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INTERACTIVITY AND DEMOCRACY IN ONLINE MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF DISCUSSION FORUMS AND E-MAIL ON NEWS24.COM

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Journalism and Media Studies.

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ABSTRACT

The simplistic, optimistic view surrounding Internet discourse suggests that because of the Net's ability to quickly and cheaply distribute vast amounts of information and facilitate communication, citizens can use digital networks to influence decision-making in society, which will lead to democratisation in communication. While there is indeed an inherent interactive capacity in the technologies of new media that facilitates discussion and debate, computer-mediated communication generally does not live up to the democratic hype. More to the point, the discursive inequalities and exclusions that result from the uneven distribution of power in society tend to be reproduced in the online environment.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The potential for interactivity in new media, where traditional boundaries between producer and consumer are blurred, provide opportunities to create virtual public spaces in which civic discourse can take place. However, up to now there has been little research into what readers actually do in discussion contexts in online platforms provided by online news media and what relationships - if any - they forge with editorial staff and their fellow readers. Moreover, the implications of their participation on the character of news and on the larger democratic culture remain largely unexplored.

Until recently, mass communications researchers have tended to overlook the Internet and the related field of computer-mediated communications (CMC). Indeed, as Morris and Ogan point out, mass communication researchers have tended to stay "within the traditional forms of broadcast and print media, which fit much more conveniently into models for appropriate research topics and theories of mass communication" (in McQuail 2002:135). They argue that if researchers "continue to largely disregard the research potential of the Internet, their theories about communication will become less useful" (McQuail 2002:135).

The tradition of mass communication research has traditionally focused on newspapers, radio and television for a host of reasons. However, argue Morris and Ogan, as technology changes and media "converge" - the overlap in technologies used by the

broadcasting, telecommunications and computing sectors - these research categories need to become more flexible (McQuail 2002).

Mass communication researchers have overlooked the Internet's potential for a number of reasons. First, because of the way the Internet developed, it didn't fit neatly into researchers' ideas about mass media since they were stuck in models of print and broadcast media (McQuail 2002). Second, computer-mediated communication at first resembled interpersonal communication and thus became part of the domain of disciplines such as education and management information sciences (McQuail 2002). However, the most important limitation on doing mass communication research into the Internet has been on a theoretical level (McQuail 2002).

With this in mind, this dissertation aims to explore the extent to which there is interactive capacity in new media and the extent to which this can enable debate and discussion which promotes democracy. More specifically, the research will focus on News24.com (http://www.news24.com), one of South Africa's most popular news websites as measured by the number of unique users accessing its pages, and in particular its interactive capacity. The research will focus specifically on two areas of interactivity: News24.com's "General" and "Zimbabwe" discussion forums (bulletin boards) and readers' electronic mail (e-mail) to News24.com's editorial staff. The editorial staff's attitudes and work practices as it relates to interactivity will also be explored.

"Networked connections between individual computers and the gradual formation of ever higher level networks of networks have made possible a new kind of written conversation" (Hirschkop 1998:211). At its most basic form this is represented by e-mail, which allows for the rapid exchange of correspondence on a global scale. Moreover, there are discussion lists and chat forums, which provide something of an open forum to which anybody with access to a computer may contribute.

Chat rooms are the most advanced in terms of interactivity. Here participants conduct "real-time" conversations over the computer screen. Contributions appear instantly and are responded to instantly as well. Chat rooms are said to be "'oral' in time scale, written in form, and electronic in range" (Hirschkop 1998:211). All forms of interactivity are distinctive in one important way; they serve as the basis for so-called "virtual communities", communities which are founded on the exchange of messages over a computer network.

Interactivity is one of the most examined issues of online media. The common approach to research has been to list a series of features which supposedly represent interactivity then assess how interactive an online paper is depending on the presence or absence of these features (Boczkowski 2002). But this has not been very useful, since online media may have a range on interactive tools which are rarely utilised for this purpose by the readers. However, this exercise nevertheless provides some sort of foundation for determining how interactive a particular website may be.

Interactivity in terms of online media is rather a confusing concept and has essentially come to mean two different things. First, it describes the process of empowering users with additional control over the sequence in which information is presented to them, in other words, users can interact with content (Boczkowski 2002). Second, interactivity refers to the increase in interaction of news consumers with news producers, or feedback (Boczkowski 2002). Here users communicate with online staff and other users employing tools such as e-mail, forums and chat rooms.

