Online news interactivity in four European countries: a pre-political dimension
(comparing practices in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy)

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A large body of opinion describes interactivity as means to overcome the unidirectionality of the message from editorial systems to audiences. Many have envisaged in this potential the beginning of an era in which audiences can influence editorial policy with their opinions and comments, can provide news, can have a better relationship with 'their' newspapers and can form a new relationship with other readers, building a more active public opinion. This analysis looks to the development of a more democratic media in which people, using the Internet, can significantly condition the process of news production and the development of political actions. Unfortunately, this debate has often been concentrated in an abstract examination of the ideal possibilities of the Internet as a new metamedium, rather than exploration of what really has happened. Emails and forums are commonly seen as major elements of interactivity. Within the COST A 20 Action exploring the Impact of Internet on Mass Media, a sub-group of researchers was formed willing to investigate what is going on in online newspapers with regard to interactivity. The sub-group limited itself to observing the forums present in the front pages of newspaper web editions. This unit of analysis has been chosen because forums present objective data, easily accessible by audiences and so also by researchers. The sample of newspaper sites comprises some of the major online daily newspapers in the following countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal. This sample is part of that used in the research of offline and online newspapers carried out by COST A20 Newspaper Group, and the project should be seen as a follow-up study that aims to deepen the understanding of participating researchers of interactivity. October 12, 2004 was the day, chosen by the researches of the participating countries to save the data from the forums of the sample. The paper will present the results of the study of the structure and meaning of interactivity in forums. It will also compare the spectrum of the strategies carried out in terms of applying interactivity confined to users, interactivity between users and editorial staffs, and interactivity between users and specific journalists or moderators.

Introduction

I nteractivity, perhaps by its nature, as a "multidimensional construct" (Downes & McMillan, 2000), has many definitions (cf. Heeter, 1989; Aoki, n.d.), and a large corpus of opinion describes it as a means of overcoming the mono-directionality of the message from the source to various publics and creating a variety of communicative forms (Hoffman, Novak & Chatterjiee, 1995; Deuze, 2003).

There are, essentially, three approaches to interactivity. One is the communicative approach, which elaborates interactivity as a dimension concerned with the communicators and the exchange of messages between them (Bretz, 1983). It defines as "interactive" those media that simulate the interpersonal exchange through communicative channels (Carey, 1989) and which make multi-directional communicative flows possible (Markus, 1987). This simulation, however, is clumsy, in that the interactivity made possible by is a rather impoverished version of interaction. The two parts do not have equal rights over the communicative space, nor do they have the same communicative ability and competence.

The second approach is that of the media environment (Steur, 1995), which maintains that interactive media are those in which users' participation can modify the form and content of the medial environment in real time. This approach can be further developed in the light of actor network theories (Latour, 1996) and social co-construction (Pinch, Oudshoorn, 2003). While traditional media have a mono-directional hierarchic structure, the new interactive media offer a platform in which users can also become producers, and re-balance the power relation in favour of the public (Bucher, 2002).

Lastly, the third approach, proposed by Kim & Sawnhey (2002, 221), is that which situates interactivity within the power relations that structure the communication. Let us remember that power in communication means, for the producer, the proactive power to select the argument, to decide how to present it, to determine who can be the interlocutor, as well as to determine the time, duration, place and cost of the communication, while, for the consumer, power means at most the capacity of reaction and defence. This is the power to refuse the acquisition and/or consumption of the communicative product, to consume it in a way or with a purpose that is different from that expected or desired by producers, perhaps giving partial attention to its function, contesting and refusing the product itself and publicly manifesting this attitude, etc. Certainly, the classic user's power is that of reaction and defence, but there is a significant difference between not being proactive and being "passive" (as the public is often depicted). In any case, as underlined by Schönbach (1997) and Vorderer (1995), passivity can be a desire and a legitimate right on the part of the public. If we consider that the concept of passivity is contiguous with that of repose, we cannot blame the post-modern individual if he refuses the "fascination" of activity in the sphere of social reproduction, when he should be recharging his energies.

These three approaches could help us to understand important aspects of interactivity, but so far they have been used, albeit with qualification, above all to hail the bi-directional potentialities of new media as the beginning of an era in which publics can influence editorial policies, procure news and even co-produce news together with editorial staffs, have a more equal and reciprocal relationship with "their" newspapers, and create a new relationship with other readers. This tends towards a more democratic society, in which people can condition the elaboration of political action in a significant way. Given these premises, interactivity is seen technically as the possibility of shifting control over production and distribution of information from the source to the public (Rafaeli, 1988, 115) and giving more power to users. Pearce (1997, 224) even arrives at considering interactivity as a "subversive" element, in that it could redesign the structure of mass communication.

