

Interactive Options in Online Newspapers of Bangladesh

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Abstract: Interactivity is said to be a great challenge for online journalism. This study conceptualizes dimensions of interactivity. Total 28 online newspapers of Bangladesh have been reviewed according to these dimensions. Results show that the newspapers provide token interactive options. Contents availability and access to the contents are the most prevalent options in these sites. However, users are not empowered to add information, stories to the site and newspapers do not provide options for blogging, chatting, discussions- the real options for interpersonal communication.

Key words: Interactivity, interactive options, online journalism, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

During the short span of its history, online journalism has already proven itself to be a powerful force to be reckoned with (Auh, 2000). With the advent of Internet technology and its sharp expansion and use, online journalism has already been successful to attract a significant number of audiences. It has been an important tool for retrieving news and information through the World Wide Web.

A review of the media history shows that there is a tradition of criticism and dissatisfaction for not involving readers or audience in the process of communication. Traditionally mass media have been said to be the provider of limited one-way flow of information. Media critics have always pointed to the lack of interactivity in media that usually lead to becoming passive audience. Usually professional journalism has offered the audience few direct opportunities for interactive communication. In print journalism, 'Letters to the editor' section is a well-known means for feedback. However, the communication remains reactive unless the journalists or other readers in other letters respond to the initial communication (Schultz, 1999).

The Internet technology has brought forth a set of opportunities for making the communication between a medium and its audience more meaningful and interactive. Online news sites can utilize the opportunities to get closer to the audience. But studies (Schultz, 1999; Massey, 2000; Kenney *et al.*, 2000) on interactivity reveal that online news sites are yet to materialize the options of interactivity or they offer few and token interactive options.

This study conceptualizes the dimensions and options of interactivity and explores interactivity in online newspapers-both in online editions of print newspapers and purely web-based newspapers of Bangladesh. The fundamental objective of the study is to investigate into the interactivity in online news web sites of Bangladesh. The specific objectives are to explore the interactive options provided by the online newspapers of Bangladesh and to track down difference in options, if any, between online editions of print newspapers and purely web-based newspapers.

Interactivity in online journalism: Generally, interaction means mutual exchange, mutual influence, sharing etc. Mortensen (1972) terms interaction as a reciprocal influence. It is an alternating process of feedback (Morris, 2002). To Schramm (1954) interactivity is sharing of meanings of a signal between the sender and receiver of a message in order to reach mutual understanding. For media, interaction occurs between the media/media people and its audience.

In online journalism, there are opportunities for the media to be engaged directly with its audience. There is a general agreement among the researchers of online journalism that interactivity means Internet-enabled communication between web journalists and readers or among readers (Massey, 2000).

The concept of interactivity has been taken as an implied feature of computer-mediated communication from the very beginning (Oblak, 2005). Interactive media should offer choices to its audience and the experience they gain from it would have an effect on them, which would result in their greater involvement with the media and this

involvement would be more active. Here the activity of the audience concerning the content is a very important aspect. Pearce (1997) says, user do not get informed passively, but chase for discovery.

Reviewing literature and interviewing online educators and publishers McMillan and Downes (1998) found that communication, to some extent, is interactive but interactivity of media increases when: The goal of communication is more to exchange information than an attempt to persuade; Audience have greater control over the communication environment; Participants play active role to have more benefit from the communication; Audience act and react to the message through two-way communication; and timing of communication is flexible and responsive to demand of participants and the environment of communication creates a sense of place.

By the sincere designing of the sites, online news media may offer greater interactivity utilizing the opportunities of Internet and computer-mediated technologies. Clearly, the Internet is a new medium that could extend interactive options in journalism (Schultz, 1999). According to Dibeau and Garrison (2001), the options may include links to other stories, e-mail to reporters and editors, chat rooms, forums, animations, photographs and biographical information about reporters and columnists, related coverage, searchable database, multimedia such as audio and video.

