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### Interactive Options in Online Journalism:A Content Analysis of 100 U.S. Newspapers

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### Abstract

The article discusses the challenge of providing interactivity within journalism. It views interactivity as a variable of responsiveness in interpersonal and societal communication. The Internet has the potential to increase interactive attempts in journalism. However, media organizations do not necessarily exploit this opportunity effectively. An exploratory content analysis of 100 U.S. online newspapers reveals that many provide only token interactive options.

### Introduction

There is a long tradition of dissatisfaction regarding the limited one-way communication of mass media. Lack of interactivity was a concern for media critics long before the term �interactive� became an inflated buzzword in the age of the Internet. Emancipatory media theorists such as B. Brecht, W. Benjamin, and H. M. Enzensberger have raised the issue that people easily become passive consumers of mass media�s manipulated, or at least commercialized, content (Brecht, 1932; Enzensberger, 1970; Kausch, 1988; Rollka, 1971; Schiller-Lerg, 1984). Habermas argued that the hierarchical structure of modern mass communication imposes a �don�t talk back� format on audiences (Habermas, 1962, p. 261).  More conservative scholars, who viewed the �couch potato� as an attack on their educational values, also adopted this critical view of audience apathy (e.g., Postman, 1985).

These positions have since been qualified by a tradition of cultural studies, as well as the uses and gratifications research approach and postmodern theories, which all emphasize audiences� active constructions of meaning. Yet the argument remains that mass media produce messages independent from audience input. One can maintain a distinction between the creation of a message and the construction of meaning by those receiving it (Jäckel, 1995; Rasmussen, 1997).

In large-scale societies, it is inevitable that producers and receivers of widely disseminated messages are separated. Besides, passivity may be a natural desire and an enjoyable right (Schönbach, 1997; Vorderer, 1995). The normative ideal of a deliberative democracy, however, requires active citizens and intense, political dialogues (e.g., Barber 1984). In recent years, the movement for *public journalism* has therefore focused on mass media�s lack of interactivity, among other things (Charity, 1995; Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1992). Some scholars and practitioners have called for an �interactive journalism� that emphasizes audience participation (e.g., Lawrence, 1993, p. 16). Its advocates have pointed out a need for journalists to encourage and solicit feedback by, for example, initiating town meetings, establishing boards of community people, creating focus groups, and conducting opinion polls. �Properly approached, public journalism is about challenging people to interact with journalists and with each other as concerned citizens� (Rosen 1996, p. 16). This approach assumes that there is a connection between the state of democracy and interactive communications stimulated by media organizations. Consequently, examination and consideration of tools and techniques that may foster interactive communications appear to be highly significant.

Against the background of such discussions, this article will present a narrow explication of interactivity that stresses its conversational aspect. Second, tools will be listed that online media may use to encourage interactive communication processes. Finally, the actual availability of such interactive options will be examined by an exploratory content analysis of 100 U.S. online newspapers.

### Concept of Interactivity

A certain tradition of democracy theory specifically emphasizes processes of deliberation and the importance of expanded and vivid public spheres (Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Fishkin, 1991; Habermas, 1992). Legitimacy in complex modern democratic societies is thought to result �from the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of common concern� (Benhabib, 1994, p. 26). This implies that ideally deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry and that all have the same chances to participate in public discourse. Accordingly, the process of will-formation cannot simply be delegated to special professions, such as politicians and journalists. But while citizens can discuss public matters with their family, friends, colleagues and with members of associations that they have joined, they have relatively few chances to access public forums and to interact with journalists and with strangers who read the same newspaper or follow the same news magazine.

Here interactivity can be understood as a formal element of (unmediated or mediated) conversations. While it is often perceived as a characteristic of dialogue, interactivity is limited neither to two people nor to face-to-face communication. It can be seen as a variable of responsiveness in interpersonal and societal communication. In this study, browsing the World Wide Web, clicking a mouse, and selecting from different hyper-links is not in itself interactivity. As required by D. P. Noth (1996}, the meaning of interactivity is elevated �beyond a click.�

In other contexts, it may be feasible to describe interactivity in different and wider terms (Fredin & David, 1998; Goertz, 1995; McMillan & Downes, 1998). The view applied in this article corresponds roughly with the term�s definition by Rogers (1986) and Rafaeli (1988; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997): Interactivity requires a thread of messages, i.e. a chain of interrelated messages. The degree to which communication transcends reaction is key. In one-way communication, one source sets the agenda, receiving no or (at most) indirect feedback. In two-way and reactive communication, both sides �send� messages. �Two-way communication is present as soon as messages flow bilaterally. Reactive settings require, in addition, that later messages refer to (or cohere with) earlier ones� (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 119). Now one can talk of *feedback*. Minimally, it consists of one reactive thread, but it may reach a fully interactive level, as well. The communication remains reactive unless �later messages in any sequence take into account not just the messages that preceded them, but also the manner in which previous messages were reactive� (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Then a fully interactive level is reached. It implies that communication roles are interchangeable (Rogers, 1995, p. 314).

