INTERACTIVITY AS A METAPHOR OF ONLINE NEWS

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Abstract

Have users challenged the power of incumbent media through interactivity, and, if so, to what extent and to what end? The front pages and their linked features of online newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy are examined as instances of interactivity in practice. A methodological path to analyse interactivity practices in online newspapers is proposed. The structures and the more frequent models of interactivity applied; the types of forums; the communicative flux between readers and editorial staffs; modalities of self-presentation, both of readers and journalists; and the rituality of their relations in forums are set out and analysed from a number of perspectives. The study demonstrates that online newspapers in the first stage of internet diffusion remain in a stage of pre-interactivity.

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Introduction[1]

Interactivity has become a buzzword in the revitalisation of many themes in studies of technology and society, of journalism, of political communication and of uses of ICTs. More than a conceptually strong category, as Jensen's analysis (1998) might suggest, interactivity has worked as a metaphor of the new: of the new media and of the new potentialities of ICTs. It has attracted many analyses and studies which have tried to understand the potentially more proactive role of users. Of course, as Semino (2008) argues, metaphors in scientific debate influence in turn the development, the direction, and the meaning of the scientific discourse itself. Indeed, interactivity has been a key consideration in analysis of new media.

With the Internet, the predominant one-way communication model of traditional news media, often characterised by artificial and inadequate modes of audience feedback, acquired a possible alternative in the interactive digital environment of the global network (Bordewijk and Van Kaam 1986; Boczkowski 1999, 2004; Hall 2001; Kung et al. 2008). The hope for an alternative model of public interaction has foreseen in the spread of the Internet a new possibility for revitalising public discourse (Shane 2004; Brants 2005). However, the structural facility to offer a more equal communication status for every participant is a required if far from sufficient condition for a more democratic and symmetrical communication. It is thus necessary to investigate how the technology is deployed in reality, in order to assess how practices in the use of public internet communication have responded positively to this hope. Interactivity, perhaps by its nature as a "multidimensional construct" (Downes and McMillan 2000), has many definitions (Heeter 1989; Aoki n.d.a.); it is often described as a means of overcoming the mono-directionality of the message from the source to various publics and of creating a variety of communicative forms (Hoffman et al. 1995; Deuze 2003, 2007). In a more sophisticated model, Rafaeli proposes to see it as "variable characteristic of communication settings" (Rafaeli 1988). In 2002, Spiro Kiousis comes to the conclusion that "little consensus has been reached concerning interactivity, but as a quality of media it can be seen in the form, content and structure of technology and their relation to the user" (Kiousis 2002, 370-371).

Kim and Sawhney (2002) argue that there are, essentially, three approaches to interactivity. One is the communicative approach, which elaborates interactivity as being concerned with the communicators and the exchange of messages between them (Bretz 1983). It defines as "interactive" those media that simulate interpersonal exchange through communicative channels (Carey 1989) and make multi-directional communicative flows possible (Markus 1987). This simulation, however, is clumsy and impoverished. The parties concerned do not have equal rights over the communicative space, nor do they have the same communicative competence. This approach, which sees dialogue in co-presence as the ideal type of interactivity (Duncan 1989), tends, however, to overestimate the interactivity of body-to-body communication in itself, since it does not recognise that such communication is structurally limited by the social division of power, by etiquette, and by personality difference.

The second approach, again according to Kim and Sawhney (2002), is that of the media environment (Steur 1992), which maintains that interactive media are those in which users' participation can modify the form and content of the medial envi-

ronment in real time. This approach can be further developed in the light of actor network theories (Latour 1996) and social co-construction (Pinch and Oudshoorn 2003). While traditional media have a mono-directional, hierarchic structure, new interactive media may offer a platform in which users can also become producers, and re-balance the power relation in favour of the public or the community (Bucher 2002, Jankowski and Prehn 2002). In recent years, this has been labelled, when applied to journalism, as networked journalism, wherein professional news workers and amateurs work together, newsgathering and processing information (Beckett and Mansell 2008).

The third approach, proposed by Kim and Sawnhey (2002, 221), is that which rightly situates interactivity within the power relations that structure communication. Let us remember that power in communication means, for the producer, the proactive ability to select the argument, to decide how to present it, to determine who can be the interlocutor, as well as to determine the time, duration, place and cost of the communication, while, for the consumer, power means at most a capacity for reaction and defence, or perhaps the option to be passive (Schönbach 1997, Vorderer 1995).

These three approaches help us understand important aspects of interactivity of online newspapers, which is the objective of the research in the present study. Here, the discourse so far has been used, albeit with qualification, above all to hail the bi and multi-directional potentialities of new media as the beginning of an era in which publics are seen as able to influence editorial policies, procure and even co-produce news together with editorial staffs, have a more equal and reciprocal relationship with "their" newspapers, and create a new relationship with other readers. Given these premises, interactivity is considered technically as the possibility of shifting control over production and distribution of information from source to public (Rafaeli 1988, 115) and giving more power to users (Chan et al. 2006, Hodkinson 2007). Pearce (1997, 224) goes so far as to consider interactivity a "subversive" element, with the potential to re-shape the structure of mass communication. Yet it is often difficult to separate rhetoric from analysis and celebration of technical possibilities from the uses actually grafted on to them (Hollander et al. 2002, Richards 2006, Robinson 2006).

