

and commenting buttons—can change users' feelings toward those who hold opposing political views.

In a study, researchers found that when online users saw the comment buttons, they felt warmer toward people across the political divide. However, when they actually left comments, or signaled whether they liked or disliked a news story, they dug in and demonstrated more extreme attitudes.

While people often blame online media in general for political polarization, the findings suggest that the way tools and features are designed on the sites could play a role in triggering political discord.

"There are different aspects to media, different tools and different action possibilities, and what this study does for the first time is drill down into these different features and show that how we use certain features, or even the presence of certain features, can have different effects," said S. Shyam Sundar, James P. Jimirro Professor of Media Effects in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory.

The researchers, who report their findings in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, recruited 368 online volunteers to take part in an online experiment. The participants were randomly assigned to interact with different versions of a news website that featured thumbs-up and thumbs-down features—which the researchers referred to as low-effort—or commenting options—called high-effort.

In some versions, the users just looked at a screenshot of the site, while in other versions they could actually interact with the liking and commenting tools. The users were asked about their political attitudes on 12 different issues before and after viewing or using the different

versions of the news site.

According to Jinping Wang, assistant professor of journalism and communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and first author of the study, just the presence of those high-effort and low-effort tools could trigger political feelings. She added that when users see the commenting button, they believe that the site is more interactive and gives them a space to express their feelings. They also felt less distant and cold toward people with opposing views.

"In one of the main findings for these cue effects, we found that just presenting the users with a comment bottom on the interface on a [news website](#) makes them feel like the website is more interactive, and this perception of interactivity seems to reduce their affective polarization," said Wang.

She added that affective polarization refers to how people feel about members of the opposite party, not necessarily their attitudes about politics.

The ability to comment on a [news story](#) also made participants feel like they have a say in the online space, and this was positively associated with their willingness to participate in relevant policy deliberation sessions.

According to the researchers, when users interacted with those tools, their political attitudes intensified. For example, when they gave a story a thumbs up or thumbs down, or commented, the participants showed stronger beliefs in their own prior opinions.

To analyze those comments, the researchers relied on [natural language processing](#)—NLP—software that could examine features, such as comment length, comment sentiment and comment incivility. A majority

of participants expressed their opinions in a civil manner.

Designing less polarizing sites

The findings that interactive features on online sites can have both positive and negative effects could lead to news and [social media sites](#) that are less polarizing, said Sundar, who is also an affiliate of Penn State's Institute for Computational and Data Sciences.

For example, even though only a minority of users add comments, the mere presence of these interactive tools may soften political feelings for most users. Getting rid of these tools when rhetoric heats up, as some organizations have done in the past, may be a mistake, Sundar added.

"Often, when discourse becomes uncivil on these sites, one strategy is to simply shut down the comments section, but that may not be the best way to solve the problem," said Sundar. "In fact, this can create other problems, for example, people may feel like they don't have to have a way to interact or engage in two-way communications with others who have opposing views. So, this can make them feel more distant towards the opposing party."

Employing low-effort tools, such as thumbs-up and thumbs-down buttons, may not be a good option either," said Wang. By allowing no middle ground or nuances in opinion expression, such tools can actually increase affective polarization.

In the future, the researchers said that more work should be done on designing interactive tools for promoting respectful political dialogue. They also call for research on how interactive tools affect politically moderates' opinions and willingness to deliberate. Researchers could also explore how continued access to interactive tools and repeated exposure to similar issues affect political outcomes over time.

More information: Jinping Wang et al, Liking versus commenting on online news: effects of expression affordances on political attitudes, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac018](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac018)

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