Interactive environments such as forums and chat rooms have been positively received by scholars since they seem to be the ideal vehicle for increasing users' participation. Pride (1998), cited in Boczkowski (2002:277), notes "with embedded newsgroups online newspapers could become a functional town square combining news, views and criticisms". Jankowski and Van Selm (2000), cited in Boczkowski (2002:277), suggest that "the role of online news sites in fostering participatory democracy should be an important focus of future research". Friedland (1996) suggests that by "combining forums with non-linear narratives and archiving capabilities a collection of views can be archived, reread, explored and connected in new ways that offer new models of problem solving that expand on the narrative boundaries of traditional journalism" (cited in Boczkowski 2002:277).

As mentioned previously, there has been little empirical research into what users actually do in Internet discussion contexts. In light of this, this study aims to make a contribution in this regard and analyse, in a South African context, the type of studies conducted by

Light and Rogers of the forums on *The Guardian* (1999) and Schultz on *The New York Times* (2000).

News24.com is one of the largest (as measured by page impressions and unique users) South African news websites. News24.com's content partners within the Media24 group include the Afrikaans daily newspapers *Beeld*, *Die Burger* and *Volksblad*, the Afrikaans weekly *Rapport*, the English weekly *City Press*, and weekly specialist finance magazines *Finansies & Tegniek* and *Finance Week*. Other information providers are *The Natal Witness*, Reuters, Associated Press, Sapa, ECNA and AFP (through Sapa), Pana and African Eye News Service. As a distributor of news, News24.com supplies a continuous feed to affinity websites such as the personal finance site Moneymax and M-Web, and also maintains Afrikaans websites for *Beeld*, *Die Burger*, *Volksblad*, *Rapport*, *City Press* and other regional newspapers.

News24.com covers general, sport and business news, with an emphasis on news from South Africa and Africa. The main sections are South Africa, Business, Sport, Entertainment, Africa, World, Politics, Sci-Tech, Health and Weather. Special news events, such as the Rugby World Cup, are covered in detail. The website hosts a variety of interactive features. Readers can, for example, e-mail the newsroom and participate in discussions ranging from general issues to politics to sport. Readers are also encouraged to comment on stories via links to relevant discussion forums. Content is also produced from readers' postings on the discussion forums, which is designed to promote further discussion and debate on a particular issue.

The first area of enquiry in this study is to determine the interactive capacity of the News24.com website. The actual availability of interactive options on News24.com will be considered in the context of what interactive options online media utilise in order to encourage interactive communication. Schultz notes that while the Internet has the potential to increase interactivity in journalism, media organisations do not "necessarily exploit this opportunity effectively" and many online newspapers only provide "token interactive options" (1999:1).

The second area of enquiry is the discussion forums. There is little doubt that forums increase the interactivity of the mass media overall by extending the opportunities for reader-to-reader communication. Forums that are surrounded by the online environment of a mass medium, such as News24.com, have specific advantages over other online settings. First, it is expected that the discussions will be related to the content of the mass medium. Second, forums are not considered to be mere information boards, but distinct areas of discourse.

However, the perceived impersonal and ephemeral character of computer-mediated communication may render users oblivious to the need to maintain some degree of civility. There is also the danger that freedom of speech and the related opportunities offered by the new technologies allow specific political groups to exploit public networks for their own benefit. The 'moderation versus freedom of speech' dilemma is a central issue in online interactivity and, as yet, is an unresolved one (Tsagarousianou 2000). The

forums provided by professional news media can nevertheless be protected against misuse by moderation and thus discussions of relatively high quality could be fostered (Shultz 2000). In addition, if journalists spent more time engaging with the 'public' on the forums instead of only maintaining them they could integrate the ideas into their writings – be that exclusively online, such as News24.com, or the online edition of a print publication like *The New York Times*. This would, arguably, have a marked impact on the type and range of news that it produced. However, in *The New York Times* survey, for example, 12 out of 19 journalists working for the publication admitted they do not even visit the newspaper's own online forums (Schultz 2000). More effort should be made to take reader response and reader-to-reader communication more seriously. But to do this, journalists would have to participate more frequently in forum discussions and the media would have to reflect what is going online in their newspaper products (Schultz 2000).