Different purposes and tasks require different communication settings and different levels of interactivity (Höflich 1996). Rafaeli dismissed the �conversational ideal,� which �represents the notion that �better� media somehow emulate the way in which humans conduct face-to-face conversations� (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 117). Studies concerned with the state of public communication may still want to focus on conversation as an ideal. Some see political talk that takes the form of dialogue-oriented conversations (mediated or not) at the heart of democracy (Barber, 1984, pp. 173-198). Following this idea(l), I assert the following:

1. The use of machines and their applications is, in itself, not interactive. Machines do not autonomously understand and respond to messages, as much as researchers in the field of artificial intelligence would like. �Interactivity places shared interpretive contexts in the primary role. Interactivity describes and prescribes the manner in which conversational interaction as an iterative process leads to jointly produced meaning� (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Machines can neither produce nor share meaning in a narrow sense. But, undoubtedly, they can mediate � and facilitate or impede � interactive communication.

2. Communication often fails to be interactive, regardless of whether it is mediated or not (Rafaeli, 1988). Yet the formal characteristics of fully interactive communication can imply more *equality* of the participants and a greater symmetry of communicative power than two-way and reactive communication, and clearly more so than one-way communication. Therefore, there is much value in a high level of interactivity, as far as the ideal of deliberative democracy is concerned. The achievement of democratic consensus is related to opinions that are not merely announced but discussed openly and free from distortions. As Hacker argues, �The more democratic a communication system, the more it will accommodate interactivity over mere connectivity� (Hacker, 1996, p. 225). Thereby an empirical criterion is created that can be related to (respectively, rooted in) Habermas� ideal speech situation (Gonzales 1989; Habermas 1973; 1983).

### Interactive Online Journalism

Traditionally, professional journalism has offered the audience few direct opportunities for interactive communication. A well-known means for feedback, especially in print journalism, is the *Letters to the Editor* section. Readers usually write letters as a reaction to media messages. The communication remains reactive, however, unless journalists or other readers (in subsequent letters) respond to the initial communication. In principle, the same applies to call-ins that are used frequently on radio and television shows.

When S. Lacy suggested an increase of reader input into newspapers, he recommended use of more than one type of feedback system (Lacy, 1992). This, he suggested, could not only revitalize public communication, but also help newspapers defend their markets. It has been argued that an increase of feedback opportunities and of reader participation in general will build trust and product loyality (Lasica 1998).

Clearly, the Internet is a new medium that could extend interactive options in journalism. �The zeitgeist of the Net--its unifying principle --is centered in interaction and interconnectedness, not �I-will-publish, you-will-accept.� The Net is not a megaphone. The Net is a conversation� (Lasica, 1996, p. 33). But this describes the potential of the Internet rather than the empirical reality. Not every communication mediated by the Internet is interactive. Receivers of messages on the Internet �may or may not move fluidly from their role as audience members to producers of messages� (Morris & Ogan, 1996, p. 42). Accordingly, hopes for activating citizens in an �electronic agora� and in an electronically backed up democracy (e.g., Arterton, 1987; Rheingold, 1993) will have to be considered with caution (cf. Barber, 1997).

Some settings are more likely than others to host fully interactive or at least reactive communication. World Wide Web sites correspond with the traditional sender-receiver model unless they integrate special tools, such as e-mail links and discussion areas (bulletin boards), which enable readers to make their own statements.

Based on rather impressionistic observations, critics insist that traditional media organizations offer only illusions of interactivity on the Net (e.g., Lasica, 1996; Saila, 1997). Years ago, Katz argued that most of the online newspapers did not even provide the e-mail addresses of their reporters and editors (Katz, 1994). A study by Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) revealed that editors of a newscast did not even look at e-mails from their audience, although they had encouraged people explicitly to send comments. It is obvious that the mere availability of tools that allow for interactive communication tells little about how journalists and their audiences use them. Still, it is a necessary condition for the initiation of interactive discourse. In that respect, online journalism can exploit e-mail, chat rooms, online polls, and bulletin boards primarily. These feedback tools can help establish reactive and possibly interactive communication processes. They constitute *interactive options*.

