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H. İbrahim

Communication in the Millennium

In Cooperation with

University of Texas Austin (U.S.A.), Anadolu University (Turkey), Istanbul University (Turkey)

Hosted by

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May 11-13, 2005



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INTERACTIVE FEATURES OF ONLINE NEWSPAPERS AND NEWS PORTALS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

The Internet has been affecting the profession of journalism in a number of ways. Interactivity is one of the important aspects of the Internet that can allow active participation of the user/audience. Interactivity can be conceptualized as the process by which the reader can exercise control over the form and content of the mediated setting through some potential instruments that the new media allow. The Internet has a capacity for interactivity that allows for multi-directional rather than just two-way, as in the form of e-mail sent by a reader/participant, flow of information. The literature on interactivity provides many definitions and some operational tools that make it possible to analyze interactive options in computer-mediated communication. The descriptive analysis of 28 online newspapers and 12 news portals in Turkey discusses the use of interactive options in online news sites. The websites were analyzed with respect to four dimensions: user control, exchange, information collection and personalization. E-mail functions, search options, counter, bulletin boards, chat rooms, polls/surveys and log-in options were among the operational tools of interactivity used in this study. The study tries to show the extent these interactive options of new forms of mediation are used in online newspapers. The findings reveal the lack of interactive features in practice. Moreover, the few available interactive options are used by the user/audience less than is commonly emphasized in the literature.

INTERACTIVE FEATURES OF ONLINE NEWSPAPERS AND NEWS PORTALS IN TURKEY*

INTRODUCTION

Convergence, defined as the coming together of communication means, modes and processes, can be characterized as one of the important changes in media technology from the 1990s onwards. Convergence has been occurring at the technical and operational level (e.g. Kawamoto 2003) as well as at the level of ownership and control (e.g. McChesney 2000). Although the latter might mean the globalization of media and cultural reproduction, conglomerates, deregulation and/or media imperialism, convergence at the technological level is embodied in the form of new media, in this case the Internet. Developments such as convergence, interactivity and the fragmentation of the audience have implications not only for communications but also for social relations.

With some rationalization, it has been claimed for the Internet that it is today's adaptation of the agora, metaphorically speaking, the open space in which public discourse can be attained without the mediation of those in authority and without the gatekeeping and agenda-setting of the traditional media (Flichy 2002, Rheingold 1994, Schultz 2000). These observations are based on Habermas' (1989) conceptualization of 'public sphere'. But some recent approaches, such as digital divide or information gap has begun to question the net itself, and problematize its uses, users and effects (Compaine 2001, Castells 2004, Clark et al. 2004).

Some political theorists, such as Elster (1998), argue that in contrast to representative democracy, legitimate lawmaking, thus deliberative and participatory democracy can only arise from the public deliberation of the citizenry. This means active participation of citizens in public discussion. Internet, as the reflection of new public sphere, allows for the main principles of public communication required by the deliberative and participatory democracy model: Social ownership, plurality, participation, interactivity and being critical.

There have also been various attempts to struggle for democratic media. Some journalists and scholars have argued that newspapers should adopt what some call 'public' or 'civic' journalism (Rosen 1996, Fishkin 1995). The idea is that journalists and citizens should realize that they have common interests on society's problems, and newspapers should become advocates of these problems. There are also some critiques of the notion of public journalism. For instance, although he sees the attempts of public journalism "well-intentioned", McChesney (2000: 300) argues that "the movement completely ignores the structural factors of ownership that have led to the attack on journalism, working hand in hand with the very corporate chieftains who benefit by the status quo".

Although McChesney points out a very crucial aspect, it is important not to forget that the foundation of public journalism model is grounded in dialogue and conversation. With the help of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), this model proposes multi-directional flow of information that is decentralized rather than one-way communication. Thus it seems that Internet with its interactivity options now suggests more opportunities for an active citizenry.

* The authors would like to thank to Murat Yüksel for his careful review and helpful suggestions.

