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Participatory Uses of Comment Sections on SPIEGEL ONLINE:
A Content Analysis

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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Participatory Uses of Comment Sections on SPIEGEL ONLINE: A Content Analysis

Eilika Freund

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the opportunities for user participation in the news media facilitated by so called Web 2.0. In particular interactivity is a heavily discussed buzzword. The debate concerns the potential of user participation for opening up new ways of democratic participation and a reconfiguration of the relationship between media producers and consumers. While a lot of research has examined, from a top-down perspective, how user participation affects journalistic work routines, far less is known about the practices of users. A common, but under-researched feature of many news websites that invites users' contributions, are article comment sections. The objective of this dissertation project was therefore to explore in what ways people make use of the participatory potential of comment sections.

The research question was approached using a content analysis designed to record the intentions and the level of interaction of a sample of 2385 user comments on articles in the politics section of SPIEGEL ONLINE, a popular German online news website. The results show that although the communicative setting of comment sections is in principle interactive, most comments are declarative, i.e. commentators neither react to nor interact with others. Widespread claims about interactive media should thus be treated cautiously since the technological potential of interactivity does not necessarily yield social interaction. Moreover, the findings reveal that most participants use comments to express their views on the issues of news stories and criticise political actors rather than to evaluate the articles' authors. This suggests that user comment sections are primarily valued for providing access to public political discourse and only to a much lesser extent as sites of a critical engagement with journalism.

INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENON OF USER COMMENTS

'The dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication, and societal communication increasingly takes place within the mass media'
(Dahlgren, 1995: 2).

News media are crucial players in contemporary mass democracies. In an age when it is for the most part unfeasible for citizens and their representatives to communicate with each other in face-to-face settings, there is an indispensable need for mediation (Thompson, 1995; Dahlgren, 1995, 2001; Bennett and Entman, 2001).

Until recently, there was a clear separation of news production and consumption. On the one hand, there were journalists collecting, editing and publishing facts about political events. On the other hand, there was an audience who subsequently consumed those journalistic products. As audience research made us aware of, this process of consumption is by no means a passive one, with recipients just absorbing what they read, watch or listen to, but rather an active process of meaning-making (Hall, 1980 [1973]; Morley, 1980; Graber, 1984; Livingstone, 1998). Still, traditional media consumers remain largely inactive with regard to the production side.

Recent technological developments within the media and communications sector, in particular the evolution of a new generation of internet applications termed Web 2.0¹, have challenged this strongly asymmetrical relationship. In various ways, media users are now invited to take part in the news process (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001; Deuze, *et al.*, 2007; Paulussen, *et al.*, 2007; Neuberger, 2006; Beckett, 2008). Certainly, compared to many citizen journalism projects that have emerged in recent years - such as Indymedia or OhmyNews - the online presences of traditional media organisations usually offer only a limited range of participatory features (Domingo, *et al.*, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman, 2008). However, there are unquestionably much more opportunities for user participation than in their offline outlets.

A very common feature are comment sections, where users are invited to post a comment on the piece of news they have just read. Indeed, user comments can be found on the websites of broadcast and print, tabloid and quality, Western and Eastern, media organisations, such as *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *BILD*, *Times of India*, and *Al-Jazeera*. Some threads comprise of thousands of posts.

Although there is often some form of moderation to avoid offensive or otherwise inappropriate posts (e.g. Thurman, 2008), there is less need for editorial selection since the online space available for comments is in principle unlimited. Thus, comments sections offer an open platform where a large number of media users can have their say on the news. Unlike, other forms of audience feedback such as letters to the editor, user comments appear immediately² and are directly attached to the story they engage with, attributing them a certain prominence and facilitating attention. Moreover, reader comments constitute ‘a novel variety of asynchronous computer-mediated communication’ (Abdul-Mageeb, 2008: 59) since they can also be used for communication between users. Therefore, comment sections can be regarded as hybrid constructs, supporting both vertical (user-to-article) and horizontal (user-to-user) communication.

Despite their prevalence and interesting characteristics, user comments have been largely ignored by current research on user participation in online news media. To date there are only two studies dealing with them specifically (Abdul-Mageeb, 2008; Singer, 2009). This neglect is in line with the fact that there is a general lack of studies on online journalism from the perspective of media users. The few which exist are for the most part concerned with examining users’ attitudes towards participation in the media on a more general level (e.g. Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Bergström, 2008; Chung, 2008). Overall, they find little interest in actively contributing to the news or engaging with other users. Yet, only rarely researchers have explored in what ways those people who *are* interested in participation make use of specific features (e.g. Schultz, 1999; Light and Rogers, 2001). Therefore, by examining the use of comment sections this study seeks to make a relevant contribution to a better understanding of media participation practices.

This paper starts with reviewing theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between media, in particular journalistic media, and participation. Based on this review, it is argued that the concept of media participation can be interpreted in two ideal-typical ways: as participation *in* the media and participation *through* the media, as similarly suggested by Carpentier (2007b). User comments are considered as, in principle, providing a communicative space for both. In addition, the term ‘interactivity’ is discussed in order to develop an analytical framework for the examination of the interactional dimension of user comments. Moreover, it will be outlined what research so far has concluded about interactive features and user participation on online news websites, to go on to present the research

¹ For a discussion of the term see the paper by its originator O’Reilly (2005).

² Sometimes posts are delayed by pre-moderation.

design and the results of a content analytical study of user comments in the politics section of SPIEGEL ONLINE, a popular German news website. The study focuses on the kinds of intentions users have when posting a comment, as well as the interaction among commentators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review provides the context for the examination of the use of comment sections. It works out how the academic debate about the relationship of media and participation developed, and critically discusses the controversy between media effects and constructionist approaches. The latter is the starting point for the development of a two-dimensional conceptualisation of media participation. Together with the concept of interactivity, which will also be discussed in the review, this will inform the subsequent empirical study.

Classic Participation Research

Research on political participation has a long history. In political science and sociology there is a large body of literature dealing with this issue (e.g. Milbrath, 1965, Verba, *et al.*, 1971, 1978; Parry, 1972; Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). Starting in the 1960s, researchers have examined theoretically and empirically how so-called ‘ordinary citizens’ come to take part in politics. Though the exact definitions of what constitutes political participation vary, most are quite similar to the one given by Kaase and Marsh (1979) who state that political participation comprises ‘all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system’ (42).

Yet, what exactly constitutes a participatory activity is contested. In particular, there is dissent regarding the significance of *influence*. Is the intention to exert influence a necessary condition for an act to be considered participatory? Some scholars argue that what matters most is that people are *involved* in politics, in both thinking and action (e.g. Milbrath, 1965). Striving for influence can then follow from that, but it should not be essential for citizens’ actions to be considered participatory.

Consequently, the disagreement about the fundamental ‘meaning of democratic participation’ (Schonfeld, 1975: 134) is reflected in different specifications as to what constitutes an act of political participation. The most common ones, however, include: running for or holding a public office, being member of a political organisation, working in an

election campaign, attending political events, contacting public officials, voting, publicly expressing a political opinion to convince others, partaking in political discussions, and exposing oneself to political stimuli (Schonfeld, 1975). Some scholars further include so called ‘unconventional’ forms of participation such as demonstrating or boycotting (e.g. Marsh and Kaase, 1979). Though many of those activities are essentially communicative, they are generally understood as non-mediated, thus taking place in face-to-face contexts. Media are at best involved as sources of ‘political stimuli’.

The Media-Participation Link

Attention to the role of media in citizens’ participation in public life emerged in the 1990s when Robert Putnam identified television as the ‘culprit’ for declining civic engagement³ (Putnam, 1995: 677; cf. also Putnam, 2000). He claimed that the consumption of ‘electronic entertainment’ was successfully competing for the scarce leisure time of citizens that could otherwise be used for participatory activities. Furthermore, he blamed it for having general detrimental psychological effects like increased lethargy and passivity which would undermine ‘civic motivation’ (Putnam, 2000: 237). Similar media-critical arguments have for example been put forward by Gerbner (1994).

This ‘media malaise’⁴ thesis was challenged by the work of Pippa Norris and her colleagues. According to their evidence, following the news media encourages rather than discourages people to participate in politics (Norris, *et al.*, 1999; Norris, 2000; Norris and Inglehart 2009). Precisely, the ‘virtuous circle’ thesis which was developed based on these empirical findings says that media effects interact with the prior political involvement of citizens: those who are already quite engaged attend the news more often which will in turn reinforce their engagement, whereas people who are not interested in politics are likely to ignore political information altogether. Thus, Norris concludes, attention to the news media has either positive or neutral effects on democratic participation, but by no means negative ones.

