



NPR Website To Get Rid Of Comments

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NPR is making an [announcement](#) today that is sure to upset a loyal core of its audience, those who comment online at NPR.org (including those who comment on this blog). As of Aug. 23, online comments, a feature of the site since 2008, will be disabled.

With the change, NPR joins a [long list of other news organizations](#) choosing to move conversations about its journalism off its own site and instead rely on social media to pick up the slack. But NPR stands for National Public Radio, so a decision to limit "public" input at NPR.org seems especially jarring.

The decision should not be taken to mean that NPR does not value audience engagement, said Scott Montgomery, managing editor for digital news.

"We've been working on audience engagement, user connections, in a variety of ways, for many, many years, certainly going back to even before the internet. It is a part of public media. It's important to us," he told me.

But at this point, he argued, the audience itself has decided for NPR, choosing to engage much more via social media, primarily on Twitter and Facebook, rather than in the NPR.org comments section.

"We've reached the point where we've realized that there are other, better ways to achieve the same kind of community discussion around the issues we raise in our journalism," he said, with money, and spending it efficiently, part of the issue. **More than 5 million people each month engage with NPR on Twitter, compared to just a fraction of that number in the NPR.org comments.** "In relative terms, as we set priorities, it becomes increasingly clear that the market has spoken. This is where people want to engage with us. So that's what we're going to emphasize," he said.

I did find the numbers quite startling. In July, NPR.org recorded nearly 33 million unique users, and 491,000 comments. But those comments came from just 19,400 commenters, Montgomery said. **That's 0.06 percent of users who are commenting, a number that has stayed steady through 2016.**



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When NPR analyzed the number of people who left at least one comment in both June and July, the numbers showed an even more interesting pattern: Just 4,300 users posted about 145 comments apiece, or 67 percent of all NPR.org comments for the two months. More than half of all comments in May, June and July combined came from a mere 2,600 users. The conclusion: **NPR's commenting system — which gets more expensive the more comments that are posted, and in some months has cost NPR twice what was budgeted — is serving a very, very small slice of its overall audience.**

It's not possible to tell who those commenters are; some users comment anonymously. **But there are some clues that indicate those who comment are not wholly representative of the overall NPR audience: They overwhelmingly comment via the desktop (younger users tend to find NPR.org via mobile), and a Google estimate suggested that the commenters were 83 percent male, while overall NPR.org users were just 52 percent male, Montgomery said.**

When viewed purely from the perspective of whether the comments were fostering constructive conversations, the change should come as no surprise. The number of complaints to NPR about the current comment system has been growing—complaints that comments were censored by the outside moderators, and that commenters were behaving inappropriately and harassing other commenters.

Mike Durio, of Phoenix, seemed to sum it up in an email to my office back in April. "Have you considered doing away with the comments sections, or tighter moderation?" he wrote. "The comments have devolved into the Punch-and-Judy-Fest of moronic, un-illuminating observations and petty insults I've seen on other pretty much every other Internet site that allows comments." He added, "This is not in keeping with NPR's take-a-step-back, take-a-deep-breath reporting," and noted, "Now, thread hijacking and personal insults are becoming the stock in trade. Frequent posters use the forums to duke it out with one another."

A user named Mary, from Raleigh, N.C., wrote to implore: "Remove the comments section from your articles. The rude, hateful, racist, judgmental comments far outweigh those who may want to engage in some intelligent sideline conversation about the actual subject of the article. I am appalled at the amount of 'free hate' that is found on a website that represents honest and unbiased reporting such as NPR. What are you really gaining from all of these rabid comments other than proof that a sad slice of humanity that preys on the weak while spreading their hate?"

Other organizations such as *The New York Times* manage to keep their comments relatively civil. But they use heavy in-house human moderation that costs far more than NPR currently spends on its outsourced system, according to NPR executives who are familiar with the numbers. The Times also opens only 10 percent of its articles for comments ([but is working to increase that percentage](#)), and keeps the comment threads open for just one week. NPR currently allows comments on all articles for two weeks.

Moving the conversation to social media

There are disadvantages to using social media as a commenting platform. Fitting a comment into 140 Twitter characters is cumbersome and time-consuming. Only about 20 NPR stories are posted to [Facebook](#) each day, out of the total of 45 to 50 stories that get posted to NPR.org. Not everyone wants to create a Facebook or Twitter account. And, Montgomery acknowledged, with some of the social media platforms, "You miss the opportunity to have users engage with one another on the same story."

But the Facebook discussions that do take place, in particular, tend to be more civil, most likely because users are required to use their own names (not that fake accounts don't get through, but there seem to be far fewer than the predominantly fake names that NPR commenters currently rely on).

Montgomery also pointed to an example of community engagement that seems to be working exactly as one might hope: a lively [Facebook group](#) that has sprung up around the NPR series *Your Money and Your Life*. The online community has about 18,300 members who discuss investment and personal finance decisions largely among themselves, with occasional input from NPR.