What I enjoy most about being a moderator is taking the initiative to ensure group participants have a fun, safe place to express their ideas, share information, and join in other conversations." – Daisy*

*"I like seeing neighbors be there for each other. [...] What I like about moderation is you see neighbors rally for each other, and seeing that support kind of gives you a little hope that there is still kindness in the world and there is still good people that care about random strangers." – Miley*

### Remember the Why

When moderation gets challenging, remember why you started: to help your community be more connected, informed, and supportive. That purpose can carry you through the tough days.

Thinking about your 'why?' Flip to page 18 to jot it down or sketch it out.

I find joy connecting with my community, and helping it grow!

I get encouraged seeing all the waste I've prevented and money people have saved!

I remind myself to take a breather when the work is too much!

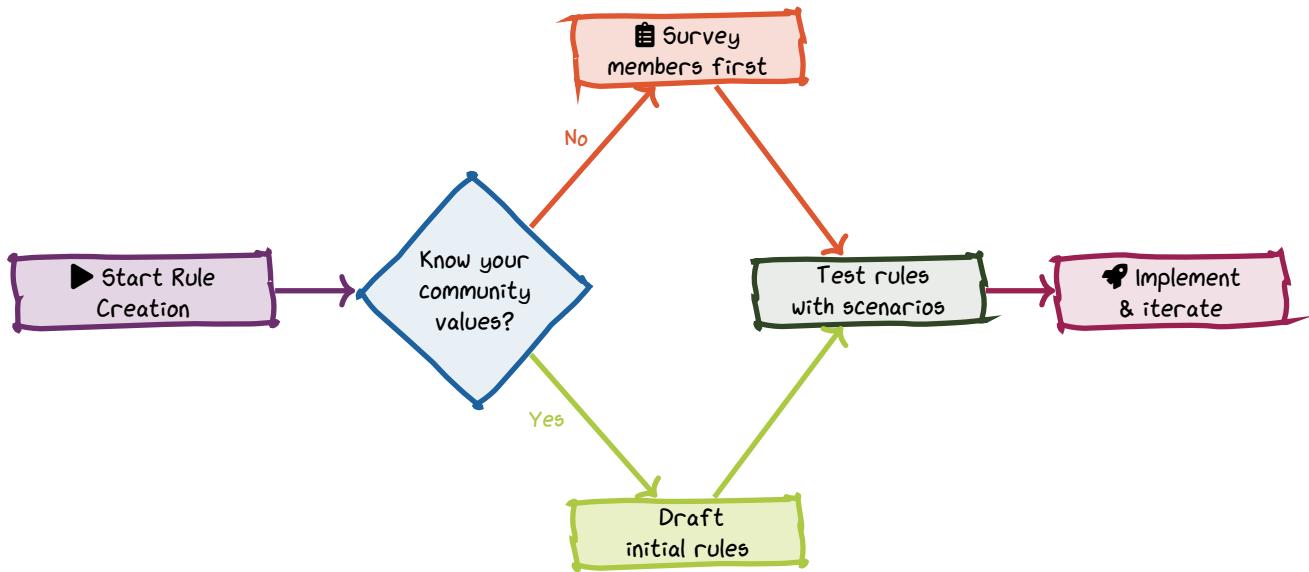
I feel so rewarded knowing my community is safer and better informed with my help!

I remember how my city has become much more accessible with my community's help!



# Rule-Making Decision Guide

## Start Here: Creating Your Rules



## Quick Reference: Rule Violations

### ❓ “What do I do when...”

#### ⚠ FIRST OFFENSE

- Private message
- Explain violation
- Offer guidance
- Give second chance

#### ⟳ REPEAT OFFENSE

- Public warning
- Reference prior contact
- Enforce consequences

#### 🔥 SERIOUS VIOLATION

- Immediate action
- Document everything
- Consult other mods
- Follow up quickly

## Pro Tips: Advanced Strategies

#### 👁 PREVENTION TACTICS

- Pin guidelines prominently
- Regular community reminders
- Welcome message with rules
- Ask potential members to agree to rules before joining

#### 🤝 COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Celebrate good examples
- Thank helpful members
- Share success stories
- Create positive momentum

## Build Thriving Communities

### Creating a Safe, Welcoming Environment for Local Connections

Moderators cultivate open and inviting spaces for all community members by using empathetic care, conflict management, and highlighting local connections.