The third area of research is reader-to-journalist communication via e-mail. E-mail can serve as a fast and direct channel between readers, editors and reporters. Readers may want to comment on articles, make suggestions or ask specific questions. Using e-mail, readers may provide valuable news tips or attempt to involve the journalist in a more general discussion about a topic or the coverage of an issue in the media. In this context the use of e-mail by readers becomes an important tool for interactivity and is thus central to my research.

Schultz (2000) notes that it is not clear how much use readers make of e-mail to individual journalists or whether journalists are prepared for more discussion with their

readers. There appear to be two major obstacles with regard to this: newsroom time schedules do not consider discussions with the audience as an important part of the job. Also, research on traditional letters-to-the-editor suggests that reader responses tend to "express extreme opinions and often rather crude ideas" (Schultz 2000:212). In addition, there is the risk of getting a lot of 'hate' or 'junk' mail using e-mail communication (Schultz 2000).

Before providing further evidence from the discussion forums and the interviews about online interactivity, the literature on the concept of interactivity and the role of the media as an open forum for debate and discussion will be reviewed. In this regard, the debate about whether the Internet can reinvigorate the public sphere will be tackled. Then, findings from the discussion forums and interviews are presented. The analysis of these findings will question the hypothesis that because of the Internet's ability to quickly and cheaply distribute vast amounts of information and facilitate communication, it can promote democracy. It will be shown that while there is indeed an inherent interactive capacity in new media that facilitates discussion and debate, computer-mediated communication generally does not live up to its democratic potential.

Chapter Two: Literature review | Theoretical framework

2.1 Interactivity

Publishing has traditionally been a one-way process whereby publishers provide content for readers. After reading a story in the newspaper, listening to the radio news or seeing an interview on television, people are often moved to talk to each other about what they have just read, heard or seen. Some may even be motivated to participate in a forum that has traditionally been made available to the public. In such an example, the media is seen as a channel, as a means of connecting a sender and a receiver. These methods of feedback may be determined by the audience - as in the case with letters and complaint lines – or they may be determined by the publisher, such as Vox Pops or reaction pieces (Light & Rogers 1999).

The forms of interaction that take place in these traditional settings are very different from those that take place in face-to-face situations. Because of production and distribution costs, "the means of publishing have mainly been owned by commercial interests who protect their investments by controlling the quality of the message. Thus, even where the public or its chosen representative is involved in giving a view, a decision is made by the publisher about what to include, and some reshaping may take place" (Light & Rogers 1999:3). Tsagarousianou believes that the success of electronic democracy projects "will depend on their capacity to support and enable new forms of "publicness" within a public sphere that is dominated by privately owned and controlled media and the state" (1998:175).

However, the interactivity of the Internet has come to redefine the relationship between user and producer. These days, publishers have the chance to move away from simply presenting material – such as in a traditional model – to a situation where content can be negotiated with their audiences, allowing more opportunities for public exchange (Light & Rogers 1999). The Web also provides the potential for publishers to play host to the exchanges among the users of the site. Here the publisher provides the communication software and displays the results of the users' exchanges. In these ways, online publishing provides users with more potential for participation. Indeed, theorists, scholars and practitioners have repeatedly criticised the lack of communication between audiences and journalists. The interactive opportunities of the Internet can address some of these criticisms levelled at newspapers that they should use more than one type of feedback system.

"Interactivity" is the buzzword in any discussion about new communication technologies. However, the attraction and familiarity of the term at the same time may result in its true meaning not being fully considered (Hanssen et al 1997). Various classifications and typologies of the concept of interactivity have been put forward, with most definitions focusing on the communication process.

Interactivity has been defined as "the degree to which participants in a communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in, their mutual discourse" (Williams

et al 1985 cited in Hanssen et al 1997:62). This definition of interactivity suggests that three actions are required in order for a system to be characterised as interactive.

> First, a message must be conveyed from communicator A to communicator B: second, there must be a response from B intended for A and based on what A has already said. Finally, there must be a response or reaction from A to B, based on B's earlier responses. Of these three actions, the second and third are always required for interaction to transpire.

Rafaeli (1988) suggests that social interaction theories must be looked at when clarifying the relationship between interactivity and communication. In the tradition of research into social interaction, interaction subsumes communication – it is not a part or subdivision of it. From this perspective, communication is seen as one way through which interaction is achieved:

> People engage in interactions, and exchange is what they were considered to be doing. But with communication as a primary focus of interest, interaction itself becomes a variable outcome, and exchange is no longer a given (Hanssen et al 1997:62).

