# User Comments in the Online News Rooms: Understanding the Journalists' Perception of Interactive Journalism

## Introduction

The news media landscape is undergoing drastic changes over the past decade, as digital platforms are creating astonishing competition for traditional, media such as the print and broadcast platforms. These traditional forms of media are converging with the advent in technology to create a forum of human communication with the net as its hub. The web tools provide an extensive ways to modify the way people network as a society. The drive for more interactive models of news and citizen journalism is, as (Flew, 2008 pg.10) points out, related with the increasing Web technologies that allow participatory and collaborative producing, editing and distributed content. The internet is altering how news is formed by including the users in the story telling process. This study sought to understand whether anonymous online comments, now a daily element of most journalists' lives, have affected how journalists perceive about user comments and do their jobs. The aim of the study was to examine whether journalists are embracing the interaction or seeing it as an insult to journalistic standards that ridicule printing anonymous, unverified and unedited information

## User Comments a platform for Dialogue

A very common feature in the online news forums was comment sections, where users were invited to post a comment on the piece of news they have just read. Indeed, user comments can be seen on the websites of both electronic and print media, and also predominantly found in Western and Eastern, media organizations, such as *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *BILD*, *Times of India*, *The Hindu, The Indian Express*. Some threads include thousands of posts while some have none. Although there is often some form of moderation to avoid offensive or otherwise inappropriate posts (Thurman, 2008), there is less need for editorial selection since the online space available for comments is in principle unrestricted. Thus, comments sections offer an open platform where a large number of media users could voice their views on the news.

Unlike, other forms of audience feedback such as letters to the editor, user comments appear right away and are directly attached to the story they engage with, attributing them a certain prominence and facilitating attention. Moreover, reader comments constitute 'a novel variety of asynchronous computer-mediated communication' (Abdul-Mageeb, 2008: 59) since they could also be used for communication between users. Therefore, comment sections can be regarded as hybrid constructs, supporting both vertical (user-to-article) and horizontal (user-to-user) communication.

However little was known of why and under what circumstances users comment on online news and about how these activities can be scientifically described (Lee and Jang 2010). Earlier Research has shown that the comments and the commenting pattern differ not only from one story to another but also from one website to another. However, most research gives attention to the users' motives to publish comments or characteristics of the messages.

**Review of literature**

**Online news and Interactivity**

We Media, Blogs and Citizen Media sites have revitalized the idea and as (Bruns, 2005) noted "Internet will make journalism more dialogical, turning the audience into active collaborators of journalists" news production work in the early 1990s the research was on interactivity and now it was more on participatory.

(Kit Lau, 2007) points that with the improvement of technologies; the process of disseminating information becomes an easy process. He observed that the process of exchanging and absorbing the information was an easy process in this Digital era. The audiences were actively participating in the news sites, which allowed them to share and gather lot of information. The results show that the readers would mostly read news through news websites.

**The Boom in Participatory Journalism**

Today almost all newspapers are exploring newsroom convergence and the boundaries between print, broadcast and online media are slowly disappearing while participatory

journalism seems to add another dimension that causes concern to professional journalism. The borderline that separates professional journalists and their audience seems to be blurring (Bruns, 2005; Jenkins, 2006).

Until the advent of Web 2.0, the working routines and values of journalistic culture had remained highly stable for almost a century (Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 2002). Traditionally journalism was a profession and was attached to a media house and the job was to gather and disseminate information. The term ''gatekeeper'', used to describe a main task of journalists, who decide what the public needs to know, as well as when where and how such information should be provided. The gatekeeper role was maintained and enforced by professional routines and conventions that were said to guarantee the quality and neutrality of institutional journalism (Shoemaker, 1991).

**Online News and Gatekeeping**

According to (Paterson, 2005) the readers were able to seek information in meeting their own interests while ignoring the intermediary processors of news (Paterson, 2005). Subsequently, (Hargittai, 2004) interprets the function of gatekeeping as "has shifted from the decision about what should be produced to control of what materials get to consumers and of what material they become aware". The internet had brought about a profound change in the dissemination of news and prioritizing the news to the readers of the news and traditional gatekeepers. Today, communication studies on digital media use and its effects need to take into account the significance of online content to which readers are easily exposed from what was just presented on the web (Hargittai, 2004).