Our principal research question is to what extent and end, after a decade of experimentation and implementation of interactivity in online newspaper sites, users and their behaviour have challenged the power of media in the selected European countries? More specifically, we are interested in whether a broadening of democratic and symmetrical communication took place; are news topics still defined by media groups, or has the Internet's capacity for interactivity extended the number of voices raising and discussing public issues?

As we seek to address these questions, it is important to recognise that the rapid development of social media in recent years, along with the rise of citizen journalism, has added new dimensions to the potential for change in public discourse. Nevertheless, the intention here is to focus on the interactive performance of classic media, on the basis that such media remain as a fundamental component – the "Fourth Estate" – in democracies.

The following section of the article sets out aims and methods. Then we move on to present the results, analysing the structures and the more frequent models of

interactivity applied in the selected online newspapers; the organisation of types of forums; the communicative flux between readers and editorial staffs; modalities of self-presentation, both of readers and journalists; and the rituality of their relations in forums. The data collected allow us to carry out the analysis from several perspectives. Finally, we present our conclusions concerning interactivity in online newspaper websites.

Methods and Aims

The hypothesis that we advance is that online newspapers remain in a stage of pre-interactivity, made up by the co-existence of para-social interaction behaviour on the part of online newspaper publishers, and ortho-social interactions on the part of their readers (Rafaeli 1988, 124). Keeping in mind our research questions, we undertook a project which aims to explore how, in four European countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy – the "front" or home page of the most widespread online dailies embodies ot links to interactivity in practice. This is a sub-project of a large, cross-cultural study carried out in 16 countries, which compared print and online newspapers (Van der Wurff and Lauf 2005, van der Wurff et al. 2008), that aims to deepen our understanding of interactivity. Specifically, we analyse a sample comprising the following online publications: Bulgaria – *Standart* (Standard), *Monitor* and *Sega* (Now); Estonia – *Postimees* (Postman) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (Estonian Daily), which are two national mid-market (sometimes also called quality papers in order to distinguish them from the national tabloid) Estonian-language dailies; Ireland – *The Irish Times, the Irish Independent* and *the Irish Examiner,* the Republic's three national non-tabloid dailies; and Italy – *Il Corriere della Sera* (The Evening Messenger), *La Repubblica* (The Republic), *Il Sole 24 Ore* (The Sun 24 Hours), *La Stampa* (The Press) and *Il Messaggero* (The Messenger), the five most-read newspapers.

We decided to collect data related to the selected outlets on October 12, 2004, with the purpose of capturing a random snapshot of interactive practices. Interactivity in a newspaper website might be composed of many elements: e-mail, forums, chat, newsgroups, polls, hypertext, online games, the ability to personalise the home page (e.g. choice of language), news topic personalisation, and so on (Greer and Mensing 2003). Among these elements, we chose to examine only those that we judged most relevant in relation to our objective of research: e-mails, forums, letters to the editor, polls, chat and/or interviews with prominent people.

The main objectives of this study were threefold: (1) the analysis of the structure of interactivity of the online edition; that is, to investigate if and to what extent emails, forums, polls and letters to the editor and other features are present in the front page; (2) the examination of the physiognomy of forums: that is, the dimensions and the characteristics of communicative fluxes with users, and the organisation models applied by editorial staff to manage them. We chose to highlight these as our second unit of analysis because they provide "objective" data, easily accessible by users and also by researchers; (3) the analysis of the interaction between users and newsrooms, by starting with the structure of messages published in forums, if any, on the specified day and examining the nature of communication between users and editorial staffs, the identity expressed in the forums by journalists and users, and the type of relation and reutilisation which develops among users, journalists and forumists.

Background of Online Newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy

Before illustrating the results of the research, let us provide a short background of the countries and outlets which we selected and which we have been studying since 2003 (Fortunati and Sarrica 2004a, 2004b; Fortunati and Sarrica 2005; Fortunati 2005a, 2005b; Fortunati and Sarrica 2006; Fortunati et al. 2007; Raycheva 2005; Raycheva et al. 2005; Raycheva 2006; O'Sullivan 2005; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Balčytienė and Harro-Loit 2009).

Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria is a small media market, a rich print milieu includes 424 newspapers (64 dailies) with annual circulation in 2004 of 318,069,000 (NSI 2009). From the late 1990's, users have been able to choose between a variety of off-line and online news services of varying quality and with diverse content. However, since web editions were seen as supplementary, their layout in 2004 was unsophisticated, and their content undeveloped.

