

# The Loud Public: Users' Comments and the Online News Media

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## Introduction

Research has already established that the availability of interactive features in news sites distinguishes online journalism from its offline counterparts (Pavlik 2000; Deuze and Paulussen 2002). Interactivity signifies a shift from the traditional media one-to-many communication flow to the emergence of a two-way communication model which converts online audiences from passive to active media consumers (Pavlik 2001). The potential of interactivity to facilitate a dialogue between the media and its audiences is therefore indisputable. Nonetheless, a series of studies has demonstrated that the use of interactive features by mainstream news sites is relatively limited, especially features that promote user-to-user interactions (Chung 2004; Deuze 2003; Domingo 2008; Kenney et al. 2000; Massey and Levy 1999; Quinn and Trench 2000; Rosenberry 2005; Schultz 2000).<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses primarily on mainstream news sites for two reasons. First, these sites are some of the most popular news sources in the World Wide Web (Rosenberry 2005). Additionally, these sites represent prominent offline news organizations and thus are more likely to be perceived as authoritative sources.

Most research thus far on interactivity and the news media is mainly concerned with the integration of interactive features as a whole (Chung 2004, 2007; Domingo 2008; Massey and Levy 1999). This approach is important because it helps us to understand the aggregated effect of these features on the news production process. This paper however examines the effect of one particular feature – users’ comments in mainstream news sites. The focus

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<sup>1</sup>For the purpose of this paper mainstream news sites refer to sites that are affiliated with traditional news media organizations such as newspapers, radio, and TV broadcast networks.

solely on users' comments is due to the unique characteristics of the feature as a facilitator of a visible and open public discourse. I therefore distinguish users' comments from comments in news sites' forums because forums are somewhat detached from journalistic content. Finally, users' comments have only recently been broadly adopted by news sites and thus they have yet to receive much attention in the literature.

The users' comments feature refers to the ability of readers to express their opinions on news reports, opinion pieces, journalists' blogs, and any other content available on the site. In essence everyone with an Internet access can 'talk back' to reporters and to each other on high-profile issues. For the purpose of this paper I use the term 'talkbacks' to refer to users' comments in news sites.

This paper has two goals: 1) to examine how do editors perceive talkbacks, and 2) to inquire whether talkbacks influence the media agenda. The empirical evidence consists of semi-structured interviews with online editors. At the moment the study includes news sites in Israel and the U.K.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of theory, this study draws on two distinct literatures. The first literature addresses the notion of interactivity and one of its by-products, user generated content (UGC). While research on UGC is still in its early stages, several studies have shown that the online news media acknowledge that UGC features are an important component of online journalism (Chung 2007; Domingo 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Ornebring 2008; Thurman 2008). Nevertheless, scholars have yet to examine how UGC in general and talkbacks in particular influence the work of online journalists and edi-

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<sup>2</sup> The final version of the paper will also include online editors in the U.S. and the results of a web-based survey that was sent to online journalists in all three countries.

tors.

The second body of literature concentrates on the agenda-setting process and the public's ability (or inability) to influence the media agenda (agenda-building). Emphasizing a unidirectional relationship between the media and the public, most studies on agenda-building attribute very little power to the public to affect the media agenda (McCombs 2004; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Several scholars however highlight that in the online environment journalists are more aware of their audiences' interests due to their constant interactions (Boczkowski 2004; Cassidy 2008; Ornebring 2008; Weaver et al. 2006). Drawing on this approach this paper argues that talkbacks can influence media content in two ways. First, talkbacks serve as cues to journalists and editors about what is important to their audiences. Second, talkbacks are used as news sources that may lead to new stories.

### **Interactivity and the Online News Media**

The literature encompasses an extensive discussion of the definitions of interactivity (Heeter 1989; Massey and Levy, 1999; McMillan 2006; Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997; Steuer 1992). Here however I rely on the approach that views interactivity as a multidimensional construct (Lee 2000; Massey and Levy 1999; McMillan 2006; Schultz 2000; Stromer-Galley 2000). In particular I draw on McMillan (2006) who emphasizes three dimensions of interactivity: user-to-user, user-to-document, and user-to-system. In the case of talkbacks the first two dimensions are germane and will be further discussed.