Yet, whether Norris’ and similar findings constitute a direct challenge to the media malaise thesis is debatable. The effects of exposing oneself to ‘electronic entertainment’ may just not be the same as those of news. While both sides of the controversy claim to examine the consequences of ‘media consumption’ for political participation, in fact, they deal with different forms of *media content*. A study of Shah *et al.* (2001), for example, concludes that

³ Civic engagement in his account is understood in a broad sense including attending political rallies, membership in parties but also in various non-political voluntary organisations.

⁴ The term was first suggested by Robinson (1976).

instead of overall use it is indeed the specific content (information- versus entertainment-oriented) which matters for participation.

From Media Effects to Mediated Participation

The studies just mentioned are, however, subject to fundamental criticism from a ‘culturalist’ (Dahlgren, 2009) or also called ‘constructionist’ (Street, 2005) perspective. The thrust of this criticism is that media were introduced into the participation debate in a too simplistic way. It is argued that many scholars falsely consider media as ‘instrumental intermediaries’ (Street, 2005: 23) between citizens and the political system, which ideally should transmit accurate, factual political information. Depending on whether this task is performed successfully, media consumption is thought to have more or less beneficial consequences for democratic participation. In short, from the perspective of both Putnam, Norris and their followers, citizens receive certain political stimuli through the media ‘that will in turn influence how they interact with politics behaviorally’ (Jones, 2006: 370).

This *media effects model* has been criticised for misconceiving the fundamentally mediated nature of contemporary social and political life. From a constructivist point of view, scholars argue that media do not simply depict and report on the political process, but that they are themselves a constitutive part of it (Bennett and Entman, 2001; Dahlgren, 2001). As media become increasingly abundant, politics is ‘largely a mediated experience’ (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001: 161), and ‘daily citizen engagement with politics is more frequently textual than organizational or “participatory” in any traditional sense’ (Jones, 2006: 378). Media consumption in this view is not understood according to a stimulus-response model, but rather as an active cognitive process of making sense of politics. In the sense of political involvement as discussed above, it is considered a participatory act in its own right.

Moreover, with the advent of interactive communication technologies, media can become ‘potential civic communicative spaces’ where citizens can get in touch and interact both with each other and with public officials in a despatialised way (Dahlgren, 2009: 115). This adds a new quality to mediated politics. Media are no longer ‘only’ sites of meaning-making but also make ‘direct political action available to citizens *through* [them]’ (Jones, 2006: 379). Bucy and Gregson (2001) call this the ‘new media use as political participation argument’ (358). Indeed, the range of participatory activities that can be exercised by means of interactive media and communication technologies includes almost all forms of ‘classic’ political participation as defined by the social science literature discussed above, such as campaigning, contacting politicians and joining political discussion (Bucy and Gregson, 2001). In addition,

new ways of political action are emerging, such as various forms of internet activism (Meikle, 2002; Bennett, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2004). Yet, mediated political participation is older than the internet, although it unquestionably opened up unforeseen opportunities. Interactive media formats like talk radio or call-in television shows much earlier already carried a similar participatory potential (Bucy and Gregson, 2001).

Excursus on Interactivity

At this point, a brief discussion of the term interactivity seems to be advisable as it is often used in a multitude of different ways (Kioussis, 2002; Neuberger, 2007). One of the main distinctions that can be found in the literature is between medium interactivity and human interactivity (e.g. Bucy, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2004; Chung, 2007, 2008). Medium interactivity is defined as ‘interactive communication *between users and technology*’, which occurs through features like the customisation or search functions of websites. Human interactivity, in contrast, is a specific form of ‘communication *between two or more users*’ (Chung, 2008: 660, emphasis added). In the present context of participation, that is, a genuinely social phenomenon, the focus is on the latter. Yet, the very broad definition given by Chung needs to be substantiated.

The significance of the concept of interactivity for an exploration of media participation is that it ‘directs our focus to ... the bridge between mass and interpersonal communication’ (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997: n.p.). Interactivity is exactly what is usually absent in one-to-many mass communication settings: neither senders and receivers of messages interact, nor receivers amongst each other. Both is, in principle, possible with the interactive communication technologies and media formats discussed above.

Yet, the adjective ‘interactive’ is ambiguous: it is commonly used to describe, on the one hand, a characteristic of *communication* and, on the other hand, a characteristic of *communication technology*. Neuberger (2007) tries to resolve this ambiguity on the level of the corresponding nouns. He suggests a terminological differentiation between *interaction* as a particular communicative, social process, and *interactivity* as the potential of interaction. Interaction, in turn, is defined by Neuberger drawing on Rafaeli’s (1988) conceptualisation of interactivity⁵ as ‘extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later)

⁵ Neuberger uses Rafaeli’s definition of *interactivity* to describe his understanding of *interaction*. Thus, though they agree on what constitutes ‘interactive communication’, Rafaeli terms this characteristic ‘interactivity’ and Neuberger ‘interaction’. The present study adopts the distinction by Neuberger since it allows a more precise distinction between technological potential and communicative process.

transmission is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions' (Rafaeli, 1988: 11, cited in Neuberger, 2007: 38). This means that interactive communication is characterised by an exchange of messages that exceeds reaction. Communicators not only receive an answer but also in turn give a response. To technologically enable communicative interactions of this kind across space and time, is what distinguishes interactive media and communications technologies.

Media as Objects of Participation

Interactivity not only offers new opportunities for participation *through* the media, but also for participation *in* the media (Carpentier, 2007b). While up to now the focus has been on media as *means* of participatory action, the following section argues that they likewise can be the *end*. In an age when politics and political participation are of an essentially mediated nature, as discussed above, the main actors of mediation, the mediators, come under scrutiny.

Since they are our main 'windows onto the world' (Couldry, 2001: 168), media organisations possess a large amount of what Thompson (1995) terms symbolic power: 'the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms' (17). Indeed, media play a crucial role in constructing what we perceive as social reality (Couldry, 2001; 2003). This applies in particular to the domain of journalism, which will be the focus of the remaining sections of this review. As the institutionalised set of practices within the larger media system that is concerned with the selection, production, editing and distribution of news about current events (Barnhurst and Owens, 2008; Domingo, *et al.*, 2008) it is of special importance for the construction of social, and political, reality.⁶ The media's, and specifically journalists', position is particularly powerful since many people accept media representations as legitimate 'sources of truth about the social' and, one may add, the political, without questioning or even recognising the active mediating intervention of media professionals (Couldry, 2001: 161).⁷

⁶ However, scholars have argued that non-journalistic media play an important role in the construction of social and political reality as well (e.g. Jones, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005).

⁷ It needs to be emphasised that this is not to be confused with claims about media effects. While researchers in the effects paradigm deal with the impact of specific media content, Couldry is concerned with the general role of media institutions in our perception of reality.

Yet, this is certainly not true for everyone, and there have, moreover, been significant changes in recent times. Driven by technological and social change, media users are increasingly becoming more critical and active. It has been argued that, as a consequence of general social processes such as individualisation and secularisation, people are increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional paternalistic relationship of journalists and their audience (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001). More and more, the work of media professionals is scrutinised and criticised. This self-liberation of the audience (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001), moreover, has been facilitated and reinforced by the proliferation of digital and mobile communication technologies, in particular the so called Web 2.0, which allow individuals to produce and distribute content themselves and circumvent the established institutional structures (Beckett, 2008).

The new forms of journalism that emerge from these developments can roughly be divided into *citizen journalism*, on the one hand, and *participatory journalism*, on the other hand. In the first model, non-professionals are responsible for all stages of news production, from news gathering to distribution. This might take the form of a news website, blog or community radio station run for example by a group of individuals or a non-profit organisation (Nip, 2006). It is often also discussed under the label of 'alternative media' (Atton, 2002; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Waltz, 2005). Participatory journalism, on the other hand, is characterised by the cooperation of professionals and non-professionals. Yet, the relationship between them is usually hierarchical rather than equal. Journalists usually set the rules and invite users to participate in their professional work (Nip, 2006).

Hence, this is where the concept of participation comes in. While citizen journalism can certainly also be understood as participatory in the sense that people create their own devices of participating in the media system, the term 'participatory journalism' is still mostly reserved for the latter case. This is presumably because participation in the media context is understood in analogy to the political meaning of the term: as participation in a vital social institution run by - political or media - professionals *on behalf of* ordinary citizens or users.⁸ In both cases the crucial issue is a struggle of those on the bottom for influence on those on top. It is about power struggles (Carpentier, 2007a; Carpentier and De Cleen, 2008). Thus, in the same way that engaged citizens intend to have their say in politics (through the media or not), they might also want to take part in the way political issues are represented in the media.

