

# Trolls win: Rude blog comments dim the allure of science online

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The trolls are winning. Pick a story about some aspect of science, any story, scroll down to the blog comments and let the bashing begin.

- "Wonder how much taxpayer cash went into this 'deep' study?"
- "I think you can take all these studies by pointy headed scientists, 99 percent of whom are socialists and communists, and stick them where the sun don't shine."
- "Yawn. Climate change myth wackos at it again."
- "This article is 100 percent propaganda crapola."
- "Speaking of dolts, if you were around in the 70s, when they also had scientists, the big talk then was about the coming ice age. And don't give me any of that carbon emission bull@!\$%#."

Such nasty back and forth, like it or not, is now a staple of our news diet, and in the realm of online [science](#) news, the diatribes, screeds and rants are taking a toll on the [public perception](#) of science and technology, according to a study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

UW-Madison science communication researcher Dominique Brossard reported the results of a study showing the tone of blog comments alone can influence the perception of risk posed by nanotechnology, the science of manipulating materials at the smallest scales.

The study, now in press at the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, was supported by the National Science Foundation. It

sampled a representative cross section of 2,338 Americans in an online experiment, where the civility of blog comments was manipulated. For example, introducing name calling into commentary tacked onto an otherwise balanced newspaper blog post, the study showed, could elicit either lower or higher perceptions of risk, depending on one's predisposition to the science of nanotechnology.

"It seems we don't really have a clear social norm about what is expected online," says Brossard, a UW-Madison professor of Life [Science Communication](#), contrasting online forums with public meetings where prescribed decorum helps keep discussion civil. "In the case of blog postings, it's the Wild West."

For rapidly developing nanotechnology, a technology already built into more than 1,300 consumer products, exposure to uncivil online comments is one of several variables that can directly influence the perception of risk associated with it.

"When people encounter an unfamiliar issue like nanotechnology, they often rely on an existing value such as religiosity or deference to science to form a judgment," explains Ashley Anderson, a postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University and the lead author of the upcoming study in the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*.

Highly religious readers, the study revealed, were more likely to see nanotechnology as risky when exposed to rude comments compared to less religious readers, Brossard notes.

"Blogs have been a part of the new media landscape for quite some time now, but our study is the first to look at the potential effects blog comments have on public perceptions of science," says Brossard.

While the tone of blog comments can have an impact, simple disagreement in posts can also sway perception: "Overt disagreement adds another layer. It influences the conversation," she explains.

UW-Madison Life Sciences Communication Professor Dietram Scheufele, another of the study's co-authors, notes that the Web is a primary destination for people looking for detailed information and discussion on aspects of science and technology. Because of that trend, "studies of online media are becoming increasingly important, but understanding the online information environment is particularly important for issues of science and technology."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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