

# Opinion: Popular Science is wrong to get rid of online comments

September 30 2013, by Marie-Claire Shanahan

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Thanks, we don't want to know what you have to say. Credit: lewishamdreamer

Popular Science [has announced](#) that it will be closing online comments on its news stories. Uncivil commenters have an overly negative effect on readers, it claims, with a small number of negative commenters poisoning the way readers perceive the stories. A [New York Times article](#) is used to back up the claims.

I disagree with their reasons. Of course, the site is theirs. They can do what they need and want to do with their comment sections. More worrying to me was the response of fellow science communicators that more publications should do the same.

There are two main reasons why I'd like to suggest caution. First, the evidence for the poison effect of uncivil comments isn't nearly as damning as is claimed. Second, there is a lot of potential good in comment sections and removing them sends some fairly negative messages about [science communication](#).

The New York Times piece was based on a study published in the [Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication](#). The authors measured the reaction of 1183 adults who read a blog post about risks and benefits related to nanotechnology. Some received a version with civil comments and some a version with uncivil comments. The overall results though:

*...did not demonstrate a significant direct relationship between exposure to incivility and risk perceptions.*

This would be tough to tell from The New York Times article.

The things that did have an impact weren't too surprising. Readers who were familiar with nanotechnology and who already supported nanotechnology tended to perceive lower risks than the rest. These factors explained more of the readers' perceptions than any others, and they support decades of work that prior beliefs are one of the [largest factors](#) in how readers interpret what they read.

Digging further into their analysis, the uncivil comments seemed to slightly heighten the views that people already had, and when they divided them by religion they tended to react slightly differently to the uncivil comments. But both of these effects together explained only 1%

of the differences in readers' risk assessments. Does that seem like solid evidence for publications to decide to do away with commenting all together? I don't think so.

Apart from a shaky justification, I also see a serious problem with the knee-jerk reaction to remove all comments. I'm generally in favour of strong moderating policies. Even if they don't really change people's minds about the risks of nanotechnology, uncivil comments may be undesirable for many other reasons.

A few years ago I completed a study of expertise claims in comments left in response to health stories in the Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail. For the study, I gathered all of the comments posted on four health stories one week after the stories had been published. Off-topic and uncivil ones were removed, but it turned out there was a lot left. They were important and valuable comments. Extensive contributions were made by parents, patients and people with medical expertise. Questions were asked and clear thoughtful answers were often given.

There are often calls in popular science publications for people outside of traditional scientific communities to become more interested and engaged in science. Comment spaces are a viable place for that to happen.

Like any actual place of conversation, they also fall victim to domination by extreme voices and need to be well managed. Town hall meetings and public consultations are a great example. When they're good, they're fascinating and offer real insight that the panel members or politicians could never have fully appreciated without opening the floor to members of the public or a particular community. They can provide access and a voice for people to actively influence science and technology as it affects their lives and communities. At their worst they can be reactionary shout-fests of frustration for all involved. Despite these dangers, though, their

benefits are usually recognised to outweigh their drawbacks.

If these online venues for scientific engagement are closed, the message becomes: "Well we didn't really mean for people to be engaged, we just want you to listen to us more." This is a return largely to outdated models of science communication where the sole purpose is to push information out to people for their ready and unquestioning uptake. If science is truly about discussion of evidence and a willingness to be open to new findings, then the public cannot be left out of that process.

But what about claims that there is a decades-long war against expertise? Well, a no commenting policy is also a no experts commenting policy. Comment spaces are also places for experts to answer questions and support or correct information presented in the article. I'm uncomfortable giving back complete control to how risks are presented in a forum where no expert has a space to disagree with what Popular Science or another venue says. What a no commenting stance says to me is that the publication doesn't need or want those contributions associated with their articles.

Overall, incivility doesn't seem to have nearly the dire effect that Popular Science seems to think it does. Comments are often frustrating (sometimes even heartbreaking) but readers are still making up their minds based on other factors. So the benefits Popular Science hopes for are unlikely to be realised. And instead of looking for better ways to manage, guide, moderate or selectively publish comments we lose all of the potential benefits for real engagement.

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Source: The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Popular Science is wrong to get rid of online comments (2013, September 30)  
retrieved 9 April 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2013-09-opinion-popular-science-wrong-online.html>

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