Empirical Findings on Media Participation

Unfortunately, most empirical studies on participatory aspects of interactive, thus primarily online, media that have been conducted in recent years do not explicitly spell out their conceptual understanding of participation. As researchers are for the most part concerned with developments in journalism, it can be assumed, however, that most are, at least implicitly, dealing with media participation in the second sense of participation *in* the media. The main intent of the earliest studies of participation in online journalism in the late nineties was to develop some kind of inventory of the new interactive features available to users (e.g. Neuberger, *et al.*, 1997; Werner, 1997; Schultz, 1999; Kenney, *et al.*, 2000; Loosen and Weischenberger, 2000). All of them found that the examined news websites offered only a limited number of opportunities for user participation, and concluded that the technological potential of interactivity and participation was not (yet) realised. More recent studies (e.g. Gerpott, 2004; Rosenberry, 2005; Roth, 2005; Thurman, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008) come to quite similar conclusions.⁹

Moreover, as a multinational study of news websites found, if the position of participatory features within the whole news production process is taken into consideration, only the final stage of news interpretation is significantly open to user participation (Domingo, *et al.*, 2008). Basically, this means that all that users usually can do is to react to professionally produced content. Article comment functions are among the most frequent features (Domingo, *et al.*, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman, 2008). Only very rarely are users allowed to produce original content or participate in the selection or editing of news. In most cases, professional journalists keep their traditional role as gatekeepers of public communication (Paulussen, *et al.*, 2007; Domingo, *et al.*, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman, 2008).

In support of these findings, various interview, survey and ethnographic studies conclude that in most newsrooms the interaction with users is only of minor significance. The observed journalists commonly regarded opportunities for user participation as some extra feature, offered to attract attention and generate brand loyalty rather than as a step towards a

⁸ This analogy is unquestionably imperfect, in particular since the media system is in most cases a commercial one. Yet, I would argue, the analogy still makes sense.

⁹ However, it has to be taken into account that overall the *range* of participatory features has broadened due to technological progress (e.g. blogs did not exist yet in the nineties) so that it can be reasonably assumed that the *absolute* number of opportunities for user participation has increased. Unfortunately, longitudinal research that could provide an empirical basis for this assumption is lacking.

fundamentally new relationship with their audience (e.g. Neuberger, 2000; Löffelholz, *et al.*, 2003; Quandt, 2005; Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008).

Other researchers, yet considerably fewer, have examined participation in journalism from the perspective of users: One of the basic questions from this point of view is the extent to which people are interested in participating at all. The few survey studies which examined this issue found that overall there is little general interest in an active contribution to journalistic work or in interaction with other media users (Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Bergström, 2008; Chung, 2008). Thus, not only journalists prefer to maintain the traditional asymmetrical relationship between news producers and consumers, but also most media users continue to consider themselves as 'spectators' rather than active participants in the news process (Bergström, 2008: 69). Examining young Finns' use of different types of media participatory activities, Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004) found that the interactive features used most frequently are those that can best be characterised as entertaining, such as quizzes and polls. The other two activity types which roughly correspond to participation *in* and participation *through* the media¹⁰, as explicated above, are considerably less popular. However, the generalisability of all of these findings is rather limited as they are based on specific cases (Sweden, Finish adolescents, and one US online newspaper).

Furthermore, as Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004) emphasise, the *type of activity* users participate in does not 'automatically reveal their motivation for such participation' (399) and the meaning they attribute to their action. Commenting on an article might for example be driven by a commentator's dissatisfaction with a certain policy an article reports on, while another one is concerned with the way the policy is evaluated by the journalists.

Therefore, to gain more in-depth insights into the ways people make use and sense of the opportunities available to them, there is need for *micro studies* of the usage of concrete participatory features. To date there are just a few: In their survey of users of the *Guardian's* 1998 election discussion website, Light and Rogers (1999) found that 'putting one's opinion' was the most common reason for participating, followed at some distance by 'disagreeing with a previous post'. From these findings the researchers conclude that most people view media participation in light of a 'traditional publishing model' rather than a new model of 'inter-visitor debate' (n.p.). The sheer technological possibility of interaction is not sufficient to make people interact, they argue.

¹⁰ Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004: 394ff) distinguish between 'voicing one's opinion' on current events, and 'commenting on journalism' (including the suggestion of story topics and sending questions to journalists).

In contrast, Schultz' (2000) study of *New York Times* discussion forums found a 'mostly interactive' and 'usually highly political and energetic' debate among participants (215). Yet, the discussion tended to be dominated by a few highly active 'hobbyists', which discouraged other users from participating. Similar concerns about an uneven distribution of users' contributions were also raised in Singer's (2009) more recent content analytical study of reader comments on the *Scotsman.com* 2007 election website. Furthermore, she found a large portion of posts that reacted to previous posts, indicating, like Schultz' findings, that a model of mediated discussion might be about to emerge. As discussed above, it could be argued, however, that *reaction* is only the first step towards a genuine *interactive* exchange of messages, which was not accounted for in Singer's study.

Regarding the issue of intentions, Singer examined the 'subjects' of a comment. She found that most posts generally referred to the issues of the Scottish election and only about 10% had a media reference. Thus, she concludes that reader comments sections are primarily used as a 'springboard' for conversations with other users (492). The relationship between users and journalists, participation *in* the media, is obviously less important as indicated by the small share of media references and the almost absent participation of journalists in the discussions.

The validity of these conclusions is, however, debatable since only the subject of comments was coded and not their intentions. What is more, both Singer's and Light and Roger's study examined media participation in the specific context of elections, which might distort the results. Thus, to gain broader insights into the use of participatory features, it is necessary to study them across different topics.

RESESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

All in all, as this literature review shows, much has been thought and written about the participatory potential of new interactive (in particular online) media: the potential for new, mediated forms of political participation, and for participation in the media. Research on how and to what extent this potential is *realised* is needed to assess these claims. Yet, most studies take a top-down perspective and examine the attitudes and practices of journalists. Studies that look at how users make use, and sense, of the new opportunities for participation are rare and, moreover, often of limited generalisability. Hence, media scholars should increasingly turn their attention to this issue.

This dissertation project wants to contribute to a better knowledge of the user perspective of media participation by looking at the widespread feature of reader comment sections on news websites in one specific case: the popular German news website SPIEGEL ONLINE (<http://www.spiegel.de>). The focus will be both on the interactional and intentional dimension. It will be examined which intentions users have when posting a comment and to what extent they interact with other users in their commenting activity. Thus, it will be assessed how, if at all, both the *interactive* and the *participatory* potential are realised, the two main claims usually made about online journalism. As interaction can be treated as one specific form or *mode* of participation, the principal research question guiding this study is:

RQ: In what ways do people make use of the participatory potential of reader comment sections on the German news website SPIEGEL ONLINE?

This question can then be subdivided into an intentional and an interactional dimension:

Sub-RQ1: Which intentions do users have when posting a comment on an article?

Sub-RQ2: What is the level of interaction of users' comments?

The intentional dimension (Sub-RQ1) will be examined in light of what I will refer to as a *two-dimensional concept of media participation*. As shown in the literature review, media participation can, on the one hand, be understood as political participation through the media – or mediated political participation. On the other hand, the focus can be on the media themselves and not on the relationship of citizens to the political domain. This is the dimension of participation in the media, or in this context specifically in journalism. Both dimensions are certainly not mutually exclusive. To readopt the above example, a media user might indeed want to criticise the positive presentation of a policy in an article (meta level) and the policy itself (object level)¹¹ at the same. Ultimately, the two conceptualisations refer to different *layers* of public communication which are essentially inseparable. Therefore, I want to argue that participation *in* and *through* the media constitute two *ideal-typical interpretations* of the concept of media participation.¹² The crucial question underlying this study is thus exactly how this two-dimensional concept is interpreted and realised by media users.

¹¹ The terms 'meta level' (*Metaebene*) and 'object level' (*Objektebene*) were borrowed from Neuberger (2006: 69).

¹² Weber (1949 [1904]) argued that 'an ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view' according to which 'concrete individual phenomena are arranged into a unified analytical construct' (90).