At the time of the study, the online versions of the newspapers *Standart*, *Monitor* and *Sega* have remained broadly similar to their printed versions, as previously observed (Raycheva, 2005). They are not updated during the day, have meagre hyperlinking, offer static images and no sound, and have skeletal staffing. Much progress has been achieved since 2004 adding changes in the layout, moving images and sound, much better hyperlinking, and uploading to Facebook.

In 2004, compared to the offline editions, newspaper websites seem to focus more on letters, messages and the invitation to readers to comment. Online editions are also attempting to break new ground in polls/user surveys, forums and internal links. On October 12, *Standart* publishes eight news items, *Monitor* six, and *Sega* two.

Among these three online newspapers, *Sega* provides most options for interactivity. Practically every news item can create a forum, and these are organised in a section under the title Sky Forum. Comments are grouped in Forum Clubs attached to the main sections of the newspaper, such as Society, Economics, Politics, Culture, Sports, Contacts. Forums are usually managed by a webmaster, and users correspond with each other except for when, twice monthly, they communicate for two hours with an invited guest. Journalists (reporters or editors) do not take part in this conversation. A significant part of this conversation is re-published in two pages in the print edition. The users, some of them regular participants in the forums, also exchange off-topic opinions. They often use inappropriate language and various emoticons. Some comments include photos or other images. Users can also play games, chat, visit virtual clubs on different topics, exchange photos, etc. Communication is effected only between users hidden behind nicknames, and there is no comment by a journalist. The first news item of the sample generates 143 comments in the forum (up to 50 are visible), and the second 31 (all visible).

Standart offers several options for interactivity: comments on articles (for the Bulgarian and for the English online edition), e-mail letters to the editor (invisible to other users), and an SMS service. Comments on articles are published, with the e-mail addresses of the senders, in a dedicated section. Forums facilitating exchange of opinions, either between users or between users and journalists, are practically non-existent, although comments are carefully read by some of the editors of the

newspaper's society section, as they revealed to us in an informal conversation. A small number of comments were chosen for printing in the off-line edition. Of the published comments, only two relate to one of the eight news items on the front page of the online edition.

The newspaper with the fewest interactive elements in 2004 is *Monitor*, which offers only an e-mail facility. In a practice similar to that of *Standart*, some messages are published in the print edition. Due to the high level of inappropriate language in messages, *Monitor* in 2004 has discontinued the use of forums. In addition, it has abandoned poll/user surveys, due to concerns over voting fairness.

Estonia. Estonia's media system has a small market – advertising revenue was €58m in 2003 (TNS-EMOR, 2009) – and a liberal media policy. Estonian newspapers started to create online versions in the mid-1990s. In 2004, as today, there were four national dailies on the market published in the Estonian language and three in Russian, of which just one remained in 2009. Print dailies are the dominant original news producers online. In 2002/2003, 74 percent of the Estonian-language population and 36 percent of the Russian-speaking population read national dailies, although newspaper readership has decreased since the 1990s especially among young people (Vihalemm 2004, Vihalemm et al. 2004). The dominant entities in the news market are media corporation Eesti Meedia (a part of international Schibsted corporation), which owns press as well as electronic media organisations, and the Ekspress Group and Bonnier (owner of the business daily). National dailies *Postimees* (belonging to Eesti Meedia) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (owned by Ekspress Group) are rather similar dailies. Like Italian newspaper organisations, Estonian newspapers have tried to expand into other sectors, with, for example, *Eesti Päevaleht*, venturing into book publishing.

In Estonian online dailies, interactivity comprises forums, polls and e-mails. The dominant feature of forums is the ability of readers/users to comment on each article, which generates a high number of contributions. Few news items draw no comment at all in the "Commentariums." Readers also can evaluate these comments. In the context of the present research, the collective commentaries of each news item are regarded as a forum. Most commentators use nicknames, and readers are asked to assist in moderation by pointing out libellous comments. In 2007-2008, most dailies introduced restrictions closing off comments that risked an intrusion into privacy.

In April 2005, those commenting in *Eesti Päevaleht* were required to be identified: they had to be registered with their real name or a nickname and e-mail address and they had to log in. However, registration was withdrawn after a year or so, as the number of comments dropped.

In 2004, *Eesti Päevaleht* has had an online interview every three to four months, in which readers can ask questions of a public figure. In the other daily, *Postimees*, almost every news story is commented on (in a forum), but readers also have the ability to create a new discussion topic. *Postimees* also asks users to help moderate its interactive sections by reporting inappropriate comments.