* *E-mail* can serve as a fast, asynchronous means of interpersonal communication between journalists and readers. It can also be used for reactive questions-and-answers sessions. When President Clinton visited China in 1998, for example, *USA Today* advertised in its print edition that readers could send e-mail questions to the reporter who traveled with the President. Moreover, impersonal, �traditional� letters to the editor can be sent quickly online. By now, general e-mail addresses are regularly provided by many media organizations, including nationwide newspapers, such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. This will have to be studied more systematically, however, especially to determine how many actually offer editors� and reporters� personalized e-mail addresses.
* Reactive communication, as well as interactive threads, can be achieved by synchronous *live chats*. Many chat areas on the Internet are open to any topic and are often characterized by trivial talk. Journalistic chat rooms could, in contrast, be guided by moderating hosts and defined topics. Informational links could be supplied, thereby increasing the chance of a rational discussion.
* The same is true for *online polls and surveys* that could be offered on journalistic Web sites. They are somewhat problematic, however, because usually they do not meet scientific standards (Wu & Weaver, 1997). They fail to be representative, and it is often possible to cast multiple votes. If the audience is informed about these deficiencies, online polls could still be used as a means to ignite and channel discussions. If they are embedded in areas of background information and discussion, they can become part of a communicative effort that may reach an interactive level. Generally, however, polls and surveys as such remain reactive.
* *Online forums*, organized as bulletin boards, are another powerful tool for interactive attempts. They especially widen opportunities for reader-to-reader communication. Using postings that are displayed on the Web, readers can comment on articles and news topics. Ideally, this leads to inspiring, instructive discussions. Participants of numerous *New York Times* online forums (which cover various topics), for example, not only referred to each other�s postings publicly on the forum, but in addition by personal e-mail (Schultz, 1998). Most of them, however, could not remember having received any feedback from the newspaper�s staff.

If media organizations attempted to increase their interactive efforts, they might invent further, more innovative features. For example, newspapers could publish excerpts of forum discussions in their print editions, organize pro and con opinion pieces by staff members versus �active� online readers, or encourage stories written by journalists in close cooperation with readers. The media could present different versions of stories online and ask for comments. In addition to the �peer review,� online (video)conferences with the audience could be established.

Such efforts may appeal to theorists of the public sphere. But executives of media organizations may find that they are risky and only consume time and money without really improving the bottom line (Brown, 1999; Caruso, 1997). Even if experiments with interactive options attract some readers and strengthen their product loyalty, the majority of readers is likely to remain uninvolved  (Light & Rogers, 1999). In fact, interactive options offered by mass media would become dysfunctional if the majority of �consumers� tried to take advantage of them.

Seen from this perspective, it would not be surprising if traditional media organizations provided only token interactive options on the Internet. Only a few systematic content analyses of online media have been published so far. Generally, they have shown that journalistic Web sites in fact do not fully exploit the opportunities offered by the new medium (Kamerer & Bressers, 1998; Niekamp, 1996; Tremayne, 1997; for Germany: Neuberger et al., 1997, 1998; Werner, 1997).

Small, entrepreneurial media organizations, in particular, might lack the required resources to set up Internet sites that integrate advanced tools. Chain-owned newspapers possibly benefit from their media group�s experience with Internet sites. Furthermore, large circulation dailies tend to have greater financial resources than smaller newspapers. This may not only enable larger and  chain-owned newspapers, respectively, to invest more in staff and in-depth coverage (Lacy & Bernstein, 1988), but also in the development of special features in their online editions. In fact, examining 83 online newspapers, an older study by Gubman & Greer (1997) suggests that online newspapers are often consistently �sophisticated� or �unsophisticated,� depending mainly on size of the organization. For example, those that exploit the Internet�s opportunities in terms of visual design (multimedia) seem also more likely to exploit the Internet�s conversational potential, among other things.

To gain more insight into these correlations and to obtain systematic data on interactive options offered by online media, a content analysis of 100 U.S. newspapers on the World Wide Web was conducted. The study was limited to daily newspapers, partly to simplify the analysis and partly because dailies are numerous and diverse in size.

### Research Questions

In the light of the previous discussion, this study�s general research question was as follows: What and how many (different) interactive options do online newspapers offer?