The examination of the interactional dimension (Sub-RQ2) will be informed by Rafaeli's (1988), respectively Neuberger's (2007), conceptualisation of interactivity and interaction as discussed above. Interactive communication is understood as one end of a continuum of different levels of communicative interaction ranging from declarative (one-way) over reactive to interactive. Only communication that conforms to the last stage can, from this point of view, be considered as a reciprocal exchange of messages, a genuine conversation. It will be examined to what extent this is realised in the, *potentially* interactive, communicative spaces of reader comment sections.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodological Approach

For an empirical exploration of the ways in which people make use of the opportunity to comment on journalistic content, there are at least two starting points: users themselves, and the texts they produce. In the former case, a researcher, using interviews or a survey, can ask individuals directly for their motives for commenting and their interaction with others - an approach applied for example by Light and Rogers (1999) and Schultz (2000). Yet, the research data obtained in this way are self-reports only and must not necessarily be concordant with the actual activities of respondents. A text-based approach, in contrast, records naturally occurring data and thus avoids a bias towards 'socially acceptable answers' (Bauer, 2000). In addition, a more practical problem that impedes a direct inquiry of commentators is the fact that usually there is no possibility to contact users since most of them choose not to publish any personal information, not even e-mail addresses.

Therefore, this study, like Singer's (2009), takes the second starting point and examines commenting activities on the textual level. In general, the great advantage of this approach is that it enables the researcher to examine not isolated individuals but to set comments in the context of the article and the comment thread in which they occur - factors both of which might make a considerable difference for both intentions and interaction. The main disadvantage is, however, that it is impossible to relate comments' characteristics back to user attributes, such as gender or age, since they are usually unknown as well. Thus, ideally, one should try to bring together individual and textual level data to get the whole picture. However, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and for the practical reasons mentioned above, the textual approach was chosen as the most suitable starting point for this dissertation project.

Among the various methods of textual analysis, content analysis was selected as method of data collection for several reasons. First of all, as the main focus of the study is on two specific features of user comments, *intentions* and *interaction*, there is need for a method for their systematic identification. Content analysis as a 'technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages' (Holsti, 1969: 14) can be considered to serve this purpose well. Moreover, I am interested in analysing a sizeable number of comments attached to many different articles to be able to draw broader conclusions about reader comments as a specific participatory feature rather than about comments on a certain topic. Content analysis is a quite efficient method to deal with such large amounts of texts and allows for the detection of general patterns (Deacon, *et al.*, 1999). Lastly, it has to be emphasised that the ultimate purpose of content analysis as a method of data *collection* is statistical analysis: the coding procedure is not an end in itself but the 'accurate representation of a body of messages' (Hansen, *et al.*, 1998: 57) through quantitative variables serves a systematic descriptive exploration of its core characteristics and analyses of statistical significance (Deacon, *et al.*, 1999; Krippendorff, 2004).

Yet, the systematic character of the method also entails some drawbacks. While it allows the examination of a large breadth of material, it cannot go in-depth. Indeed, a quantitative content analysis must inevitably 'skate over complex and varied processes of meaning-making within a text' (Deacon, *et al.*, 1999: 117) which are not encompassed by the coding frame. Only those textual characteristics can be identified that were preconceived by the researcher. This limitation can, however, be accepted in the present study.

Furthermore, researchers disagree on whether content analytical studies can grasp only the manifest or also the latent level of a text's meaning. While, for example, Berelson (1952) emphasises that only the 'manifest content of communication' (18) can be recorded, others argue that this restriction is not stringently required. They state that it is impossible to exclude the interpretive moment in textual analysis by focussing only on what is observable directly, such as the frequency of certain words, since 'texts, messages, and symbols never speak for themselves' (Krippendorff, 2004: 25). Therefore, there can be no reading of a text that does not involve some form of interpretation, neither in everyday life nor in research contexts. Still, for content analytical studies it is more important to identify textual characteristics by a procedure which is in some way 'objectified by systematicity' (Bauer, 2000: 138) than it is for research using more strongly interpretive methods such as discourse analysis. I want to argue that the two main features of interest in the present context, intention and interaction, can be regarded as sufficiently 'tangible' to make them viable codes for content analysis. Moreover, the intersubjective comprehensibility of the codes was

ascertained by tests of intercoder reliability, which are at the heart of the method (Lombard, *et al.*, 2002) and, together with an appropriate selection of the sample data, the fundament for any claim about generalisability.

The Case: SPIEGEL ONLINE

This study looks at reader comments on articles in the politics section of SPIEGEL ONLINE (commonly referred to as SPON), a popular German news site. Launched on 25th October 1994 as the first online news magazine worldwide (Bönisch, 2004), the offshoot of the weekly news magazine DER SPIEGEL soon became a major player in German online journalism. Today, with 9.4 million unique users per months, it is the second most visited news site in Germany, seconded only by *bild.de*, the online outlet of Germany's leading tabloid (SPIEGEL QC, 2010a).

Most users of SPON are male (67%), middle-aged¹³ (66%), well-educated¹⁴ (58%) and have a job (72%) (SPIEGEL QC, 2010b). The news style of SPON is a characteristic mix of quality and tabloid, which is commonly put forward as both reason for its success and major source of criticism (Bönisch, 2004; Meyer-Lucht, 2004). Article comment sections can be accessed via a link below the article labelled 'We want your opinion: Discuss this article!'¹⁵, followed by a brief overview of the most recent comments. In addition, all comment threads are listed in a directory¹⁶, which was used for sampling.

Sampling

The sampling procedure comprised multiple stages. First, a time frame of four months (January-April 2010) was set to ensure a wide range of topics. Then, all articles in the politics section with an attached comment section were recorded, resulting in a sampling frame of about 900 articles. As the aim was to select 20 comments per thread, articles with less than 20 comments were excluded, cutting the sample roughly in half. Of the remaining items one article per day, i.e. a total of 120 articles, was randomly selected.¹⁷ The decision to further choose the first 20 comments on each of these articles, resulting in a final sample of 2400 comments, was based on the following rationale: To be able to record interaction in the

¹³ i.e. between 29 and 49

¹⁴ i.e. have at least a German university entrance qualification ('Abitur')

¹⁵ original text: 'Ihre Meinung ist gefragt! Diskutieren Sie über diesen Artikel!'

¹⁶ URL: <http://forum.spiegel.de/forumdisplay.php?f=22> [Last Consulted 1 June 2010]

comment threads, a sequential string of messages instead of a random selection has to be examined. Only the first 20 posts are definitely available in every thread. Moreover, a range of different intentions is, in principle, as likely to occur in the first posts as in later ones since the moment of posting is to a large extent determined by chance as it primarily depends on when he or she enters the site. Hence, the focus on the first 20 ranks seems to be justifiable in that respect, too. Of the 2400 sampled comments, 15 double posts (i.e. the same comments posted twice) were excluded. Thus, the final data base actually comprises 2385 individual comments.

Coding Scheme

The coding scheme consists of codes for the basic characteristics of the article a comment is attached to, i.e. date of publication, headline, and article type, as well as codes for each comment. The comment codes are the basic descriptives *username* and *length*, as well as the more interpretive codes for comments' *intention* and *level of interaction*.

A comment's intention is defined as comprising two dimensions: reference and 'text function'. Text function is a term borrowed from linguistics. It denotes a message senders' 'communicative intention that is determined in the text by certain, conventional, i.e. in a communicative community obligatory, devices' (Brinker, 2005: 100, own translation). Typical text functions are for example appeal, request or evaluation. Based on an extensive engagement in the sampled comments, as well as empirical findings of previous studies on letters to the editor¹⁸, the following text functions were selected for the coding scheme: *positive evaluation*, *negative evaluation*, *appeal*, *information*, *general-expressive statement*, and *other*.

Yet, the text function alone seemed not to be informative enough, since it obviously makes a difference to whom a message is addressed. Therefore, the reference dimension was added to the code. The reference, or rather addressee, can either be the article's author or SPON in general, the article's actors, other commentators or readers, or some unspecified addressee. Both dimensions were combined, resulting in 12 different intention categories. As a comment might have more than one intention, a primary and a secondary intention code are included.

¹⁷ There were a few days with no suitable article (with at least 20 comments). In these cases the following day was oversampled with two articles.

¹⁸ Letters to the editor can be regarded as 'offline precursors' of reader comments. The mentioned studies are: Pounds, 2006; Heupel, 2007; and Nielsen, 2010.

The *level of interaction* code closely follows Rafaeli's (1988) and Rafaeli and Sudweeks' (1997) conceptualisation: A comment can either be declarative, reactive, or interactive. Yet, it has to be emphasised that communicative interaction only refers to what happens *among commentators*, since otherwise every comment could be coded as reactive – in relation to the article. For details of the coding scheme see appendix A.