This debate has often concentrated on an abstract examination of the ideal possibilities of the Internet as a new meta-medium, rather than on the exploration of what has really happened. Rather than asking, "What do users want?" it has asked, "What should users want, given the technical possibilities offered by the Internet?" Consequently, it is often difficult to separate rhetoric from analysis of the facts; celebration of the technical possibilities of interactivity of new media from the practices of use that have been grafted on to these new interactivities. For instance, from research conducted on the development of online newspapers from 1997 to 2003 in the USA, it emerges that, after half a decade, the sites have changed radically in respect of a series of variables. They are updated more frequently and are the object of continuous experimentation in layout and so on (Greer, Mensing, 2003). However, it is in interactivity that the slowest change is registered.

In Europe, after a first decade of experimentation and implementation of interactivity in online newspaper sites, have users and their behaviour challenged the power of the media, and, if so, to what end? Has there been a broadening of democracy, as many scholars claim? Are news topics still being defined by the media groups, or has the net's capacity for interactivity extended the number of voices discussing public issues?

Method and aims of the research

To answer to these questions, we undertook a project which aims to explore how, in four European countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy – the 'front' page of the most widespread online dailies embody interactivity in practice. Given the continuous changes in the structure of online newspaper interactivity, we decided to collect data related to the selected outlets on October 12, 2004. Generally, interactivity is composed of many elements: e-mail, forums, chat, newsgroups, polls, hypertext links, portals, online games, the ability to personalise the homepage (e.g. choice of language), news topic personalisation, and so on (Greer, Mensing, 2003). Among these elements, we chose to explore

only the following interactive elements shown in the webpage: e-mails, forums, letters to the editor, polls, chat and/or interviews with prominent people. Starting from here, we sought, as our first objective, to analyse the structure of interactivity and the main models applied.

The second objective has been to observe forums in particular. We chose to highlight these as our second unit of analysis because they provide objective data, easily accessible by users and also by researchers (Chae, 2004). It would be interesting to analyse e-mails and polls, but it is problematic to collect email messages, while polls are used irregularly and form a one-way interactivity that does not influence the news or discussions agenda. In the forums, we analysed the dimensions and the characteristics of communicative fluxes with users and also the organisation models applied by editorial staff to manage them.

Our third objective has been to analyse messages published in forums, if any, on the specified day. This also allowed us to study the models applied by users to interact with online newspapers, that is to examine the nature of communication between users and editorial staffs, the identity expressed in the forums by journalists and users, and the type of relation and ritualisation which develops among users, journalists and forumists.

A question with which we had to deal immediately is the fact that online newspaper forums also comprise an archive of messages, often dating to the beginning of the section. New messages and old messages share the same place, creating a spatial contiguity that is unfamiliar. This differs from how a newspaper generally distinguishes the news from the social memory, dedicating to this last a special section, which is properly the archive. Also considering this specific structure of forums, we decided to limit our analysis to messages published October 12, 2004 and present in forums on or linked from the front page.

The countries from which our sample newspapers are drawn are part of a group which carried out research on offline and online newspapers under the COST A20 Action 'The Impact of the Internet on Mass Media' and the project should be seen as a follow-up study that aims to deepen our understanding of interactivity. Precisely, we analyse a sample constituted by the following online publications: Bulgaria – *Standart* (Standard), *Monitor* and *Sega* (Now); Estonia – *Postimees* (Postman) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (Estonian Daily), two national mid-market (sometimes also called quality papers in order to distinguish from the national tabloid) Estonian–language dailies; Ireland – *The Irish Times,* the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Examiner;* and Italy – *Il Corriere della Sera* (The Evening Messenger), *La Repubblica* (The Republic), *Il Sole 24 Ore* (The Sun 24 Hours), *La Stampa* (The Press) and *Il Messaggero* (The Messenger), which are the five most widespread newspapers in this country.