Thus, with a focus on media and the impact of the new technologies on the communication setting, the interest is directed at communication with varying levels of

interaction. This, argues Rafaeli (1988), offers the possibility of placing interactivity in a framework based on a model of communication.

Schultz (2000) notes one has to be very careful when applying the term "interactive" because its precise meaning has not yet fully been explained. According to Schultz (2000), Rafaeli's (1988) thorough explication of interactivity and its levels is the most useful because it can be applied to empirical research and at the same time is not only viewed in technological terms.

Rafaeli (1988) is interested in group computer-mediated communication, and more specifically in the thread of messages, or the chain of interrelated messages. For Rafaeli, the degree to which communication transcends reaction is significant. Thus, to distinguish between different levels of interactivity one must ask whether, and to what extent, later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages. Also, in interactive communications the communication roles are interchangeable. Thus, the receiver can become the sender and vice versa.

According to Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997:3), "interactivity is a process-related, variable characteristic of communication settings" and like face-to-face communication, computer-mediated communication has the capacity to enable high interactivity. The engagement and sociability that are likely outcomes of interactivity lead Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997:3) to argue that the reason computer-mediated communication groups stick together is because of the concept of interactivity:

> The concept of interactivity directs our focus to the intersection of the psychological and the sociological, the bridge between mass and interpersonal communication, the meeting of mediated and direct communication, and the paradox of written vs spoken.

Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) argue that interactivity varies along a continuum:

> At one end is declarative (one-way) communication (e.g. most radio and television). Reactive (two-way) communication is further down the road. In reactive communication, one side responds to the other side. Fully interactive communication requires that later messages in any sequence take into account not just messages that preceded them, but also the manner in which the previous messages were interactive. In this manner interactivity forms a social reality (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997:3)

Rafaeli's (1988) model suggests that a lot of use of the new technologies is not interactive. However, along the continuum of interactivity there are settings that make it more likely that full interactivity will occur. Therefore, Rafaeli's distinctions between the various types of communication, and particularly that of the reactive type, can be suitably applied to mass media online (Schultz 2000).

Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) state face-to-face conversation cannot be used as the standard of comparison of group computer-mediated communication. They argue that most communication, including the face-to-face type falls short of full interactivity. Rafaeli and Sudweeks also claim that computer-mediated communication differs from conversation in terms of its "sheer size" and because "interruptability and turn-taking take on different meanings" (1997: 4).

Hanssen et al (1997:63) posits that the three levels of interactivity that Williams et al and Rafaeli differentiate can be called "biodirectionality" (lowest level of interactivity), "reactiveness", and "responsiveness" (highest level). Examples of biodirectionality include teletext, an example of the second level is videotext, while the third level can be achieved with technologies such as e-mail and Web-based discussion forums.

Jones notes that software developers continually strive to create interactions that are more and more "lifelike", and this is done in order to come as close as possible to the "conversation ideal" (1995:28). But he notes that much of which is most valuable in face-to-face interaction is actually the absence of information, the silence and the pauses between words and phrases. Thus, "one must realise that face-to-face communication does not necessarily break down boundaries between people and to adopt it as an ideal will likewise not necessarily facilitate communication, community building or (shared) understanding among people" (cited in Hanssen et al 1997:66).

The main differences between face-to-face, unmediated communication and computer-mediated communication are set out clearly by Hanssen et al (1997). Face-to-face communication is defined by the sender-receiver roles. Though these roles are interchangeable, it is not necessary. On the other hand, in computer-mediated communication information is not transmitted from sender to receiver. Depending on the communication technology used, communication activities can lead to a degree of interactivity between users and a multimedia system or between users among themselves (for example, e-mail, online discussion forums). Another difference between face-to-face and human-computer interaction (of which computer-mediated communication is one part) is that "conversation partners are much better able to react in unexpected situations and are also able to solve communication problems" (Hanssen et al 1997:63).

Audience members in traditional mass media are uniformly and impersonally approached. On the other hand, networks allow more individual media use. Users become editors in their own virtual environments, and in this way the communities in which they participate are no longer determined by geography but are based on shared interests. It has been argued that while forms of community are called virtual, they are in every sense very real (Rheingold 1999, Van Dijk 1996, Jones 1995). Some of the characteristics, including involvement, gossip and conflict give rise to the development of new meanings, values, rites and identities. As Van Dijk (1996 cited in Hanssen et al 1997:65) notes:

> There appears to be an entirely new type of community emerging from network communication. New forms of language, interaction and identity are

created. Virtual communities seem to be a perfect compromise between individuality and in modern (network) society.

