

# ONLINE COMMUNITIES REPORT, 2022

The Power and the Potential  
*for Publishers Today*



# INTRODUCTION

Online communities are, today, the main arena of public discussion. They mobilize voters, move markets, and provide job leads and advice. When we think of online conversations and communities, we most commonly associate them with social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, and Twitter. In this report, we'll [explore how the public feels about these channels and the opportunity for publishers to create a better alternative.](#)

For these platforms, online communities are essential. They ensure high levels of engagement, and they're a vital source of unique data – crucial to these platforms' business models.

But social media platforms are not the only conveners and hosts to be found online. Online publications, ranging from the largest digital media companies to small local newspapers, also host communities, providing forums for their readers to discuss and bond over the events covered there. Properly implemented and managed, these communities can benefit publishers in many of the same ways they have strengthened social media platforms: they build engagement, allow publishers to collect and strengthen their first-party data, and in so doing, future-proof their businesses.

In June 2022, OpenWeb, in partnership with YouGov, conducted a nationwide survey of more than 1,400 people to explore how and why Americans participate in online conversation and communities. Our goal: to create a more complete understanding of the motivations and actions that drive people to engagement and conversation online. With this understanding, we'll be better prepared to create and promote more relevant, healthy, and productive conversations and communities.

Our research found that even though Americans are often on social media multiple times a day, they're not necessarily happy about it. Overall, they don't think conversations on social media are healthy, and many believe the platforms should be doing more to counter toxicity, trolls, and misinformation.

The potential for change is dramatic: By using technology to encourage healthy engagement online, we can foster communities that provide information, perspective, and

belonging. We can empower media properties to host vibrant, healthy communities, and collect and leverage data to support a sustainable revenue model.



ONLY

**36%**

**OF AMERICANS SAY THAT CONVERSATIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA ARE "GENERALLY HEALTHY."**

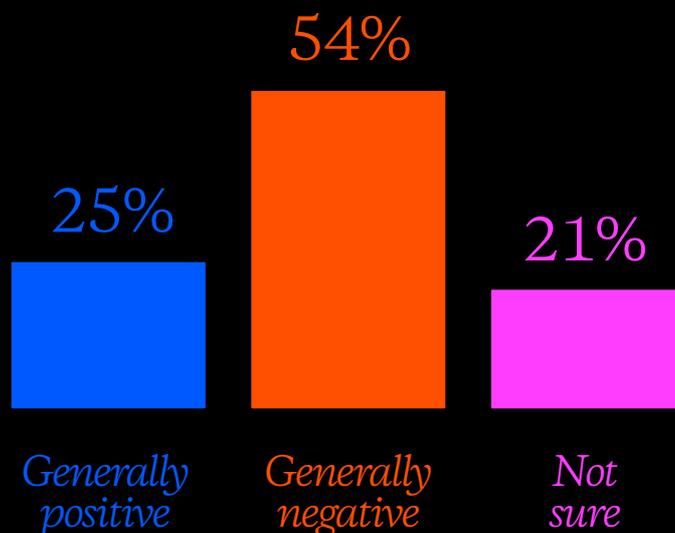
# AMERICANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: UNHAPPY, BUT UNABLE TO STOP

It's not an overstatement to say that many Americans are addicted to social media — just ask anyone with a smartphone. Yet the level of social media use, combined with the level of dissatisfaction about social media, is still striking.

For all the benefits of social media, a majority of Americans — 54% — say that the overall effect of social media on society has been negative. Fully half say that social media platforms don't do enough to fight against toxicity, trolls, and misinformation. Yet these platforms clearly fill a need, and this discontent doesn't seem to be slowing

participation: some 93% of Americans use social media, with 74% participating at least once a day (55% report using multiple times every day). Only 5% participate less than once a month. These platforms have staked out a position that has become central to our lives, to our ability to connect with others, and to our understanding of the world.

Effect of social media on society



# ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA: IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU

Social media platforms are well-tuned engines for driving engagement and collecting data.