Following this theoretical framework, this paper, first tries to explicate interactivity and briefly define the interactive features of online journalism practices. Based on the concepts defined, to what extent online news publications (both online versions of print media and online-only news portals) in Turkey use these interactive features is examined through a descriptive analysis.

Definition of Interactivity

In Rafaeli's words interactivity "is a special intellectual niche reserved for communication scholars" (1988: 113). Although interactivity has been assumed to be a natural characteristic of interpersonal communication, fortunately it has become a conception and even a model applied to ICTs, such as the Internet. In this study, the focus is on mediated interactivity rather than interpersonal interactive communication. But, in this mediated environment, both user-to-medium and user-to-user interactive communication are taken into account.

As Gunter (2003: 146) puts, "understanding interactivity and how it works is fundamental for understanding the likely success of Internet services". Thus, interactivity is a critical concept in computer-mediated communication since it is seen as the essential advantage of the medium (Pavlik 1996, van Dijk 2000, Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997, Durlak 1987, Sundar et al. 2003). However, different researchers have used different conceptualizations of interactivity. Ideally, an interactive system is illustrated by an immediate involvement between the human and the system, or, as Lippman puts it, as a working technical definition, by "mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of both participants, usually working toward some goal, but not necessarily" (Brand 1987:46).

Scholars have been making different categorizations to define and explain interactivity. Kawamoto argues that interactivity is "the process of engaging active human or machine participation in the process of information seeking and information sharing" (2003: 4). Following his definition, this study overviews the literature through a two-dimensional approach: People interaction, interacting with technology and people together (a varied model).

In terms of interacting with people, Rafaeli (1988) suggests a model with three levels of interactivity: (1) two-way non-interactive communication, (2) reactive or quasiinteractive communication, (3) fully interactive communication. Two-way communication occurs when messages are delivered both ways. While reactive communication requires that later messages respond to previous messages, fully interactive communication appears when later messages respond to a sequence of previous messages (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997). In this model, interactivity is perceived as responsiveness. Through online information sources like FTP, or WWW, two-way exchanges become possible via e-mail. Taking a further step, Jensen (1998) expounded on Rafaeli's framework of interactivity as the measure of media's ability to allow the user to employ an effect on the content and/or form of the communication.

For the varied model, Heeter (1989) discusses interactivity with its relationship with ICTs and sees it as a multidimensional concept. She pinpoints these dimensions as the complexity of choice available, user effort, responsiveness of media to the user, ability to monitor information, ease of adding information and facilitation of interpersonal communication. Heeter argues that if a medium allows various choices to the user, it is more interactive. Thus, Internet with its navigation quality allows the users to follow their interests in a multi-directional and non-linear fashion. Immediate and/or non-immediate feedback mechanisms become real, so that discussion platforms.

According to Kiousis' (2002) definition of interactivity, users become participants and can communicate "both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges" (p. 372). He argues that this perception of that experience turns out to be a "simulation of interpersonal communication".

Apart from these definitions, the need of tools for operationalizing the concept of interactivity in computer-mediated environments is also outlined in some researches (e.g. Downes and McMillan 2000, Chung 2004). These tools are summarized according to several aspects such as direction of communication, level of control, sense of place, responsiveness and time flexibility. As McMillan (2002:175) points out the emphasis of all explications basically gathers around the "locus of control". An operational definition is important because the term's meaning is constantly changing and is shaped by the argument of "why we need it" (Aaerseth 2003:426).

Indeed, all these definitions are useful to comprehend different dimensions of interactivity (especially in computer-mediated environment) in an operational manner, Huhtamo's (1999) standpoint of user-medium interactivity, as the transition from the "waiting operator" to the "impatient user" is the best summary of all.

Online Journalism and Interactivity

The Internet provides more and various news content than that every day and most of it is free. So it's not surprising that more people are going online for their news. By surfing through in almost all languages, one can find anything, which is not on that day's print-paper. Beyond that, online news outlets can provide and archive as much information as possible through a hyperlink.