The ability to post comments on new sites not only facilitates a commu-

nication between users<sup>3</sup> (user-to-user interactivity) but it also enables users to create their own content (user-to-document interactivity). For each of these dimensions McMillan (2006) offers a four-part model that reflects the receivers' level of control juxtaposing the direction of communication (one-way vs. two-way) in the case of user-to-user interactivity and the nature of the audience (active vs. passive) in the case of user-to-document interactivity.<sup>4</sup>

In the user-to-user dimension talkbacks are primarily but not exclusively a feedback transmitted from receivers to senders (one-way communication). Users also discuss issues among themselves and thus several news sites now offer a talkback feature that is structured like a forum (two-way communication).<sup>5</sup> The user-to-document dimension illustrates that with regards to talkbacks the audience is perceived active since it is producing its own content. However, the level of users' control can be either low or high based on the moderation process implemented by the news site (pre-moderation vs. post-moderation).

From an empirical standpoint this paper focuses on the attitudes of newsrooms staff about interactive features in general and talkbacks in particular. Thus far, studies on attitudes reveal that online journalists have mixed feelings toward interactive features. Some research has found that journalists are concerned with the consequences these features may have on the profes-

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<sup>3</sup>By users I mean both the news site staff and fellow readers.

<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A for the description of the models. The boxes marked in yellow denote the characteristics of the talkback feature.

<sup>5</sup>In several news sites the talkback feature also enables a two-way communication between journalists and users; however evidence has shown that this form of dialogue rarely occurs.

sion and tend to hold on to their traditional media routines (Domingo 2008; Paulussen and Ugille 2008).

On the other hand, Chung (2007) identifies three types of attitudes toward interactivity that can be placed on a continuum. On one side there are the 'innovators' who welcome the incorporation of interactive features on news sites. On the opposite side are the 'purists' who follow the one-to-many traditional model of communication. Chung however finds that the majority of the online editors and managers are 'cautious traditionalists'. These interviewees expressed considerable uncertainty about how they should deal with the unique characteristics of the medium (Ibid).

Finally, Hermida and Thurman (2008) examine UGC features in British news sites. These features are some of many interactive features that are now available to users' in news sites. Their study shows a growing tendency among online editors to adopt UGC features. At the same time the editors questioned the worthiness of UGC due to the quality of the content that is being produced. The authors therefore argue that online editors rely on a traditional gate-keeping approach by using moderation mechanisms and by creating a clear separation between journalistic and users' content (Ibid).

### **Talkbacks in the Literature**

The ability to post comments online is not particularly new and is available in numerous virtual platforms, such as blogs, forums and other content producing sites. Despite their growing popularity among users of news sites the feature has yet to receive much attention in the literature. Few studies on UGC features in news sites mention talkbacks as one of many opportunities

for individuals to contribute their own content (Domingo 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Ornebring 2008). Domingo (2008) highlights that only one of his case studies, an online-only portal, allows users to comment right below news articles. Domingo distinguishes these comments from comments left on news sites' forums arguing that talkbacks make journalists "[feel] closer to their audience, as users could directly criticize, comment and suggest links on news stories." (Domingo 2008:694). Conversely, Hermida and Thurman (2008) show a growing use of talkbacks by British news sites. The authors argue that editors are more willing to adopt UGC features in general but that they are concerned with the effect these features may have on the reputation of the brand. Bergstrom (2008) analyzes the extent to which users' are engaged with interactive features on news sites when posting comments is one of many possibilities available. The study finds that users are not very motivated to generate content in news sites and those who do consider writing comments see it as a creative leisure time activity and not as an opportunity to exercise their democratic rights.

Only few studies focus specifically on talkbacks, most of which looked at comments in Israeli news sites probably because the feature has been available in these sites for the last eight years (Hecht 2003; Kohn and Neiger 2007; Sikron et al. 2007). To the best of my knowledge Hecht's study (2003) may represent the first scholarly work done on talkbacks in news sites. According to Hecht, talkbacks are a new sphere enabling a spontaneous public discourse on critical contemporary issues. Hecht also emphasizes that talkbacks on news sites differ from comments in other virtual venues such as blogs and forums because they appear on platforms that are associated with author-

itative media organizations (Ibid). Another study by Sikron et al. (2007) utilizes talkbacks as a source of data to learn about individuals' attitudes toward road accidents and their prevention. A different example is Kohn and Neiger's (2007) analysis of the rhetoric of talkbacks as a tool of persuasion. Finally, I found one study that examines talkbacks in the Al Jazeera's Arabic news site (Abdul-Mageed 2008). Abdul-Mageed uses a quantitative analysis to examine a series of factors that determine the frequency of comments.

