



## THE ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT

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

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## WHAT YOU SAY BEFORE HYPERLINKS MATTERS

*Study from the Engaging News Project shows statements before hyperlinks affect business, democratic outcomes – and not always in expected ways.*

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

- The Engaging News Project of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin conducted a study examining what happens when different statements, such as “Follow the issues that worry you” appear before hyperlinks on a news website.
- Six hundred and eighty-one people participated in a study where they were asked to browse a news website. Participants saw different versions of the website that were identical except for a statement appearing above hyperlinks to other stories. Either there was no statement (control group), or one of five different statements, such as “Follow the issues that worry you” and “Thanks for keeping up with the news. Be proud of protecting your democracy.”
- The statements were designed based on previous research in psychology, political science, and communication.
- Both business outcomes and democratic outcomes were measured. For business outcomes, the researchers looked at number of clicks, how credible people found the site, and other similar metrics. For democratic outcomes, the researchers analyzed time with entertainment (versus hard news content) and how study participants evaluated arguments both supporting and opposed to their political view.
- The statements had effects. “Thanks for keeping up with the news. Be proud of protecting your democracy,” for example, yielded less time with entertainment articles and less clicks on the site overall. No statement had uniformly positive effects on both business and democratic outcomes.
- The results of this study suggest that newsrooms should be extremely cautious using these sorts of statements on their sites – although they may have some positive effects, they may have negative effects as well.

### QUOTATIONS FROM PROJECT STAFF

Natalie Stroud, Director of the Engaging News Project:

- “Although the results from this first study were complicated, they did show that statement have effects. I’m eager to keep researching which prompts have which effects to provide newsrooms with more guidance.”
- “Newsrooms should use extreme caution changing a statement like this on their site – it can affect their bottom line and what site visitors think.”

## RELATED WORK

- *The Washington Post* has [left-leaning](#) and [right-leaning](#) columnists on their website, connecting the two with the phrase, “Disagree with our opinions here? Check out our [left-/right-] leaning opinions.”
- Many other news organizations organize hyperlinks into “Most Popular,” “Recommended,” and “Top Stories.”

## FOR MORE DETAILS

Download the full report at <http://engagingnewsproject.org/hyperlinks/>

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

These findings are part of the **Engaging News Project**. The Engaging News Project has a single aim: to provide research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially-viable and democratically-beneficial ways. To sign up for our newsletter, visit [www.engagingnewsproject.org](http://www.engagingnewsproject.org).