Ireland. In Ireland, in 2004, with a then fast-growing economy driving all sectors, newspapers were read by 91.4 percent of adults in the Republic, (JNRS cited by Media Live 2005). Circulations and advertising revenues had followed an upward

trajectory since the start of the boom in the 1990s. A notable feature in this time had been investment by British interests, especially through Irish editions of tabloids and Sundays but also in regionals. The national daily broadsheet sector (with which this article is concerned) was shared between the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner* and *The Irish Times*, with the latter positioned as the "paper of reference" but with the mid-market Independent enjoying the highest circulation. Independent News and Media, which also has extensive international interests, is dominant in the newspaper market, a situation that occasionally raises concern over concentration of ownership and control, but with little regulatory action in response (Horgan et al. 2007). While The Irish Times had been a pioneer of early news publishing on the Internet in the early 1990s, by 2004 its online division had experienced severe cutbacks. Other titles had made modest investments in online editions, the content of which largely mirrored their print counterparts. Online editions of daily newspapers in Ireland at the time of data collection carry little material generated by readers. This can, at least in the first instance, be put down to the severely constrained opportunity to contribute. In only one of three newspapers studied is it apparent from the front page that readers can post to a forum. None of the sites allows readers to comment in a forum associated with specific new items. Each re-publishes letters from the print edition (with names and addresses of contributors).

The front page of *The Irish Times's* portal, ireland.com, and the Breaking News section of the online newspaper edition itself – though not the front page of the actual online edition – carry a daily poll inviting Yes/No responses, after which readers are invited to post comments under the heading "Your Reaction" in the Breaking News section. Readers are told to keep contributions relevant, and posts are said to be filtered by a monitor for abusive content or libel. Comments have to be submitted before 11.30 pm. The *Irish Independent* online edition publishes print edition letters online and also offers a Yes/No poll on a pre-determined topic. Readers are allowed no means of posting responses directly, but are invited to do so by email. They are advised that they should keep contributions short, and that abusive messages will not be posted. *The Examiner* site advertises a bulletin board as well as a chat room. However, since the day on which data was collected, the publisher has closed the forums, citing legal precautions. The *Examiner* also publishes print edition letters, though these are not directly linked from the front page. Perhaps the most significant development since our observation of the daily news sites is a partial freeing of interactivity via the introduction of direct reader comments on journalists' blogs and on selected opinion articles in *The Irish Times*.

Italy. With its traditionally low readership of daily newspapers, Italy has paradoxically a prosperous press. Daily newspapers, unable to attract more readers directly, have successfully turned their audiences into readers of books, such as novels and encyclopaedias, distributed with newspapers and now providing the bulk of revenues. The Italian news market is characterised by a few strong editorial groups such as RCS and the Gruppo Editoriale dell'Espresso, mainly connected to industrial dynasties. About 100 printed newspapers comprise almost 20 national dailies, 70 regional and local dailies, and eight free dailies. The total daily circulation of newspapers in 2004 was less than eight million copies; average readership was around 20 million persons a day (Audipress 2004). The number of dailies published online reached nearly a hundred, with a little less than half of the population hav-

ing access to the Internet. Of all Internet users, 85 percent have visited at least one news site in the previous six months.

In Italy, the structure of interactivity in the five home pages varies widely. The only interactive element present in all five is e-mail, while forums and polls are present in three. Other elements, like letters to the editor and interviews with experts, or chats with prominent persons, are less represented. Numbers of contributions vary greatly, and editors are not always able to create reader interest. Polls and invitations to vote are frequent elements in entertainment sections, but not in news and current affairs. *La Repubblica* has the biggest interactive space among Italian online dailies, formed by three different sections. *Il Sole 24 Ore* appears to follow a minimalist strategy for interactivity, with no forums apparent on the front page but with experts who respond on issues proposed by readers. The site carries forums, but they are contained in its sections without being flagged on the front page (which is the locus for this study's data collection). *La Stampa* consistently carries a number of forums, while *Il Messaggero* is the least interactive among Italian outlets, since email is the only interactive element present in the front page of its online edition.

Results

Structures of Interactivity

As regards Bulgarian media, on October 12, *Standart* published eight news items, *Monitor* six, and *Sega* two. In Sega, the two news items of *Sega*, published on the front page, attracted 174 comments in total. The first news item, entitled "Traffic police will suspend driving licenses for unpaid fines," received 143 comments (up to 50 are visible). The second – "Property prices are slightly stalled" – received 31 (all visible). In *Standart*, only two of the published comments related to one of the eight news items published on the front page. The general impression of the comments was that they were emotionally toned, and most of them included emoticons. Almost all of the comments expressed critical sentiments towards the topic. Arguments with other commentators prevailed. A small number of the comments were completely off-topic. Both comment streams in *Standart* were connected with the news item concerning the traffic police. Authors of these comments were unhappy about road conditions and did not mention the main topic at all.

In Estonia, both dailies provided a number of comments (as a part of each headline) concerning each news item or opinion article. On October 12, 2004, the overall number of news and opinion articles of *Eesti Päevaleht* (Business supplement excluded) was 105; *Postimees* only had 50 items. The most commented-upon article at *Eesti Päevaleht* ("Society needs atheistic explanations") attracted 832 comments (the article was not on the first page of the online version and the latest comments are added on 5th June 2008); other news items drew comments ranging in number from 400 to fewer than 10. The article that attracted the highest number of reactions (113) at *Postimees* on school absenteeism was also the first news item on the front page. Very few news items gathered no comments. Both dailies also provided a "top news" list of the most read news items. The commentaries included both discussion between commentators and single reaction to the article; editorial staff did not moderate comments.