On a methodological level, the present research has some weak points. First, for technical reasons, we could not fix the time of saving the online pages; hence the number of forums and messages is not exact. The number of contacts per day would be more precise if all online versions could be saved at 24:00 and also if another collection of data had been produced on a holiday, as some newspapers

could be expected to have fewer public responses on such days. Another weak point is the frequent uncertainty in the categorisation of readers' identities, given that it is often difficult to distinguish a name from a surname or a nickname and to understand properly the management strategies of forums. In fact, our data is inert, because they are not supported by interviews with the same journalists who manage them. If these are the weak points, the strong point is the visualisation, albeit partial, of the phenomenon of online newspaper interactivity at a European level. There is a certain balance among the selected countries, as they comprise a northern country (Ireland), a southern country (Italy) and two eastern countries (Bulgaria and Estonia).

In any case, the data allow us to carry out the analysis from several points of views, but, given that this research project is still in progress, we will illustrate here only preliminary results. The first part of the article is devoted to illustrating aims and methods; in the second part, we will move on to show the results, analysing the structure and the more frequent models of interactivity applied in online newspapers; organisation of types of forums; communicative flux between readers and editorial staffs; modalities of self-presentation, both of readers and journalists; and the rituality of their relation in forums.

Preliminary results

Comparative dimension between the different structures and models of interactivity

The structure of interactivity in the homepages of the thirteen newspapers as it appears on October 12, 2004 is rather uneven, as can be seen in Table 1.

Country	Newspaper	Forum	E-mail	Poll	Interview; Letters to the editor + other forms
Bulgaria	*Standart*	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes, SMS
	Monitor	None	Yes	Irregular	Yes
	Sega	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes
Estonia	*Paevaleht*	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	Irregular
	Postimees	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	No
Ireland	*Irish Times*	None	Yes	1 (daily)	Yes
	I. Independent	None	Yes	1 (daily)	None
	Irish Examiner	Yes	Yes	None	None
Italy	*Il Corriere della Sera*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	La Repubblica	Yes	Yes	Yes	None
	Il Sole 24 Ore	None	Yes	None	Yes
	La Stampa	Yes	Yes	Irregular	None
	Il Messaggero	None	Yes	None	None

Table 1. The structure of interactivity

Among the interactive elements we considered, the only one present, or linked from, all thirteen front pages is e-mail, which in principle allows readers to write to the news outlet. The management of the e-mail remains mysterious, in the sense that in the various sites there is no trace of this communicative interplay between users and editorial staffs. Forums are present on the whole in more than half of cases: in Bulgaria they are in evidence in two on three online newspapers, in Estonia in the two newspapers analysed, in Ireland in one of three and in Italy in three of five. Polls are used quite regularly in almost half of the sample analysed. Letters to the editor are relatively rare, and they correspond to those published in the print edition.

In order to analyse properly the main differences and similarities between the various structures and models of interactivity in the four countries, let us provide short qualitative descriptions per country.

In **Bulgaria,** the general impression of the online versions of the analysed newspapers is that they do not differ greatly from their printed versions. They are not updated during the day, have meagre hyperlinking, offer static images and no sound, and editorial boards spare only a skeleton staff for the maintenance of the Internet sites. Their greatest advantage is the opportunity to read them on the office or home computer, and for the Diaspora to obtain up-to-date information in Bulgarian about the events in Bulgaria and the world.

Comparing the data, one can see that online editions focus on the opportunities presented by the letters/messages, invitation to comment and search options. On-line editions are also attempting to break new ground in polls/user surveys, forums and internal links to points in same news service.

On October 12, Standart publishes eight news items, *Monitor* 6 and *Sega* 2. *Sega* provides most options for interactivity. Practically every news item can create a forum, and these are organised in a section under the title SkyForum. Comments are grouped in Forum Clubs that follow the main compartments of the newspaper: Society, Economics, Politics, Culture, Sports, Contacts, etc., under each of which many forums on different topics can be found. These usually are managed by a webmaster and users correspond with each other except for when, twice monthly, they communicate for two hours with an invited guest. The editors do not take part in this conversation. The users, some of them regular participants in the forums, often exchange off-topic opinions. They often use inappropriate language and a diversity of emoticons. Some of them include photos or other images. Users can also play games, chat, visit virtual clubs on different topics, exchange photos, etc. The first news item of the sample generated 143 comments in the forum (50 of them visible), and the second 31. The communication was carried on only between users hidden behind nicknames, and there was no comment by the editor.