### **Agenda-Building and the New Media**

The second body of literature this paper draws on is the scholarly work on agenda-building which evolved from the agenda-setting research program. While agenda-setting emphasizes the transfer of issue salience from the media to the public, agenda building assumes the existence of numerous forces that shape the media agenda (McCombs 2004; Berkowitz and Adams 1990; Weaver and Elliott 1985). In other words the process of agenda-building is concerned with "how the press interacts with other institutions in society to create issues of public concern." (Weaver and Elliott 1985:8) Theoretically this study relies on Shoemaker and Reese's (1992) model which includes five distinct levels of agenda-building influences: individual, routines, organizational, extra-media, and ideological. Here I focus on extra-media forces since talkbacks represent audiences which are not part of news organizations. Other external influences include the government, public relations efforts, influential news sources, interest groups, and inter-media influences (see for example Berkowitz 1992; Cassara 1998; Curtin 1999; Golan 2006; Huckins 1999). It seems however that in the context of the traditional media

the public is rarely considered as an external source of influence (Neuman et al. 1992; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Sigal 1973; Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

Journalists communicate with an audience they cannot see or hear. It is a one-way conversation. They operate in a professional world inhabited mainly by news sources, public relations specialists, and other journalists. (Neuman et al. 1992:3)

Is this all changing in the new media environment? The answer is 'yes'. Several studies for instance demonstrate how blogs have become an influential source of information that affects the agenda of both online and offline news media (Messner and DiStaso 2008; Wallsten 2007). Other scholars argue that online journalists in particular know more about their audiences' preferences which may translate into an agenda-building capacity (Boczkowski 2004; Cassidy 2008; Picone 2007; Weaver et al. 2007). In Boczkowski words:

Users' have much greater direct effect on the news, from a qualitative leap in the intensity of their exchanges with journalists via emails, to presentation of their own views of journalist-authored stories on online papers' forums, to the publication of their own newsletter within the online paper. (Boczkowski 2004:185)

Drawing on this approach I therefore argue that the talkbacks can influence online editors in two distinct ways. First, the quantity of talkbacks on a given article serve as cues of issue salience. These cues are then taken into account in future editorial decision-making. Second, comments may include information that could potentially lead to new stories and thus function as traditional news sources.

Based on the two theoretical frameworks mentioned above this paper addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1: How do online editors perceive the talkback feature?*

*RQ2: In what way and to what extent do talkbacks influence editorial decisions?*

## **Method and Case Studies**

I have conducted semi-structured interviews with online editors in 13 news sites in the U.K. and Israel, focusing mainly on sites that are affiliated with leading national newspapers. The additional news sites in the U.K. represent local and regional newspapers (Manchester Evening News and London Evening Standard). In Israel, the additional sites are an online-only portal, walla.co.il, which is the second most popular news site in the country, and Jpost.com which is affiliated with the Jerusalem Post, an English language newspaper that targets the Jewish Diaspora in the U.S., U.K., and France (see table 1 for description of the case studies).

— Table 1 about here —

The interviews were conducted with 11 online editors-in-chief, 5 online news-desk editors, and 3 community editors who are mainly in charge of the comment section and the interactive aspects of the news sites. The main goal of this paper is to study the potential role of talkbacks as agenda-builders. Consequently, I chose to focus on editors-in-chief and news-desk editors given their function as the dominant gatekeepers in the news media. In other words the role the editors play in the organization is vital to the research question at hand (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). I used the interview method to both explore the editors' attitudes toward talkbacks and to elicit the extent to which talkbacks are considered in editorial decision-making. During the interviews, editors were first asked to define interactivity and to

talk about their perspectives on the talkback feature. The editors were then asked to describe the process of incorporating talkbacks in their site. Finally, the editors evaluated the role of talkbacks as agenda builders.

*Talkbacks in Israel:*

In the Israeli case it was easier to trace the evolution of the feature. In 2000 the national newspaper 'Yediot Achronot' went online and presented its news site Ynet.co.il. The site included the talkback feature since its inception. Two weeks later, Walla.co.il, an online-only portal also enabled its users to write comments. Ynet.co.il and Walla.co.il are the most popular news sites in the country and some scholars attribute their success to their welcoming approach toward talkbacks (Caspi 2007). By 2004 all Israeli news sites adopted talkbacks as the feature became very popular among users. For instance, Ynet and Walla receive between fifteen to twenty thousands comments a day and a recent survey shows that almost sixty percent of Internet users in Israel read talkbacks on a weekly basis ([www.themarker.com/tmc/article.jhtml?ElementId=mc20090315\\_45450](http://www.themarker.com/tmc/article.jhtml?ElementId=mc20090315_45450)).

