

ATTACKS IN THE COMMENT SECTIONS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR NEWS SITES

Austin, TX – January 24, 2019 – Rude words and hateful attacks are not uncommon in a comment thread. But how do these comments affect how the public views a news organization? In a new study, the Center for Media Engagement (CME) examined two main questions:

- Do uncivil comments on news stories make people perceive a news site and other site users more negatively?
- Do people make this evaluation based on the first few comments they see or based on the overall tone of all the visible comments?

To find the answers, CME researchers conducted two online experiments that exposed readers to differing amounts of incivility in a news story comment section. The study led to several key findings:

- Uncivil comments taint the perception of a news brand.
- Setting a positive tone with the first few comments may not be enough.
- News organizations would benefit from improving comment streams.

“To protect their brand, news organizations should focus on the overall tone of the comment section,” said Gina Masullo Chen, CME Assistant Director. “If incivility dominates, perceived value of and loyalty to the site takes a hit.” The study also found that the practice of asking journalists to post the first comment to set the tone is not enough to make an impact. In fact, perception of the site was almost the same regardless of the tone of the first few comments. These findings show that, to make a difference, news organizations need to focus on the whole comment thread.

To read more about CME’s findings, access the full report on our website:
<https://mediaengagement.org/research/attacks-in-the-comment-sections>.

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