Hyperlink is the simplest level of interactivity, which allows users to move from point to point within the same page, within the same site or to external sites and pages. Online newspapers offer choice not only in content but also in various outlets across a variety of platforms.

In order to understand the impact of new media on journalism, it is also important to look at the transformation of storytelling, new tools for newsgathering, redefined audiences, removed boundaries and reinvented relationships. These interactive features of online journalism will allow new relationships transforming from one-way discourse to a dialogue that in democracy will be better served (Pavlik 2001).

Pavlik's (1996: 135) definition of interactivity as "a process of reciprocal influence" is crucial in order to comprehend the online newspapers' characteristics that make possible multiple-flow of communication become real. Because the Internet provides a wider range of communication flow than that provided by any other medium, interactivity differentiates online journalism from its traditional forms and has created new/restructured relationships not just between the journalist and the user but also amongst the users. The characteristics of online journalism propose an immediacy that traditional journalism means cannot compete in diversity, expansion, quality and context. In Deuze's (1999: 377) perspective, there are three keywords in the debate between traditional media and the Internet: Interactivity, personalization and convergence. This study tends to absorb convergence and personalization into interactivity, since Deuze convert them together in his later article.

According to Deuze (2003) interactive options can be divided into three categories: *Navigational* interactivity that allows the user navigates through buttons etc.; *functional* interactivity that allows the

user/reader be a part of production process as a participant via weblogs, e-mail links, and bulletin boards; and *adaptive* options such as chat rooms and personalization of the site.

Massey and Levy (1999), on the other hand, conceptualized interactivity in four dimensions for online newspapers. They examined the complexity of choices available, responsiveness to the user, ease of adding information, facilitation of interpersonal communication in terms of a general immediacy rule. Their categorization has guided other researchers in order to understand the users' online interactivity behavior. For example, Salwen et al. (2005) found out while the majority of participants (%89.1) get their news online, they did little interacting (%12.6) through posting to the message boards or joining the chat rooms.

In control dimension, since most people who access Internet are interested in finding specific information, the fast and efficient way for people to find what they want is by using a search function. Furthermore 'e-mail to the article' function helps out to stay connected with others.

Providing a facility that allows users to e-mail the reporter, editor or the writer of an article in relation to the story increases responsive interactivity putting pressure on the journalist to be more accountable for their work. Bulletin boards allow the user to interact with other users exchanging comments and criticisms. Providing a chat room encourages users to engage in discussion about the topic and can provide the journalism for a further story, allows 'public journalism' outlets work and gathers the users. All these are the reflections of exchange facility that Internet makes possible. If a user can move easily around the newspaper and its archive without much effort or wait in download time (speed dimension), he/she will feel more connected with the medium.

Through information collection dimension, log-in, counter or polls functions allow the user to feel being a part of an audience. Personalization options of online newspapers range from choosing topics and headlines, getting newsletters and alerts/updates via e-mail, getting specific community information (local weather, theater schedules etc.), greeted by the site to event calendars.

There are a significant number of researches with contradictory findings on online newspapers' use of the web's interactive capabilities: Boczkowski (2004) verifies that his case study of 'Community Connection' website "illustrates the new horizon opened by turning users into co-producers" (p.153), in contrast, findings of other studies reveal the lack of interactivity in practice (e.g. Oblak 2005, Kenney et al. 2000, Massey and Levy 1999, Schultz 1999). Deuze (2003) explains this failure of attempted interactivity by how much the new ways of storytelling is dependent on newsroom's perception of 'public'.

The key assumptions that facilitated the formulation of the research questions are as follows: (1) participants take an active role to benefit from the communication, (2) participants act and react to messages via two-way and multi-dimensional communication, (3) timing of communication is flexible and responsive to demands of participants, and (4) communication environment creates a sense of place.