*Talkbacks in the U.K.:*

In the British case I rely on surveys conducted by Thurman (2008) and Hermida and Thurman (2008).<sup>6</sup> Most of the editors I spoke with in the U.K. could not recall the process of adopting the feature mainly because they were not the editors during that time. Only one editor from the Manchester Evening News stated that talkbacks were available on their site since 2001. The surveys conducted by Thurman (2008) in April 2005 and by Hermida and Thurma (2008) in November 2006 illustrate that other British news sites were

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<sup>6</sup>Hermida and Thurman (2008) refer to talkbacks as 'comments on stories'.

much slower than the Manchester's paper. In April 2005 Timesonline.co.il was the only site in Thurman's survey that allowed comments on news reports but these comments were selected by editors. The Guardian was the only site that allowed talkbacks in journalistic blogs. Nineteen months later Thurman and Hermida (2008) find a substantial increase in the use of UGC features in general and of talkbacks in particular. By November 2006 five additional sites had adopted talkbacks, these include the Dailymail.co.uk, Guardian.co.uk, Telegraph.co.uk, Scotsman.co.uk, and Thisislondon.co.uk. In a survey I have conducted in January 2009, all sites affiliated with a mainstream newspaper integrated the talkback feature in one way or another.

### **Characteristics of the Feature**

At this point I would like to provide a brief overview of the feature's characteristics. These characteristics include the scope of content people are allowed to comment on, the anonymity level, users' profiles, and the moderation process. This review emphasizes the differences between Israeli and British news sites and the variations across case studies.

*Scope of Content:* As noted the talkback feature refers to users' comments posted on editorial content which primarily includes news reports, commentary, and journalists' blogs. While in Israel users can post comments on all the content in all major news sites, in the U.K. there is some discrepancy. Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of the news sites and the content on which talkbacks are enabled (limited content refers to opinion pieces and/or some news reports). It is important to note that this variation across British news sites may change since most editors I have spoken with stated that the fea-

ture is still evolving and thus there is a great likelihood that comments will be allowed on most of the content in the site.

—Table 2 about here—

*Anonymity:* Another element worth noting is the level of anonymity. By level of anonymity I mean the amount of information users are asked to provide before posting a comment. I identify 3 levels of anonymity a) full anonymity - users are not required to reveal any identifying information prior to posting a comment, b) partial anonymity - users are asked to leave a valid email address in a required field before posting a comment, and c) partial identification - users are asked to register and log in before they can talkback to reporters. All Israeli news sites in this study allow users full anonymity when posting a comment.<sup>7</sup> The option to register with the news site is possible but it is not a requirement. In the U.K. there is slightly more variation but I could not find a single site that allows full anonymity for its users (see table 3).

—Table 3 about here—

*Users' Profiles:* A more recent development that is related to the level of anonymity are users' profiles. Users in most sites in the U.K. and Ynet.co.il in Israel can create their own profile. The users remain anonymous but their past comments and their previous activity on the site are documented. According to the editors users' profiles fulfill two main purposes: to enhance users' sense of loyalty to the site and to improve the quality of the comments.

*Moderation Process:* The final characteristic that needs to be addressed is the

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<sup>7</sup>In fact I've located only one independent news site that publishes the IP address of the users' computer right next to the talkback.

management of comments. Moderation is vital to editors not only because of legal issues but also because editors are concerned with maintaining the brand reputation. In Israel all major news sites employ a pre-moderation approach. Currently in the U.K. I find some variation. The Guardian, the Independent, the Telegraph, and the Daily Express use post-moderation methods in most of their sections, while the Times, the Mirror, Manchester Evening News, and London Evening Standard ([thisislondon.co.uk](http://thisislondon.co.uk)) utilize a full pre-moderation format.