Leveraging behavioral analyses of billions of users, they've learned which content and actions will quite literally push our buttons, encouraging us to like, share, and otherwise provide intent and sentiment signals, driving engagement and revenue. As a result, visitors to these sites are highly likely to engage. The vast majority — 91% — say they read, reply to, comment on, “like” or “share” information from social media.

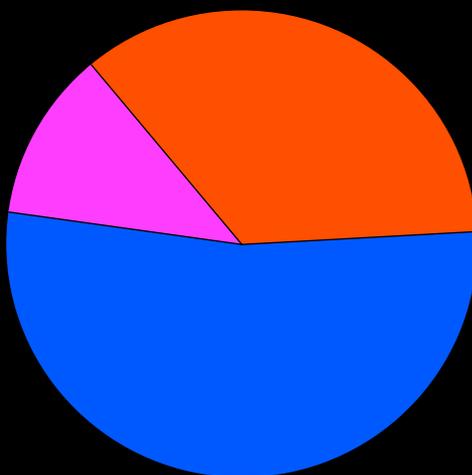
And while social media sites are known for hosting spirited debates, that's not why most people say they show up to platforms like Facebook and Reddit. Instead, 53% say

they're looking for a deeper understanding of an issue — to better understand something they've read or heard, or to explore other viewpoints. Only 35% say they engage on social media because they want to add their own voice to a conversation.

But despite — or perhaps because of — this high level of engagement, only 36% of people say conversations on social media are “generally healthy.” That leaves us with massive numbers of people regularly visiting social media platforms and engaging in conversations that they don't think are good for them.

Reasons for reading or engaging with social media content

11%  
*Other*

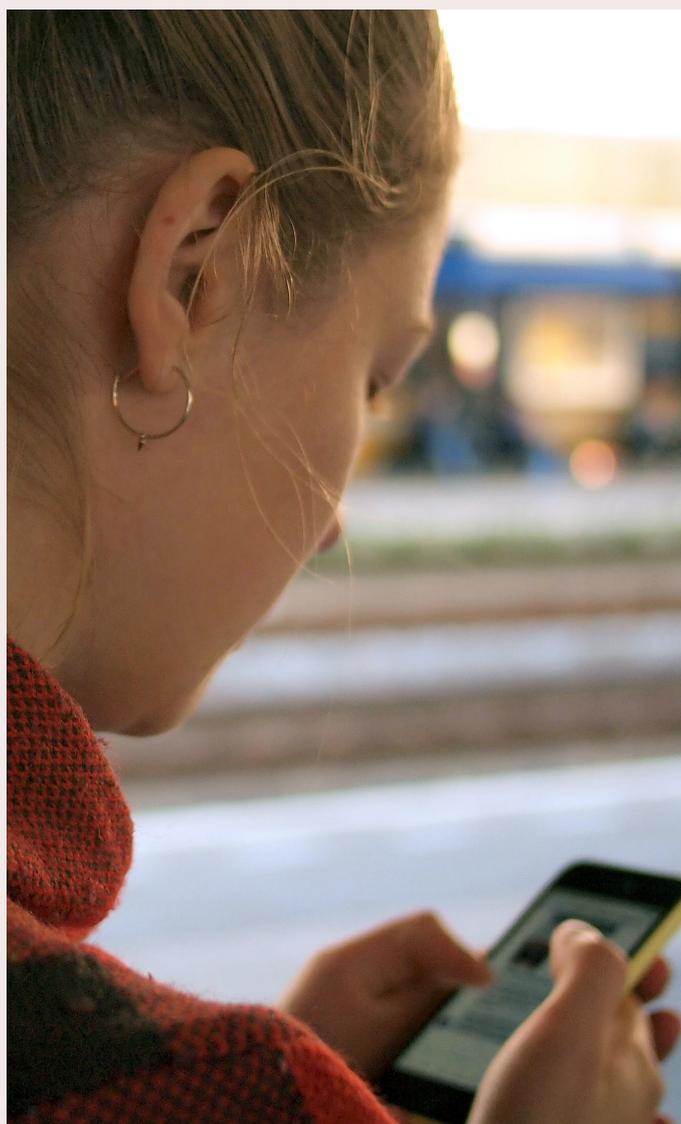


35%  
*To add my own voice*

53%  
*To better understand a story, or to gain another point of view*

# ONLINE PUBLICATIONS AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

There is an alternative, one with the potential to be much healthier for individuals and for society: the conversations and communities found in the comments sections hosted by online publications.