An answer to this question does not allow conclusions about exactly how readers and journalists use these tools. The main goal was to determine how many features are provided at all, which encourage at least reactive, and possibly interactive, communication processes. Ten more specific research questions were created:

Q 1. How many online newspapers offer general e-mail addresses/posting forms that readers can use to contact the newsroom?
Q 2. How many online newspapers offer a list of personalized e-mail addresses to contact individual editors and writers?
Q 3. How many online newspapers offer direct e-mail links to articles� authors (attached to the stories).

Q 4. How many online newspapers offer chat rooms?
Q 5. How many online newspapers offer polls and surveys?
Q 6. How many online newspapers offer discussion forums?

Q 7. What is the overall level of interactive options offered by online newspapers?

Q 8. Is there a difference in offered interactive options between online newspapers that use photos and multimedia applications compared to those not using photos/multimedia?
Q 9. Is there a difference in offered interactive options between chain-owned and entrepreneurial online newspapers?
Q 10. Is there a difference in offered interactive options between online newspapers of different size?

### Method

One hundred U.S. online newspapers were examined by a content analysis in the summer of 1998. A list from the Web site of the *American Journalism Review* (<http://www.newslink.org/daily.htm>) was used as sampling frame. It is one of the most reliable and up-to-date lists of online newspapers. From 517 online newspapers listed as U.S. general-circulation dailies with �full online service,� [100 newspapers](http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue1/sample.html) were randomly selected by a stratified sample.

Four circulation categories were filled until each contained 25 online newspapers. Circulation was measured by weekday circulation of the print edition, as reported in the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook 1997*. The following circulation categories were used: less than 25,000; 25,001 to 50,000; 50,001 to 100,000; and more than 100,000. They were better suited for that study than other categories that are commonly used, such as those by the [Newspaper Association of America](http://www.naa.org/info/facts) (e.g., under 50,000; 50,001 to 100,000; 100,001 to 250,000; and more than 250,000). For, in 1997, only 15 percent of all newspapers had a circulation greater than 50,000. The smallest newspapers can be suspected to lack significant resources and advantages of scale when going online. To study their use of interactive options, it seemed appropriate to introduce categories that shift the emphasis to the majority of smaller-sized newspapers.

***Coding***

After a pretest with 20 randomly selected online newspapers, the final version of a [coding scheme](http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol5/issue1/coding.html) was prepared along with coding guidelines. The unit of analysis was interactive options of online newspapers. It was not required to read through all the editorial text. The study focused on the availability of feedback tools (structural elements) discussed above such as e-mail links and directories, chat rooms, online polls, and discussion forums. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the coding scheme was open for unexpected interactive options. Coding not only included quantitative categories but qualitative notes, as well. This way it was possible to obtain more specific information on encountered interactive options, especially on topics and structures of chats, polls, and forums: Were forums and chat rooms hosted? What kinds of topics were polled, and how reliable were these polls?

Using the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook* as a guide, it was marked whether newspapers were owned by media groups (chains) or entrepreneurs. There were 21 �independent� newspapers of all four circulation categories in the sample. Ownership structure was not a statistically significant predictor of newspaper size.

Also coded was whether an online newspaper used at least one editorial photo and multimedia application, respectively. Multimedia applications were defined as sound files, video files, animated graphics, or a combination of these.

In the final analysis, most newspapers were checked only once. During the pretest, the newspapers� sites were observed on a daily basis for a period of three weeks. It was found that the features examined in this study are fairly constant elements that do not change on a daily basis, unless a newspaper launches a whole new concept for its site. While topics of discussion forums or polls, for example, do change frequently, the mere availability of such tools does not. Nevertheless, some sites still have been double-checked, especially to test the reliability of online polls as well as this study itself. To compare results of the coders, sites were double-checked on the same day. This was done to minimize the danger that features had changed from time one to time two.

Coding was performed by the author and a graduate student in journalism. Recognizing the mere availability of interactive options involved few subjective judgments, which could have jeopardized the study�s reliability. However, it was possible to overlook feedback features. Disagreements between the coders could be resolved by clarifying how closely large newspapers� sites had to be examined. Examination of large online newspapers took up to 45 minutes. Generally, all Web sites of a selected newspaper were examined, excluding advertisements. If a newspaper offered an overwhelming number of Web sites, the focus was on all traditional sections (i.e., news/politics, local news, business, sports, and opinion). At the same time, coders attempted to determine whether special sections featured interactive options. An intercoder reliability test for the quantitative variables was conducted with ten percent of the sample (randomly selected). A simple calculation of percentage agreement between the two coders (Holsti�s r) seemed sufficient for this study. The overall agreement was 92 percent.

