

# Anonymity makes a difference with online comments, researcher finds

January 22 2014

---

In a study titled, "Virtuous or Vitriolic: The Effect of Anonymity on Civility in Online Newspaper Reader Comment Boards," University of Houston assistant professor Arthur D. Santana at the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication found a significant correlation between anonymity and civility.

Comparing the tone of thousands of online [comments](#) posted by anonymous and non-anonymous users following online newspaper stories, Santana found that 53.3 percent of anonymous comments included language that was vulgar, racist, profane or hateful; only 28.7 percent of non-anonymous comments were found to be uncivil.

"Anonymity has a long history in journalism dating back to the beginning of U.S. newspapers. In the 1700s, Benjamin Franklin used the pseudonym Silence Dogood to get his opinion published after being denied several times with his real name," said Santana. "It has long been seen as a valuable way to express an opinion, however unpopular."

At play is the so-called "online disinhibition effect," which predicts that when people's identity is hidden, their actions or words have no consequences, thus their inhibitions drop. Online, under the cloak of anonymity, people are more likely to behave in ways that they ordinarily would not if their identity was intact.

"One of the benefits of online anonymity is that it allows people to express their views, uninhibited, especially if it is an unpopular opinion,"

Santana said. "It's when commenting descends into hateful language, threats or racism that the conversation breaks down and any benefits of constructive dialogue goes away."

Santana observed that non-anonymous commenters were nearly three times as likely to post civil comments. He found that 44 percent of non-anonymous commenters posted civil comments following news articles compared to 15 percent of anonymous commenters. "In short, when anonymity was removed, civility prevailed," he said.

Vexed with an overwhelming number of uncivil comments that threaten to undermine the value of their commenting forums, newspapers are increasingly disallowing anonymity by making readers sign in with their Facebook account; 48.9 percent of the 137 largest U.S. newspapers have disallowed anonymity in their commenting forums, 41.6 percent allow anonymity and 9.4 percent do not have forums, Santana found.

His study also was designed to determine whether an online article's topic affected whether the comments' tones would be civil or uncivil. Comparing comments following a racialized topic and a non-racialized topic, Santana observed that comments that followed the racialized topic were significantly more likely to be uncivil.

"These findings should be of interest to those newspapers that allow anonymity and that have expressed frustration with rampant incivility and ad hominem attacks in their commenting forums," Santana said, "particularly those that follow sensitive news topics."

News organizations, such as the *Huffington Post*, hope that abandoning anonymous commenting will raise the level of the dialogue and allow more people to join the conversation.

"Incivility serves as a barrier," Santana said. "People don't want to enter

the fray when there are a bunch of bullies in the room. Why would you want to join a conversation when everyone is shouting at each other? It's possible to be forceful, robust and emotional in your argument, but when even a small minority of people resort to hateful or even intimidating language, others are reluctant to join a conversation."

Santana's research on [anonymity](#) and civility has been accepted for publication in *Journalism Practice*, and his research on civility and story topics has been accepted for publication in *Newspaper Research Journal*.

**More information:** [dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.813194](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.813194)

Provided by University of Houston

Citation: Anonymity makes a difference with online comments, researcher finds (2014, January 22) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-anonymity-difference-online-comments.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.