Readers both want and appreciate these conversations and the communities they foster: 72% say that online publications should offer comments. And 91% of those who read online publications say they also read these interactions.

Readers view these conversations as much more than the letters to the editor they've largely replaced. They see the online conversations prompted by stories as vibrant sources of information, perspective, and opinion in their own right. Online, the conversation can become a critical extension of a story itself, often generating follow-on stories and buzz.

Only 34% of people say the conversations hosted by online publications are “healthy” - about the same percentage as for social media. That doesn't mean the two are equivalent: 41% of respondents say community interactions on online publications are healthier than those on social media, but only 16% say social media interactions are healthier than those on online publications' sites.

## Conversation starters

# 72%

**SAY THAT ONLINE PUBLICATIONS SHOULD HAVE COMMENTS SECTIONS**

# 91%

**OF THOSE WHO READ ONLINE PUBLICATIONS READ THE COMMENTS**

Readers of online publications are slightly more likely than visitors to social media platforms to be looking to add their own voices to a conversation. But overall,

their attitudes toward online content and community are similar to those of social media users — they're in search of deeper understanding and additional points of view.

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### Why do you engage with the comments in online publications?

## 68%

*To better understand a story, or to gain another point of view*

## 32%

*To add my own voice*

# THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLISHERS: HEALTHY, RELEVANT CONVERSATIONS AND COMMUNITY

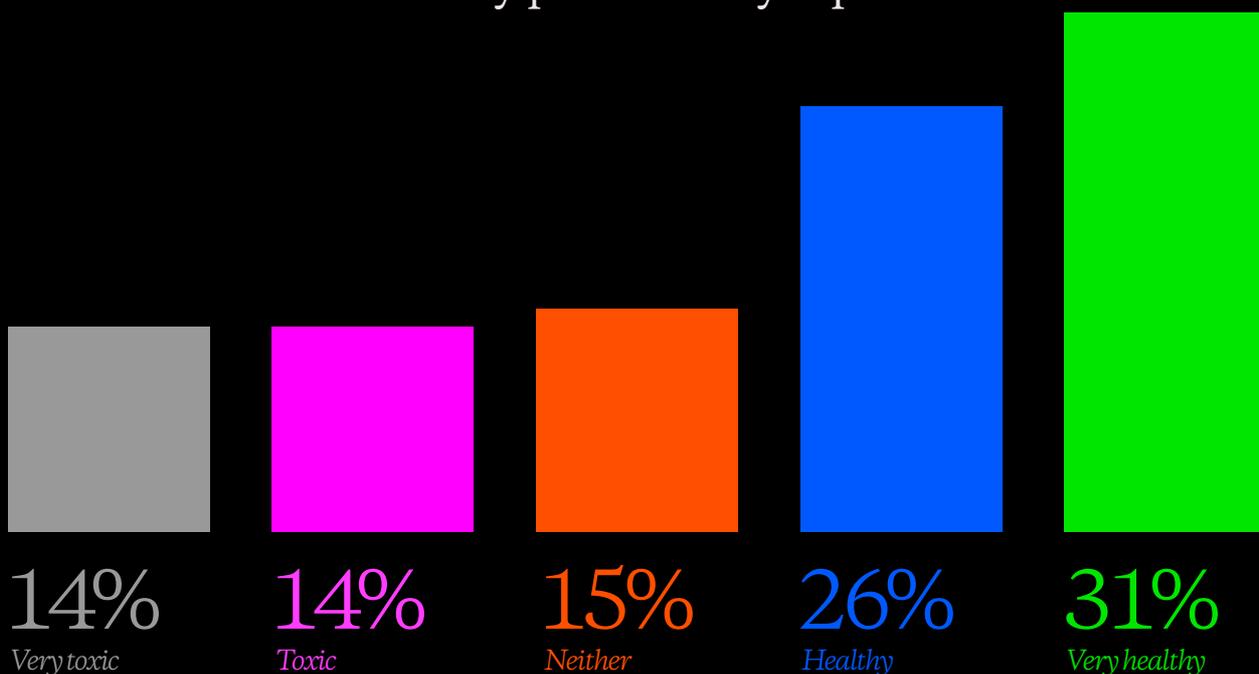
Overall, our research shows that in most online communities, there's room – and a need – for vast improvement.

