Anne Applebaum is an American political journalist living in Poland whose columns appear weekly in The Washington Post and on Slate. Her views are pro-free-trade and generally hawkish. A Thatcherite in the 1980s, and a supporter of Obama for president in 2008, Applebaum is stoutly pro-immigration, pro-intellectual and anti-torture. Last year Foreign Policy magazine declared her one of “the world’s most sophisticated thinkers.” In awarding the 2004 prize for general nonfiction to her book “Gulag: A History,” the Pulitzer committee called it a “landmark work of historical scholarship and an indelible contribution to the complex, ongoing, necessary quest for truth.”

But what does the analog world know? Online, readers see Applebaum and her work quite differently. To read The Washington Post’s comments section is to discover an outraged throng that insists she knows absolutely nothing. Not long ago, a poster named jbburrows pronounced Applebaum a “liberal fool.” Respondus described her as “a lapsed neo-con addict.” Lloyd667 on Slate wrote, “Anne gets just about everything wrong.”

Just about everything. You don’t say. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the commentary on Applebaum’s column — freely accessible on the Washington Post site — runs according to its own uncertain logic. Themes persist nonetheless. One is that the columnist, whatever her topic, is a “Zionist stooge liar” (in a commenter’s recent phrase). And while some readers applaud her approach to foreign policy, she is also subjected to anti-Semitic tirades when she’s not being acidly patronized.

Like no male columnist at The Post, Applebaum is regularly called “sweetie” and “dear” by commenters who disagree with her. At least one commenter worries that Applebaum’s mother must be disappointed in her for wasting her education; others slight her for being married to the Polish minister of foreign affairs; still others insist she should lose her job.

What commenters don’t do is provide a sustained or inventive analysis of Applebaum’s work. In fact, critics hardly seem to connect one column to the next. In spite of Applebaum’s hard-to-miss hints that she celebrates Christian holidays (“On Christmas morning, my husband found a CD of ‘The Greatest Speeches of All Time’ in his stocking”), conspiracy-minded commenters insist that she’s Jewish and that her Jewishness determines her politics. And even though she makes it plain that her worldview coalesced when she was reporting on Eastern Europe in the ’80s and ’90s, commenters almost never address the intellectual consequences of her analogies between the cold war and the war on terror.

Someone should be paying more attention, especially since online newspaper commenters as a whole seem to have (at least) the stamina, drive and spare time to become a cogent part of online journalism. But as it is, online commentary is a bête noire for journalists and readers alike. Most journalists hate to read it,
because it’s stinging and distracting, and readers rarely plow through long comments sections unless they intend to post something themselves. But perhaps the comments have become so reader-unfriendly, in part, because of the conventions of the Web-comment form.

Online commentary, for one thing, is a circadian art, one in which style and tone seem largely determined by the time of day a comment is posted. At washingtonpost.com, Applebaum’s columns typically receive around 100 or 200 responses before the site closes off the commenting option. (At Slate, which is online-only, registered commenters weigh in on the same column, but in a more formal way.) Immediately after the column appears online — often late at night — come early amens. Then dissent sets in, and a scolding tone emerges (“You should know better”; “Surely you jest”). In the later hours, things get more plaintive and surreal, as lonelier, insomniac imagery takes over and commenters begin to turn on one another. (Around 2 a.m.: “What has happened to the soul of The Washington Post?” and “The blood is on your hands. I’ll help you look for a rag, but don’t wipe it on my pants.”)

By the time the East Coast workday starts, responders seem showered, caffeinated and ready for battle. Comments of 250 words or more show up, and sometimes they’re itemized. These itemized entries borrow their structure from the blogosphere’s signature “fact-check,” a form in which a skeptic affects exhausted patience as he paces through a published argument point by point to show how perniciously or laughably wrong it is. These fact-checks are rarely potent enough to compel corrections by The Post, and Applebaum never replies to them.

Commenters, in short, rarely really sock it to a columnist. They also too often go automatic, churning out 100-word synopses of one stock ideological position after another. But most disappointing of all, for readers, is that commenters don’t, as literary critics say, read an article against itself to show how, for example, an argument framed as incendiary is in fact banal, or one that’s meant to be feminist is retrogressive, or one that touts its originality is a knockoff.

Instead, paradoxically, commenters frequently reiterate Applebaum’s own arguments in the service of their would-be critiques. Last year, for instance, when Applebaum described her newfound disillusionment with John McCain, whom she supported for president in 2000, many commenters criticized her bygone support for McCain by doing little more than rehashing her new case against him, which she had just presented.

This echo-chamber effect is unpleasant, and it makes it hard to keep listening for the clearer, brighter, rarer voices nearly drowned out in the online din. Which is too bad: newspaper journalism benefits from reader comments. Creating registration standards, inventive means of moderating and displaying comments, membership benefits for regular posters and ratings systems for useful comments are just some of the ways that other news outlets like Slate have improved the quality of reader responses.

On the other hand, the Slate comments on a recent Applebaum column are hardly models of astuteness. What’s more, making commenters more accountable for their posts doesn’t exactly transform them into the reverential chorus that every writer probably thinks he deserves. See Slate’s Joshua911, on Applebaum’s column about a renovation at Monticello: “Awful place. Awful change. Awful analysis. Awful writer. Awful country. Awful.” The audience for incantations like this one has got to be mostly Joshua911 himself. And maybe nothing can — or even should — be done to curb entirely the brute urge of readers to defy what they’ve read.
Points of Entry

THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

READ ONLY: If you crave discussion with fellow readers, the work of major opinion writers — like the first-rate Anne Applebaum — is a perfect place to start. Find her work at anneapplebaum.com or at washingtonpost.com under “opinions.”

WRITE ONLY: The pluralistic contention of the 1990s that everyone “deserves a voice” has come to terrifying life in the past 10 years on blogs, message boards and now Twitter. Everyone is published! But please, aim for originality and brevity when you post, and read what has already been posted. For models of the form, Slate’s Fray still can’t be beat (fray.slate.com/discuss).

THE BIG TALK: For a macro look at what people like most to jabber about, see the always surprising, constantly updated list of humongous message boards at big-boards.com. Anime, paint ball, video games and Volkswagens are topics with devoted boards that have many millions of posts.