Research questions

Interactivity is conceptualized as the process by which the reader can exercise control over the form and content of the mediated setting through some potential instruments that the new media allow.

Through their engagement in this process, readers are transformed from passive audience to active participants. Therefore following this conceptualization, research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ 1. What is the level of control available to users of the websites?

RQ 2. What is the level of exchange available to users of the website?

RQ 3. To what extent are the websites collecting information?

RQ 4. To what extent are the websites utilizing personalization/customization features?

METHOD

The research on the communication capabilities of the new media such as e-mail, chat rooms, which are unique to the Internet (Jones 1999). In terms of data gathering and methodology, the study examines online newspapers and news portals by using content analysis. The unit of analysis was the entire newspaper website, beginning at the 'home page'. The names and URLs of newspapers and portals in Turkey were gathered from the lists from Office of the Prime Minister, Directorate of General of Press and Information's web site (<http://www.byegm.gov.tr>) and Ankara University Communication Faculty's web site (<http://ilef.ankara.edu.tr>). Based on the criteria having a valid (active or online) website, the final data set included 28 online newspapers (one in English language) and 12 news portals.

Each site was coded only one time for the presence or absence of various types of features like e-mail links, electronic bulletin boards and forums, polls, and personalization options etc. The authors, who were the coders, were already proficient in using the Internet. After resolving some initial coding problems, inter-coder reliability was over .85, a widely accepted threshold (Poindexter and McCombs 1999). Although advertisement content might have indicated some interactive features, since journalistic tools are under question, only the news content of the web pages were examined.

While eight out of twelve news portals were online-only portals, the other four were online versions of thematic news television channels. They were all included in the online-only category as opposed to 28 online versions of daily print-newspapers. All these newspapers were also categorized in terms of their circulations and ownership patterns (as being chain/affiliated or independent). In terms of the circulation, four categories were made; but the interval of these categories was not equal (<200.000; 100.000-200.000; 10.000-100.000; >10.000) in order to be able to manage the data and have an operational analysis.

FINDINGS

A brief review of descriptive findings will be provided context for review of the research questions in the order of user control, exchange, information collection and personalization dimensions.

In order to pursue the interactivity options in user control dimension, two variables were considered. Search function and 'e-mail article to a friend' function were observed. As it is shown in the Table 1, while in almost all websites either internal or both internal and external search function was available, 25 out of 40 websites had the 'e-mail article to a friend' feature.

Table 1: Interactive features of user control dimension

Dimension	Interactive Features	Frequency (n=40)
User control	Search (total)	37
	Internal only	27
	Both internal and external	10
	E-mail article to a friend	25

Internal search links sometimes appeared only as a search box at the home page, sometimes it was a whole new page with advanced search options, such as in writers, in dates or in supplements, e.g. *Radikal* daily. Google.com was the main provider of all external search links. For the 'e-mail article to a friend' option, it was generally a mere icon at the end of the article, instead of the phrase itself. As it will become more apparent later, these two features especially search function, are the most common interactive options provided by online newspapers and portals.

To measure the extent of use of the exchange dimension, eight variables were observed: presence of list of staff e-mails, e-mail links to the reporter, e-mail link to the writer of the article, question and answer options, message boards, chat rooms, feedback option at the end of article, letters-to-the-editor.

Table 2 presents the frequencies of these options of exchange. The list of newsroom staff's e-mails included only the editors'. 31 out of 40 sites had provided e-mail links to their newsrooms. In some sites, although there were not any e-mail links (9 of 40), the mere lists without the links were observed. Some had e-mail addresses of the advertising and technical departments.

Apart from a general e-mail address list, a majority (34 out of 40) of the sites provided e-mail links to the writer of an article or an editorial. While it creates a simulation of a great deal of exchange, still it was not found a significant number of e-mail links to the reporter. Only three sites, *Referans*, *NTVMSNBC* and *BIANET* seemed to have that feature.