**A shift from Industrial Production of Journalistic Content to "Prod usage"**

The emergence Web 2.0 brings into light the potential transformation of the audience's role, as active producers of news. Several researchers have been quick to declare a transfer in power to the advantage of users and the rise of a new open and participatory form of communication (Jenkins, cited in Van Dijck, 2009, p. 42 - 43), in which the margins between production and usage become blurry and porous. (Bruns, 2007) concludes that increase in the interactive tools and applications indicate an ongoing paradigm shift, where notions such as "production" need to be conceptualized outside the

industrial socio-economic models. Further he suggested a hybrid model of "produsage", in which he explains that the creation of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which shatters down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead allows all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge.

**User comments and its Impact on Journalism**

In the era of print, feedback to journalists and audience participation was in the form of Readers' letters to the editor. However, as (Van Dijck, 2009) states that the availability of inexpensive and user friendly digital technologies which encourages the internet channels, especially user generated sites to allows its users to do it themselves distribution. The trend in media today is to integrate user generated content applications in their websites, asking users, to submit videos and pictures and to rate their stories, to create their own blogs, post or comment on news articles. Pew Research found that in 2014, 14% of social media users posted their own photos of news events to a social networking site, while 12% had posted videos.

Media professionals identify the importance of audience participation in the shaping of the news, however their findings also shows that the journalists were weary of handling the user generated content as it was time consuming and did not meet the values of professional journalistic standards of credibility, objectivity and accountability. (Paulussen and Ugile's, 2008).

On the other hand, Neuberger & Nuernbergk (2010), using survey to understand professionals employed in online newsrooms, conclude that editors and journalists are of the belief that users content are an added sources which could harmonize professional media, rather than act as a challenger or as a threat to their profession. Overall, most researchers conclude that the journalists and their users still preserve the role they already had in traditional media.

**The role of User comment vis-à-vis Journalist's Role**

Despite the fact that much theoretical discussion was carried out regarding the potential effects of users' contributions, empirical accounts, based on the study of the actual

content users produce, have so far been scarce (Singer, 2009). Although Singer' studies did not examine the  fact the users comments may contest with journalists function as producers of content for mass media, her findings shows that these spaces perform a connecting function, to users even from far off and remotely located spaces and can act as a common forum for social interface and community building.

While, (Karlsson, 2010) and  (Robinson, 2009) most noteworthy finding was that in several occasions users challenged the newspapers' version of the story and expressed anti-media feelings, or considered themselves as collaborators with journalists.

Whereas (Domingo *et al.*, 2010) state that modern media critics have called for a more mutual relationship between media and their audiences. Several authors have talked about user generated content's potential to challenge the role of the established media as gatekeepers and to offer alternative methods, in parallel to professional journalism.

**Research Methodology**

This study sought to determine whether anonymous online comments, which are now a daily part of most journalists' lives, have affected how journalists think about and do their jobs. The aim of the study was to examine whether journalists are embracing the interaction or seeing it as an insult to journalistic standards that ridicule printing anonymous, unverified and unedited information. The paper uses the social constructivist theory **"social** constructivism", which emphasises how meanings and understandings grow out of social encounters, emphasis is on the learner as an active "maker of meanings". The role of the teacher is to enter into a **dialogue** with the learner, trying to understand the meaning to that learner of the material to be learned, and to help her or him to refine their understanding until it corresponds with that of the teacher. In the case of online news journalists' perception of professional roles by examining how journalists view their roles in regard to online comments and whether such a forum is used extensively in framing and dissemination of online news.  The study compared the perception of journalists during the months of June - August 2012.  Semi structured Interview method was adopted to explore the attitude of journalists toward user comments and also the extent to which these comments were pivotal in the agenda

building and decision – making process among 11 journalists working from daily print newspapers, news agencies and online news papers.

