

The internet is subtly changing. The Financial Times, the Daily Telegraph and the Times are now behind paywalls and give limited free access. The Guardian adopted a different strategy with free access and a comments page called "Comment is Free" (CIF), paid for out of advertising. The quality of the articles is middling-to-poor, and they are mostly written by the Guardian's old warhorses. Their views are 100% predictable.

For several years, however this has provided a useful forum for discussion and the exchange of views. But the Guardian has just altered the format of its CIF website and introduced what is called "threading". Responses are gathered together instead of being in chronological order. This seems to be unpopular - an overall look at the number of comments suggests that there are less than half the number there were before.

In addition to making navigation difficult, the threading system has led to fragmentation of discussions to the point of meaninglessness. The comments have degenerated into one-liners.

It may have seemed like a good idea, and if the aim is to stifle discussion, it is a good system. The Telegraph used it too, but I have stopped going there anyway since they put themselves behind a pay wall.

Around three years ago, the quality of the comments was often better than that of the editorial pieces. Some of the same people are still commenting but there has been a falling-off, possibly also due to changes in format, the most important being the ability to view "newest first". The original system gave an advantage to the early posters but that allowed discussions to develop coherently until they tailed off after a couple of days.

If the aim was to stifle public discussion and close down a forum of debate, the redesign has done the job perfectly. But then open debate can threaten the powers-that-be, and the Guardian is just as much a part of the system as the more openly oppressive political "right".

As campaigners on the edge of the field, this closing down of forums makes life difficult, since it reduces our ability to reach a wider public and we will become increasingly dependent on search engines. There is also a worrying trend for governments to control what content people have access to. This inevitably began with the nastier dictatorships but will spread to wherever there are powers-that-be who need to keep control on their subjects. With a widening gap between rich-and-poor almost everywhere, they are going to need to. The future is not looking bright for freedom of discussion.