

'Liking' an article online may mean less time spent reading it

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When people have the option to click "like" on a media article they encounter online, they spend less time actually reading the text, a new study suggests.

In a [lab experiment](#), researchers found that people spent about 7 percent less time reading articles on controversial topics when they had the opportunity to upvote or downvote them than if there was no interactive element.

The finding was strongest when an article agreed with the reader's point of view.

The results suggest that the ability to interact with online content may change how we consume it, said Daniel Sude, who led the work while earning a [doctoral degree](#) in communication at The Ohio State University.

"When people are voting whether they like or dislike an article, they're expressing themselves. They are focused on their own thoughts and less on the content in the article," Sude said.

"It is like the old phrase, 'If you're talking, you're not

listening.' People were talking back to the articles without listening to what they had to say."

In another finding, people's existing views on controversial topics like gun control or abortion became stronger after voting on articles that agreed with their views, even when they spent less time reading them.

"Just having the ability to like an article you agreed with was enough to amplify your attitude," said study co-author Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, professor of communication at Ohio State.

"You didn't need to read the article carefully, you didn't have to learn anything new, but you are more committed to what you already believed."

The study, also co-authored by former Ohio State doctoral student George Pearson, was published online recently in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* and will appear in the January 2021 print edition.

The study involved 235 college students. Before the study, the researchers measured their views on four controversial topics used in the experiment: abortion, welfare benefits, gun control and affirmative action.

Participants were then shown four versions of an online news [website](#) created for the study, each on one of the controversial topics. Each webpage showed headlines and first paragraphs for four articles, two with a conservative slant and two with a liberal slant. Participants could click on the headlines to read the full stories.

Two versions of the websites had a banner that said, "Voting currently enabled for this topic," and each article had an up arrow or down arrow that participants could click on to express their opinion.

The other two websites had a banner that said,

"Voting currently disabled for this topic."

Participants were given three minutes to browse each website as they wished, although they were not told about the [time limit](#). The researchers measured the time participants spent on each story and whether they voted if they had the opportunity.

As expected, for each website, participants spent more time reading articles that agreed with their views (about 1.5 minutes) than opposing views (less than a minute).

But they spent about 12 seconds less time reading the articles they agreed with if they could vote.

In addition, people voted on about 12 percent of articles that they didn't select to read, the study showed.

"Rather than increasing engagement with website content, having the ability to interact may actually distract from it," Sude said.

The researchers measured the participants' views on the four topics again after they read the websites to see if their attitudes had changed at all.

Results showed that when participants were not able to vote, time spent reading articles that agreed with their original views strengthened these views. The more time they spent reading, the stronger their views became.

When participants were able to vote, their voting behavior was as influential as their reading time. Even if they stopped reading and upvoted an article, their attitudes still became stronger.

"It is important that people's views still became stronger by just having the opportunity to vote, Knobloch-Westerwick said.

"When they had the opportunity to vote on the articles, their attitudes were getting more extreme with limited or no input from the articles themselves. They were in an echo chamber of one."

Sude said there is a better way to interact with

online news.

"Don't just click the like button. Read the article and leave thoughtful comments that are more than just a positive or negative rating," he said.

"Say why you liked or disliked the [article](#). The way we express ourselves is important and can influence the way we think about an issue."

More information: Daniel J. Sude et al. Self-expression just a click away: Source interactivity impacts on confirmation bias and political attitudes, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106571](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106571)

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