Lasica (1996) labels Internet as a conversation. But online media do not utilize its potentiality to be interactive enough that results few interactive options in online media or traditional sender-receiver communication. Integrating different tools and options online journalism could be more interactive where audiences will not only be the receiver of the information provided by the media but they also make their comments, add ideas. Schultz (1999) suggests online journalism to exploit e-mails, chat rooms, online polls and bulletin boards primarily that would help establish reactive and possibly interactive communication process. Millison (1999) suggests hyperlinks to be the primary mechanism for interactivity on the web. The hyperlinks might include links to detail of a story, links in the different sections/categories/page of a web site (on-site links) or links to different sites (off-site links).

Nevertheless, Internet technology can extend the opportunity for a website from only navigating through the stories or pages of a news website. According to Dueze (2001), interactive options can be navigational ('Next Page', 'Back' to 'Top'), functional (mail links, Bulletin Board System, moderated discussion lists), or adaptive

(chat rooms, personal customization of page). In another article, Dueze (1999) elaborates the concept of interactivity in online media when he says:

"... online news has the potential to make the sender/user part of the news experience. This can be done through a number of ways: through direct or indirect e-mail exchange between the journalist or staff and the user, through a bulletin board box underneath each news story or, more recently, through web chat possibilities, even introducing the people who are featured in the storey to the users together with the journalist responsible for the piece in an ultimate interactive environment".

Heeter (1989) identified six dimensions of interactivity that cover almost all the interactive options recognized in the online journalism reviews and researches. The dimensions are: Complexity of choices for users; Efforts users must exert; Responsiveness to the user, Facilitation of interpersonal communication; Ease of adding information and Monitor system use. Massey and Levey (1998) later added a new dimension in addition to Heeters' ones named 'Immediacy'. This dimension shows to what extent the website provide latest news.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Selections of newspapers: A list with the URLs of online newspapers of different countries around the globe is available in the website <http://www.onlinenewspapers.com>. The researcher accessed the homepage of the site first and then clicked Asia, a list of Asian countries appeared where from Bangladesh was chosen. The URL of Bangladesh newspapers in the site is <http://www.onlinenewspapers.com/banglade.htm>. The site compiles different types (national, local, daily, weekly, published abroad, sites collect news from different papers etc.) of online news sites of Bangladesh. All the newspapers, which are published daily from Dhaka, the Capital city of Bangladesh, have been selected for the study. Some of the newspapers that are listed in this website and meet this study criterion are currently not in operation or have halted their online editions. This study, therefore, examines a total number of 28 online news sites, of them 23 are the online editions of print newspapers and 5 are purely web-based.

It is expected that online newspapers should provide their interactive options on the home pages; hence, the study explores only the homepages of the newspapers.

Operationalization of the concept: It is difficult to encompass all the dimensions and features of interactivity into categories for analysis or investigation. But the dimensions provided by Heeter (1989) shows the possibility to identify different options of interactivity of online newspapers. Massey and Levy (1998) adapted Heeter's concept in studying interactivity in web newspapers of Asia. They also added another dimension 'immediacy' to Heeter's conception. So the Heeter's six dimensions plus Massey and Levy's one dimension have been adopted to look into the interactivity of online newspapers in Bangladesh in this study. The dimensions are as follows:

Complexity of choice offered: A variety of contents to choose for the users should be incorporated in online newspapers. The complexity of contents and hyperlinks allow the audience to navigate through the website. Thus, this dimension is conceptualized as the presence of variety in news (hard, soft, national, international, business, sports, entertainment, culture etc) views (editorial, post editorial, columns and letters to the editors), advertisements, photographs, hyperlinks, audio/video, language options and as news personalization tools- archives and search engines.

Efforts users must exert: This dimension provides users control over accessing certain content so that they can have specific information as per their need. It can be labeled as the user's effort required to access the content. The availability of indication on the homepage about specific information provided in the newspaper is conceptualized as this very dimension. The indications might be index and/or page/categories.

Responsiveness to the users: The technology of online newspapers may offer the options to Internet journalists with their audience. This kind of communication would be asynchronous, or delayed, as in the case with e-mail (Massey and Levy, 1998). Kenny *et al.* (2000) suggests responsiveness would also be achieved by programming instructions, help pages and error messages. This study counts links to 'Contact us', 'About us', 'Help' links to newsroom or to the journalists. Actually, 'responsiveness' has been defined as potential for responsiveness.