### **Talkbacks - a Blessing or a Curse?**

I began the interviews asking editors to talk about their attitudes toward interactive features in general and more specifically talkbacks. Similar to previous research on UGC (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Thurman 2008) I found that editors in both countries are mainly concerned with the quality of talkbacks and with the cost of moderation. That being said, one of the interesting things the interviews uncovered was that no matter how editors felt toward talkbacks, they all said that due to commercial reasons they have to offer the feature. An Israeli new editor explained: 'if I would not allow talkbacks on the site users' will go and comment somewhere else.' Moreover, the editors mentioned that talkbacks increase the traffic in the site which is critical for the news sites. An editor-in-chief from Israel described his priorities:

If someone puts a gun to my head and asks me to leave only two features on the site I will leave news reports and talkbacks...I leave talkbacks because of the amount of people who write comments and because they add an important element to the articles.

An editor-in-chief from the U.K. was also adamant about their importance:

The commentators are part of the site now. The media landscape is changing with sites of video, sites of audio, sites of comments, I think if you do not have one of those things, if we did not have comments on the site, we will be dead.

Several editors pointed out that Internet users now have an expectation to be able to respond and create their own content online including in newspapers' web sites. The failure to live up to these expectations indicates little understating of the medium. Editors also highlighted that while traditional news media are somewhat detached from their audiences, news sites have a greater opportunity to share a two-way communication with their users. A community editor from the U.K. summarized it well:

News always has been a conversation it is just we did not get a chance to take part in it before. The conversations were going on in people living rooms, around the breakfast table, pubs, they were talking about it with each other but not to us and we were not hearing...we had the letters page, several thousand letters a day come through, 15 make it into the newspaper... The story we told ourselves was that actually we were the ones having the conversation and the readers were excluded, but that is not true it is the other way around. So now we have the opportunity to take part in the conversation and we have this obligation to take part because the Internet is not a publishing medium it is a communication medium and so instead of publishing something that is read by people, we now have an active medium and we are communicating with our readers.

Few editors stated that in the process of integrating talkbacks they really did not know what to expect and were somewhat overwhelmed with the magnitude of the response:

You launch things online and you don't have a sense of how popular it is going to be and when we started with the comments we thought we are jumping into a little ditch when in fact we were jumping off a cliff. (Editor-in-chief, U.K.)

Consequently, many editors stressed that the growing popularity of talkbacks introduced legal issues, among other things problems. For instance

editors mentioned that the low quality of some comments undermines the reputation of the newspaper. The critique about the quality of talkbacks was more severe among Israeli editors:

Our policy in the beginning was to upload everything that is legal, with very minimal selection. my ideology was that I do not have the right to decide, if people would like to express themselves the way they do, it is their territory and they should behave as they see fit. But I've reached a point when I understood that the feature brings out the ugliest aspects of Israeli society...and by allowing that, I am facilitating a rather violent public discourse...so we changed the moderation rules and we got to a situation that we reject many more comments. (Editor-in-chief, Israel)

British editors expressed similar concerns with regards to the quality of talkbacks. However, most of them stated that the feature is still in its developing stages and they are exploring different strategies to deal with the quality of comments. Some editors for instance mentioned the integration of users' profiles while others highlighted the need to elevate prudent commentators.

Despite these reservations I found that editors both in Israel and the U.K. valued the interaction with their audiences. More specifically, editors thought that talkbacks enable a dialogue with users that in some cases are more knowledgeable than journalists, providing their unique perspectives on critical issues.

### **Talkbacks as Agenda-Builders**

The study of agenda-setting is about 'the relative importance of an issue on an actor's agenda' (Soroka 2002:5). Consequently, prior to addressing the second research question it is essential to examine whether online editors perceive talkbacks as cues of issue salience. The study finds some disparity

between editors in the U.K. and editors in Israel. Most editors in both the U.K. and Israel stated that if an article draws a lot of attention it most likely an indication of salience. However, few Israeli editors said that the quantity of talkbacks is not necessarily a sign of importance but that 'talkbacks are a measure of the amount of interest that you were able to generate.' Furthermore, some editors, mainly in Israel, highlighted that people comment when they are provoked 'when something in the article touches a nerve.' The editors added that after eight years with the feature they do not only know which issues will get many comments, they sometimes will frame an issue in a way to intentionally invoke a reaction. One editor for example explained that a site without comments will seem empty 'as if no one is around.'