(Bruns, 2008) suggests that qualitative studies can play an important role in understanding how citizen journalism was integrated into processing of news, especially in consideration of the limited tools and methods of research established so far. Semi structured interviews with journalists was conducted to receive purposeful sample interviewees with the experience and knowledge suitable for addressing this research's goal, which includes exploring the gate keeping and agenda building of online newspapers that were open to user comments.

Although the focus was to interview journalists who worked completely for the online newspapers, the task of choosing samples was difficult because such journalist were few in number as the transition from the print to online was in its nascent stages in India. Economic times according to one of its journalists were in the process of moving completely online. In India the journalist worked for both the print and online media and therefore journalists were short listed using snowball techniques irrespective of the years of experience in the online media.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their position and availability and were strictly representative in nature of their category of their roles in the publication. However, because the sampling frame constitutes a large proportion of the population under study, the qualitative research interviews provide the basis for a useful initial exploration of the topic and for the development of hypotheses for further research. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from recordings made on location. (Weiss, 1994) issue-focused methodology was used as the basis for the interview analysis.

The actual study interviews used the questionnaire as a starting point, but the researcher asked follow up questions that explores the attitude and opinions of journalists to user comments especially as a tool to agenda building.

During the interview the journalist were asked to opine on online news and interactivity. The journalists shared their point of views on the issues of open forum and the online news. Also they commented on the threat to professional status as news now was not the

sole property of the journalist as in the traditional times. Users were constantly uploading news, photographs, video clipping and the nature of scoop news or exclusive news was slowly vanishing. The journalists were then asked the process of incorporating user comments in their sites, the levels of moderation and news as source to do follow up stories of similar kinds. Finally the journalist evaluated the user comments and also discussed the reasons for not responding to the comments posted by the users.

**Findings and Analysis**

Semi structured interview was conducted with journalist belonging to both the print and online medium. Since the rate of hybridizing into online medium was in its early stages in India there were not many journalists who worked solely for the online newspaper.

The interviews were conducted with 6 senior journalists who worked for more that 10 years and whose nature of work encompassed such provinces as Editors of Websites, Columnist, Journalist Trainers, Editors in chief. 3 Editors with a work experience ranging from 6 – 10 years, of which one of them was from a news agency and the other two worked for the online section of the Mainstream newspaper and 2 others were sub – editors and work at the news desk.

The journalists interviewed for this study belonged to various media excepting one of the interviewees all the others have worked for a print newspaper or magazine before they have shifted to their present position. Since the main goal of the research was to study the role of user comments in the agenda building process the researcher concentrated in interviewing the Editors in Chief, Editors and news desk editors given their function as dominant gatekeepers of the News organization. Interview method was adopted to explore the attitude of editors toward user comments and also the extent to which these comments were pivotal in the agenda building and decision –making process.

During the interview the journalist were first asked their opinion on online journalism and further on citizen journalism and specifically on user comments. Further the journalist was asked the process of incorporating the user comments in their sites and the moderation levels they followed. Finally the journalists were asked to evaluate the nature of user comments and their role as a tool to agenda building.

**Online News a Boon or a Bane**

The researcher began the interview asking journalists' attitude towards online news. A journalist from Reuters aptly summarized

"Online journalism was a two edged sword, while on one side the print media was struggling for a survival the online media was an answer to the print media. Online media was popular among all kind of people irrespective of age. Most of people online were 12-70 years of age. Online users were not particular about the brand image of the Website. They read through everything of interest to them. Today's readers were scanners and they browse through everything. Active reading takes place online people go by "Sensational headline rather than a particular Website"

Another Online Editor of Economic Times observed, "On the whole just to put things into context, 20 years ago when somebody needed news, see I know only about business journalism and I can talk only on business journalism point of view. See, what people needed was information, like for example, I am an investor, a stalk market investor…I need a news in this line, the only platform available was print medium, you want the readers and users to give the news and I need to pick up the paper to know what it was. But now with the advent of internet and other things and even with BSNL, having their own platform everything, so information was with everyone, so no longer I can be an information provider as a journalist".