Facilitation of interpersonal communication: Interactivity, for this dimension, could be thought of as synchronous or in real time, conversation (Massey, 2000). This dimension allows the newspaper and audience to interact mutually. E-mail address, online forum, live chat, feedback are the specific options of this dimension investigated into in this study.

Ease of Adding information: One of the major potentials of online journalism is to allow users to add some sort of message, information or stories to the site. Audiences become more active and turn to be the providers of messages from only being consumers. This type of interactivity could be achieved by providing the option of adding announcements, blog, personal webpage, reader/opinion poll, letters to editors/comments, press release, news stories.

Monitoring system use: Using monitoring system an online newspaper can track the audiences who visit the site and can keep record the number of audiences as well. By developing the mechanism website operator can track down the trend of the users that which parts or sections of the site are being mostly visited. Readers' interest and numbers facilitate operators in designing the page and arranging contents of newspapers. Options of having cookie, visitor counter and/or visitor registration on the home page have been measured here.

Immediacy: Immediacy is always an important concern in journalism. Internet technology has put online journalism to the challenge of updating the site providing fresh news or information frequently. This factor is concept utilized as the presence of 'scroll box' of latest news and/or update ticker/update version of the newspaper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Complexity of choice: Availability of contents and wide variety of choices are significantly prevalent in the online newspapers of Bangladesh. Every newspaper studied provide various types of news. Views are absent in some newspapers especially in some web-based ones. Photographs are found in all web-based newspapers, two of them provide photo slide show, but this very content is not available in all online editions of print newspapers. All newspapers use some sort of, at least on-site, hyperlinks. Off-site hyperlinks are available only in advertisements. Audio-video option is present in only one web-based news site. Web-based newspapers are clearly ahead in providing language option and search engine, whereas online editions are ahead in presenting with archives (Table 1).

Efforts users must exert: Finding different types of news or other contents is easier as the sites provide an index on the homepage or categorize contents into pages or categories. Different pages have names such as National, International, Editorial, Sports, Letters to editors,

Table 1: Complexity of choices available

Options	All online newspapers N = 28(%)	Online editions N = 23 (%)	Web-based newspapers N = 5 (%)
News	100.00	100.00	100
Views	85.71	95.65	40
Photographs	89.29	86.96	100
Hyperlinks	100.00	100.00	100
Audio-Video	3.57	00.00	20
Archive	82.14	91.30	40
Search engine	21.43	8.70	80
Language option	14.29	4.35	60
Advertisements	89.29	86.96	100

Table 2: Efforts users must exert

Options	All online newspapers N = 28(%)	Online editions N = 23 (%)	Web-based newspapers N = 5(%)
Index	85.71	86.96	80
Page/categories	85.71	82.61	100

Table 3: Responsiveness to the users

Options	All Newspapers N = 28(%)	Online editions N = 23(%)	Web-based N = 5(%)
Contact us	60.71	52.17	100
About us	28.57	13.07	100
Help	14.29	13.04	20

Entertainments etc. Audiences can go to the desired section or page clicking the links. Specific options in this dimension are shown in Table 2.

Responsiveness to the users: In this layer of interactivity, a clear difference between online editions and web-based newspapers is seen. All the web-based newspapers prove their responsiveness providing both mailing and e-mail address, in 'contact us' link and in providing information about them in 'about us' link, but a different picture is present in online editions of print newspapers. A few of both types of newspapers provide help options/message for the readers (Table 3).

Facilitation of interpersonal communication: Online newspapers of Bangladesh are not well presented with the interactive features of interpersonal communication. Majority of the newspapers provide at least one e-mail address to the newsroom. But in other features-online forum, live chat, feedback-they show a very weak indication for their willingness to engage in communication with their audiences (Table 4).

Ease of adding information: Audiences of online newspapers of Bangladesh are not empowered to add their personal webpage, hobby page, announcement or blog. Only one web-based newspaper (BDdnews24.com) allows to add press release and another (The Editor) allows to add news stories directly to the site. 'Readers poll/Opinion poll' and 'Letter/comments to editor' are present in 42.66% print editions and 21.43% web-based newspapers, respectively.