A second coder, political science student and German native speaker, was trained to pilot the coding frame and assess its reliability. As measure of intercoder reliability Krippendorff's alpha (α) was selected, an index which can be considered as conveying very accurate reliability data since it, among others, corrects for chance and is applicable to and comparable across different levels of measurement (Krippendorff and Hayes, 2007). 5% of the comments and 10% of the articles were double coded and intercoder reliability data were calculated¹⁹. As the value of α is above .75 for all of the variables, and indeed above .80 for all except the secondary intention-variable (see appendix B) the coding scheme was considered sufficiently reliable.

Data Collection and Analysis

The sampled articles and comments were downloaded and saved as pdf files. Though the unit of analysis is the single comment the coding scheme was designed to code each article with the attached 20 comments at once. After coding all items on paper, the collected data were loaded on to SPSS for analysis. Since most variables were measured on a nominal level, the main methods of analysis were frequency counts and percentages, crosstabulations, as well as some significance test as appropriate. Further details about how results were obtained can be found in the next section.

¹⁹ using a SPSS macro available online: <http://www.comm.ohiostate.edu/ahayes/spss%20programs/kalpha.htm> [Last Consulted 20th April 2010]; for a description of the macro see Krippendorff and Hayes, 2007.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In the following section the results of the content analysis of 2385 user comments on articles in the politics section of SPIEGEL ONLINE are presented. The data give insight into the comments' intentions as well as their level of interaction. Moreover, information about the general characteristics of comments was recorded, which will be reported to begin with.

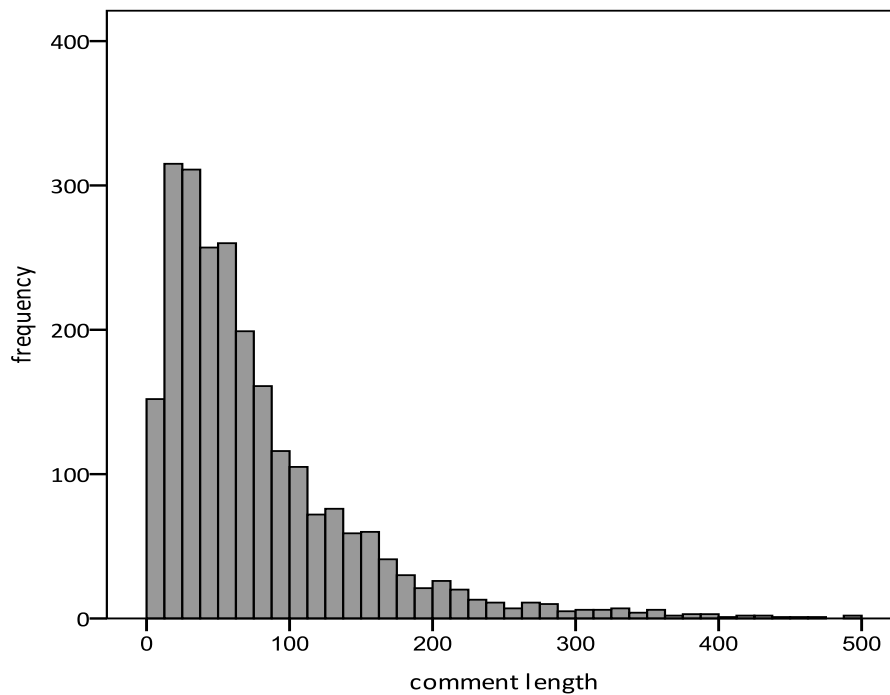
Comment Length

The content analysis shows that the average length of a comment, in words (excluding quotes), is 77.56, the median is smaller, indicating a distribution of comment length that is skewed to the right – as clearly illustrated by the histogram in figure 1. The maximum number of words set by SPON is 500, which consequently defines the range of comment lengths (precisely the range is from 1 to 496). The third percentile is 102 which means that 75% of comments comprise of at most 102 words – about as many as this paragraph. Most users hence do only make use of a small portion of the word allowance and submit rather short comments.

Comments per Commentator

The 2385 sampled comments were written by 1406 individual users - or rather usernames. In principle, it is possible that one person has multiple usernames, or two or more people are using the same name. Nevertheless, it still seems reasonable to assume that in most cases one username represents one user. The relation of the number of posts and the number of posters recorded in the content analysis gives a first idea of the general pattern of activity: The distribution of comments per commentator is heavily skewed to the right. The overwhelming majority of users (86%) is responsible for only one or two comments in the sample. Together they make up 60.6% of all comments. Yet, it has to be kept in mind that the sample only comprises of the first 20 comments of each thread so no valid ultimate conclusions about the frequency of posting per user can be drawn on that empirical basis. Still, the figures provide some interesting hints (for details see appendix C).

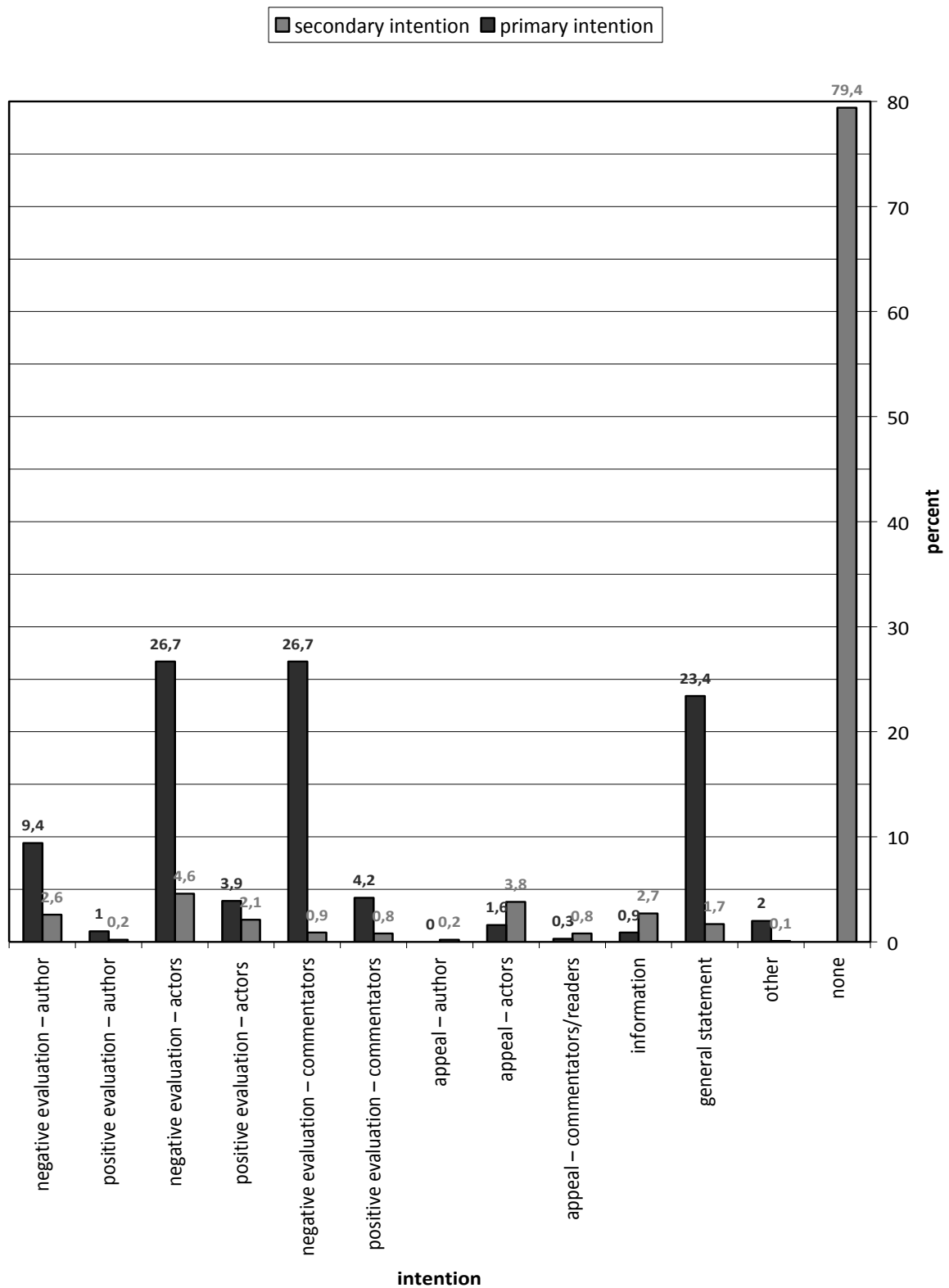
Figure 1: Comment Length – Histogram



Primary and Secondary Intentions

After this preliminary exploration of the structural characteristics of the comments, subsequently the focus will be on their content. This is what the content analysis revealed about the comments' intentions: The most frequent primary intentions are negative evaluations of other commentators and the story actors (26.7% each), closely followed by general statements on the story topic (23.4%). Rank four, though with quite a distance to the first-ranked intentions goes to negative evaluations of the story author. All other 'intention' categories are below 5% (see figure 2). What is most obvious from a first cursory look at the distribution of the secondary intentions of comments is that a clear majority of 79.4% was coded as having no secondary intention at all. This finding is in line with the overall not very extensive length of comments. Most posts are rather short and have a single purpose. For this reason, I decided to focus only on the primary intentions in all subsequent analyses. Yet, only after at least a quick examination of the present secondary intentions (see figure 2). Just as in the case of primary intentions, the most frequent secondary intention is a negative evaluation of the story actors (4.6%). However, apart from that the distribution is different. The second most frequent secondary intention (3.8%) is an appeal to the story actors – which was only at 1.6% amongst primary intentions. Providing additional information is the secondary intention of 2.7% of the comments. 2.6% have a negative evaluation of the author as secondary intention, and 2.1% a positive evaluation of the story actors.