Facilitations of interpersonal communication were observed at one-fourth of the online news websites in terms of employing bulletin boards and forums. Most of them did not need any kind of registration, while to be able to reach *Cumhuriyet's* forums as well as the newspaper itself, it was necessary to have subscription. On the other hand, only two sites offered synchronous chat option, namely *Hurriyet* and *ObjektifHaber*. 39 out of 40 sites did not offer 'question and answer' (QandA) feature at all. The only online newspaper offered the QandA was *Yeni Safak*.

Although 12 web sites (4 portals, 8 newspapers) offered the option of writing feedbacks at the end of an article or a news piece, feedbacks written by users were observed only in top stories of *Hurriyet*, *Radikal* and *InternetHaber* (consecutively 16, 8 and 25 feedbacks). It is important to note that in this study, websites were observed only for one time (except reliability observations). So the numbers of feedbacks are relative according to the observation and the stories.

Table 2: Use of interactive features in the exchange dimension

Dimension	Interactive Features	Frequency (N=40)
Exchange	List of newsroom staff e-mails	31
	No links	9
	Limited	20
	All staff (as in all editors)	11
	E-mail link to the writer of an article	34
	E-mail link to the reporter	3
	Letters to the editor	26
	Feedback function at the end of article	12
	QandA	1
	Bulletin boards, forums	11
Chat	2	

In exchange dimension, although letters-to-the-editor feature was found in twenty-six sites, only *Hurriyet*, *Milliyet* and *Vakit* displayed those letters.

Finally, one might expect to find a more rich scheme in exchange dimension since the Internet has evolved exponentially. Yet one has to search for some interactive options with a magnifier, for example daily *Dunya* provides more than 50 non-moderated forums with a basic log-in.

To determine the amount of interactivity found in the information collection dimension, three variables were observed: log-in, polls and counter. These features seem to provide an organic relationship between the user/reader and the producers/journalists of online newspapers.

Sixteen of forty websites supported polls, usually on their front pages (Table 3). While some were related to the political agenda and some dealt with entertainment and sports, a few basically aimed to gather information about the user. While some polls provided the preference to check the results, some did not. Coders voted more than one time to check the reliability of these polls. Because each vote is added to statistics and the site did not differentiate the computer, the polls lacked reliability.

Full log-in was required to view all articles in *Dunya* and both articles and news in *Turkish Daily News*. In addition, *Cumhuriyet* and *Birgun* required subscription to access the online versions of newspapers. Both newspapers were independent in terms of ownership (not affiliated or a part of chain) and explained the need for subscription with their ownership status.

The counters that collect information about the number of users/visitors were checked. Seven out of forty websites had counter display. All counters were for a specific news piece.

Table 3: Interactive features of information collection dimension

Dimension	Interactive Features	Frequency (N=40)
Information collection	Log-in	11
	Partial	7
	Full	2
	Subscription	2
	Polls	16
	Counter	7

These measures are important to get information about the user and tendencies for further steps such as personalization options or designing the site through that information.

Although the options mentioned above widely provide the possibility to personalize the online newspapers and portals, the websites observed did not employ this feature. Personalization was observed as choosing topics and headlines, getting newsletters and alerts/updates via e-mail, getting specific community information (local weather, theater schedules etc.), greeted by the site and event calendars. None of the sites provided specific community information or event calendar at all. Five out of forty websites had the option of e-mail alerts; two sites allowed users to share their profile with others; four sites greeted the user by their names; and eleven websites had the option of log-in. These interactive features were apparently ignored by the majority of online newspapers and portals.

Table 4 summarizes the relationship between the circulation of print versions of online newspapers and interactive options they provide.