The idea of aggravating users intentionally is one indication that talkbacks can effect media content. An editor-in-chief from Israel provided his take on the matter:

I will admit that today many times, when we know that an item will bring lots of talkbacks, even if it is not that important, we say lets put it up so users' can go wild on it, and we like it when they go wild....so in that way talkbacks influence my decisions, if an issue is provocative we are more likely to publish it.

The use of talkbacks as news sources is another example of how the feature influence editorial decisions. However most editors, especially in Israel, pointed out that it does not happen very often. British editors on the other hand tended to be more willing to use talkbacks as news sources stating that they are interested in what their users have to say but they rarely find information that leads to new stories.

The final and maybe most concrete evidence for the effect of talkbacks on editorial decision-making are follow ups to stories due to the magnitude

of the response. Almost all editors said that they have asked journalists at least once or twice to follow up on issues that received large number of comments. A news editor from the U.K. for example stated that thus far he asked journalists to expand on highly debated stories only few times, 'but that is three or four times more than I did in a decade and a half before. I can see that this is an area that is going to grow.' An editor-in-chief added that journalists will also follow up on their own 'if they see that an article is hot.' An Israeli editor expressed similar views:

As an editor my job is to provide information but also to interest my audiences and if people are interested in a certain article and write a lot of comments than yes I will consider a follow up to the story. (Editor-in-chief, Israel)

All editors provided at least one example of an issue that received further attention because it attracted a large number of comments. An editor-in-chief from Israel described how a story on an entertainer biting (or more accurately sexually harassing) an actress live on TV received over 2000 comments which led to two additional articles. An editor from the U.K. mentioned how an article on bank charges and fees drew a great response that led to 'a whole series of articles on the topic.' Finally, a news editor from Israel highlighted how sometimes the most insignificant stories will stir an unexpected debate that will lead to additional coverage:

A soldier yawned in the memorial ceremony for Itzhak Rabin. A small story, seemed not too important, but it opened wounds and it is related to bigger issues of the right vs. the left, all these political cleavages...People just bombed us with comments..so we did several follow ups on the story.

In addition, an editor-in-chief of a major British newspaper provided an example how certain sections were added to the site because of their popularity

among commentators:

The books section for example, they sort of would not have done that if people did not comment on that. We are also about to launch a page site on religion and issues like that, I am not sure we would have done that if we did not get comments. We would not have sensed that the subject draws an enormous interest.

It is important however to note that all the editors emphasized that the effect of talkbacks on their day-to-day work is not as substantial as one may think. Editors pointed out that the media agenda is mainly a product of real events, organizational goals, and traditional journalistic procedures. Interactions with users are considered important and informative especially in comparison to the inability to communicate with audiences in the traditional media. Nonetheless, all editors agreed that publishing only what interests their users will significantly undermine the quality of their product.

We would certainly bear in mind articles that generate a large response when considering future stories on that topic. But in themselves, reader comments do not drive the news agenda. If we allowed that to happen, we would only publish stories on a very narrow number of subjects. (Editor-in-chief, U.K.)

## **Discussion**

This study had two objectives: to examine editors' perceptions of talkbacks, and to assess whether talkbacks influence editorial decisions. First, it became clear that the integration of talkbacks is no longer considered a matter of choice but a matter of necessity. The commercial motivations for adopting interactive features such as talkbacks trumped the hesitations and the doubts editors expressed in the past (Chung 20007; Hermida and Thurman 2008). Additionally it seems that the decision to incorporate talkbacks was mainly a function of technological resources available to the news site and market

forces. In other words, if your competitors adopted an innovative feature you can not afford to stay behind. These factors may explain why Israeli news sites were quicker in adopting talkbacks in comparison to mainstream British news sites.

I also find some disparity between editors' attitudes in the U.K. and Israel. Israeli editors were somewhat more dismissive of the feature due to the low quality of content being produced; however only one Israeli editor presented strategies to improve the discourse. Conversely, British editors expressed some frustration with the quality but the editors stated that they are constantly searching for new ways to communicate with their audiences while maintaining constructive conversations.

As for the effect of talkbacks on editorial decisions I find that issues that stir a debate or that draw a lot of attention are likely to be considered in future editorial decisions. This does not mean that every issue with seven hundred comments receives a follow up but it does inform the editors' judgments. I also found that in some cases talkbacks encompass information that may lead to new stories. But as noted, British editors differed from Israeli editors in their willingness to utilize talkbacks in such a way. I identify two possible explanations for this variation. The first reason may be the dismissive approach of some Israeli editors toward the feature e.g. 'talkbacks do not contribute a thing, I do not learn anything new from talkbacks' (news editor, Israel). Additionally, major news sites in Israel maintain a separate feature for users to report news and offer ideas. It is often called the 'red email' and it is placed in a visible location on the home page. A search in the archive of Ynet.co.il for instance revealed that during the month of March

2009, nineteen news stories originated in information that was first received via the feature. I did not find an equivalent feature in British news sites.