OpenWeb has developed technology that allows online publications to host communities they can be proud of, that readers enjoy and value, and that generate the first-party data crucial to powering a sustainable business model. In polling of more than 800,000 readers participating in communities powered by OpenWeb, 72% characterize the conversation as “healthy” or “neutral,” a

significant improvement when compared to publishers' sites overall, which were rated only 34% healthy.

The result is a massive opportunity for publishers. “There is real demand for healthy online communities, and widespread dissatisfaction with how the largest platforms today have served as hosts,” says Shoval.

Rating of conversations and community powered by OpenWeb



# 72%

**OF THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE  
IN ONLINE CONVERSATIONS  
POWERED BY OPENWEB SAY  
THOSE CONVERSATIONS ARE VERY  
HEALTHY, HEALTHY, OR NEUTRAL**

# 34%

**OF THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE  
IN ONLINE PUBLICATIONS'  
CONVERSATIONS SAY  
THOSE CONVERSATIONS ARE  
GENERALLY HEALTHY**

# 36%

**OF THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE IN  
SOCIAL MEDIA CONVERSATIONS  
SAY THOSE CONVERSATIONS  
ARE GENERALLY HEALTHY**

“Publishers can seize this opportunity, filling that gap by transforming their properties—today, amazing repositories of content—into true community destinations,” says Shoal.

That will be a major step toward what users want, and what we need as a society: better, healthier community experiences that bring people together.”

# ABOUT OPENWEB

OpenWeb facilitates high quality, brand-safe communities by integrating proprietary machine learning and artificial intelligence with human moderation. OpenWeb starts by using filtering to combat toxicity, and by automatically adjusting controls on a per-user basis. It incentivizes civility by rewarding positive contributors. And it highlights quality by surfacing the best content, creating community role models.

OpenWeb offers a full range of advanced community features:

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1

Polls and reactions engage users directly on the issues that matter to them;

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2

Live blogs, digital events, and AMA's (Ask Me Anything) enable publications to more easily cover live events, arrange conversations with experts, and create lasting connections between journalists and readers;

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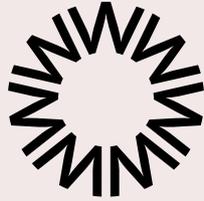
3

“Popular in the Community” recommendations surface content that’s resonating best with readers;

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4

Topic Tracker lets users follow and receive notifications about the content they care about the most.



All of these features build the first-party data that strengthens editorial strategy, improves advertising, and future-proofs your business.

OpenWeb is able to help communities become more healthy before the first user even posts the first comment—and continues to ensure a positive environment as more is learned about each reader. Before a comment is posted, OpenWeb uses ML and AI, combined with human moderation, to filter it for undesirable attributes like incivility, author attacks, white supremacy, and more. These filters can be adjusted to meet the requirements and expectations

of your site and your community. We also allow users to flag comments that they believe are inappropriate, and we use manual moderation for any content that needs additional examination.

OpenWeb integrates data about each user to build individual civility profiles, which help determine the level of trust placed in each reader's contributions. The result: Quality conversations that attract users and create value; communities that are sticky and show strong engagement and retention; and sustainable revenue through context-relevant, high-value advertising at scale.