Table 4: Newspaper size (circulation of print edition) predicting availability of some interactive features

Circulation of the print version	E-mail article to friend	List of newsroom staff e-mail (both limited and all)	E-mail link to the writer	Letters to the editor	Feedback function at the end of article	Q and A function available	BBS available	Chat available	Total
<200.000 (n=8)	5	5	8	6	4	-	2	1	31
100.000-200.000 (n=5)	1	3	5	4	1	1	2	-	17
10.000-100.000 (n=7)	6	7	7	5	2	-	2	-	29
>10.000 (n=8)	4	8	5	2	1	-	2	-	22
Total (N=28)	16	23	25	17	8	1	8	1	

Through the distribution of interactive options according to circulation categories, it seemed that the first and the third categories provided the most options. While the third category represents mostly (10.000-100.000) independent newspapers, the category of <200.000 contained most of the chain/affiliated papers.

CONCLUSION

Since the Internet has almost unlimited space to provide reportorial depth, texture, and context, which are relatively less available in other medium, it offers a variety of new options for transforming journalism. Some of the online newspapers analyzed in this study offer original material designed specifically for the web: *BIANET* publishes a great deal of photojournalism samples; one can find English versions of daily news available only online; or financial information updates such as stock exchange reports and/or currency converter. But generally, very few of the features that the Net provides were observed in the online newspapers and portals in Turkey.

The components of interactivity that some researchers pointed out as hypertextuality (Oblak 2005), sense of place (Downes and McMillan 2000), interpersonal communication in mediated environments (Rafaeli 1988) and user control (Jensen 1998) were observed in online newspapers and news portals in Turkey only to a limited extent. Bulletin boards, forums and chat option were observed only in two websites. In terms of exchange options, 26 sites offer a link to letters to the editor, but a few of the sites displayed them to share with other users. Furthermore, the fact that only three websites offered 'e-mail to the reporter' feature begs the question whether they gather news from centralized news agencies and other sources, or from their own reporters.

Following Deuze's (2003) interactivity definition, it was observed that hyperlinks that forward both to other pages of the site and to other websites provided navigational interactivity, mostly linking to the ads, search engines or lottery results apart from the news and articles. While some features were observed in terms of functional interactivity, a few of the adoptive options, such as chat rooms, were available.

Personalization dimension of interactivity is one of the major features of Internet that challenges traditional journalism practices. Through personalization dimension, users can feel themselves as a part of community and share their experiences with others. However, the findings of this study show that it was the least employed option in online newspapers.

Many of the online newspaper sites simply transplant articles from their print counterparts onto the web page. Schultz's (2000: 209) statement about the online newspapers during the early years of Internet still seems to hold for the current situation in Turkey: "In fact, ...online newspapers produce just an illusion of interactivity was not mere invention. A lot of newspapers simply put the content of their print edition online and made little effort to take interactive options seriously".

In their research of English-language websites in Asia, Massey and Levy (1999) found out that only 20 percent carried exchange links whereas 61 percent supported message boards and 35 percent had question and answer links. In another study, Schultz (1999) found out a larger percentage of exchange links (%44) in the case of US online newspapers. Contrary to Massey and Levy's and Schultz's findings, only one online newspaper in Turkey had question and answer option and 31 of 40 sites had exchange links. Most of the online newspapers in Turkey did not even provide e-mail addresses linking their editors or reporters. Although counters are widely observed in personal homepages (Chung 2004), the number of counters used in online newspapers and news portals in Turkey were limited.

The studies by Massey and Levy and Schultz were conducted five years ago. Considering the fact that the websites has evolved since then, one would expect that they provide more interactive features

today. However, online newspapers' chase for interactivity in Turkey is not very promising. Online journalism's opportunities of procedural and participatory experiences (Pavlik 2001) were not observed in online newspapers and news portals in Turkey.

The problematic of how interactivity presupposes Internet to gather communities in this mediated environment is one of the most important questions of all. However, based on the findings of this study, it is not possible to argue that the reader can exercise control over the form and content of the mediated setting. This study does not explain or analyze the actual feedback options and how much they are employed or used by the editors, journalists and the producers of the web sites. Thus, further researches on what users do with the available interactive features will help understand how these features may affect societal dynamics.

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