



Are comment sections a breeding ground for hostility or useful tools?

by Layla Saqibuddin

The comments section on news sites should be a place to stimulate discourse. Too often, the exact opposite is the case. It becomes a place for aggravating others and for acting uncivilized.

So, why do online commenters scream their opinions into the comments section? Is it because the reader actually read the article? Or is it because the reader is merely interested in brandishing their own opinions on to the comments section?

Research at the University of Texas-Austin has confirmed something that many readers hypothesized: A lot of online commenters are more eager to display their opinions on the comments section than actually taking the time to read the article themselves.

The study Engaging News Project at the University of Texas at Austin found 20% of readers spend more time on the comment section than on the article itself.

The results are from statistics and surveys given to people who comment on news, websites, social media and in other forums.

We need to realize that interacting with other readers and understanding other viewpoints are important. Unfortunately, this is just how the internet works.

Some web pages have taken out their comments section because it was becoming a place

of barbaric dialogue. Chicago Sun-Times, The week, Popular Science, Mic, Reuters among others recently disabled their comments sections.

Most of these news sites temporarily have turned off their comments section for online articles until they find a way to stop or at least minimize negativity, racism and hate speech.

We should take advantage of the internet instead of abusing it. The internet gives us the opportunity to discuss and exchange ideas with people around the world, but these sites and forums too often turn into a place where racism sparks, and we start hating one another, which undermines the content, where hate speech starts. This has reached a point where news sites themselves are disgusted by it.

According to the New Yorker, Popular Science makes it clear that the internet comments, especially those that are anonymous, ruin the virtues of science and lead to a cultivation of aggression and deception that eventually lead to meaningless discussion.

Online-content Director, Suzanne LaBarre, cited a study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison where “Even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader’s perception of a story”.

On the other hand, some

commenters believe that it’s ridiculous to try to find a way to stop negativity and inequality. “Sun-Times kills comments until it can fix ‘morass of negativity, racism, and hate speech’”- so until the internet stops being the internet?” said @StartKyleOrton from twitter

Although comments aren’t just about having arguments, they offer an opportunity for readers to openly correct errors and give suggestions or perspectives below the original article. Too often, sites believe people abuse their right to comment and display their opinion.

The current political climate has created much controversy. Racism and hate speech have become more popular. Perhaps, because of the comments that are displayed, readers don’t even bother reading the articles and comments anymore.

At its finest, the comments section are flourishing examples of civil discourse. At its worst, it is a place of ignorance and cruelty, where people attack one another and where even slurs count as dialogue.

One would think that most people spend more time reading than trying to think of an ignorant remark to start a discussion. Still, we should take advantage of the opportunity of exchanging ideas and understanding other perspectives through the internet.

People are people, and it



would benefit everyone if we took advantage of the comments section as we do when we speak to someone face to face. This

means we have the ability to make our own decisions and can choose what kind of spaces we want to create.

The power of social media: how politics will forever be changed

by Mia Sherin

It’s old news that social media has changed our lives. It’s nearly impossible to check Instagram without having an adult say, “Back in my day, we actually had to talk to each other.” Cue the teenage eye roll.

But what has become strikingly clear recently is how much social media has affected politics. Whether it’s Facebook, Twitter, or some trending Instagram memes, our country’s election process, and politics in general, will never be the same because of these platforms.

While some have strong views one way or another, Senior Sophie Brown lands somewhere in the middle, believing that social media has had both positive and negative effects on politics.

“It’s positive because you can be connected to people who share the same political views as you through platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and you can share your views with other people.”

She added, “This can sometimes be negative because a lot of people have different views than you, and politics can get pretty nasty especially now, and social media is just one way that happens.”

While many social media platforms have contributed to this shift when it comes to politics, Facebook is one that has played a major role.

Senior Isaac Slomski-Pritz spoke to this point, “The problems with social media is that Facebook divides us into what we already agree with and gives us more information and content and stories that agree with that side. One of the reasons



President Trump has used Twitter more extensively than any other president, his tweets often making headlines | AP

our country is so polarized is because we are just seeing our own view in a tunnel vision.”

He continued, “When we see other people with different views it’s more shocking since we never see it online.”

The Wall Street Journal published an interactive article to demonstrate the way that Facebook affects our political experience. In this interactive, you click on a topic, such as “President Trump,” “healthcare,” or “guns,” and the site shows you what articles would

appear in the Facebook feed of a liberal and a conservative.

If healthcare is selected, articles such as, “VICTORY! Congress Votes to Repeal Independent Payment Advisory Board, Obamacare’s ‘Death Panels’” appears for conservatives while many Facebook posts about Bernie Sanders show up in a liberal feed.

This clearly speaks to Slomski-Pritz’s point that “we are just seeing our own view in a tunnel vision.”

However, according to Statista, an August 2016 survey of Facebook

users stated that only 23% reported having similar political viewpoints as their Facebook friends. So, is this tunnel-vision a reality, or possibly, a more recent reality?

Of course, Facebook is not the only key player in this discussion. Twitter has proven to have had a monumental effect on politics, especially during the most recent presidential election.

When speaking about Twitter, Kerrie Harvey, author of the Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics, said, “Both the technology

itself, and the way we choose to use the technology, makes it so that what ought to be a conversation is just a set of Post-it notes that are scattered. Not even on the refrigerator door, but on the ground.”

Basically, she sees political conversation on Twitter less as conversations and more as a giant mess.

When it comes to Twitter, talk of automated accounts has added a layer to the effect of this platform on politics today.

According to NPR, a study conducted by Oxford University found that between the first and second presidential debates, one-third of pro-Trump and one-fifth of pro-Clinton tweets were from automated accounts.

Douglas Guilbeault, one of the researchers in the study, said, “They reinforce the sense of polarization in the atmosphere, because bots don’t tend to be mild-mannered, judicial critics. They are programmed to align themselves with an agenda that is unambiguously representative of a particular party. . . It’s all ‘Crooked Hillary’ and ‘Trump is a puppet.’”

While this study portrays the effect of Twitter in a negative light, Junior Jessica Tenenbaum felt that social media has positively affected her participation in politics.

She said, “Social media has really made me more involved on the day to day decisions in politics. When there is a new bill, or when the president or congress makes a new decision on a law, I feel like it is more publicized and more accessible to me through social media.”