

Why are online political discussions so mean?

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Abstract

Online discussions about politics can be very nasty. But why is that? Researchers have proposed two theories. One talks about the disagreement over ideas. And the second theory is that people see others as rivals. But there is a third theory called the "troll hypothesis". It suggests that mean people are mean, regardless of the topic. To see if this is right,

we analyzed comments on Reddit. We found that people who often argue and are rude in political discussions are also mean when they talk about other things. Plus, those who make comments on communities of both political sides turn out to be the meanest! So, online discussions get mean largely because of these people rather than the topic.

Introduction

Imagine you're at recess with your friends. And some kids really like soccer while others love basketball. They might even start arguing about which game is better. Sometimes these arguments can get very mean! The kids might say very unkind things to each other. Now, think about something similar happening but not with games. Many people get really mad at each other when talking about politics. This is especially true when the discussions are online. These intense disagreements are what we call "**partisan hatred**".

But **why are people who care a lot about politics so mean when they talk about it?** There are two main theories. One is that these people think the other side's ideas are just plain wrong. The other theory is that they see the other side as competition. It's like they are playing on different teams, fighting for the same prize. Both theories focus on the political context, though.

We wanted to explore another theory called the "**troll hypothesis**". Have you ever heard of online **trolls**? They are people who like to cause trouble on the Internet by saying mean things just to upset others. They might leave rude comments or start arguments just for fun. Even if they don't really mean what they say! So, **the troll hypothesis says that people who are mean online would be mean no matter what they are talking about. They are just generally rude.** But is this true? That's what we wanted to find out.



Why bother discussing politics?
It's all a joke anyway. 😏

Wow, another genius political analysis from the armchair experts! Keep 'em coming, I need a good laugh.



Let me guess, another 'woke' take from someone who's never left their mom's basement. Try getting a life instead of spouting nonsense online.

Examples of political comments from online trolls.

Methods

To figure this out, we looked at comments people made on Reddit. This is a big online platform where people talk about all sorts of things. There are different communities, usually organized by topic or interest, called subreddits. We identified subreddits as either partisan or nonpartisan. We analyzed comments posted there from 2011 to 2022. We used a tool called Perspective API to assess the toxicity

of the comments. Toxic comments are those that are rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable. They are likely to make someone leave a discussion. Online trolls are very good at that! Just like bullies are very good at making you feel bad.

Results

We looked at over 260 million comments. When the subreddits were not very divided politically, the toxicity of comments was low. But in places where people stuck to one political side, there were a lot more mean comments.

We also looked at whether people who are mean in political discussions are also mean when they talk about other things. And, yes, they are! Those who are mean when talking about politics tend to be mean in nonpolitical conversations, too!

Then we checked if people who participate in subreddits of only one political side are meaner than those who participate in subreddits of both sides. And we found out something interesting. Those who engage with both political sides are the meanest! (See Figure 1.)

Which group posts the most toxic comments?

