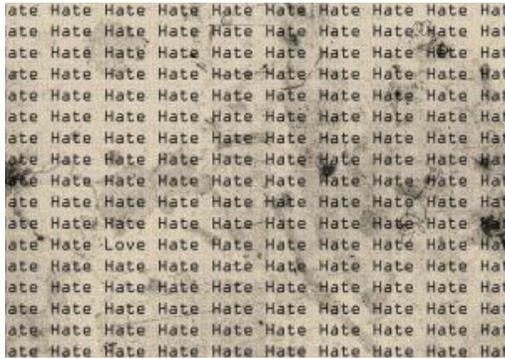




## No Comment: Online Comment Sections and Democratic Discourse



dinokfwong / CC0

The online world seems defined by interaction. We converse with known and unknown others on social media sites, blogs, and even at the bottom of stories on news sites. For journalism, this interaction is fairly new. In the early 2000s, only about eight to 30 percent of news sites had comment sections. About 10 years later, that number rose to 85 percent. As of 2010, Pew reported that 32% of Internet users have posted a comment on an online news article (Stroud et al., 2014). Newspapers and news websites realized the value of online comment sections: they can

facilitate reader interaction and the sharing of opinions about journalistic content. But having the ability to comment doesn't necessarily mean that readers will leave constructive or thoughtful comments; sites such as *NPR*, *Popular Science*, *VICE News*, *MSN*, and the *Guardian* decided to abandon comment sections altogether. Many cited the hateful, irrelevant, or crude content that so often populates comment sections as the primary reason for eliminating them on a news site.

In 2013, *Popular Science* got rid of their comment sections due to “trolls and spambots” who overwhelmed those who were actually “committed to fostering intellectual debate.” Some evidence seemed to show that uncivil comments can “skew a reader’s perception” or even change a reader’s mind altogether about the scientific information presented in the article. As Natalie Stroud and co-authors (2014) argue, “instead of being a forum for learning and discovery, comment sections can devolve into a dark cave of name-calling and ad hominin attacks.” Following *Popular Science*, *NPR* announced their decision to eliminate comment sections in 2016. They explained that the comment sections attached to their stories were “not providing a useful experience for the vast majority of [their] users” (Montgomery, 2016). Comments could be moderated, but this slows down discourse and increases costs; it also puts a news company in the uncomfortable position of judging and potentially censoring certain opinions. Eliminating comment sections avoids the worries and costs about selecting which comments are worthwhile to post, while avoiding the distractions and harms of uncivil, irrelevant, or hateful posts.

Instances such as these evoked both support and condemnation from those interested in creating more vibrant journalistic practices. Some worried that the hateful and uncivil actions of a small percentage of users was dictating the communication opportunities of the majority of news audiences. If the interaction of citizens through reason-based debate and discussion is vital for a democracy’s flourishing, removing the immediate space for such discussion on a specific newsworthy story is seen as problematic. Additionally, some may argue that the ability to put up with or tolerate disagreement—or in the worst case, hateful



opinions—is an important skill for democratic citizens living in a community that often has to live with difference and disagreement among its members. Disabling the airing of such strong and controversial views may also discourage this habit in citizens, especially when connected with the pro-democratic institution of journalism.

Others applaud closing down of comment sections that have become a magnet for trolls seeking to provoke others to no real-world end. They point out the harm that giving a platform for extreme and hateful viewpoints creates; clearly, a democracy cannot be totally free of disagreement or hateful views, but should it place a spotlight on these by allowing any and all to comment on the news of the day? If relevant comments get overwhelmed by comments filled with irrelevant, false, or even derogatory content (often stoked by the ability to post anonymously), the real conversational value of comment sections disappears. Beyond this, newspapers worried about what a hostile and vitriolic comment section may do to their image as an objective news source.

The supporters of eliminating comment sections place the hope for civil discourse in other, more controlled, contexts. The cost to democratic community and the information-conveying function of the news is too high. Alternatively, supporters of comment sections see these areas of sometimes-wild discourse as a vital part of democracy. Perhaps one can clean up the comments—by using software that require individuals to log in with social media accounts—but these may raise the cost of risky or unpopular comments too high and stifle speech that would otherwise be uttered if protected by the veil of anonymity. How free should our discussions be on websites that offer us the news we need to be a flourishing democracy?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Are comment sections integral for the functioning of digital journalism in a democracy? Why or why not?
2. Is eliminating comment sections the right decision when they become targets of trolling, hateful comments, irrelevant discussion, or personal attacks?
3. How ought we to react to comments we judge as hateful or vile? Should we respond to them, ignore them, or find a way to get them removed from the discussion section?
4. What are the ethical obligations of a citizen of a democratic state to others who hold differing views? What are the ethical obligations of news corporations and social media platforms to those who hold unpopular or even hateful views?

### **Further Information:**

Scott Montgomery, “Beyond Comments: Finding Better Ways To Connect With You.”  
*National Public Radio*, August 17, 2016. Available at:



<https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2016/08/17/490208179/beyond-comments-finding-better-ways-to-connect-with-you>

Suzanne LaBarre, "Why We're Shutting Off Our Comments." *Popular Science*, September 24, 2013. Available at: <https://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>

Clothilde Goujard, "Why news websites are closing their comments sections." *Medium: Global Editors Network*, September 8, 2016. Available at: <https://medium.com/global-editors-network/why-news-websites-are-closing-their-comments-sections-ea31139c469d>

Maranda Jones, "Why Traditional Comment Sections Won't Work in 2018." *SquareOffs*, March 29, 2018. Available at: <https://blog.squareoffs.com/why-traditional-comment-sections-wont-work-in-2018>

Natalie Jomini Stroud, Ashley Muddiman, Joshua Scacco, Alex Curry, and Cynthia Peacock, "Journalist Involvement in Comment Sections." *The Engaging News Project*, September 10, 2014. Available at: [https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ENP\\_Comments\\_Report.pdf](https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ENP_Comments_Report.pdf)

**Authors:**

Bailey Sebastian & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.  
Media Ethics Initiative  
University of Texas at Austin  
August 31, 2018

[www.mediaethicsinitiative.org](http://www.mediaethicsinitiative.org)