***Statistical tools***

Crosstabulations, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were applied when examining relationships between variables. An index was created that combined the different feedback tools that were encountered. It assigned values according to their sophistication and significance for interactive communication (Table 1).

*Table 1: Index of Feedback Options*
*(points per option offered by online newspapers)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| General e-mail address(es) to contact newsroom  |  1 pt  |
| List of at least some editors�/writers� e-mail (limited)  or:  List of editors�/writers� e-mail addresses (general pattern)  |  1 pt  2 pts |
| E-mail links to at least some articles� authors (limited)  or:  E-mail links to articles� authors (general pattern)  |  1 pt  2 pts |
| E-mail links to politicians/officials |  1 pt |
| Discussion forum(s)  or:  Discussion forum(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate  |  2 pts  3 pts |
| Chat room(s) provided  or:  Chat room(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate  |  1 pt  3 pts |
| Quick poll/user survey  or:  �Sophisticated� poll/survey  (open questions/linked to forum/background info) |  1 pt   3 pts |
| Letters to the editor displayed online  |  1 pt |
| MAXIMUM  (MINIMUM)  | 15 pts   0 pts |

While certain assumptions may be contested, the construction of the index was not arbitrary. Even though the actual use of feedback options was not examined, it was theoretically appropriate, for example, to weight discussion forums more heavily than simple quick polls, which are not embedded in any further discursive effort. Quick polls create reactive communication only, while a forum is fairly likely to host fully interactive threads. Applying this idea, the index resulted in a scale ranging from a maximum of 15 to a minimum of 0 points (if a newspaper offered none of the options). The higher an online newspaper scored, the more likely it was to offer different and sophisticated feedback options, which may encourage interactive communication.

### Findings

***E-mail***

Almost every newspaper in the sample provided at least one general e-mail address to contact the newsroom (Q 1). Only 6 out of 100 newspapers did not offer this opportunity. They fell into the two smallest circulation categories. Either they had no e-mail at all or only e-mail addresses of the advertising, subscription, and technical departments. Among the clear majority that offered e-mail addresses to contact the newsroom, many newspapers even had different e-mail addresses or e-mail based forms for each editorial section or for different purposes (to submit letters to the editor, comment on the print edition, comment on the online edition, or offer news tips).

Some encouraged feedback very openly. The *Salt Lake Tribune* claimed �Reporters, photographers and editors ... welcome all forms of e-mail.� The *Chicago Tribune* implied that readers could expect a response to their comments. In an e-mail�based feedback form, readers were asked �In which manner would you like us to respond to you?� The options included �call, e-mail, no response necessary.� In this case, the chance to reach a reactive and even a fully interactive communication seemed quite good.

Apart from general e-mail addresses, 29 newspapers used directories that listed their editors and reporters with personal e-mail links (Q 2). Only two of these papers fell into the category with the smallest circulation (and 11 into the largest). Twenty-five newspapers displayed a limited list. They provided e-mail addresses of at least some editors and writers, usually opinion writers, online editors, and/or top editors (see Table 2).

But most online newspapers (67 percent) did not provide direct e-mail links from the stories to the authors (Q 3). Only 10 newspapers provided author e-mail links as a general pattern. Twenty-three newspapers had only a few links to authors from their stories, and most of these were columnists (Table 2).

*Table 2. U.S. online newspapers with personalized*
*e-mail addresses of journalists*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|   | E-mail  directories | E-mail links  attached to stories  |
| Not offered | 46 | 67 |
| Limited | 25 | 23 |
| Offered | 29 | 10 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

One might expect that newspapers that offer e-mail directories would also attach personalized e-mail links directly to articles. Yet a crosstabulation did not reveal such a pattern. Differences not only failed to be statistically significant, more than half of the papers that had e-mail directories did not attach personalized e-mail links to the stories. Presumably, they tried to minimize the amount of personally addressed e-mail that editors and reporters receive.

***Chat Rooms***

Ninety-two out of 100 online newspapers offered no synchronous chat at all (Q 4). Three provided a direct link to another chat provider. Only five newspapers in the sample offered their own chat rooms. None of these papers fell into the smallest circulation category.

Three of the five newspapers with organized chat rooms presented them without specific topics and schedules. Journalists were neither hosting nor participating. In contrast, the *Florida Times-Union* (Jacksonville) offered a more sophisticated chat that involved invited officials. Transcripts of past chats were displayed. Readers were required to register with an e-mail address and a password to gain access.

