



## ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT

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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

Here's Yet Another Strange Side Effect of the Government's Position on Pot

New Comment

Name

Comment

Position

Comments

Supporting Legalization	Questions about Legalization	Opposing Legalization
<p><b>Margaret says:</b> The argument is not just a libertarian one but also a liberal question of justice and the affect on minorities of a draconian law that puts people in prison for society to pay for when its use is not worse than taking a drink. This is injustice and very expensive to us as a society, both in money and in lost lives.</p> <p>10 minutes ago <a href="#">Like (1)</a></p>	<p><b>R.B. says:</b> Does smoking marijuana cause lung cancer?</p> <p>11 minutes ago <a href="#">Like (4)</a></p> <p><b>Willibie says:</b> How will pot legalization affect hemp farming for fiber and oil?</p> <p>14 minutes ago <a href="#">Like (2)</a></p>	<p><b>Joe says:</b> It's a cool dude, but I do not think marijuana should be legalized. Of the 10 or more friends I see on a consistent basis that also smoke pot 4 of them, including myself, have had severe panic attacks that was the initial event that prompted the use of anti-anxiety medicine or counseling. Marijuana causes extreme anxiety in some, and I hope no experimenter ever has to experience a massive</p>

### One-Column Comment Section

Here's Yet Another Strange Side Effect of the Government's Position on Pot

New Comment

Name

Comment

Comments

User Comments

**Margaret says:**  
The argument is not just a libertarian one but also a liberal question of justice and the affect on minorities of a draconian law that puts people in prison for society to pay for when its use is not worse than taking a drink. This is injustice and very expensive to us as a society, both in money and in lost lives.

10 minutes ago [Like \(1\)](#)

**R.B. says:**  
Does smoking marijuana cause 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](http://engagingnewsproject.org).*