**User Comments in Indian Online Sites**

According to Wikipedia, The Hindu was the first paper to go online in the year 1995. It was predicted earlier that Web features would change rules and forms of online journalism and publishing (Pavlik, 1999). It was also observed that different skills would be employed in news designing and delivering (Phipps, 1999). But then the reality and prediction were not always the same. Interactivity being a major online feature was almost nonexistent in Indian News Websites. (Riley et al., 1998); (Schultz, 1999) state

that there was hardly any interaction with online readers in the early stage of online journalism and the issue remained largely unsolved (Oblak, 2005).

(Xu Xiaoge,  2008) had done a comparative study on the interactive features of Nine Asian News Websites, the findings of the comparative analysis of Web feature usage show that more Web features were used on the homepage than on the individual news page. It reveals the common practice among news websites to use comparatively more showcase features on homepages without taking the trouble of using more interactive and empowering features in the inside pages. Such a performance was largely driven by the common mentality among most newspapers of treating online outlets as a promotional tool to promote offline newspapers online and thus to increase their circulation and readership (Foo *et al.,* 1999).

According to (Xaioge, 2008) there was lack of well-trained online journalists especially the Asian online journalists have not received any substantial and solid training in online journalism and publishing.  During the interview the researcher found that only three of the eleven journalist had worked on online news papers and the rest of them were transferred from the print or broadcast media of the news organization .the finding coincided with the results of Xaioge who found most of them were simply transferred from the tradition newsroom to the online newsroom without any or little further training in Web journalism.  This holds true because out of the 11 journalists, 5 of them had never had any sort of training on online journalism. Only one of them had his training in International Institute of Journalism in Berlin, while two others had External Training and the remaining 3 had internal training at their own initiative. One of the journalists said, "We were trained for sourcing skills and ethics involved in picking up stuff from online" and another added "We were just informed about how the news structure should be for an online stories. To what extent we can reveal news was also informed well ahead." And the third said, "Sourcing has been a major issue in online journalism. We were trained for sourcing skills and ethics involved in picking up stuff from online"

**Internet using Pattern**:

(Xaioge, 2008) observed in most cases, that an average online users log on to any website excepting that they need not pay for their services and consume online content for education or entertainment. If a charge was levied on them, they will click away. But for unique online material, it takes time, energy and other resources to produce something that was exclusive online and it cannot be free. The production of multimedia content for online consumption also costs. Therefore, thee everything-online-free mentality has dampened. The internet using pattern was analyzed and all the journalists were connected and used internet in their work place. 88% of the journalists worked for more than 5years on internet, while 6% of them worked for 1- 2 years and 6% of the journalist worked for 3-5 years.

All the journalists who were interviewed use e-mail for work purposes daily or almost daily and 100% of them visit websites for work purposes everyday. CAR reporting was another feature of online news where the journalists use internet as the only source for news story. In this study it was found that 77% of the journalists never use internet as only source for information while 22% use the internet daily to source stories and a meager 1% use the internet as source in a fortnightly. This shows that internet was yet to replaces other sources of information for the journalist, which was markedly different from the nature of journalists working in other developed countries. According to one study, nearly two-thirds (64%) of journalists sometimes or often use news from the Web in their reporting (EURO RSCG Magnet & Columbia University Survey of the Media, 2005). Furthermore, more than 90% of journalists say that the Internet has had a substantial impact on how they perform their jobs (Middleberg/Ross Media Survey, 2002). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) believe that the Internet has prompted a shift in the role of journalists in the communication process. This research also found one journalist using information without indicating it was obtained via internet and he added, "Hardly sometimes information was exclusively for internet much of information "online" comes from print media which gets uploaded too". The journalist uses the internet profusely for searching information.

