



THE ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT

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COMMENTING *WITH* SITE VISITORS

Study Shows Having Reporters Interact with Commenters Reduces Incivility

RESEARCH SUMMARY

- A recent study by the Engaging News Project of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin found that having a political reporter interact with commenters can reduce incivility in a news organization's online comment section.
- The Engaging News Project partnered with a local television news station affiliated with a major television network in a top-50 Designated Market Area (DMA).
- Based on a schedule prepared by the research team, the station varied who interacted with commenters for 70 political news posts on the station's vibrant Facebook page.
- For each post, one of three things happened: (1) a prominent political reporter interacted with commenters, (2) the station, using a generic station logo, interacted with commenters, or (3) no one interacted with commenters.
- The Engaging News Project team analyzed the nearly 2,500 comments for the presence of incivility, looking for obscene language, name calling, stereotyping, and exaggerated arguments.
- The chances of an uncivil comment were reduced when the reporter interacted with commenters compared to having no one interact.
- When the station's post included a question with just a few possible options (e.g. "Do you agree or disagree?"), incivility also declined.

FAST FACTS

- The chances of an uncivil comment declined by 15 percent when a reporter interacted in the comment section compared to when no one did so.
- Asking a question with only a few answer options (e.g. "yes or no") in a post reduced the chances of an uncivil comment by 9 percent compared to posts without a question or a statement inviting site visitors to leave a comment.

QUOTATIONS FROM PROJECT STAFF

Natalie Stroud, Director of the Engaging News Project:

- "By commenting four to five times on average in response to a post, the reporter was able to improve the tone of the discussion in the comment section."

- “This project shows the benefits of having an identifiable reporter engage with site visitors in the comment section.”
- “One explanation for these results is that people appreciate being heard by a recognizable person from the news.”

RELATED WORK

- [The Huffington Post](#) recently announced that they would suspend anonymous commenting.
- [The Washington Post](#) encourages reporters to engage in the comment section.
- [Wired](#) calls comment sections “wastelands ruled by trolls.”

FOR MORE DETAILS

Download the full report at <http://engagingnewsproject.org/comment-sections/>

PROJECT BACKGROUND

These findings are part of the **Engaging News Project**. The Engaging News Project has a single aim: to provide research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially-viable and democratically-beneficial ways. To sign up for our newsletter, visit www.engagingnewsproject.org.