Of his experiences in the WELL[1], Howard Rheingold notes that people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but "we leave our bodies behind" (1999:273). Madhavi Mallapraganda (2000) has shown in the case of immigrant Indians in the United States that the Web is being used to meet important social and cultural needs.

In an article entitled "The myth of interactivity on the Internet", McGovern (2002) takes a dim view of online communities. He argues these are more like clubs, associations or gangs than genuine communities. When properly focused, argues McGovern, "they can contribute to social bonding and/or aid in the sharing of knowledge" (2002:1). However, these online communities are often a "waste of time" and advertisers have shied away from them because they tend to contain "people with too much time on their hands and too little money in their pockets" (McGovern 2002:2).

2.2 Role of the media as open forum for public debate and discussion

The rise of multi-party democracies around the world and the emergence of new communications technologies have forced a rethink of media and its relationship to democracy (Curran 2000). In liberal theory, the media is viewed as an agency of information and debate that facilitates the functioning of democracy. The media educate

[1] The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) is a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private e-mail.

the electorate and assist voters to make an informed choice come election time. The media also provides a "channel of communication between the government and the governed, which helps society to clarify its objectives, formulate policy, co-ordinate activity and manage itself" (Curran 2000:127).

Through the freedom of the market, anyone is allowed to publish an opinion that ensures that all significant points of view are aired and that information is made available from varied sources. Thus, participation in public debate is extended and good governance is fostered since decision-making processes are exposed to opinion. This approach assumes, and rightly so, that democracies need informed and participant citizens to manage their affairs. It also assumes that public debate is more likely to produce rational and just outcomes if it takes into account differing views and interests.

However, Curran (2000) notes the belief in the free market system undermines what the media sets out to achieve in four ways. First, the free market restricts the effective freedom to publish. In other words, "the central square of the public sphere has been rendered inaccessible, in short, by the high cost of market entry" (Curran 2000:128). Second, the free market reduces the circulation of public information and renders people less well informed. Third, the free market restricts participation in public debate. Finally, the market undermines intelligent and rational debate.

2.3 The public sphere

Jurgen Habermas has attempted to relate a theory of media to democracy, that is, the collective and institutional forms of a modern political system. In his pioneering study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argued that a "bourgeois public sphere" came into being in the eighteenth century as a result of a variety of social changes in Germany, France and Britain. This consisted of large numbers of middle class men who came together "to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interest and concern, creating a space in which both new ideas and the practices and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated" (Roberts & Crossley 2004:2). The emergence of this public space in which consensus was reached that influenced government, influenced and was in turn influenced by the emergence of the concept of the consciousness of publics (Roberts & Crossley 2004). However, Habermas argued that this public sphere was limited by being socially restricted. It was also later corrupted by the corporate organisations of public life and commodification, a process Habermas called 'refeudalisation' (Curran 2000).

This early work of Habermas has been criticised on the grounds that it does not take into account the intermediary structures of modern democracy and also invokes an idealised notion of public debate through a socially responsible media (Curran 2000:135). Habermas has since revisited his early work, invoking a more conventional understanding of the workings of democracy. Habermas has also revised his understanding of the public sphere. The concept is no longer conceived of as private individuals coming together as a "single public but as a 'network for communicating information and points of view' that

connects the private world of everyday experience to the political system" (Curran 2000:136). The private sphere is also seen as being much more differentiated, pluralistic and organised than before.

2.4 The Internet and the public sphere

These days technology provides more opportunities for active citizenship than people are prepared to accept. But instead of "buying in" to the claims made mainly by business people that the new technologies will lead to a new era of active participation, this simple question must be asked: "under what conditions might existing and near-term configurations of communications technology be used to extend democratic practices and lead to a broadened public sphere?" (Schultz 2000:207). The hope is that new media will facilitate consensus-finding processes in which the participants will take part in a public discourse free of the imperatives of money and power (Schultz 2000).

The Internet provides a space that has the potential to be used in this way. Social movements, for example, can harness the power of the Internet to help revitalise the public sphere (Schultz 2000). Bulletin boards and chat forums online can check the power and biases of traditional mass media and play an important role in controlling and criticising journalism as well as in establishing mobilising types of communication. However, these opportunities do have their drawbacks. First, communication and participation alone do not mean much in terms of quality and value of content. Second, communication can only have a significant impact if it is transformed into communicative power and effective decisions. Finally, the greater the number of

communicators, the less time everyone has to listen to others, and thus the smaller their significance for society as a whole (Schultz 2000).