The chat area of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, which also displayed transcripts and required registration, was organized according to a weekly schedule. Two evenings were kept open for chats without prescribed topics. The other days were reserved for entertainment, politics, Internet issues, and sports. Journalists and experts participated. Besides, some chats were related and linked to news stories. While these efforts indicated a willingness to adapt to the conversational ethos of the Internet, most newspapers appeared to be reluctant to embrace online chats.

***Polls and Surveys***

Twenty-four out of 100 newspapers conducted online polls or surveys (Q 5). Only two newspapers with a print circulation under 25,000 ran polls, compared to 10 papers from the largest circulation category. Most often, newspapers featured simple quick polls (11 papers) and user surveys (7 papers) that asked readers about their preferences concerning the (online) newspaper.

Quick polls were often run on a weekly basis and usually involved two to five answer categories without a chance to post additional comments. To check the polls� reliability, coders tried to cast more than one vote. When multiple votes were not blocked yet still counted in statistics, which could be retrieved immediately, the polls clearly lacked any reliability. Generally, multiple votes were indeed possible. Readers could easily vote twice or more. Only five newspapers attempted to make this difficult. When voting for the second time a warning sign popped up, and the vote did not count. However, after a few hours or days (or when using a different account, of course), multiple votes were no longer detected. It is interesting to note that only two of the newspapers that ran quick polls used a disclaimer explaining that the poll was unscientific. Most quick polls strictly dealt with entertainment or sports.

Seven newspapers used polls that were slightly more sophisticated. For example, they allowed for in-depth comments and provided editorial background. The *Mobile Register* (AL) and the *Grand Rapids Press* (MI) even linked their polls to discussion forums.

***Discussion Forums***

Thirty-three out of 100 online newspapers ran discussion forums (Q 6). Fifteen required a simple registration with e-mail and password, while forums of the other 18 newspapers could be accessed without registration.

Some offered an almost overwhelming variety of forums. In the pretest, the number 30 had been found to be a practical upper limit for counting forums. In the sample, 13 newspapers had more than 30 different discussion forums, and two papers had between 16 and 30 different forums (Table 3). A wide range of topics was covered from �discussions� about cooking, movies, or sports, to public affairs, political, and economic issues.

*Table 3. U.S. online newspapers with discussion forums*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Discussion forums** | **Online newspapers** (n = 100) |
| No forum | 67 |
| 1 forum | 8 |
| 2 to 15 forums | 10 |
| 16 to 30 | 2 |
| 31 or more | 13 |

Eight newspapers in the sample offered only one discussion forum. Six of these were general forums often called �guestbooks,� to which all kinds of messages were posted. Ten newspapers offered between 2 and 15 forums, many of which dealt with local public affairs and sports.

Only rarely (seven sites) were forums linked to articles or Web sites that provided background information on the discussion topics. Online newspapers might view discussion forums merely as �reader playgrounds.� In fact, the examination suggested that forums were mostly unmoderated and that journalists rarely participated. But there were exceptions. Seven newspapers ran forums that indicated moderation and participation of journalists and experts, respectively. The *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Times Union* (Albany, N.Y.), the *St. Petersburg Times* (FL), and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (TX) clearly indicated that at least some of their forums were hosted and that journalists made guest appearances. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO) not only advertised that journalists participate in some of the discussions, it also featured a special forum with an online columnist who answered questions about news issues. Likewise, many forums of the *Washington Post* were moderated, some joined by experts, and three forums explicitly reserved for discussions with top editors and top writers.

Nothing can be concluded about the discussion level, or the actual level of interactivity reached by any of the forums. In any event, they mark interactive options that are apparently ignored by the majority of newspapers.

***Other Features***

Online newspapers did not display letters to the editor�the traditional form of reactive feedback�as often as one might expect. Fifty online newspapers ran a letters section, whereas the other half in the sample lacked letters to the editor, though they surely featured letters in their print editions.

At the same time, feedback tools other than those already described were infrequent. Eight newspapers provided e-mail links to politicians. Others featured special search options and �interactive quizzes,� which were only based on hyperlinks, however, and did not fit this study�s conversational concept of interactivity levels. Five newspapers integrated reader homepages on their online sites. Four newspapers offered �digital postcards� that readers could send to friends. Finally, five papers had an e-mail-based tool that enabled readers to send an article to someone else.

The *St. Petersburg Times* featured virtual tours, for example through an aquarium, supplemented by a �guestbook� that readers could use for comments. *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn maintained a specially edited forum where he arranged readers� comments and questions along with his answers. However, such efforts were exceptional.