Standart offers several options for interactivity: comments (for the Bulgarian and for the English on-line edition), e-mail letters to the editor that are invisible, and an SMS service. The comments are published with the e-mail addresses of the senders in a section entitled 'Contents of the books of comments'. Forums, i.e. exchange of opinions either between users or between users and the editors, practically do not

exist, although the comments are carefully studied by some of the editors of the Society section of the newspaper. A small number of the comments (two to three) are chosen to be printed in the off-line edition on the following day. Out of the nine published comments, only two were related to one of the eight new items published on the front page of the on-line edition. Interactivity in this case exists only on the basis of publishing the received comments in the on-line edition.

The newspaper with the fewest interactivity elements from the sample is *Monitor.* It offers only e-mail letters to the editors, which are invisible. In a similar practice to that of *Standart*, some of the most interesting messages are published in the print edition under the title 'Analysis'. Due to the high level of bad language in messages, *Monitor* has cancelled the forums as a major interactivity service. Deciding to open the web site of the newspaper to more readers, it cancelled the registration of the users. This led, because of difficulty in ensuring fair voting, to the cancellation of the poll/user survey on important topics of public interest.

In **Estonian** online dailies, the structure of interactivity is composed of forums, polls and e-mails. The dominant feature of forums is the ability for readers/users to comment on each news item, which leads to a high number of contributions. In practice, very few news items draw no comment at all. Readers also can evaluate these comments. In the context of the present research, the collective commentaries of each news item are regarded as a forum. Most of the commentators use nicknames, so it is not possible to know how many real persons are discussing one or another topic.

Eesti Päevaleht provides a special "top news" list of the most commented-upon news items. In summer 2004, one of the dailies, *Eesti Päevaleht,* considered ending this practice and opening only a selected number of news items for discussion, but the proposal was not adopted. Since autumn 2004, the other daily, *Postimees,* has not provided space for comment for certain topics that relate to private information or sensitive issues. *Postimees* enables readers to start a new forum, and most of the topics are linked with news. *Eesti Päevaleht* has an online interview every two to three months, in which readers can ask questions of a public figure.

Online editions of daily newspapers in **Ireland** carry little material generated by readers. This dearth of interactive content can, at least in the first instance, be put down to the severely constrained opportunity to contribute. In only one of three newspapers studied is it apparent from the front page that readers can post to a fully-fledged forum, i.e. one in which readers can themselves attempt to set the agenda by starting discussion threads. However, since the day on which data was collected, the publisher has closed this message board, citing legal precautions. None of the three titles allows readers to comment in a forum tied to specific new items. Each re-publishes letters from the print edition, none of which carries anonymous letters (although in some instances identities are withheld by the newspaper). The willingness to re-publish these items, contrasted with the cautious approach to newer forms of reader interactivity and expression, tends to indicate that, in addition to legal inhibitions, online editions remain rooted in the concepts, culture and practices of print newspapers.

The front page of *The Irish Times*'s portal, ireland.com, and the Breaking News section of the online newspaper edition itself – though not the front page of the online edition – carry a daily poll inviting Yes/No responses, after which readers are invited to post comments under the heading 'Your Reaction' in the Breaking News section. Readers are told to keep contributions relevant to the editorially determined topic, and posts are said to be filtered by a monitor for abusive content, offensive language or libel. Comments have to be submitted before 11.30pm each day. The poll on October 12 drew 106 responses, including some substantial and reflective contributions. Postings are presented in a single sequence, rather than in threads. There is no evidence of editorial staff responding.

The *Irish Independent* online edition publishes print edition letters online and also offers a Yes/No poll on a pre-determined topic. Readers are allowed no means of posting responses directly, but are invited to do so by email. They are advised that they should keep contributions short, and that abusive messages will not be posted. On the day of observation, no responses are published (although contributions, usually fewer than 10, are carried on some other days).

The Irish Examiner website advertises a bulletin board as well as a chat room. It also publishes print edition letters, though these are not directly linked from the front page. At the time of data collection, the chat room was empty, and the last forum post was 12 days old. A recheck in early 2005 found that forum links from the saved forum entry page led to an undated notice informing the reader that the forum and chat functions had been suspended "due to concerns on legal vulnerability". The Examiner forum had used the widely available vBulletin system to hosts its forums, of which there were four, dedicated to 'People and Places' (748 posts), 'Current Affairs' (253), 'Business' (18) and 'Sport' (3).

