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/](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](http://www.engagingnewsproject.org).