Figure 2: Primary and Secondary Intentions



However, it is only of limited use to examine secondary intentions in isolation from primary intentions since they can be assumed to interact at a semantic level. To gain more meaningful insights, the interplay of primary and secondary intention has to be explored. This was done

Table 1: Most frequent combinations of primary and secondary intentions

rank	frequency	percent	by crossstabulating both variables. For this purpose, cases with no secondary intention were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a subsample of 144 cases.	
			primary intention	secondary intention
1	52	10.6	negative evaluation of actors	appeal to actors
2	41	8.4	negative evaluation commentators	negative evaluation of actors
3	29	5.9	negative evaluation of author	negative evaluation of actors
4	28	5.7	negative evaluation of commentators	positive evaluation of actors
5	27	5.5	positive evaluation of commentators	negative evaluation of actors
6	25	5.1	negative evaluation of commentators	information
n=144	289	58.9	///	///
OTAL	491	100		

Table 1 presents the six most frequent of the overall 144 possible combinations of primary and secondary intentions of which each accounts for at least 5% of the subsample.

On top of the ranking is the combination of a negative evaluation of the story actors and an appeal to them. The second most frequent combination is a negative evaluation of both commentators and actors, suggesting that users' criticism of previous comments is motivated by a disagreement about the evaluation of actors. This might also be concluded from the intention-combinations on rank 3 and 4, while the combination of a positive evaluation of commentators and a negative evaluation of actors might, in turn, suggest that the positive evaluation of other users stems from a shared criticism of the story actors. Combination 6 could indicate that in those cases other commentators are criticised for a neglect or ignorance of further information.

However, all of these conclusions have to be considered cautiously. As discussed in the methodology section, content analysis does not allow for a precise examination of complex patterns of meaning within a text. Still, it seems to be acceptable to conclude that these findings suggest that secondary intentions primarily serve to complement or support the primary intention of a comment and do not add an entirely new or contradictory dimension. Hence, on the basis of this analysis, the decision to focus only on comments' primary intentions can be regarded as even more justifiable.

Table 2: Text Function * Reference – Crosstabulation

	MSc Dissertation Eilika Freund				TOTAL
	author/media	actors	commentators/ readers	unspecific	TEXT FUNCTION
negative evaluation	15% 225 90.0%	42.5% 637 83.1%	42.5% 637 85.7%	0% 0 0%	64.1% 1499
positive evaluation	11.5% 25 10.0%	42.9% 93 12.1%	45.6% 99 13.3%	0% 0 0%	9.3% 217
appeal	0% 0 0%	84.1% 37 4.8%	15.9% 7 0.9%	0% 0 0%	1.9% 44
information	0% 0 0%	0.0% 0 0%	0.0% 0 0%	100% 21 3.6%	0.9% 21
general statement	0% 0 0%	0.0% 0 0%	0.0% 0 0%	100% 557 96.4%	23.8% 557
TOTAL REFERENCE	250 10.7%	767 32.8%	743 31.8%	578 24.7%	100% 2338 100%

Table 2 shows that in total negative evaluations account for the largest part of all comments' text functions (64.1%). Most of them are addressed to the story actors and to other commentators (42.5% each), and the remaining 15% to the story authors or SPON more generally. There is a similar pattern for positive evaluations, which altogether make up 9.3% of all comments: 42.9% are addressed to story actors, 45.6% to commentators and 11.5% to the author. The few comments (1.9%) containing an appeal are predominantly addressed to the story actors (84.1%), some to other commentators or readers (15.9%) and none to the author. Both informative (0.9%) and general-expressive (23.8%) comments have - by definition - an unspecific reference. This might seem imprecise at first sight, however, as both pilots and the final coding showed, most of the time, the addressees of information provision and general-expressive statements were indeed indeterminate.

²⁰ 42 comments (2%) with 'intention = other' were excluded since they cannot be interpreted along these lines, resulting in a subsample of 2338 cases.

Table 3: Intention*Article Type - Crosstabulation

When the perspective is turned around to the distribution of references, what already became obvious from the inspection of the text functions is confirmed: most comments refer either to the story actors (36.7%) or to other commentators (33.8%) and about a quarter (24.7%) have an unspecific reference. Only 10.7% refer to the author(s) of the story or SPON in general.

The distribution of comments' intentions might, however, be different for comments attached to different story types. To explore this question, the intention variable was cross-tabulated with article type.

	evaluation author	evaluation actors	evaluation commentators	appeal author	appeal actors	appeal commentators	information	general statement	
news report	51 4.3%	437 36.7%	393 33.0%	0 0%	21 1.8%	6 0.5%	9 0.8%	275 23.1%	1192 100%
news feature	104 12.2%	218 25.5%	289 33.8%	0 0%	12 1.4%	1 0.1%	10 1.2%	220 25.8%	854 100%
comment	95 31.2%	75 24.5%	54 18.5%	0 0%	4 1.3%	0 0%	2 0.6%	62 19.9%	292 100%
TOTAL	250 10.7%	730 31.2%	736 31.5%	0 0%	37 1.6%	7 0.3%	21 0.9%	557 23.8%	2338 100%

Table 3 shows that in the appeal, information and general statement categories there are no noticeable differences across story types. Within the evaluation categories²¹ the differences are, in contrast, considerable. While only 4.3% of comments attached to news reports evaluate the story author, this percentage rises to 12.3% for news feature-related comments and 32.5% for comments related to comments. In the 'evaluation of actors' category the incline is not as constant, but there is a (reverse) decline from 36.7% for comments related to news reports to about 26% for both news feature and comment-related comments. A similar pattern occurs for evaluations of other commentators which proportion declines from about 33% for news report and news feature-related comments to 18.5% for comments attached to comment articles. These figures suggest that more opinionated articles differ from more fact-oriented ones with respect to the kinds of comments they provoke. Predominantly opinionated comments receive considerably more comments that intend to criticise the story author than fact-oriented news reports do. News reports, in contrast, attract much more story

actor and commentator related evaluations. News features which are characterised by a mixture of fact and opinion have an intermediate position. The chi-squared test of statistical independence that was run for both variables ($\chi^2= 226.48$, $df=12$, $p<0.001$) confirms that there indeed is a statistically significant association between comments' intentions and article types. The null hypothesis of statistical independence can be rejected at all conventional levels of significance.

Interaction among Commentators

As interactivity is one of the most discussed features of user participation in online media, the content analysis was also designed to examine the interactional dimension of reader comment section. Of the 2385 comments the majority of 62.8% was characterised as declarative, thus not containing any reference to other comments. About a third of comments (33.7%) were coded as reacting to previous comments. Only 3.6% of comments can be considered as interactive, meaning that they refer to previous exchanges of messages (see appendix D).

Due to the construction of the coding scheme, there is a close association between comments' level of communicative interaction and their intention. As discussed above, only reactions to and interactions with other commentators were coded as reactive, respectively interactive, because without this caveat actually every comment would be some form of reaction – a reaction to the article - but this would not convey any interesting insights. Thus, overall, the level of communication interaction corresponds to a large extent to the pattern of intentions in the comments: comments with reference to author or actors are declarative by definition – unless there would be a reaction back from an author or actors, which unsurprisingly did not happen in any of the examined threads. Yet, comments with 'unspecific reference' might receive some reactions from other commentators.

Since the proportion of comments with reference to other commentators is quite large (31.8%), the small number of interactive comments is noticeable (11.4% of all comments with commentator reference). As indicated above this is no surprise if one takes into account that about 70% of all commentators contributed only one post to the sample. However, since only the first 20 comments were included in the sample possible later interactive exchanges might have been excluded. This assumption is supported by the value and statistical significance of

²¹ For reasons of clarity the positive and negative evaluation categories were merged. From the previous analyses it should however be clear that in most cases 'evaluation' means negative evaluation. In addition, the 'other' category was excluded again.

