

5. Fake News

In 2017, news outlet Aljazeera.com disabled comments on its stories. This move was in response to what Aljazeera perceived to be the racism, maliciousness, and false information that some users regularly spread through its comments section. Ideally, the comments section for online news sources should be, as Al Jazeera put it, to “serve as a forum for thoughtful and intelligent debate that would allow our global audience to engage with each other.” However, Aljazeera.com argues that while discussion is important, it was spending too much of its resources policing behavior in the comments section and that the “vitriol, bigotry, racism, and sectarianism” the comments produced precluded “the possibility of having any form of debate.”³⁰ Critics of the move decried the decision as censorship, which is particularly disturbing coming from a media company.

Al Jazeera has joined a growing number of online news sites that have disabled their comments in recent years due to the perception of trolling and abusive content. One of the first to do so was Popular Science in 2013, in response to a study showing that comments can “have a profound effect on readers’ perceptions of science.”³¹ Another disturbing effect of such comments is that they appear to discourage marginalized and targeted individuals from engaging in discussions. One of the ideals of online comments is to provide a voice to those whose perspectives and opinions are underrepresented in public conversations. The internet can be a haven for marginalized groups to share their perspectives, but that opportunity is missed when they are subjects of the same antagonism and hostility that they experience in the offline world.³² Thus, it is tempting for many online news outlets to disallow all comments, rather than make choices about which comments contain the hate and prejudice they want to avoid.

Other criticisms of the move to disable comments include claims that it 1) prohibits readers from challenging journalists who might include bias, misrepresentations or false information in the original news articles, and 2) affects advertising revenue, since the majority of people who spend the most time on news sites, renew their subscriptions, and return most often are those who leave comments.³³ According to *Wired*, “*The Financial Times* found that its commenters are seven times more engaged than the rest of its readers. The *Times of London* revealed recently that the 4 percent of its readers who comment are by far its most valuable.” Statistics from this article indicate that disabling comment sections may adversely affect online readership. Thus, critics argue, in the effort to prevent trolls from having a platform, news sites are actually abandoning one of their most valuable assets.

³⁰ “Why we’re disabling comments on Aljazeera.com,” Medium.com, August 30, 2017,

<https://medium.com/@AJEnglish/why-were-disabling-comments-on-aljazeera-com-a9ffbac61f10>

³¹ Matthew Green, “No Comment! Why More News Sites Are Dumping Their Comment Sections,” KQED, January 24, 2018 <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/29720/no-comment-why-a-growing-number-of-news-sites-are-dumping-their-comment-sections>

³² Tauriq Moosa, “Comment sections are poison: handle with care or remove them,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2014/sep/12/comment-sections-toxic-moderation>

³³ Andrew Losowsky, “Actually, do read the comments—they can be the best part,” *Wired*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/actually-do-read-the-commentsthey-can-be-the-best-part/>

Alternatives to disabling comments (e.g., moderation and algorithms) are also problematic because not every outlet has the money or resources to be effective. Al Jazeera stated in a *Medium* post that, “We feel that rather than approaching the problem with a collection of algorithms and an army of moderators, our engineering and editorial resources are better utilized building new storytelling formats that resonate with our audience.” One option could be to force commenters to use real names. However, one wonders if forcing commenters to use their real names will effectively discourage expressions of racism, sexism and bigotry.