

## **ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT**

Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin

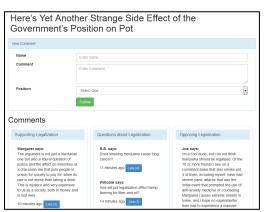
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## ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT FINDS BENEFITS, LIMITS TO USING THREE-COLUMN COMMENT SECTIONS

There are several benefits – and limits -- to using a three-column comment section as opposed to using a traditional one-column section, according to a new report by the Engaging News Project, part of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin.

The group's research found that study participants rated a three-column comment section more favorably than the one-column comment section.

## **Three-Column Comment Section**



## **One-Column Comment Section**

	nother Strange Side Effect of the
Government	's Position on Pot
New Comment	
Name Comment	Enter Name
	Enter Comment
	submt.
omments	
User Comments	
	ilbertrarian one buf, also a liberal question of justice and the affect on minorities of a draconian law that puds to pay for, when its use is not worse than taking a drink. This is injustice and very expensive to us as a society, wes.
R.B. says: Does smoking marijuana c	ause lung cancer?
11 minutes ago Like (4)	

Research participants also were more likely to leave a comment in the three-column comment section than the one column. About one in five participants who had the ability to comment in this study chose to do so. In the one-column section, 17 percent of respondents left a comment. In the three-column comment section, 26 percent of participants left a comment.

Although most comment sections on national and local news websites are designed as one column of responses organized in a vertical or cascading manner, several news organizations, such as The New York Times and The Washington Post, have been experimenting with different formats.

"Most news organizations use comment sections on their websites, but only a small percentage of site visitors actually leave a comment," said Dr. Talia Stroud, director of the Engaging News Project. "We wanted to see if changing the structure of the comments would make a difference in how many individuals left a comment and how people reacted to news topics."

During the Engaging News Project's research, two limits of the three-column structure emerged. First, although most of those leaving a comment in the three-column section selected the appropriate column

for their comment, 5 percent left a comment in the incorrect column and 12 percent left a comment indicating little engagement (e.g. "NA"). Second, there were some indications that study participants were less engaged with the third, right-most column on the webpage. Those looking at the three-column structure "Liked" comments left in the third column less frequently than those in the one-column structure.

Other findings from the Engaging News Project's research include:

- The three-column comment section was less familiar to participants than the one-column section.
- On average, participants spent one-and-a-half to two minutes with the comment sections. There was no difference in time spent with the one-column versus three-column comment section.
- The one- and three-column comment sections did not polarize people's attitudes.

For its study, the Engaging News Project designed a working three-column comment section and a one-column comment section. The three-column section included comments categorized by whether they "favor," "oppose," or "ask questions about" marijuana legalization. In the one-column comment section, comments were displayed in the order they were posted.

"Based on our research, we think news outlets should pay attention to the structure of their websites, particularly their comment sections," said Dr. Josh Scacco, research associate for the Engaging News Project. "Although we learned quite a bit about comment structure, we need to think more about how best to format the columns in a comment section."

The Engaging News Project is planning to do more research on the design of comment sections in the future.

The Engaging News Project has a single aim: to provide research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at engagingnewsproject.org.