Gamma ($\alpha = .375, p < 0.001$)²² for the relationship between level of communicative interaction and comment rank. The positive coefficient of Gamma, which is statistically significant at a 0.1% level of significance, indicates that higher ranks, i.e. later comments, are likely to be more interactive.

Discussion

SPIEGEL ONLINE, like many other online news websites, invites users to comment on articles. As discussed above, potentially, these user comment sections can be sites of participation in and through the media. This study sought to explore in what ways people realise this potential. Specifically, attention was paid to two dimensions: the interaction amongst commentators (Sub-RQ2) and their intentions (Sub-RQ1). The following section discusses the major findings of the statistical analyses detailed above and sets them in the context of the research questions and the reviewed literature.

Interaction

Regarding the interactional dimension, all in all, the content analytical examination of a large sample of comments revealed that, on the one hand, many different users make use of the comment function but, on the other hand, communicative exchanges between them are quite rare. The observed ratio of posters to posts does not support previous study's (Schultz, 1999; Singer, 2009) conclusion that the discussion (as far as there is one) is dominated by a few 'hobbyists', even if there are a few users with an exceptionally high number of posts. Rather, participation is quite broad in the sense that many users contributed few comments to the sample.²³ This finding can, on the one hand, be evaluated as positive since it demonstrates that there is indeed a wide interest in commenting on articles. On the other hand, however, it also indicates a lack of interaction in the comment sections.

This supposition is confirmed by the dominance of declarative comments found by the content analysis. A large majority of posts does not react to previous posts or exchanges but comments on articles without taking other commentators' contributions into account. This shows that most people choose to 'discuss' an article individually, rather than together with

²² For this analysis, level of interaction was treated as ordinal level variable, which seems to be appropriate since Rafaeli himself described interactivity as a continuum ranging from declarative to fully interactive (Rafaeli, 1988).

²³ It must, however, be reiterated that the fact that the sample comprises only the first 20 posts of each comment thread limits the validity of these conclusions.

other readers. Thus, it seems that comment sections are primarily valued for providing ‘open mike access to a wide audience’ (Bucy and Gregson, 2001: 375), rather than for enabling an exchange of opinions. While such declarative contributions to journalism can unquestionably be valuable, they do not reflect the interactive potential of new media, which above all enable exchanges between spatially, and often also temporally, separated media users (Light and Rogers, 1999).

About a third of comments in the sample make use of interactivity at least in the limited sense of reacting to previous posts. This proportion is smaller than the one found by Singer (2009) on the Scottish election discussion website (52.7%) but still considerable. The fact that every third comment is posted in response to a previous one suggests that there are many people who are not only interested in commenting on an article directly but do also critically engage with other users’ opinions.

Yet, as argued above, reaction is only the first step towards an interactive exchange of message, a genuine discussion. In the studied comment sections this is very rare. No more than 85 out of 2385 sampled comments (3.6%) were coded as interactive. As the significant association between rank and level of interaction shows, this is in part certainly due to the fact that the study only looked at the first 20 comments in each thread and more interactive communication is likely to occur in later posts. Another, non-methodological, reason might, however, be the specific nature of reader comments sections.

First, there is the ambiguous invitation to ‘discuss this article’, which might indeed mean both an individual and a collective discussion, as the following definition of the verb ‘to discuss’ demonstrates: ‘1. to examine or consider something in speech or writing, 2. to talk or argue about something in conversation’ (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, 1996).

The *technological setting*, secondly, does also allow for both interpretations, i.e. individual and collective discussion: In principle, every comment is a new comment on the article and as such just attached to it on a first-come, first-served basis. Studies suggest that such linear thread structures can impede interaction since they do not support the ‘basic turn-taking of human conversation’ (Smith, *et al.*, 2000: 97; cf. also O’Neill and Martin, 2003). Yet, on the other hand, the chronological order of comments and the opportunity to quote another post by clicking a button invites some form of logical reference between comments.

Lastly, the *short-term character* of comment threads needs to be taken into account. News and in particular online news are generally of a temporary nature, and, consequently, so are

the discussions attached to them. While there are few people commenting on articles even days after their publication, most comments are posted within a few hours. Thus, individual comment threads rather than being durable communicative spaces can maybe best be characterised as ‘pop-up’ sites of discussion. Taking this into consideration the lack of interaction becomes, at least partially, comprehensible, since presumably most people read an article, post a comment and then go on reading other, more up-to-date, articles without ever returning to the one(s) they commented on. Yet, even in the long-term setting of newsgroups, studies found on average no more than 9% of interactive posts (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997).

Though the above considerations give some pointers, based on the present data it is impossible to discern the exact reasons for the limited realisation of interactive communication. Comparative studies of the level of interaction in different settings of mediated communication and an inquiry of users are needed to gain further insights.

Overall, the findings, however, clearly show that the technological potential alone does not make communication interactive. Rather, the specific communicative settings and cultural processes have to be taken into account. A majority of users who comment on articles in a declarative way still seem to stick to a ‘traditional publishing model’ of media participation (Light and Rogers, 1999), and do not usually consider the horizontal dimension of communication amongst users. This finding is in line with previous studies which also found the news audience to be quite reluctant when it comes to interacting with others (Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Bergström, 2008; Chung, 2008). Yet, the considerable amount of reactive and in particular the occurrence of even a few interactive comments suggest that things are in a state of flux and a new model of user interaction might be about to emerge.

Moreover, it is noticeable that of all 2385 comments there was not even one post by an article’s author or any other SPON employee. This finding once more supports the conclusion that most media professionals regard participatory features as something provided for communication amongst readers rather than something that they should engage in themselves, or that might even change their relation with the audience (Domingo, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Singer, 2009; Schultz, 1999). This is particularly interesting when contrasted with the conclusion just drawn regarding the audience’s lack of interest in reader-to-reader communication.

Intention

The content analysis' results on the intentional dimension of article comments, however, indicate that most commentators are not interested in an engagement with journalists either. The small share of comments with reference to an articles author or SPON in general is in line with previous studies which found generally less interest in 'commenting on journalism' (Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004) and little 'media reference' in user discussions (Singer, 2009). In the politics section of SPIEGEL ONLINE only in about a tenth of cases the comment function is used to practice what is defined here as participation in the media: Users discuss an article on the meta-level of representation rather than the object level of the represented. Those comments deal for example with the choice of diction in an article, the specific angle a journalist chose to present an issue, or the quality of an article in general. Though after all 10% of those meta level-oriented posts intend to express a positive evaluation, the overwhelming majority of 90% formulates a negative evaluation. Thus, in the comment sections media reference usually means media criticism.

Interestingly, the amount of media criticism varies across article types. As the accordant analysis shows, the more opinionated an article the more comments will aim at criticising its author. Hence, the specific role the author plays in a journalistic text seems to influence the way users engage with it. In factual news reports journalists are in a way hidden behind the facts they present, so that readers are only very rarely incited to evaluate their performance in the comment sections. Rather, they discuss the facts themselves. Whereas in cases where media professionals act not as a seemingly neutral *reporters* but as active *interpreters* of political events, users are much more likely to directly respond to them. These findings suggest that to what extent people accept journalistic media representations as 'sources of truth about the social' (Couldry, 2001:161) depends to some extent on the role journalists play in those representations.

A considerable amount of about a quarter of comments was found as having no clear reference to any addressee at all and intending to provide general statements on the story topic. General statements were defined as messages that are neither clearly evaluative nor informative or appellative but their intention is really to generally express a user's opinion on a given issue or event. They range from ironic comments to conspiracy theories, and do also include statements such as 'I've always known that things would turn out like that'.

Although this set of statements was identified as a distinct category of comments' intentions²⁴, the quite broad definition is certainly a methodical weakness of the present study. In particular, since 'general statements' account for a large proportion of comments, it might be valuable and interesting to have a closer look at them with more in-depth methods of textual analysis.

At this point, it can however be concluded that comments of this general-expressive kind are those who profit most from the 'open mike' character of comment sections. Due to the, in principle, unlimited space that is available online even really vague or bold statements get a chance to be published (instead of falling victim to editorial censorship), and quite a lot of people make use of this opportunity. Admittedly, the participatory meaning of general-expressive statements is difficult to make out. This is certainly a flaw of the present study.