Structurally, the Internet is a public sphere in itself. With private business and governmental services growing in volume on the Internet, it has become a realm of public communication and debate (Sassi 2002). Previously the public was a national entity but the rise of the Internet has been responsible for the fragmentation of society. The public is now made up of many smaller groups which stretch across national borders and have, at least, only informal ties to each other (Sassi 2002).

Sassi (2002) argues that something like a sense of commonality has grown on the Internet and although it is technologically mediated, it differs markedly from a mass-mediated one. This, Sassi argues, is because the mode of communication on the Internet is mixed, containing interpersonal and group interaction in addition to the one-to-many type associated with traditional media.

To what extent does the Internet enhance the public sphere? This question has been raised by many media researchers over the past decade. Some argue that there is the possibility that the Internet's decentralised communications can enhance the public sphere. However, others stress those factors that limit the expansion of the public sphere online.

In tackling the question of whether online discourse is extending the public sphere, Dahlberg (2001) compares online discourse to a normative conception of the public sphere as developed from Habermas' theory of rational communication. According to Habermas' analysis of communication, "every participant engaged in moral-practical discourse makes reference to a number of pragmatic presuppositions, and thus to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere" (Dahlberg 2001:3). These conditions are: autonomy from state and economic power, exchange and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality (Dahlberg 2001).

Even more than the traditional mass media, the Internet provides spaces that stimulate critical debate. What distinguishes democratic consensus is that the opinions are not merely announced but discussed openly and free of distortions (Schultz 2000). However, these online spaces that stimulate critical debate cannot be said to be fully autonomous because they are always situated in a complex relationship with corporate and state power (Dahlberg 2001). Curran (2000) argues that a new global communication order is developing in a lop-sided fashion, which is connected to wider inequalities of power and resources in the world. In this context an international public sphere is taking shape. However, full autonomy is not required before the online discourse that currently exists can begin to contribute to the development of rational-critical discourse and the public sphere at large (Dahlberg 2001). This view is contested by those who believe that the

Internet is creating a global public space that exists independently of nation, distance and power[2].

Curran notes that this optimism fails to account for the ways in which "relations of inequality in society enter into and are structured by cyberspace" (2000:137). Despite formal accessibility and the rapid expansion of the Internet, much of the world's adult population still does not have any real chance of gaining access to the Internet due to poverty, poor telecommunications infrastructures and state censorship. In South Africa, for example, there are 3 523 000 million people connected to the Internet out of a population of 48 051 581[3]. In other cases, it is not so much Internet access as time, cultural capital or support, which stands in the way of online deliberation. Thus, it can be stated that, at best, the Internet can support an elite public sphere.

Central to the conception of the public sphere is the idea of conversation. Gabriel Tarde, a French sociologist, saw the public sphere as a linear model where "(1) the newspaper fuels conversation, (2) conversation shapes opinion, and (3) opinion triggers action" (Hunter 1998:1). Perhaps more than any other scholar, Habermas stresses the importance of conversation in constituting the public sphere.

Some critiques of Habermas' work have been mentioned above. However, in none of these critiques is the idea that conversation leads to democracy attacked. But does all conversation lead to democracy? Schudson tackles this question, arguing that

[2] See, for example, Rheingold, H. 1999.
[3] Statistics obtained from the Internet World Stats (http://www.Internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#za)

conversation for conversation's sake has nothing to do with democracy (Hunter 1998:6). Schudson identifies two types of conversation: homogenous conversation and democratic conversation. Homogenous conversation is "talk primarily with others who share their values", that is, conversation which is seen as pleasurable. On the other hand, democratic conversation takes place between those who have different values and backgrounds, and is "often uncomfortable", leaning "not towards agreement and affability, but argument and problem-solving" (Hunter 1998:6).

Does conversation on the Internet strengthen or weaken the public sphere? Following on from Habermas, it can be argued that Internet discourse generally does not enhance the public sphere (Hunter 1998, Dahlberg 2001, Lax 2000). As mentioned above, not all relevant voices can be heard via the Internet mainly due to socio-economic reasons.

