

The dark side of Guardian comments

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Comments allow readers to respond to an article instantly, asking questions, pointing out errors, giving new leads. At their best, comment threads are thoughtful, enlightening, funny: online communities where readers interact with journalists and others in ways that enrich the Guardian's journalism. But at their worst, they are something else entirely.

[The Guardian](#) was not the only news site to turn comments on, nor has it been the only one to find that some of what is written "below the line" is crude, bigoted or just vile. On all news sites where comments appear, too often things are said to journalists and other readers that would be unimaginable face to face – the Guardian is no exception.

New research into our own comment threads provides the first quantitative evidence for what female journalists have long suspected: that articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about.

Although the majority of our regular opinion writers are white men, we found that those who experienced the highest levels of abuse and dismissive trolling were not. The 10 regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four non-white) and two black men. Two of the women and one of the men were gay. And of the eight women in the "top 10", one was Muslim and one Jewish.

And the 10 regular writers who got the least abuse? All men.

How should digital news organisations respond to this? Some say it is simple – "Don't read the comments" or, better still, switch them off altogether. And many [have done just that](#), disabling their comment threads for good because

they became too taxing to bother with.

But in so many cases journalism is enriched by responses from its readers. So why disable all comments when only a small minority is a problem?

At the Guardian, we felt it was high time to examine the problem rather than turn away.

We decided to treat the 70m comments that have been left on the Guardian – and in particular the comments that have been blocked by our moderators – as a huge data set to be explored rather than a problem to be brushed under the carpet.

This is what we discovered.

To date, 1.4 million comments (2% of the total) have been blocked by Guardian moderators because they violated the Guardian's [community standards](#). Most of these are abusive to some degree (they may use insulting language, or be ad hominem attacks) or are so off-topic that they derail the conversation. [Full methodology](#).

1 of 6 To see if men and women were treated differently by commenters, we began by classifying the authors of the articles by gender. **While the number of articles published increased over time, the writers' gender gap stayed pretty much the same, [as it has in most media organisations](#).**

2 of 6 **This gender gap is bigger in some sections than others.** *Sport* had the smallest proportion of articles written by women writers, but *World News* and *Technology* were not far behind. The only section that had significantly more articles written by women was *Fashion*.

3 of 6 **Articles written by women got more blocked (ie abusive or disruptive) comments across almost all sections.** But the more male-dominated the section, the more blocked comments the women who wrote there got (look at *Sport* and *Technology*). *Fashion*, where most articles were written by women, was one of the few sections where male authors consistently received more blocked comments.

4 of 6 Another way of looking at this, is that since around 2010 **articles written by women consistently attracted a higher proportion of blocked comments than articles written by men.**

5 of 6 **Some sections attracted more blocked comments than others.** *World news*, *Opinion* and *Environment* had more than the average number of abusive or disruptive comments. And so did *Fashion*.

6 of 6 We also found that some subjects attracted more abusive or disruptive comments than others. Conversations about **crosswords**, **cricket**, **horse racing** and **jazz** were respectful; discussions about the **Israel/Palestine** conflict were not. Articles about **feminism** attracted very high levels of blocked comments. And so did **rape**.