**Feedback and the Internet**

The researcher asked the journalists to talk about their attitude towards feedback. Similar to previous research of User Generated Content (Hermida and Thurman 2008.) even here the editors were mainly concerned with the quality of the feedbacks. The journalists were asked to share their opinions on finding information from individuals or groups via the Internet that they would not access otherwise. 33% of the journalists did it once a month while 44 % did it everyday and 11% of them never approached the groups or individuals and 12% did it almost daily. While receiving feedback from the internets the 60 % of the journalist received feedback daily or almost daily while the remaining 40% received feedback occasionally or never. Responding to the feedbacks as one of the journalist said, "I respond as and when I receive the emails". 33% of the journalist also used public feedback via the internet to create of follow up news stories daily and 55% of them do it occasionally and the remaining 22% almost never did it. Almost all the journalist agreed that there was more feedback via internet than their counter part print medium.

**Interactivity and Internet**

Research into journalists' beliefs regarding their roles in news gathering began with the work of (Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, 1976), who found that most journalists were pluralistic in their outlooks. (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986) continued this line of research and repeated many of the questions asked by Johnstone and his colleagues. Their findings classified journalists into three professional role conceptions: (1) interpretive; (2) disseminator; and (3) adversarial. Almost 60% of the journalists fell in the category of interpretive role, while another half did so in the disseminator role. The adversarial role conception was the least important, with only 17% of journalists scoring high on it. In general, most journalists concluded that their professional roles were a combination of interpreter and disseminator. Here in the age of internet there was not much difference in the role of the journalist but most of them felt they have advanced to becoming the gate watcher rather than the gate keeper. In online journalism as it was produced by professional/commercial news organizations, plans to implement interactive features were increasing – but journalists find it difficult to navigate the challenges this brings to established notions of professional identity and gatekeeping (Chung, 2007). The

journalist from Economic Times added: "Yet another factor may be the internal competition. The moment you go online, you make yourself a rival of your parent company, leading to internal competition between online and offline versions. If you offer everything online free and make it available to all, they will naturally stop buying or subscribing your offline newspapers or switch off TV and watch online television programs. It was the internal competition that has probably stopped news media from putting more efforts to fully utilize Web features in designing and delivering news online enthusiasm to employ as many online features as possible to make it a truly multimedia communication in the cyberspace". The limited use of Web features was also due to the underdeveloped information and communication technology infrastructures in Asia. Most home computers remain on dial-up and slow connection. Broadband was still something luxury in much of Asia. In such an environment, one cannot run high graphics version of their websites. Such restrictions have stopped webpage designers and webmasters to design and maintain a website full of Web features ranging from interactivity to multimodality."

An Journalists from Economic Times summarizes, "20 years ago when somebody needed something in the context of business journalism which I am familiar off, so what people needed was information for example as a top market investor if needed information the only platform was print medium, but now with advent of internet BSE and MSE having their own platform information was with everyone and no longer the journalists alone were the providers of information. So now the journalists have to give something as a package and IPL is an example where they have their own official tweeter, while the information was available and the journalists with this information had to anlyse to give which team was better".

**Journalist's perception and scope of user comments in online news production process**

On being asked if User Comments and interactivity helps journalists gain wider access to diverse points of views 54% of the journalist agree or strongly agree while 27% did not react and 27% disagree. While 18% of the journalists strongly agree that online journalism give the impression that sensitive issues can be published locally 27% agree

18% of them were neutral while 18% disagree that sensitive issues can be published locally as they were published online. Editor of News Website adds,"Local issues get published for a global audience. The reach of local issues was phenomenal. The mainstream Newspapers were supported by the social media greater reach of an issue at lesser cost and again space was unlimited". A journalist working for Times of India pointed, "Very few do it though". Several journalists observed that internet users now have an opportunity to develop and respond their own content while the traditional newspapers were somewhat detached to their users. An Editor of the Weekend Leader and an online journalist from Economic times stated that they did not know where the process of integrating user comments was leading too but they were taken aback on the magnitude of responses. Last five six months put online news and then analyse and give it on the print.

The researcher found that all the journalists valued the interaction with users. One of the journalists critiqued, "Lot of it was wrong information going viral" another added all information 27% of the Editors interviewed strongly agreed that User Comments improves the coverage of news story events catering to users' needs and another 27% concurred with these thoughts. 9% of were neutral and another 9% strongly disagreed that user comments play a vital role in the coverage of news catering to the needs of the audience.