To conclude, the study shows that talkbacks are gradually increasing the audience's ability to influence media content. Ordinary citizens are expressing their opinions almost instantaneously and online news media are listening and communicating. In other words, the online news media now have an audience they 'can hear and see.' This does not mean that users dictate news media messages but they have become one of many external forces that possess an agenda-building capacity.

This study is not without limitations. To begin with the sample of interviews was not chosen randomly. Therefore the ability to generalize the findings is limited. I also did not manage to extract much cooperation from British 'red top' tabloids which may show more willingness to 'give users what they want' due to their populist nature. Finally since interactive features such as talkbacks are constantly evolving it will be interesting to see whether news sites will adopt even more restrictive moderation formats.

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Table 1: Case Studies

|                               | U.K.  | Israel                                   |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| National newspapers           | Timesonline.co.uk<br>Telegraph.co.uk<br>Guardian.co.uk<br>Independent.co.uk<br>Dailyexpress.co.uk<br>Mirror.co.uk | Ynet.co.il<br>Haaretz.co.il<br>Nrg.co.il |
| Regional and local newspapers | Manchestereveningnews.co.uk<br>Thisislondon.co.uk   | Jpost.com                                |
| Other                         |   | Walla.co.il (online-only portal)         |

Table 2: The Scope of Content in British News Sites

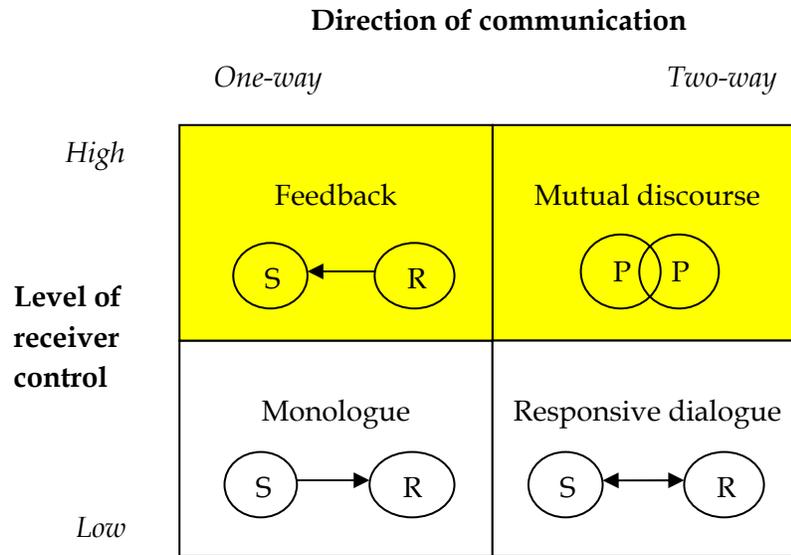
|                             | All Articles | Limited Content | Blogs only |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| Timesonline.co.uk           | X            |                 |            |
| Telegraph.co.uk             |              | X               |            |
| Guardian.co.uk              |              | X               |            |
| Independent.co.uk           |              | X               |            |
| Dailyexpress.co.uk          | X            |                 |            |
| Mirror.co.uk                |              |                 | X          |
| Manchestereveningnews.co.uk | X            |                 |            |
| Thisislondon.co.uk          | X            |                 |            |

Table 3: Level of Anonymity in British News Sites

|                             | Partial Anonymity | Partial Identification |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Timesonline.co.uk           | X                 |                        |
| Telegraph.co.uk             | X                 |                        |
| Guardian.co.uk              |                   | X                      |
| Independent.co.uk           |                   | X                      |
| Dailyexpress.co.uk          |                   | X                      |
| Mirror.co.uk                | X                 |                        |
| Manchestereveningnews.co.uk |                   | X                      |
| Thisislondon.co.uk          | X                 |                        |

## Appendix A

### A Typology of User-to-User Interactivity from McMillan (2006)



### A Typology of User-to-Documents Interactivity from McMillan (2006)

