

High level engagement in comment sections can curb internet trolling

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Scrolling through the comments section on a news site is like seeing a verbal war before your eyes. Internet trolls flourish in an anonymous world, so much so that sites like Reuters and Popular Science have done away with the comment sections altogether. But there has to be a better way to let the audience engage in a civil manner. A recent study published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* by researchers at the University of Texas, Purdue University, and University of Wyoming, found that having a journalist engage with commenters can affect the deliberative tone of the comments, effectively reducing trolling.

Natalie Stroud (University of Texas), Joshua Scacco (Purdue University), Ashley Muddiman (University of Wyoming), and Alexander Curry (University of Texas) published their findings in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. The researchers partnered with a local television news station and conducted an experiment using its Facebook community of 40,000 followers.

Between December 2012 and April 2013 a total of 70 political posts were included in the study on a randomized schedule. Each post was assigned to one of three random conditions: a well-known reporter would engage in the [comments](#) section; the station's web team (under its insignia) would engage; or there would be no engagement at all from the station. The researchers then conducted a content analysis of all 70 posts and the 2,403 comments left on these posts. They examined whether the comments were civil, relevant, contained genuine questions, and

provided evidence. The researchers found that in comment sections where the recognized journalist engaged with the audience, it had a statistically significant effect on the tone of the comments. Incivility decreased by 17% and people were 15% more likely to use evidence in their comments on the subject matter.

Recent studies specifically examining comment sections found that comments can polarize people's beliefs about news topics and that comments can affect how they interpret the news. This study looks toward solutions, or ways to improve comments left on news sites.

"Given that many [news](#) organizations have comment sections and recent surveys suggest that they are likely to stay around, we wanted to identify strategies that could affect the types of comments left by site visitors," said Stroud. "Drawing from theoretical work about norms, our research suggests that journalist involvement is a helpful strategy."

More information: "Changing Deliberative Norms on News Organizations' Facebook Sites," by Natalie Stroud, Joshua Scacco, Ashley Muddiman, and Alexander Curry; *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, [DOI: 10.1111/jcc4.12104](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12104)

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