# ANALYSIS OF NEW YORK TIMES COMMENTS FINDS DESIGN, INTERACTION OPPORTUNITIES INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

An analysis of more than nine million comments from The New York Times website found that site design and opportunities for interaction between the newsroom and commenters can increase engagement in comment sections.

These findings are part of a new Engaging News Project report that examines the content of the comments on The New York Times site. The report also looks at factors affecting commenting activity, including journalists' engagement in comment sections, the design of the website, and the structure of the comment section.

Using both human and computer-aided content analysis, researchers examined more than nine million comments that had appeared on The New York Times site between Oct. 30, 2007 – when the news organization began allowing users to post comments on news stories – and Aug. 13, 2013. The analysis was conducted in partnership with The New York Times.

In 2011, The New York Times redesigned its comment section, allowing users to post directly below the article text rather than requiring them to go to a separate webpage. Researchers examined how the redesign of the comment section affected behaviors within the commenting section and how the moderating team's interactions affected comments. Through the analysis, researchers found that the redesign resulted in an increase in the number of comments left on the website. The redesign also caused a decline in the use of abuse flags.

The Engaging News Project analysis showed that after the newsroom or other commenters interacted with comments left on the site, users left more comments. Individuals who had received a recommendation or had a comment selected as a "NYT Pick" increased the number of comments they posted after they had received those designations.

"Comment sections can be a valuable asset to news websites, as they provide ways for news audiences to build community and help a newsroom's business side. Yet there are still many questions about best practices for comment sections," said Ashley Muddiman, faculty research associate with the Engaging News Project and assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. "Our analysis shows that there is value in news organizations finding ways to interact with commenters, as well as to provide opportunities for commenters to engage with one another."

Additional findings from the study of New York Times comments include:
- The 2011 redesign had little effect on the number of recommendations per comment
- The use of uncivil terms declined slightly after the redesign
- More comments are received on weekdays than on weekends

- Rejection rates and the use of uncivil terms in the comments are higher on weekends than on weekdays
- Comments containing profanity and using fewer words are more likely to be rejected by moderators
- Comments containing profanity and using fewer words are less likely to be selected as NYT Picks
- Using partisan and uncivil terms in a comment corresponds with a greater number of user recommendations

"Ever since news organizations began allowing comments on their websites, journalists have been concerned about the quality of the conversations that appear in the comments section," said Talia Stroud, director of the Engaging News Project and associate professor of communication studies at the University of Texas at Austin. "There is still much researchers and journalists don't understand about the commenting process and the tensions between participation and ideal content. With these results we are able to understand how real-life commenting works and how newsrooms can redesign and interact with comments on their sites."

*The Engaging News Project provides research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at engagingnewsproject.org*