In **Italy**, the structure of interactivity in the five homepages varies widely. The only interactive element present in all five newspapers is e-mail, while forums and polls are quite widespread (three newspapers of five). Other elements, like letters to the editor and interviews with experts, or chats with prominent persons, are present more sporadically. We could say that *Il Corriere, La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* have a high interactive structure, *Il Sole 24 Ore* low and *Il Messaggero* very low, in the sense that this newspaper has only e-mail as an interactive element. In the three outlets with high interactivity, readers are asked to keep contributions short, and are advised that abusive messages will not be posted.

The interactive space of *Il Corriere della Sera* is constituted firstly by the online publication of letters to the editor which appear in the offline newspaper, and then by seven forums managed by prominent journalists of the offline outlet who have their own following of readers. In addition, five other forums are managed by experts. Anonymous moderators manage another 43 forums, where online editorial staff set a theme that readers discuss. Numbers of contributions vary greatly, and editors are not always able to create reader interest. On October 12, 2004, for example, the only two open forums were 'The crisis of tourism in Italy: reasons and remedies', which generated two messages, and 'Championship season 2004/05', which drew 65 messages. Elsewhere, polls and invitations to vote are fre-

quent elements in entertainment sections, but not in news and current affairs.

La Repubblica has the biggest interactive space among Italian online dailies, formed in turn by three different spaces. In the first, forums are managed by an anonymous moderator. On October 12, 2004, there were thirty forums, but all had already closed. Consequently, we couldn't collect any messages published on that day. A second space is dedicated specifically to polls. Another space is formed by a section entitled 'Interactivity', where the newspaper actively seeks opinions on specific topics, or runs competitions based on reader contributions, including photographs. Apart from these more conventional spaces, three forums are dedicated to stories, where the emphasis is on narrative rather than discussion: the first, on rock music, carries 502 posts; the second, entitled 'Life as a Teacher', comprises 236 stories; and the forum "My University", has 1,127 stories.

Il Sole 24 Ore appears to follow a minimalist strategy for interactivity, with no forums apparent on the front page but with instead experts who respond on issues proposed by readers. The site carries forums, but they are contained in various sections without being flagged on the front page. On October 12, 2004, eight experts respond to eight questions posed by readers. These responses are provided via a link which encourages the reader to learn more by means of paid access to the databases.

From this review, there are two elements that demand further reflection. One is the publication of the letters to the editor in the Irish and Italian online newspapers and the other is this blocking of offensive material in Bulgaria, Ireland and Italy. As regards letters, we must say that, although this feature is limited to two countries of the four, it is the model which largely inspires the 'new' interactivity of online newspapers, in respect of both the structure and meaning of messages and the means of managing messages. This feature implies a uni-directional relation with readers: most letters don't get an answer. Readers' letters in newspapers don't represent a model of interaction between editorial staff and readers, but the assimilation and application of readers of the uni-directional model of mass communications.

Messages on forums maintain the formal expression of letters to the editor and share their ambiguity: they remain both a communication addressed to a specific person in his/her professional function and a communication which its author hopes enters the public arena. Furthermore, forum contributions receive the same treatment from online editorial staff as that applied to letters by offline staff. Like these, messages are selected and a heading is attributed to them.

The second element is the need to moderate the apparently high level of abusive or ill-mannered contributions. Clearly, readers use forums in order to vent their anger, as if all of their frustrations accumulated over centuries with no means of expression were somehow invading the public sphere.

Forums

From a specific analysis of forums, we can observe in Table 2 the communicative flux in the forums of the first page of online newspapers in the four countries on October 12, 2004.

Newspapers in the four countries	Number of forums	Number of messages
Bulgaria: *Standart*	1	2
Monitor	0	0
Sega	2	174
Estonia: *Postimees*	38	402
Eesti Paevaleht	24	1094
Ireland: *Irish Times*	0	0
Irish Independent	0	0
Irish Examiner	4	0
Italy: *Il Corriere della Sera*	14	211+38 answers from ed. staff
La Repubblica	33	0
Il Sole 24 ore	0	8*
La Stampa	15	51+11 answers from ed. staff
Il Messaggero	0	0

* Messages sent to the editorial staff

Table 2. The flux of interactivity in front page forums

The data described in this table suggests that there is clearly a burgeoning of the space dedicated to readers' opinions. The technical possibilities offered by the web are exploited amply in half of the cases. But we are still far from being able to consider forums as a driver of ideas, reflections and stimuli in which readers have such influence that they challenge the power of editorial staff. Media owners have not yet invested enough to build an organisation model inside online newspaper editorial staffs which might face this bi-vocal exchange in a real way. But, while readers' contributions remain minimal, the cultural impact of forums on the editorial staff must have a certain relevance.