### Strategies for Building Stronger Communities

#### ♥ Creating Welcoming Spaces:

- Clear, fair, consistent guidelines
- Quick response to problems
- Celebrating positive contributions
- Making newcomers feel welcome

#### :人群 Building Connections:

- Highlight local connections
- Encourage resource sharing
- Organize community events
- Recognize helpful members

#### ☒ Managing Conflicts:

- Stay calm and neutral
- Address issues quickly
- Focus on behavior, not people
- Know when to seek help

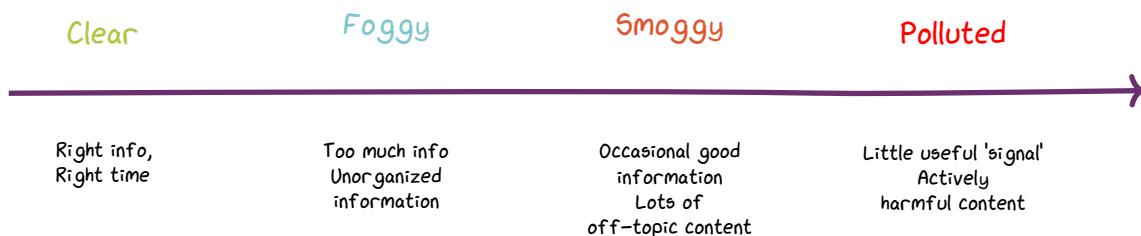
#### ☒ Working as a Team:

- Share moderation duties
- Support each other
- Make decisions together
- Take breaks when needed

# When Information Gets Messy

Having important local information isn't enough—moderators must navigate different levels of information quality, from crystal clear to completely chaotic.

## The Information Quality Spectrum



## What Each Level Looks Like (And What You Can Do)

### CLEAR

Right information, right amount, right timing. Community naturally self-organizes and self-corrects.

**Moderator role:** Light touch, celebrate good practices

### FOG

Slightly too much good information. Multiple people posting similar content. Some redundancy but all legitimate.

**Moderator role:** Gentle organization, create megathreads, direct 'traffic'

### SMOG

Off-topic posts, promotional content, spam make it difficult to see good info.

**Moderator role:** Active or aggressive filtering, corrections, member education

### POLLUTION

Community overrun by coordinated harassment, threats, false emergency alerts, scams, and/or spam. Community trust is broken. Social relationships actively damaged.

**Moderator role:** Emergency response, platform escalation

## Countering Challenges

### Beyond Content Moderation

Moderators described their role as supporting a constructive local information ecosystem and as a defense against incivility. Their responsibilities extended well beyond content approval and removal to include connecting people to local resources, fostering community safety, and enabling communities to thrive amid platform constraints and volatility. Moderators assume proactive roles in managing conflict and promoting an open, inclusive environment.

### Key Areas of Focus

#### 🛡 Dealing with Spam, Scams, and Other Challenges

#### 👥 Helping Community & Facilitating Productive Discussions

#### ⚠ Diffusing Threats and Minimizing Harm



#### 👁️ EARLY DETECTION

- Monitor for hate-speech, incivility, and other kinds of trolling
- Check shared links to ensure they go to what they report to (catching 'link-jacking')
- Encourage users to share verified information
- Be on the lookout for suspicious accounts or requests

#### 💡 COMMUNITY EDUCATION

- Share official local resources
- Model critical thinking
- Link to consumer alerts and other scam awareness resources
- Encourage source verification

# Growing Sustainable Communities

## Planning for the Long Term

 The most successful local communities think beyond the immediate crisis or need—they build systems that can adapt and grow over time.

## Preparing for Growth

### Scaling Moderation:

- Train additional moderators
- Document decision-making processes
- Create clear role definitions
- Establish conflict resolution procedures

### Community Leadership:

- Identify emerging community leaders
- Create opportunities for member involvement
- Recognize valuable contributors
- Develop succession planning

### Evolving Guidelines:

- Review rules regularly
- Gather member feedback
- Adapt to new challenges
- Learn from other communities