Some of the Editors agreed that User Comments helps neutralize the stories and makes them acceptable to publish in the local press while there was equal number of them who disagreed and another 50% of the newspaper men left no comments. Most specifically the journalists thought that the user comments enable a dialogue with users and in some cases provide unique perspectives on issues, "but it was a rare occurrence", said a Times of India Online Editor.

**Users' comment in Agenda Building Process**

As discussed in-depth in the earlier chapters the agenda-setting theory, was developed by Prof. Maxwell McCombs and Prof. Donald Shaw in their Chapel Hill study (1968), in

which they concluded that mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues. The two scholars studied the way media covered political campaigns, Shaw and McCombs found that the main outcome of news media was agenda-setting, i.e. informing people not issues to think, but put forth issues what they should think about. Agenda setting was usually referred to as a function of mass media and not a theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Researchers have studied various forms of agenda setting in news media but there was little literature on the user comments as an influence to agenda setting. On studying the agenda building role of user comments, all most all the journalists disagree that User Comments helps neutralize the stories and makes them acceptable to publish in the local press.

There was a mutual concurrence among journalist in their attitude towards user comments and its effect in enhancing the news story 45% of them strongly disagree that user comments enhances the news story. Journalists from the News Agency and the Editor of the Weekend Leader disagree, 27% of the journalists were not committal while just 3% of the Editors agree on this statement. The News Agency journalist rightly summarized:

"Participatory journalism was a new occurrence; the lines between journalists and the reader were now merging. Now the online newspaper was leaving itself open to comment, it was also paving way to criticism, and traditionally, there was no space for criticism in journalism. The part of a journalist was to be a gatekeeper, to frame what was important and newsworthy and convey it to the public. Now, the public can choose what story interests them and read the same, and if they feel it was not to their liking, if they have a dilemma with a news story, Almost all the online newspapers have some kind of comment section on their websites, so they can share their feelings and opinions. Then, it was totally up to the journalist to make a decision whether he/she would like to shield their work, or react to the user who had left the comment"

Journalists were greatly concerned with the feedback on the internet. Most of them felt the quality of the users comments need monitoring and they also added that the bulk responses to a news article were the unique feature of the article and not the news website itself. One Editor also felt that "Users comments and readers opinion do not priorities the

journalists' agenda of news presentation. The user comments help the advertisers. The user comments in fact give the numbers of people who have viewed or interested in the story than setting stage for the presentation of the news. It does not affect the coverage and presentation and shaping of the news and its coverage. The users' comments have an influence in the reader selecting the news to be read for the number of comments and other interactive tools such as share, like tweet etc…"

## Monitoring of users comments

As the entire Editors' and journalists' agreed that the quality of feedback and user comments was poor so there need to be some kind of moderation. News Agency Journalist observed, "Reuters uses software to monitor the comments. Reuters weekly saw – Page Views were a source of monitoring. The users cannot register themselves for the second time at Reuters" another journalist from Economic Times added "All comments were moderated in

While an Editor of Economic Times says, identify the trend. Solar energy will not attract masses specialized come in India but foreign magazine put out the news list and ask the readers to classify them and in India it was lacking. The editor of Weekend Leader commented that there should be a pre moderation so as to filter comments which were poor in quality and abusive.

## Suggestions and Future Research

The online news forums although allowing users to interact and participate in their websites, were undoubtedly reluctant to open up most of the news production process to the active involvement of the audience. Further research could explore areas where the websites restrict or foster openness in their website. Interviews with the journalists showed that all most all the journalists do not reply to the comments either fearing criticism or reluctant to get into an argument with the users. The western websites have adopted methods where users were given their own space as in "my space" and another features of the western sites were that the journalists replied to the comments which showed a peer to peer sharing this system should be adopted. An analysis should be

carried in areas as in the; Professional context: existing newsroom, organizations, journalistic culture, ethical guidelines, media tradition.

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