



ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT

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STUDY FINDS JOURNALISTS READ COMMENTS, RESPOND TO COMMENTERS

When it comes to news comment sections, many professional journalists read the comments and respond to commenters, according to a new report from the Engaging News Project.

To better understand how journalists – in print, broadcast, and web-only publications – deal with comments, Dr. Gina Masullo Chen interviewed 34 professional journalists from a wide geographic area who are employed in a variety of journalistic jobs. She then analyzed the journalists' responses as a whole, looking for common experiences across the journalists interviewed.

All the journalists interviewed reported that they read the comments, at least occasionally, with some embracing the task enthusiastically and seeing it as a necessary expansion of their duties. However, only some of the respondents set aside a specific period of time to do this work, while others can't get through as many comments as they want because of a lack of time and/or too many comments.

Two-thirds of the journalists reported responding to commenters, at least occasionally, and felt it was part of their jobs to engage with commenters. They said they interacted with commenters because it could set the tone for the conversation or make it less likely that people will interact inappropriately. These findings support a previous Engaging News Project report that experimentally found that having journalists engage in the comment section can improve civility in the comments.

But while most of the journalists felt it was important to engage in the comments, most also said that they received little training on how to respond to commenters or what to say to calm incivility. This led most of them to feel unequipped to diffuse tension or incivility in the comments.

Other findings include:

- Some journalists have the power to moderate, hide, or delete comments, but others did not. They were mixed in how frequently they used this power.
- One-third were strongly opposed to responding to comments in any manner, seeing it as outside their journalistic role.

“Comment sections are such an interesting issue right now that I felt it was important to hear straight from journalists their thoughts on comments and commenters,” said Dr. Chen, a faculty research associate with the Engaging News Project. “While many journalists embrace the opportunity to engage with and learn from commenters, there are still those that are ambivalent about the comment section.”

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