***Index of Interactive Options***

Most online newspapers scored low on the �index of interactive options� (Q 7). The mean score was 4.1, and the median was 3.5 (standard deviation = 2.51). With 12 points, the *Florida Times-Union* achieved the highest score in the sample.

***Predictors of Interactive Options***

Use of photos and multimedia was correlated with interactive options (Q 8). First of all, 77 out of 100 newspapers used photos in their online editions. Sixteen out of 100 even featured multimedia applications (14 of which also used photos). They were more likely to provide discussion forums than those that did not use multimedia: 69 percent in the multimedia group had forums, compared to only 26 percent in the group of newspapers that did not employ multimedia applications (Table 4).

*Table 4. Use of multimedia applications and availability of discussion forums*
*at U.S. online newspapers*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  No forum offered |  Forum(s) offered | Total  (n = 100)  |
| No multimedia |  62  74 % | 22  26 % | 84  100%  |
| Multimedia | 5  31 % | 11  69 % | 16  100 % |
| Total |  67  67 % |  33  33 % | 100  100 %  |

 X² = 11.01, p = .001
Kendall�s tau-b = .33

In addition, on the �index of interactive options,� newspapers that used multimedia reached a mean score of 5.88, while the others reached a mean score of only 3.74. This 2.14-point difference was statistically significant according to a t-test (p= .001).

Similarly, online newspapers that used photos were far more likely to offer discussion forums than those that did not (Table 5). They also scored higher on the �index of interactive options.� Online newspapers with photos reached a mean of 4.57, compared to 2.43 by papers without photos. Again, the difference was statistically significant according to a t-test (p < .000).

*Table 5. Use of photos and availability of discussion forums*
*at U.S. online newspapers*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | No forum offered |  Forum(s) offered | Total  (n = 100) |
| No photos | 21  91 % | 2  9 % | 23  100%  |
| Photos | 46  60 % | 31  40 %  |  77  100 % |
| Total | 67  67 % | 33  33 %  | 100  100 %  |

X² = 7.98, p = .005
Kendall�s tau-b = .28

There seems to be a consistent pattern of how �advanced� online newspapers operate. Those that exploit the Internet�s possibilities to use photos and multimedia applications instead of simple text and graphics also feature relatively many interactive options. Their commitment to the development of Internet sites seems higher. Perhaps organizational factors, such as ownership structure or the size of the newspaper, account for this.

In fact, the use of photos and multimedia in the online edition was correlated with the size (measured by circulation) of the print editions. Twelve out of 25 newspapers with a circulation of 25,000 or less did not have photos in their online edition. In addition, no paper in this category used multimedia applications. At the other end, all 25 newspapers with a circulation of more than 100,000 used photos, and 11 included multimedia applications. This positive relationship between size and use of photos/multimedia was statistically significant at the .001-level.

Ownership structure (chain vs. independent) was not correlated with the use of photos or multimedia. It was not a good predictor of interactive options, either (Q 9), even though chain-owned papers achieved a mean score of 4.28 points on the index, compared to only 3.33 points achieved by independent newspapers. Yet this relationship failed to be statistically significant. Moreover, the five newspapers that scored highest on the index were not only owned by chains, but also fell into the largest circulation group. Newspaper size proved to be a clearer predictor than ownership structure. Generally, smaller newspapers were less likely to feature interactive options (Q 10).

In the availability of discussion forums this relationship was visible most clearly. Seventeen out of the 25 largest newspapers offered discussion forums, i.e. 68 % compared to only 33 % in the whole sample (Table 6).

*Table 6. Organization size (circulation of print edition)*
*predicting availability of discussion forums at U.S. online newspapers*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Circulation** | **No forum offered** | **Forum(s) offered** | **Total** (n = 100)  |
| 25,000 or less  | 20  80 % | 5  20 % |  25  100 %  |
| 25,001 � 50,000 | 21  84 % | 4  16 % | 25  100 %  |
| 50,001 � 100,000 | 18  72 % |  7  28 % | 25  100 %  |
| 100,001 or more |  8  32 % | 17  68 % | 25  100 % |
| Total | 67  67 % | 33  33 %  | 100  100 % |

   X² = 19.31, p< .000
  Kendall�s tau-c = .39

Consistent with this finding, larger newspapers scored higher on the �index of interactive options.� One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant mean differences between the circulation groups (Table 7).