In Ireland, the single *Irish Times* poll on October 12 drew 106 responses, including some substantial and reflective contributions. Postings were presented in a unified sequence, rather than in focussed discussion threads. There was no evidence of editorial staff responding. In the *Irish Independent*, which similarly invited responses to polls, no reader comments are published (contributions, usually fewer than 10, are carried on some other days, again in a single sequence). In the *Irish Examiner* online, at the time of data collection, the chat room was empty and the last forum posted was 12 days old. A recheck in early 2005 found that links from the saved forum page led to an undated notice informing the reader that the forum and chat functions had been suspended "due to concerns on legal vulnerability." In 2004, the *Irish Examiner* used the freeware vBulletin system to host its forums, of which there were four, dedicated to "People and Places" (748 posts), "Current Affairs" (253), "Business" (18) and "Sport" (3). Some general characteristics were recorded: communication in the forums was user to user, and, while discussions were anonymously moderated, there was no interaction with journalists. Discussion threads were independent of editorial content items. Included in the same bulletin board, for which a single registration is required, are forums associated with other specialised outlets developed by the publisher, such as sites dealing with sport and motoring. While the presence of a forum using a commonly deployed independent platform like vBulletin might indicate a high level of interactive freedom, and while some of the posts counts appeared substantial, it must be borne in mind that the contributions on the day were not current and, in fact, the forums were relatively inactive. It is also worth noting that the category with the highest count by far referred to social/recreational use rather than debate on public issues.

In Italy, in *Il Corriere della Sera*, the only two open forums were "The crisis of tourism in Italy: reasons and remedies," which generated two messages, and football "Championship season 2004/05," which drew 65 messages. In particular, the interactive space of *Il Corriere della Sera* was constituted by the online publication of letters to the editor, which appeared in the off-line newspaper, and seven forums managed by prominent journalists who had their own following readers (Hynds 1991, Wahl-Jorgensen 2001; 2002, Richardson and Franklin 2004). In addition, five other forums were managed by experts (whose identity is ambiguous). Anonymous moderators managed another 43 forums, where online editorial staff set a theme that readers discussed.

The front page of *La Repubblica* was made up of three sections. In the first, forums were managed by an anonymous moderator. A second section was dedicated specifically to polls. Another, entitled "Interactivity," actively sought opinions on specific topics, or ran competitions based on reader contributions, including photographs. On 12 October 2004, all of 30 forums on the front page of *La Repubblica* were already closed. Consequently, we could not collect any messages published on that day. Apart from these more conventional spaces, three forums were dedicated to stories with an emphasis on narrative rather than discussion: the first, on rock music, carried 502 posts; the second, entitled "Life as a Teacher," comprised 236 stories; and the forum "My University" had 1,127 stories. In *Il Sole 24 Ore*, eight experts responded to eight questions posed by readers. These responses were provided via a link which encouraged the reader to learn more by means of paid access to a restricted area. In *La Stampa*, four forums were run: "Caffè Buongiorno" [Coffee Good Day], "Il Meglio del Web" [Best of the Web], "Ebusiness,"

and "Lettere & Cifre" [Letters and Figures], handled by a journalist and an expert of mathematical and linguistic games. In *Il Sole 24 Ore*, letters to the editor were published along with eight messages sent to the online newsroom. Finally, it is interesting to note that "Letters to the Editor" were present in the form of a forum only in *Il Corriere della Sera*, where journalist Paolo Mieli was replying (later on he has been substituted by Sergio Romano). This column was the exact reproduction of that in the print newspaper, but in addition, it carried a selected archive of the "Letters of the Week."

As it can be seen in Table 1, the structure of interactivity in the homepages of the 13 most read newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy was rather uneven.

Table 1: The Structure of Interactivity on the Webpage of Online Newspapers

Country	Newspaper	Forum	E-mail	Poll	Interview; Letters to the editor + other forms
Bulgaria	*Standart*	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes, SMS
	Monitor	None	Yes	Irregular	Yes
	Sega	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes
Estonia	*Paevaleht*	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	Irregular
	Postimees	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	None
Ireland	*Irish Times*	None*	Yes	1 (daily)	Yes
	I. Independent	None	Yes	1 (daily)	None
	Irish Examiner	Yes	Yes	None	None
Italy	*Il Corriere della Sera*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	La Repubblica	Yes	Yes	Yes	None
	Il Sole 24 Ore	None	Yes	None	Yes
	La Stampa	Yes	Yes	Irregular	None
	Il Messaggero	None	Yes	None	None

* While The *Irish Times* does not have a forum, its poll responses provide some of this function, albeit in a crude format, and are discussed later in this article in the context of discussion of forums.