Far more concrete are the two most frequent intentions. The major comment types are those with a reference to the story actors (32.8%), on the one hand, and to other commentators (31.8%), on the other hand. As discussed in the results section, comments with reference to previous comments are for the most part reactive, or even interactive. Therefore, they are the ones that can most likely be considered as constituting at least some rudimentary form of discussion. The findings, moreover, suggest that this discussion is mainly driven by dissent, since 85.7% of comments with commentator reference have a negative-evaluative intention.

Since the proportion of posts referring to other commentator is much smaller than in her study, Singer's (2009) conclusion that comment sections are primarily used as 'springboard' for conversation cannot be supported by the present data. Presumably, this is due to Singer's focus on comments on articles on the specific event of the Scottish election, which might make the 'pop-up nature' of comments sections, as discussed above, less relevant.

Nonetheless, even in the topic-independent sample of the present study every third comment can be regarded as discussion-oriented. Considered in light of the two-dimensional model of media participation, discussion-oriented comments can be regarded as manifestations of mediated political participation. Media users take part in, or at least try to start, political discussions through the medium of reader comments. As discussions are initiated by and develop in reference to a specific news article, they are usually issue-focussed and of short-term nature. Engaging in such 'micro-discussions' is the second most frequent way people

²⁴ The category worked well in several pilots and intercoder reliability testing.

make use of comment sections, seconded only, and just marginally, by the use of comments for the purpose of a criticism of story actors.

As the study's focus are political news, those story actors are for the most part *political actors*, widely defined as including both individuals, collectives and institutions. The most common text function of comments with an actor reference is again a negative evaluation. Therefore, it can be concluded that most commentators make use of the article comment function to publicly criticise political actors, their decisions, actions and political procedures in general. For those users comment sections primarily seem to provide a public platform which allows them to have their say on political issues vis-à-vis a wide audience. The opportunity of exchanging opinions with others seems to be of subordinate relevance, rather publicity is what matters. This finding once again emphasises the ongoing importance of what Light and Rogers (1999) term the 'traditional publisher-reader relationship'. What most people seem to value about media participation is not so much the horizontal, but rather the vertical axis of communication, the fact that it 'amplifies' their voice.

Still, I want to argue that this also represents a form of political participation through the media. Media users, when publicly voicing criticism of political issues, act as citizens. They take part in mediated public discourse, in mediated politics. Their engagement with political media contents is followed by communicative action. Whether article comments are used for reactive or interactive political discussions or declarative political criticism - in both cases, comment sections become 'civic communicative spaces' (Dahlgren, 2009: 115) where media users as citizens participate in politics as it has been envisaged by various scholars (Bucy and Gregson, 2001; Jones, 2006). As this study's results show, those civic uses make up the largest part of article comments. Incidents of a use of comments for a participation *in* the media are comparatively rare.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This dissertation research project is premised on the assumption that it is not enough to investigate *to what extent* media users are interested in participatory features of online news media. Rather, media scholars should also examine *how* people make use of the opportunities they are offered. Thus, this study looked exclusively at positive cases of participation, instead of the ratio of participation versus non-participation. Specifically, a content analysis was designed to examine the intentions users have when posting a comment on an article in the politics section of the German news website SPIEGEL ONLINE and to what extent commentators interact with each other.

The results demonstrate that comment sections are indeed used with a range of different intentions and with different levels of interactivity. First, of all this supports the basic premise of this study: One cannot infer from the characteristics of a participatory feature to its usage but must examine it empirically. As the investigation of commentator interaction shows this is particularly true for the heavily discussed characteristic of interactivity. Although comments sections are potentially interactive, the communication going on within them usually is not. This finding not least highlights the significance of distinguishing between interactivity (as potential) and interaction (as process) already on a terminological level as not to imply that communication technology necessarily yields certain social practices.

Overall, the examined user comment sections can better be characterised as public platforms for individual expression than as forums for debate, as they are often advertised. Moreover, when comments' intentions are analysed against the backdrop of a two-dimensional conceptualisation of media participation the findings reveal that there is comparatively little interest in participation *in* the news in the form of media criticism, though there is variation across different article types. On the one hand, this is surprising given the common controversy about the journalistic quality of SPON. User comments actually seem to be ideal sites for an expression of respective criticism. Yet, on the other hand, it could also be argued that the findings just reflect the fact that those people who are displeased by the typical SPON-style are most likely not those who are using the website and its commenting functionality. Instead, they express their criticism on external platforms such as the blogs *SpiegelKritik* (<http://spiegelkritik.de>) and *SPIEGELblog* (www.spiegelblog.net).

Most of the examined 2385 comments rather deal with the object than the meta level of articles. Commentators engage with the political issues reported on and express their own

point of view. Thus, for most users comment sections primarily seem to provide an access point to public debate. The 'open mike' function is what matters most. This is exactly what Bucy and Gregson (2001) envisage in their 'new media use as political participation argument' (358). Drawing on a quote by Thomas Jefferson, they argue that in mass democracies there is an urgent need to provide citizens with 'more public space than the ballot box and with more opportunity to make their voice heard in public than election day' (376) and that new media formats can satisfy it. This study's results suggest that many media users, as citizens, indeed have this need and make use of user comment sections to fulfil it. They use them for a mediated participation in politics.

While the research project yields insights into how people make use of comment sections, it cannot relate them to users' socio-demographic attributes or their political attitudes. As already indicated in the methods section, it would therefore be instructive to conduct a study combining text-based with interview or survey data. Furthermore, comments might be assessed with regard to their discursive quality. In particular considering the large amount of evaluative posts, it would be interesting to examine user comments more in detail against the backdrop of some normative criteria, such as theories of deliberation, as it has been done in the context of other forms of online communication (e.g. Dahlberg, 2006). Lastly, it would be valuable to compare the use of comment sections across different news platforms and countries. With regard to letters to the editor, studies found considerable differences as to how people make use of them (Heupel, 2004; Pounds, 2008) and it is very likely that this also applies to comment sections online. Research approaches of this kind could further contribute to a better understanding of newly emerging forms of public participation in an age of digital communication.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Coding Scheme

Code article and each comment attached to it according to the following and based on the 'Coding Guidelines' provided separately:

SECTION I: ARTICLE

<p>DATE OF PUBLICATION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_ _ / _ _ / _ _ _ _</p>	
<p>HEADLINE</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	
<p>TYPE OF ARTICLE</p> <p>(1) news report (2) comment (3) news feature (4) other</p>	

SECTION II: COMMENTS (starting from comment #2)

COMMENT #2	
COMMENT LENGTH (in words , excluding quotes)	
USER NAME	
.....	
<p>PRIMARY INTENTION OF THE COMMENT</p> <p>(1) negative evaluation - story author (2) positive evaluation - story author (3) negative evaluation - story actors (4) positive evaluation - story actors (5) negative evaluation - commentators (6) positive evaluation - commentators (7) appeal - author (8) appeal - story actors (9) appeal – commentators/readers (10) additional information (11) general-expressive statement (12) other</p>	

<p>SECONDARY INTENTION OF THE COMMENT</p> <p>(0) no secondary intention (1) negative evaluation - story author (2) positive evaluation - story author (3) negative evaluation - story actors (4) positive evaluation - story actors (5) negative evaluation - commentators (6) positive evaluation - commentators (7) appeal - author (8) appeal - story actors (9) appeal – commentators/readers (10) additional information (11) general-expressive statement (12) other</p>	
<p>LEVEL OF COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION</p> <p>(1) declarative (2) reactive (3) interactive</p>	

<p>COMMENT #3-21</p>
<p>comment codes as for comment #2</p>

Appendix B: Intercoder Reliability Data

VARIABLE	LEVEL OF MEASUREMENT	KRIPPENDORFF'S ALPHA
ARTICLE CODES		
date of publication	///	///
headline	///	///
type of article	nominal	.8119
COMMENT CODES		
comment length (in words)	ratio	.9905
username	///	///
primary intention	nominal	.8143
secondary intention	nominal	.7586
level of interaction	nominal	.8087

Appendix C: Comments per Commentator

comments per commentator	frequency	percent of commentators	percent of total posts
1	971	69.06	40.71
2	238	16.93	19.96
3	85	6.05	10.69
4	39	1.78	5.24
5	25	1.78	5.24
6	18	1.28	4.53
7	7	0.50	2.05
8	6	0.43	2.01
9	6	0.43	2.26
10	6	0.43	2.52
12	1	0.07	0.50
15	2	0.14	1.26
16	1	0.07	0.67
25	1	0.07	1.05
TOTAL	1406	100	100

Appendix D: Level of Communicative Interaction

level of communicative interaction	frequency	%
declarative	1497	62.8
reactive	804	33.7
interactive	85	3.6
TOTAL	2385	100

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