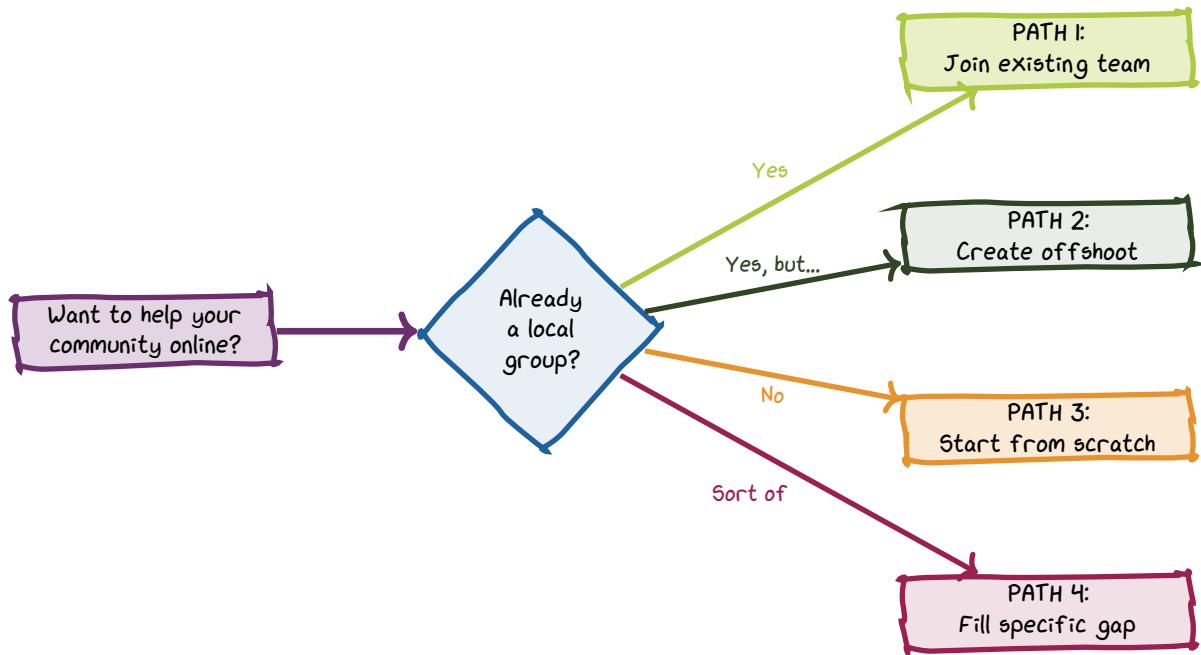
### Offline Connections:

- Organize in-person meetups
- Partner with local organizations
- Support community events
- Engage local elected officials

 **Think of moderation like hosting:** Many moderators described their skills and moderation practices in a way that was similar to being a good host of a 'party'—making guests feel welcome, respected, and giving them space for conversations that leave everyone feeling more informed and connected, and wanting to attend your 'party.'

# So You Want To Be A Moderator?

## Four Pathways to Community Moderation



### Pep Talk Time!

Taking the leap to create or join an online community can feel scary. Fear of failure and inadequacy often stops us from serving our neighbors. This guide aims to lessen those concerns and encourage you to make that jump into helping your community.

## Starting from Scratch? Here's What Every Community Needs:

### 🔧 Basic Structure:

- Clear group purpose
- Simple membership rules
- Basic posting guidelines
- Consistent enforcement

### 👥 Moderation Team:

- At least 2-3 depending on size
- Clear responsibilities
- Regular communication
- Shared decision-making

### ⌚ Growth Strategy:

- Start with quality over quantity
- Seed initial conversations
- Celebrate early contributors
- Adapt rules based on experience

### ❤️ Community Building:

- Welcome new members
- Encourage participation
- Address conflicts quickly
- Connect people with similar interests

## Your Community's Future

### Keep Growing

If you are already involved in moderation, we hope this guide has offered some insight into the role's opportunities and challenges. If you're just getting started, remember: every strong community started with one person who cared enough to begin.

Remember your 'why' (or your next big idea for your group) — Tot it down or sketch it out here.

### What's Next?

To help you grow as a moderator and strengthen your community, check out the additional resources and links in the QR code on the next page.

Next Page 

**Final Thought:** *Community moderation is not just about managing content—it's about nurturing the connections that make neighborhoods stronger, more resilient, and more caring places to live.*

## About the Project

### What did we find?

All across the United States local newspapers have been closing, leaving communities without a reliable source of information about their area. We were curious if local social media groups were able to fill this gap, and how the information they shared were similar or different to newspapers. More specifically, we were interested in the experiences of moderators who helped create and run these groups; what sort of challenges they encountered, how their knowledge of the local area helped them serve, why they began moderating, and who they aided? We explored these questions, and others, through interviews and found that moderators play an important role in meeting their community's information needs. They also helped organize resource sharing during crises, built connections between community members, and kept locals aware of important civic and political events. Moderators' role is different from journalists, but still important in keeping their community informed and involved. This research shows how local moderators support their community's health and encourages platforms to invest more resources to assist local moderators.

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#### Want More?

Check out our work:

[bit.ly/4llo9rJ](https://bit.ly/4llo9rJ)



## Thanks

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