

'Respect' button is better for democracy than 'like' button, study finds

September 19 2013

Replacing the ubiquitous social media "Like" button with a "Respect" button on news websites would be better for democracy, according to a new report from the [Engaging News Project](#) at The University of Texas at Austin.

When given the option of a "Respect" button, more readers of online news click on comments from opposing political perspectives in comparison with the "Recommend" or "Like" buttons many sites have adopted from Facebook. The finding is part of a report released today that gives news organizations recommendations for engaging online audiences in ways that are beneficial for democracy and business.

"Given the political polarization facing our country, newsrooms should be thinking carefully about strategies to help citizens find common ground," says Natalie Stroud, director of the Engaging News Project and associate professor of [communication studies](#). "This study shows that the word choices used for social media buttons are consequential and can encourage readers to engage with and show appreciation for opposing points of view—practices that are crucial to [democracy](#)."

As part of the study, researchers examined how more than 700 readers of online news interacted with the comment sections following articles. The [study participants](#) saw identical comment sections, with one exception: one-third of participants saw a "Like" button next to each comment, one-third a "Recommend" button and one-third a "Respect" button.

Researchers found that some participants were up to 50 percent more willing to click on a "Respect" button in response to comments expressing opposing political perspectives.

Funded initially by the Democracy Fund via the New America Foundation, the Engaging News Project seeks to provide research-based techniques for engaging online audiences at a time when many news outlets are seeking new [business models](#). In addition to examining [social media](#) buttons, the Engaging News Project tested ways in which comment sections, online polls and quizzes, and hyperlinking practices could be improved.

After receiving an initial grant of \$100,000, the Engaging News Project has recently received a grant of up to \$400,000 from the Democracy Fund over the next two years to continue its work.

Stroud's research examines the effects of [political polarization](#) in the media. In 2011, she published "[Niche News: The Politics of News Choice](#)," which studies "partisan selective exposure," the phenomenon of people consuming news that aligns with their own political views. The Engaging News Project is a way to address some of the issues raised in the book.

Stroud is assistant director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, a nonpartisan research and outreach organization at the university that seeks to respond to growing political cynicism and disaffection in the United States.

Other findings from the Engaging News Project include:

- [Reader comments in online stories](#) become more civil when journalists participate in discussions.
- [Online polls and quizzes](#) should present new information to

- readers, rather than data on other readers' opinions.
- Readers of online news spend more time with and learn more from "slider polls" compared with multiple-choice polls and information presented without interactive features.
 - [Hyperlink prompts](#) have mixed results for increasing page views and engaging readers with opposing points of view.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: 'Respect' button is better for democracy than 'like' button, study finds (2013, September 19) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-09-respect-button-democracy.html>

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