

## Changes to commenting at The Conversation

Written by Misha Ketchell, Editor, The Conversation

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The Conversation exists to serve the public by providing reliable information from scholars with deep expertise, to fight back against misinformation and spin. We are committed to disseminating clean information, which is way too scarce in the digital world. This is as important for a healthy democracy as clean water is for physical health.

This commitment to reliable information underpins everything we do, including our approach to comments. Over the years we have experimented with ways to make the comments streams more trustworthy and a better reading experience.

We have tried (and ultimately rejected) a system for readers to rank comments based on quality. We have asked academic authors to join the comment streams and answer readers questions. We have tried to enforce a policy that commenters can only use their real names. We have sought out comments from experts. We have created a community council of readers and academics to moderate comments that are off-topic or breach our community standards.

Along the way we had some success, but there is still a steady stream of comments that don't add terribly much to the debate. The ones that breach our community standards by being outright offensive are speedily enough removed. The others, those that are merely shouty or aggressive, pose a challenge.

All the research shows that poor quality comments have an impact on how readers rate the quality of information in the article higher up on the page. When the comments undermine our academic authors, it is a deeply deflating experience.

So after consultation with editors and our Editorial board we have decided to try a new approach. It will involve.:

- Keeping comments open for only 24 hours after publication on most stories, so our editors can spend more time actively moderating and engaging in the comment thread
- Closing our Community Council
- Weekly author Q+As which will provide an opportunity for readers to communicate directly with researchers
- Closing comments automatically on certain topics, for example when there is a legal risk

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that we need to manage

- Using technology to automatically flag and lock spam accounts
- Closing the Off Topic Comments (OTC)

As with everything we do in the comments space we will review how we've gone in a few months time.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of our community council who have been tireless in their efforts to help us create a better conversation. Each and every member of the community council has been thoughtful, committed and vigilant in helping us police our commenting threads. They have donated countless hours of their time, and to be honest we haven't always had the capacity to give them the support and backup they need.

We have written to members of the community council separately but I'd like to thank each and every one for their hard work and commitment to a better quality public discourse on The Conversation.

Finally, it's important to note that comments remain a work in progress. Our new approach to comments probably isn't going to be our last. There are still some very interesting ideas happening in the comments space, and with more resources we may be able to experiment. For example, The New York Times uses an Alphabet-designed tool called Perspective to assist with moderation. Norway's NRKbeta makes commenters pass a quiz about the article before commenting.

These days there is an abundance of places on social media where you can discuss anything you like and have your view heard. Our aim is to provide something a little different, a comment stream that is accurate and illuminating, both for those who are active participants and those who want to follow the discussion.

We know that's aiming high, but I ask that you please bear with us as we try and find a way to create a better conversation.

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