*Table 7. Mean scores on �index of interactive options� by circulation categories*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Circulation** | **N** | **Mean score on index** | **Std. deviation** |
| 25,000 or less  | 25 | 2.56 | 1.69  |
| 25,001 � 50,000  | 25 | 3.28 | 1.90 |
| 50,001 � 100,000  | 25 | 4.08 | 2.08  |
| 100,001 or more | 25 | 6.40 | 2.53 |
| Total | 100 | 4.08  | 2.51  |

F-ratio = 16.13, p< .000
The index ranges from 0 to 15 points. The higher the score, the more diverse interactive options are offered.

Perhaps it is easier for large newspapers to allocate resources for the development of their online editions. Also, editors and the management of smaller newspapers might see no need to focus on feedback tools, as their readership at least appears to be closer to the newsroom than at large media organizations.

A closer look at the findings reveals that not only the mean score on the index, but also the standard deviation is highest among the biggest newspapers. It suggests that some bigger newspapers notably engage in interactive efforts, while others tend to stick to the paradigm of one-way communication. Nevertheless, findings were not �skewed� by one or two larger papers with high scores. Even without considering the five large newspapers that scored highest, the mean score of the 20 remaining large papers was 5.45 and, thus, still higher than the mean of all the other groups (p< .000).

### Conclusions

Interactivity has been discussed as a challenge for journalism that can be met, at least partly, by the thoughtful development of Internet sites. The Internet allows for quick movement from an asymmetrical mode of communication to a more egalitarian, interactive mode. Findings of this study, however, show that many news organizations infrequently exploit this advantage of the new medium. Journalistic Web sites are not necessarily interactive at all.

A content analysis of 100 U.S. online newspapers revealed generally few and token interactive options. The findings are concurrent with a similar study by Tankard & Ban (1998), whose results were released when work on this content analysis had been finished. Tankard and Ban concluded that �many online newspapers are simply using the online site to mirror or reproduce the content of the print newspaper� (1998, p. 14).

However, it would not be fair to say that newspapers have totally ignored the Internet�s conversational potential. E-mail has become a widely accepted tool that readers can use for feedback. It is now possible to contact most newsrooms and even many individual journalists by e-mail. For media organizations and journalists this means an organizational challenge. Do media organizations need a policy or ethical guidelines to help journalists deal with personal e-mail from their readers? How much time can or should editors and reporters spend reacting to reasonable reader e-mail? How can they be protected against �hate mail� and �spammed� messages? Hopes that interactive options of the Internet will help reinvigorate public communication also depend on the resolution of such practical questions.

At the moment, however, many newspapers seem reluctant to enter new territory at all. While most news media are represented on the Internet, they do not necessarily employ the specific tools characteristic of the medium. In fact, some journalists appear horrified at the idea that readers want to engage in a discussion with them (Riley et al., 1998).

Web sites of smaller newspapers, in particular, have been found to lack options such as discussion forums and chat rooms. Even many large newspapers rely primarily on a few well-known feedback settings, while they rarely develop further interactive features. For example, videoconferencing, to name an especially advanced tool, was not encountered at all. Only one-third of the examined online newspapers offered discussion forums, of which only a few were joined by journalists.

On the other hand, one can ask what the point would be of getting ever more online media that offer discussion forums and chat rooms? First of all, it simply would not make sense if every newspaper offered a forum on the latest scandal in Washington. Readers can easily go to the Web sites of large national newspapers that are sure to have such a forum. Small newspapers must limit their interactive options to local matters.

Moreover, one can consider the problem of �communication overload.� In a case study of discussion forums that were offered by *The Guardian* during British elections, Light and Rogers (1999) concluded that �the traditional publisher-contributor relationship remains preferable to both users and developers.� Many readers were reluctant to participate in the forums, especially because of lack of time. Traditional means of feedback, like letters to the editor, appear less �chaotic� (complex), because messages are edited and remain mostly reactive.

Furthermore, discussion forums are not *necessarily* more egalitarian and democratic than traditional mass communication. They can easily be dominated by a few participants and by dubious topics and opinions (cf. Stoll, 1996). Exchanges may be formally interactive still. And they may be important and fulfilling for the participants. Yet often their value is  fairly limited, measured by high standards of democratic deliberation. While there is a need for rational deliberation on public affairs, there is certainly a danger of a jungle-like density of communication that is growing from permanently repeated prattle. This danger could be reinforced by interactive options offered by traditional mass media (cf. Buchstein, 1997).

Objections of this kind do not imply that the general idea of improving public communication by interactive options is obsolete (cf. Peters, 1994). But one clearly has to go beyond questions of the mere *availability* of communicative tools and settings. The examination of interactive options presented in this article provided only a starting point to study and question the reality and possibilities of online journalism.

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