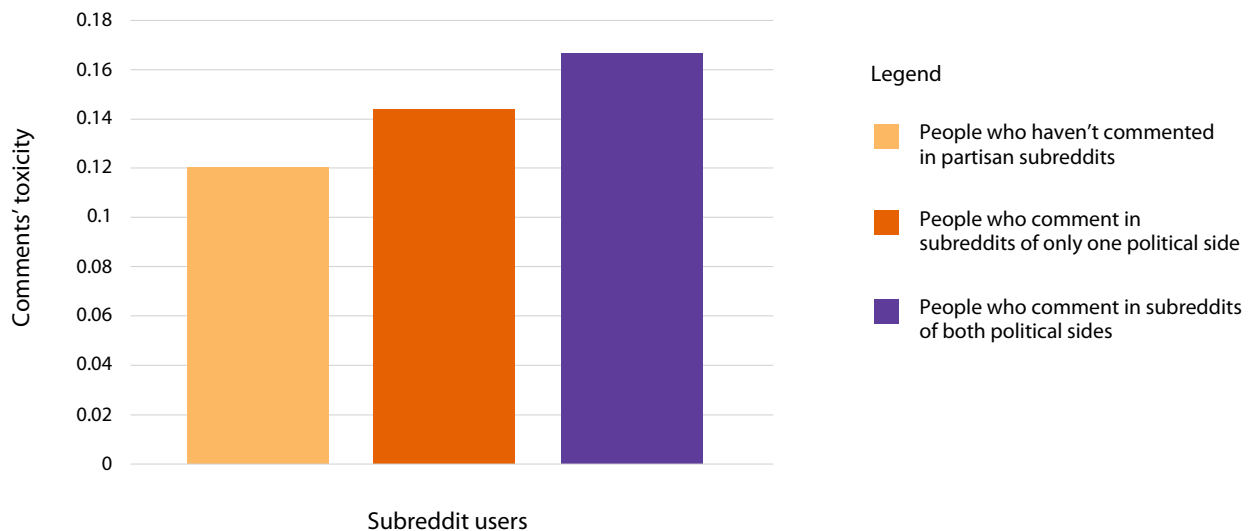


Figure 1:

Comparing the toxicity of the comments of people who have not engaged in partisan subreddits, those who comment in subreddits of one political side, and those who comment in subreddits of both political sides.

Discussion

So, what does all this tell us? People who are mean in online political discussions are generally mean. It doesn't matter what they are talking about. Also, the meanest ones engage with both political sides. **So, our findings do support the "troll hypothesis"**. Remember that recess argument over which sport is better? Some kids might think soccer is way better and some may really prefer basketball. But a few of them are bullies who like to make mean comments to anyone who will get upset. It doesn't matter what their favorite sport is. The bullies are mean even when they talk about other things, like movies. It's not really about the topic, it's about the person. And this is a problem, not only in politics but everywhere online.

This is important because it makes it hard for people to have good discussions and share ideas. If you know that people will be rude to you for sharing an opinion, would you talk at all? Probably not! And that's not good for making progress or solving problems.

We want the Internet to be a nicer place, where everyone feels welcome. So, we need to find ways to encourage the nice kids to join in and try to make sure the mean kids don't ruin it for everyone else. Then we can all have better conversations. We can understand each other better, even if we disagree sometimes.

Conclusion

People often disagree about things. It's natural! But this doesn't mean we should be rude. It's important that we are kind and try to understand others' points of view. Treat people the way you'd like people to treat you. It's even easier online, since you can think through the words in your

post before hitting send. If you do see someone being mean, don't be afraid to speak out against it!

Glossary of Key Terms

Nonpartisan - not belonging to one group with certain beliefs, unbiased.

Partisan - belonging to one side of an issue; having certain beliefs that are different from the other side's.

Partisan hatred - strong dislike or animosity between individuals or groups with differing political beliefs.

Reddit - an online platform where users can engage in discussions on various topics by posting comments and content.

Subreddits - communities within Reddit dedicated to specific topics or interests.

Toxicity - a measure of how rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable online comments are. Toxic comments make people feel bad, upset, or angry. They are likely to make someone leave a discussion.

Troll - originally, a creature from fairy tales who caused trouble for travelers. Today, we use the name "online trolls" to describe people who like to cause trouble on the Internet by saying mean and rude things to upset others.

Troll hypothesis - the idea that some people behave rudely or provocatively online regardless of the topic.

Acknowledgment: This article's adaptation was supported by the Goggio Family Foundation.

Goggio Family Foundation

Check your understanding



1 Can you describe the three theories in this article that try to explain why online political discussions can become nasty?

2 How do toxic comments affect the quality of online discussions?

3 Can you propose strategies or interventions to help people have nicer, more constructive conversations on social media platforms?

4 Have you ever had mean comments directed at you online? What was the topic? Do you think they came from an online troll? How did you react?

5 Suppose you were organizing an online debate series on important political topics. A debate is when people take turns arguing for or against different topics. Each side tries to convince others that their point of view is the right one. How would you structure the debates to ensure that they are respectful and productive?

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eSafety Commissioner: Trolling

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/trolling>

Bullies Out: Be kind online

<https://bulliesout.com/need-support/be-kind-online/>