



In the beginning, the technology gods created the Internet and saw that it was good. Here, at last, was a public sphere with unlimited potential for reasoned debate and the thoughtful exchange of ideas, an enlightening conversational bridge across the many geographic, social, cultural, ideological and economic

boundaries that ordinarily separate us in life, a way to pay bills without a stamp. It should have been a piece of cake. Then someone invented reader comments...

The Web, it should be said, is still a marvelous place for public debate. But when it comes to reading and understanding news stories online, the medium can have a surprisingly potent effect on the message. Comments from some readers, our research shows, can significantly distort what other readers think was reported in the first place. But here, it's not the content of the comments that matters: it's the tone.

A recent study reported on an experiment designed to measure what one might call "the nasty effect." 1,183 participants were asked to carefully read a news post on a fictitious blog, explaining the potential risks and benefits of a new technology product called *Nanosilver*. These infinitesimal silver particles, tinier than 100-billionths of a meter in any dimension, have several potential benefits (like antibacterial properties) and risks (like water contamination), the online article reported.

Participants then read the comments on the post, supposedly from other readers, and responded to questions regarding the content of the article itself. Half of the sample was exposed to civil reader comments and the other half to rude ones — though the actual content, length and intensity of the comments, which varied from being supportive of the new technology to being wary of the risks, were consistent across both groups. The only difference was that the rude ones contained insults and profanity, as in: "If you aren't gonna see the benefits of using nanotechnology in these kinds of products, you're an idiot" and "You're stupid for not thinking of the risks for the fish and other plants and animals in water tainted with silver" and "Silver, really? lol. No thanks."

The results were both surprising and disturbing. Uncivil comments not only polarized readers, but they often changed a participant's interpretation of the news story itself.

In the civil group, those who initially did or did not support the technology — identified with preliminary survey questions — continued to feel the same way after reading the comments. Those exposed to rude comments, however, ended up with a much more polarized understanding of the risks connected with the technology.

Simply including an ad hominem attack in a reader comment was enough to make study participants think the downside of the reported technology was greater than they'd previously thought.

An estimated 60% of the Americans seeking information about specific scientific matters say the Internet is their primary source of information — ranking it higher than any other news source. The emerging online media landscape has created a new public forum without the traditional social norms and self-regulation that typically govern our in-person exchanges — and that medium, increasingly, shapes both what we know and what we think we know.

One possible approach to moderate the nasty effect, of course, is to shut down online reader comments altogether, as some media organizations and bloggers have done. But as they say, the genie is out of the bottle. Reader interaction is part of what makes the Web the Web — and, for that matter, Facebook, Twitter and every other social media platform what they are. This phenomenon will only gain momentum as we move deeper into a world of smart TVs and mobile devices where any type of content is immediately embedded in a constant stream of social context and commentary.

It's possible that the social norms in this brave new domain will change once more — with users shunning mean-spirited attacks from posters hiding behind pseudonyms and cultivating civil debate instead. But until then, beware the nasty effect.

- Edited from the *New York Times*, written by Dominique Brossard and Dietram A. Scheufele.

**A. Match the definitions below with a word from the article.**

1. extremely small.
2. blasphemous or obscene language.
3. causing people to separate into opposing groups.
4. preceding or done in preparation for something fuller or more important.
5. persistently avoid, ignore, or reject someone.

**B. Match the types of words and expressions 1-5 with the examples A-F.**

- |                         |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Loanword             | A. tl;dr                           |
| 2. Informal Contraction | B. Thou                            |
| 3. Obsolete Term        | C. Café                            |
| 4. Idiom                | D. Wanna                           |
| 5. Internet Speak       | E. Letting the cat out of the bag. |

**C. Find examples of 1-4 from the original article.**

- |                         |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| 1. Loanword             | _____ |
| 2. Informal Contraction | _____ |
| 3. Idiom                | _____ |
| 4. Internet Speak       | _____ |

**D. The expressions A-H below are all related to language. Use each expression once to complete sentences 1-8.**

- |                       |                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| A. Bilingual          | E. Mother tongue     |
| B. Foreign language   | F. Non-native        |
| C. Lingua franca      | G. Official language |
| D. Minority languages | H. Standard form     |

1. The majority of people in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand speak English as their \_\_\_\_\_.
2. English is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ in fifty-three countries, including India and the Philippines.
3. English is the most widely taught \_\_\_\_\_ in the world.
4. Because English is used by so many people around the world for so many purposes, it is widely regarded as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The ratio of \_\_\_\_\_ speakers to native speakers of English is roughly three to one.
6. People who can speak two languages fluently are commonly referred to as \_\_\_\_\_.
7. There are many different varieties of English spoken throughout the world; in fact, there is no single \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Many people fear that the spread of English as a global language will contribute to the death of \_\_\_\_\_.

**E. You are often required to express more than one point of view. You can use reporting verbs to do this. In English, there is a wide variety of reporting verbs to choose from:**

- To express beliefs: *believe, maintain, suspect, think*
- In discussion: *argue, assert, claim, insist, say*
- To show agreement: *accept, acknowledgement, admit, advocate, agree, concede, support*
- To show disagreement: *challenge, deny, disagree, dismiss, doubt, object, question, refuse*
- To give suggestions: *imply, suggest, urge*

Reporting verbs can be cautious (e.g. *suspect, suggest*), neutral (e.g. *say, agree*), or forceful (e.g. *assert, dismiss*). Look at sentences 1-7 below and underline the stronger of the two reporting verbs.

1. Many people *insist/argue* that there is one “best” variety of English.
2. However, I *question/refute* the idea that one variety of the language is better than another.
3. Some people *doubt/deny* the value of a bilingual education.
4. Other *accept/advocate* the idea of a bilingual education, even for very young children.
5. I would *urge/suggest* that educational experts do all they can to promote minority languages.
6. Some people *suspect/maintain* that within a century, there will only be two of three languages spoken in the world.

**F. Write a response to the statement with one of the words provided.**

1. Reader comments should be restricted or banned on the internet.

- *believe, maintain, suspect, think*

2. You should no longer be allowed to post anonymously on the internet.

- *argue, assert, claim, insist, say*

3. The dominance of English as a global language puts languages like Polish in jeopardy.

- *accept, acknowledgement, admit, advocate, agree, concede, support*

4. If you don't know English, you'll never succeed in today's world.

- *challenge, deny, disagree, dismiss, doubt, object, question, refuse*