However, once people do manage to become involved in online discourse they are also faced with exclusion and inequality. It is often argued that social hierarchies and power relations are negated in cyberspace because of the anonymity factor. But, according to Dahlberg, this is not so; "identity becomes just as salient online as offline and the "development of identity differences leads to the reassertion of authority and power differentials online" (2001:15). Even in anonymity, status develops online with every post. Factors that contribute to the development of the reputations of users of online forums include time spent online, displays of technical expertise, frequency of postings, consistency in replying to others' postings, being a group moderator, helping new users and posting messages which the group admire (Dahlberg 2001).

That some participants are able to make their voices heard more than others leads to the domination of discourse by certain individuals or groups and thus to discursive inequalities. This takes place in three ways: abusive postings, monopolisation of attention, and the control of the style and agenda of the discourse (Dahlberg 2001). Because users cannot be held physically accountable for their words, they are much more likely to become verbally abusive. These verbal attacks, known as "flames", intimidate people or groups into being silent. Such abuse is often aimed at those with less power in cyberspace and, given the ease with which offline power and identity can be brought online, such targeting overlaps with those marginalised in "real" life; new users, women and non-white ethnic groups (Dahlberg 2001). Thus, Internet discourse does not allow for equality of participation.

This is also evident when considering the monopolisation of attention within online discourse by particular individuals or groups. In many groups, a small number of users are responsible for the majority of postings while most subscribers or registered users post infrequently or 'lurk', reading messages without posting. By way of example, Hunter (1998) cites the study by Schneider (1996) of a Usenet[4] newsgroup on the topic of abortion. Schneider found that one user accounted for 11 percent of the all posts and that the top 10 contributors accounted for 40 percent of all posts. However, as Dahlberg (2001) notes, an uneven distribution of the number and length of postings to a group does not necessarily indicate inequalities and exclusions.

[4] A Usenet refers to an Internet service consisting of thousands of newsgroups.

Related to the monopolisation of attention is that of dictating the agenda and the style of the dialogue. Here, dominant users may not necessarily be abusive or say more; rather they assert their influence and sideline other users' views. These dominant voices are those who have developed online authority, and tend to be educated, white, English-speaking males (Dahlberg 2001).

It has been shown that contrary to the utopian views of an egalitarian cyberspace where information and discourse lead to a new and better democracy, the Internet can be characterised by inequality, too much meaningless information and vitriolic, irrational discourse. Dahlberg notes the millions of communicative acts hosted on the Internet everyday is testament to the fact that the medium is replicating the "basic structure of rational-critical debate and that in various ways approximates the requirements of the public sphere" (2001:18). However, the quality of Internet discourse does not meet the requirements of the public sphere model.

2.5 Digital democracy

The global reach, instantaneous speed and limitless information available via the Internet has the potential to serve a wide and diverse community worldwide. However, in many poorer households across the world telephones, radios and televisions have not yet become standard items. This casts some doubt on the "rosier scenarios projecting widespread connectivity for ordinary citizens in developing societies" (Morris 2001:95). Indeed, up to now the Internet has only provided alternative channels of communication mainly for countries and groups already rich in informational resources.

Some regard digital technologies as one of the most important developments in our lifetime because of its potential to fuel the democratic process. The wealth of information on the Internet has the potential to allow the public to become more informed about public affairs and more articulate in expressing their views via e-mail, online discussion lists or chat rooms (Morris 2001). As a two-way communication channel the Internet could function to strengthen the links between citizens and intermediary organisations, the news media and governmental agencies. The Internet could also facilitate opportunities for direct democracy, like electronic voting in elections.

On the other hand, sceptics suggest that in practice the use of digital technologies will fail to transform existing patterns of democratic participation with some even more pessimistic accounts suggesting that the Internet will widen the gap between the engaged and the apathetic (Morris 2001). At an institutional level, the early hopes for an Internet-generated democratic revival have not been fulfilled, in the US particularly, because established interests such as major political parties, traditional interest groups and large media corporations have reasserted their dominance in the cyber world (Morris 2001). To some extent this may be true but, as Hirschkop notes, at the organisational level "the technology is politically neutral, for it provides the same aid to those in authority that is provides to those trying to resist that authority" (1998:212). Hirschkop states:

> The true political claims for the new technologies lie in the belief that they make possible an access to information, and an international form of

> interaction that is not politically neutral, which is inherently democratising. For if informed discussion of a more or less unhindered kind is critical to democratic life, then a technology that fosters it can only work to the advantage of the forces of democracy (1998:212).