The presence or absence of features allows us to understand how the structure of interactive practices is organised in the various front pages of online editions. Moving to consider the measure of interactivity in these European countries, Table 2 shows the four interactive models of the selected editions.

Table 2: The Interactivity Models on the Front Page of Online Newspapers

Model	Newspaper	Number of features present
1. Full interactivity	*Il Corriere della Sera*	4 of 4
2. Moderate interactivity	*La Repubblica, Irish Times, Standart, Sega, Paevaleht, Postimees*	3 of 4
3. Partial interactivity	*Monitor, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner, Il Sole 24 Ore, La Stampa*	2 of 4
4. Low interactivity	*Il Messaggero*	1 of 4

As we can see in Table 2, the most widespread models of interactivity in 2004 online newspapers editions are of a moderate interactivity. The first model, that of full interactivity, is embodied only by *Il Corriere della Sera*, which offers a full range of the interactive elements in its website.

Among the elements we considered, the only one present, or linked from, all 13 front pages is e-mail. Management of e-mail between the newsroom and the readership remains, however, mysterious, in the sense that there is no trace of this communicative interplay between users and editorial staffs. Forums are present on the whole in more than half of cases: in Bulgaria, they are in evidence in two of the three online newspapers under review, in Estonia in the two newspapers analysed, in Ireland in one of three (though soon to be scrapped) and in Italy in three of five. Polls are used regularly in almost half of the sample analysed. Letters to the editor are relatively rare, and where present they correspond to those published in the print edition.

Forums' Physiognomy and Communicative Fluxes

As one of the most essential elements of interactivity is made up by forums, we have attempted to deepen our analysis on their presence and their characteristics. Table 3 illustrates the number of forums present in or linked from the home page of the online newspapers on October 12, 2004 and their communicative fluxes, constituted by the number of messages posted in the forums by users and by the number of the answers from editorial staff. (The number of messages refers to messages posted on the day of data collection.)

Table 3: Number of Forums in Front Page of Online Newspapers and their Communication Fluxes

Newspapers in the four countries		Number of forums	Number of messages
Bulgaria:	*Standard*	1	2
	Monitor	0	0
	Sega	2	174
Estonia:	*Postimees*	38	472
	Eesti Päevaleht	24	1294
Ireland:	*Irish Times*	0	0
	Irish Independent	0	0
	Irish Examiner	4	0
Italy:	*Il Corriere della Sera*	14	211+38 answers from ed. staff
	La Repubblica	33	0
	Il Sole 24 ore	0	8*
	La Stampa	15	51+11 answers from ed. staff
	Il Messaggero	0	0

* Messages sent to the editorial staff

In the Bulgarian sample, the general impression of the comments is that they are emotional rather than rational. Users' opinions in *Sega* (174 comments in total)

are supported by a wide variety of emoticons. In some cases, emoticons substitute entirely for text. Exchange of comments occurs with no moderation by the editorial staff. A tendency to express opinions off the main topic can be observed, especially in *Standart*.

In the Estonian dailies, the most commented-upon article (a column about a leader of a political party) receives 422 comments; in *Postimees,* news of plans to establish a new control system over school truants draws 113 comments. Most participants react emotionally to the published text; some add information and some merely argue with other commentators. News stories or columns that are highlighted by the newspaper (for example, lead stories or those with pictures) usually get more comments. Among the countries in the study, Estonia has the highest number of user comments.

The Italian sample shows a vibrant presence of forums. (It is only by chance, for example, that *La Repubblica*, one of the most interactive Italian online newspapers, has no messages as, on the day of our data collection, no one posted messages in its forums.) Both *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* show willingness on the part of readers to communicate and a limited number of answers from journalists to readers' comments.

On the whole, the data described in Table 3 suggests that there is a burgeoning of the space dedicated to readers' opinions. The technical possibilities offered by the web are exploited in half of the cases. However, we are still far from being able to consider forums as a driver of ideas, reflections and stimuli in which readers have such influence that they challenge the power of editorial staff. Media owners have not yet invested enough to build an organisation model inside online newspaper editorial staffs which might face this bi-vocal exchange in a real way. While readers' contributions have in turn elicited few reactions from editorial staff, the cultural impact of comments and forums on journalists might have relevance.

Nor have readers constructed an interactive model from the bottom up. Online interactivity on the whole concerns less than 10 percent of Internet users (Nielsen 2006). The large majority do not seek interactivity: they prefer to lurk, anonymous and silent. They are more interested in consuming what the web has to offer rather than investing time, money and effort to re-design the web's information or to modify the process of production, elaboration and distribution of news online. Even as blogs and social networks offer an alternative model, surfers at a mass level gathering at newspaper sites have remained the sons and daughters of book and newspaper readers, interpreters of a model that has separated reading activity from writing.