Nor have readers constructed an interactive model from below. As has been calculated several times, online interactivity on the whole concerns only almost 10% of Internet users. The large majority of people on the net are not interested to interactivity; they prefer to remain anonymous and silent. They are not interested in investing time, money and effort to re-design the web's information, to modify the process of production, elaboration and distribution of news online. Surfers at a mass level have remained the sons and daughters of the book and newspaper readers, interpreters of a model that has separated reading activity from writing.

In order to find answers to our research questions, we need to analyse at least the problem: who is communicating with whom, and what is the level of identification between the communicators. On the basis of empirical finding of these 13 newspapers we could identify six main "traffic" types.

Possible communicative fluxes in online newspapers (*traffic models*):
1- Journalist is setting the agenda, users respond and journalist might answer
2- Moderator (webmaster, a reader or someone else) is controlling the forum

and users communicate with him/her, other users or a specific user

3- Expert provides answers on a particular subject, users communicate with him/her, with other users or a specific user

4- Users communicate with each other

5- Users communicate with each other and the journalist

6- Media organisation sets the agenda, users react and the forum is managed by an anonymous moderator.

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

Table 3. Types of communication models applied in the forums

Comparing the data of the forums in the examined newspapers, it can be noted that the prevailing traffic model is No. 6 (media organization sets the agenda and users react and managed by an anonymous moderator), followed by No. 4 (users communicate with each other) and No. 3 (expert answers on the domain).

To complete the picture of relations between readers and online newspapers and of their ritualisation, we examined the measure of their relational closeness. We began by considering in which way readers choose to reveal their identity. We reconstructed eight types of identification of the persons who interact and five types of the identity of the media organisation.

Models pertaining to the identity of forum contributors:

1. User identified by nickname
2. User identified by e-mail
3. User identified by signature
4. User identified by name
5. User identified by nickname and e-mail
6. User identified by name, surname and e-mail
7. User identified by name and e-mail

8. User entirely anonymous

Model pertaining to the identity of media organisation:
a. No identification (one should assume that someone from the staff is doing the job)
b. Journalist identified by signature
c. Anonymous moderator
d. Identified moderator
e. Identified experts

The results are illustrated in Table 4. The identity of interacting persons is prevailingly hidden behind a nickname. The prevailing model for the identity of media organisations is collective identity, followed by the anonymous moderator and identified experts.

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

Table 4. Identity models in the forums

Discussion

From the data collected and illustrated so far, it seems that the power relation between media organisations and readers is not in play. Contrary to what others have stated (cf. Bucher, 2002), several elements delineate a picture where the power hierarchy seems to remain unaltered. Users continue to seem, as Lieb (2003) writes, a "protected minority", and many online newspapers seem "mausoleums instead of saloons". Readers who write in forums are hosted in a space which is public, but which belongs to the publisher. Feedback from readers is allowed, not solicited, by the editorial staff. Finally, it is always the moderator who decides when to open and to close a forum. All these elements show further the asymmetric nature of the relation between readers and online newspa-

pers. Certainly also, users apply several strategies to defy, necessarily in a furtive and silent way, the agenda-setting of forums. For example, they discuss issues other than the official theme of the forum itself. Another practice is to articulate one's own thoughts at length (moderators continually urge users to write briefly). But these are defence strategies in the sense that they are reactive, rather than positive strategies aimed at radically changing the role of the reader.

Moreover, there is not sufficient democracy to create a public opinion constructed of distinct individuals and which is able to exploit the strength of diffusion allowed by the net. It is still the anonymous masses that speak. This tendency towards under-developed identity seems to mean that readers do not perceive the potential of revealing their ideas and opinions. We are still not in a stage of full disclosure; rather, we are in a pre-political, antecedent stage, where private opinions are made public for their own sake.

More than to democracy, one should look to the spectacularisation of communication. In interactivity in online newspapers, often what is in play is display and self-exhibition. So this phenomenon pertains more to the social than the political sphere. It may be that Internet users express the will to assert information power not via online newspapers, but in other forms, like 'we-journalism', blogs and so on, that are not connected with newspapers. Online newspaper forums are instead often inhabited by fragile individuals who are still afraid to deal fully with a public dimension.

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