Table 4: Facilitation of interpersonal communication

Options	All Newspapers N = 28(%)	Online editions N = 23(%)	Web-based N = 5(%)
Email address	71.42	69.57	80.00
Online forum	00.00	00.00	00.00
Live chat	7.14	8.70	00.00
Feedback	28.57	34.78	00.00

Table 5: Monitoring System use

Options	All Newspapers N = 28(%)	Online editions N = 23(%)	Web-based N = 5(%)
Visitor registration	10.71	4.35	40.00
Visitor Counter	17.86	21.74	0.00
Cookies	00.00	00.00	00.00

Monitoring system use: Newspapers are not sincere to have an idea of the number of the audience and their reading/visiting habits. No newspapers use cookies for this purpose (Table 5). Features related to monitoring audience number and habit of the sites are as follows:

Immediacy: The last dimension of interactivity proves interactivity utilizing internet technology in immediate uploading or updating information. Bangladesh newspapers generally do not respond immediately in providing fresh news. Only two web-based newspapers (Bdnews24.com and The Editor) update their sites frequently and one online edition of print newspapers (Prothom Alo) hosts two update editions in a day. 7 (25%) newspapers run scroll box, of them six are online editions and one is purely web-based. Update ticker is available in 4 (17.39%) online newspapers compared to 3(60%) of web-based ones.

CONCLUSION

As findings say, online newspapers of Bangladesh provide limited level of interactivity, which is in line with previous studies and literatures. Contents availability and accessing to the contents navigating through the category/page links are the most prevalent layers of interactivity. Options of interpersonal communication, adding information, stories, chat rooms, discussion forums are significantly absent. One of the great challenges of online journalism is to provide fresh news to the audiences utilizing technological facilities. Bangladesh newspapers prove their remarkable weakness concerning immediacy.

In few options, online editions of print newspapers are better and web-based ones are more improved in some options. Overall, purely web-based newspapers are to some extent advanced in providing interactive options.

It is not surprising that the online editions of print newspapers would be practicing journalism with traditional mindset, serving by only providing news/views

or other contents. They would not be sincere enough to get engaged in communication with audiences and would provide minimum number of interactive options. However, online newspapers, specially online-only ones should concentrate on providing options of interaction between a medium and its audiences. These options, in real sense, would turn audiences the participants of the process and eventually it would lead a change in the culture of journalism.

The limitation of the study is, it serves as a preliminary one and it looks only into the options on the home pages and does not explore further if all the options readily functioning or not throughout the websites. Further study should be conducted in this regard. Studies on users' experiences and expectations concerning interactivity could also be areas for further investigation.

Appendix 1: Online newspapers with their web address

Online Editions of Print Newspapers

- AL-Ihsan <http://www.al-ih-san.net>
- The Bangladesh Today <http://www.thebangladeshtoday.com>
- The Daily Amader Shomoy <http://amadershomoy.com>
- Daily Amar Desh <http://www.amardeshbd.com>
- Daily Bhorer Kagoj <http://bhorerkagoj.net>
- The Daily Inqilab <http://www.dailyinqilab.com>
- The Daily Ittefaq <http://www.ittefaq.com>
- Daily Jugantor <http://www.jugantor.com>
- The Daily Manab Zamin <http://www.manabzamin.net>
- Daily Noya Digonto <http://www.dailynayadiganta.com>
- The Daily Prothom Alo <http://www.prothom-alo.com>
- The Daily Sangbad <http://www.thedailysangbad.com>
- The Daily Sangram <http://www.daily-sangram.com>
- The Daily Star <http://www.thedailystar.net>
- Dainik Destiny <http://www.dainikdestiny.com>
- The Financial Express <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com>
- The Independent <http://www.theindependent-bd.com>
- Jai jai din <http://www.jajaidin.com>
- Janakantha <http://www.dailyjanakantha.com>
- New Age <http://www.newagebd.com>
- The New Nation <http://nation.ittefaq.com>
- The News Today <http://www.newstoday-bd.co>
- Shamokal <http://www.shamokal.com>

Purely Web-based Newspapers

- 3rdEYE <http://www.3rdeyeinfo.net>
- Bdnews24.com <http://www.bdnews24.com>
- The Editor <http://www.the-editor.net>
- ENB News <http://www.enbnewsbd.com>
- News from Bangladesh <http://newsfrombangladesh.net>

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