A last observation: while our data collection is confined to one day, newspaper forums also comprise an archive of messages, often dating to the beginning of the section. New messages and old ones share the same location, creating a spatial contiguity that is unfamiliar. This differs from how the newspaper's own content distinguishes the news from the social memory, by dedicating an archive to older material.

Interaction between Users and Newsrooms

In order to explore more deeply the features of interactivity in these online newspapers, we analysed further the characteristics of communicative fluxes in

forums, namely: who is communicating with whom, and the level of identification between the communicators. Based on empirical observations of these 13 newspapers, we could outline six possible communicative fluxes in online newspapers or *traffic models*:

1. Journalist sets the agenda, users respond and journalist might answer;
2. Moderator (webmaster, a reader or someone else) controls the forum and users communicate with him/her, other users or a specific user;
3. Expert provides answers on a particular subject, users communicate with him/her, with other users or a specific user;
4. Users communicate with each other;
5. Users communicate with each other and the journalist;
6. Media organisation sets the agenda, users react and the forum is managed by an anonymous moderator.

Table 4: Communication Models Applied in the Forums

Country	Newspaper	Prevailing traffic models
Bulgaria	*Standart*	6
	Monitor	6
	Sega	3, 4, 6
Estonia	*Eesti Päevaleht*	4; 6
	Postimees	4; 6
Ireland	*Irish Times*	6
	Irish Independent	6
	Irish Examiner	4
Italy	*Il Corriere della Sera*	1, 3, 6
	La Repubblica	0
	Il Sole 24 Ore	3
	La Stampa	1, 3, 6
	Il Messaggero	0

The prevailing traffic model is No. 6 (media organisation sets the agenda and users react and managed by an anonymous moderator), followed by No. 4 (users communicate with each other), and No. 3 (expert answers on the domain). This means that the model of the forms of interactivity in the first stage of mass use of the Internet is still put in place by media organisations and dominated by them. Readers seem to be seen by media organisations as a group to be tamed in *ad hoc* spaces and structures.

To complete the picture of relations between readers and online newspapers, and their ritualisation, we considered the ways in which readers choose to reveal their identity. We reconstructed eight types of identification on the part of users and five types of identity with which media organisation present themselves.

Types of user identities of forum contributors include: (1) nickname, (2) e-mail, (3) signature, (4) name, (5) nickname and e-mail, (6) name, surname and email, (7) name and email, and (8) entirely anonymous.

Identity of media organisations ranges from (a) no identification (one should assume that someone from the staff is doing the job) to (b) journalist identified by signature, (c) anonymous moderator, (d) identified moderator, and (e) identified experts.

With these data, we have built a model that illustrates the frequency of different identities present in forums. The results are presented in Table 5. It emerges that the identity of interacting people is usually hidden behind a nickname, while the prevailing model for the identity of media organisations is collective identity, followed by anonymous moderators and identified experts.

Table 5: Model of Users' and Media Organizations' Identity in the Forums

Country	Newspaper	Identity of interacting persons	Identity of media organisation
Bulgaria	*Standart*	2	a
	Monitor	0 – no forums	a
	Sega	1	a, e
Estonia	*Eesti Päevaleht*	1	a or b
	Postimees	1	a or b
Ireland	*Irish Times*	1,4	a or c
	Irish Independent	1,4	a or c
	Irish Examiner	1	c
Italy	*Il Corriere della Sera*	1, 4, 5, 6, 7	b, c, e
	La Repubblica	0	c
	Il Sole 24 Ore	8	e
	La Stampa	5, 6, 7	b, c, e
	Il Messaggero		0

Discussion and Final Remarks

Our study has clear limitations, confined as it is to interactivity evident from the front pages of online newspapers and captured on a single day. For technical reasons, we could not fix the time of saving the online pages; hence, the comparison of the number of forums and messages recorded is not exact. There is a naturally-arising uncertainty in the categorisation of readers' identities, given the fact that it was not always easy to distinguish a name from a surname or a nickname. It should be also noted we did not interview journalists, which makes our understanding of the aims of moderation of forums incomplete. Nevertheless, bearing in mind these limitations, our analysis of data provides some clear indications that interactivity is markedly under-developed.

Other research carried out later by some of the present authors and other colleagues on journalism and the internet (Fortunati et al. 2009, Sarrica et al. forthcoming) and on interactivity in Italy (Fortunati, Sarrica and de Luca 2007), indicates that editors' and managers' indifference towards interactivity continues. Newspapers have not invested in interactivity as a driving engine in a new conception of the newspaper based at least in part on collaboration with audiences. They did not

invest in the implementation of a newsroom organisation that would be oriented towards managing readers' input, or in designing journalistic work practices to include audiences' voices. Our research has shown that, at least in Italy, editors pass information on reader behaviours mainly to online journalists, probably because they assume that print editions cannot take advantage of such information. At the same time, however, it emerged that the majority of the journalists interviewed agree that the future of newspapers is in interactivity and multimediality. In addition, almost half of them assert that they make significant efforts to deal with readers on a voluntary basis. However, in spite of this spontaneous commitment, journalists are scarcely aware of the importance of online communities that develop around the website of their newspaper. This lack of interest is strongly correlated with the prevailing opinion among journalists interviewed that the audiences prefer print to online newspapers.

The current research adds to this understanding a visualisation, albeit partial, of the phenomenon of online newspaper interactivity in some European countries with varying market sizes. There is a certain balance among the selected countries, as they comprise a northern country (Ireland), a southern country (Italy), a post-socialist eastern country (Bulgaria) and a post-socialist northern country (Estonia). It seems that the power relation between media organisations and readers is not in play. Contrary to the perceptions of transformation of some observers (Bucher 2002), several elements delineate a scene wherein the power hierarchy seems unaltered. Users still seem to be, as Lieb (1998) writes, a "protected minority," and many online newspapers continue to consider themselves "mausoleums instead of saloons." Readers who write in forums are hosted in a space, which is apparently public but which belongs to the publisher. Feedback is allowed, not solicited, by editorial staff. Finally, it is the moderator who most often launches the issue to be discussed, decides the length (moderators continually urge users to write briefly) and the appropriateness of messages, and decides when to open and close a forum. All these elements demonstrate the asymmetric nature of the relation between readers and online newspapers. Certainly, users apply strategies to defy, necessarily in a furtive and silent way, the agenda-setting of prescribed discussions in forums. They may, for example, discuss issues other than those officially assigned to the forum or articulate their own thoughts at length. However, these are defensive tactics rather than proactive strategies aimed at radically changing the role of the reader.

Two our findings in particular, demand further reflection. One is the publication of the letters to the editor in Irish and Italian online newspapers; the other is the blocking of offensive material in Bulgaria, Ireland, and Italy. Although online publication of readers' letters is limited to only two sample countries, we could speak of a legacy model, which largely inspires the "new" interactivity of online newspapers in terms of both structure and meaning of messages, and the means of managing messages (Rafaeli 1988). This feature implies a uni-directional relation with readers: most letters are not met with a response. Readers' letters to the newspaper's editor do not represent a model of interaction between the editorial staff and readers, but assimilation to and application of the uni-directional model of mass communication by the readers. Messages in forums often seem to maintain the form of letters to the editor and share their ambiguity: they remain both a communication addressed to a specific person in his/her professional status and a communication which its author

wants to enter the public arena. Furthermore, forum contributions are treated by the online editorial staff in the same way as off-line readers' letters by print editorial staff. In both cases, messages are selected and a heading is attributed to them. The second element is the obvious need to moderate the apparently high level of abusive or ill-mannered contributions. Clearly, readers often use forums in order to vent their anger, as if frustrations accumulated over centuries with no means of expression were somehow invading the public sphere.

At this stage, a lack of democratic culture in the web fetters the formation of public opinion constructed by distinct individuals. Still anonymous masses speak. The tendency towards hidden identity seems to mean that readers do not perceive online forums as an opportunity to reveal their ideas and opinions. We are still not in a stage of full disclosure; rather, we are in a pre-political, antecedent stage, where private opinions are made public for their own sake. More than for democracy, one should look perhaps for the spectacularisation of communication in a networked society (Castells 1996-1998). The interactivity of online newspapers is often reduced to display and self-exhibition. Consequently, this phenomenon pertains more to the social than the political sphere. It may be that Internet users express the will to assert information power not via online newspapers, but in other forms, such as citizen journalism, blogs and so on, that are not connected with newspapers. Online newspaper forums are instead often inhabited by fragile identities that are still unable or unwilling to deal fully with a public dimension.

The data in our analysis support the initial hypothesis that online newspapers are still in a stage of pre-interactivity, although there are some attempts to re-define the role of gatekeepers in the newspapers. Some print editions in Bulgaria and Italy, for example, carry selected messages from online forums. This may be the first steps towards a new relationship between newsrooms and readership that would not rest on an exclusively uni-directional communication. However, responses or interventions by the editorial staff on readers' comments are rare (we found them only in Italy). Indeed, a full-fledged interactivity remains an ideal that the current practice lags behind. After more than a decade, traditional media continue to fail supporting a genuine interactivity, which means not only to set it up but also to keep it alive and effective. Online newspapers seem to hesitate providing a truly bi- or multi-directional flux between newsrooms and readers. The implementation and maintenance of interactive communication is time consuming, and its outcomes are not easily measurable, thus more sustaining financial and organisational investments would be needed to make it feasible. Diverting the interactive process to a discussion among readers themselves, building thus a kind of virtual communicative ghetto, may be a technology driven "tactical" solution which does not give hope yet for higher levels of interactivity between journalists and audiences.

Note:

1. A paper relating to an earlier stage of the development of this research was presented at a conference in Barcelona in 2005, and published in the event's proceedings (Fortunati et al 2005).

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