However, the form of the network and the structure of computing equipment is determined primarily by the needs of state and capitalist corporations. The relatively low cost of PCs and modems disguise the significant costs of computing research and development as well as installing a network infrastructure. Thus, the state and big business look upon the Internet as an investment rather than an extension of democracy (Hirschkop 1998:213).

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study's research question is two-fold: To what extent is there interactive capacity in new media and to what extent can this interactivity enable debate and discussion which promotes democracy?

The first aim of the study was to determine what and how many different interactive options the News24.com website offered and to what extent these features facilitated and enabled communication processes to occur. The second aim of the study was to determine the nature of the communication processes (levels of interactivity) that occur on News24.com, between the readers themselves and also between its readers and editorial staff.

3.1 The interactivity of News24.com

The interactivity of News24.com was determined by using two different methods. First, a method similar to that used by Schultz (1999) in his "exploratory content analysis" of 100 US online newspapers was used to determine the interactive capacity of the website. Second, in order to gain an understanding of how the editorial staff of News24.com and the website's readers used these interactive tools and their general attitudes towards interactivity, two questionnaires were constructed[5].

3.1.1 Interactive capacity

Schultz set out to determine what and how many different interactive options online newspapers offer. That is, how many features encouraged at least reactive, and possibly interactive, communication processes? Schultz created 10 specific research questions[6] according to which the 100 online newspapers analysed were coded. These questions were adapted and used to determine the interactive capacity of News24.com[7]:

- Does News24.com offer a general e-mail address/posting forms that readers can use to contact the newsroom?
- Does News24.com offer a list of personalised e-mail addresses to contact individual editors and writers?
- Does News24.com offer direct e-mail links to articles' authors (attached to the articles)
- Does News24.com offer a chat room facility?
- Does News24.com offer polls and surveys?
- Does News24.com offer discussion forums?
- What is the overall level of interactive options offered by News24.com?
- Does News24.com use photos and multimedia applications?

In order to answer these questions, the News24.com.com website was downloaded and checked for the availability of the interactive features. This is because these interactive

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[5] See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for questionnaires.
[6] For a list of the questions see Schultz, T. 1999.
[7] It must be noted that whereas Schultz examined the online version of printed newspapers, News24.com does not have a print edition; it is a stand-alone online publication. The last two questions posed by Schultz could not be adapted since they explore the differences between online newspapers that are "chained-

website elements are mostly constant and do not change on a daily basis unless a website is redesigned and new elements are added, altered or simply removed. While the topics of discussion forums and interactive polls changed daily on News24.com, the interactive tools did not. In this regard, one aspect worth noting is that the 18 topic-specific discussion forums on News24.com.com were scrapped in favour of one forum, but this was after the period of analysis.

3.2 Attitudes towards interactivity

According to Rubin, Rubin and Pride (cited in Berger, 1998: 38), "survey research often employs a correlational design, not looking for cause-and-effect connections but seeking to describe the opinions or attitudes of certain groups, or the relationship between two or more factors."

One important aspect of surveys is to obtain a representative sampling of the social groups to be surveyed. If a representative sampling of the population (the technical term for a complete group of interest) is not obtained, the answers won't be worth very much (Berger 1998). For the purposes of this research this was avoided by directly sampling both the readers and editorial staff of News24.com. A survey was published (posted) on the homepage of News24.com for a period of seven days, where readers were invited to follow a quite prominently displayed link to a set of questions. The editorial staff was surveyed through a questionnaire that was e-mailed to the editor of News24.com who

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owned" and "entrepreneurial" and whether there are any differences in the interactive offerings of online newspapers of different sizes.

then distributed it via e-mail to the staff. The completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher via e-mail.

Surveys were used for the purposes of this research for a number of reasons. First, it was a relatively inexpensive way of obtaining information. Second, according to Berger, if the sampling is correct surveys and other forms of opinion polls are "generally reasonably accurate" (1998: 38). However, the limitations of the survey as a research method should be highlighted. Since surveys must have some focus, they must remain limited in scope; the list of questions is fixed and there is no room for manoeuvre, as in the in-depth interview (Berger 1998). Second, the people who respond to surveys may not give honest answers or they may not understand particular questions but think they do. These facts affect a study's validity and accuracy (Berger 1998).

The first survey, published on News24.com and intended for the readers of the website, attempted to gain an understanding of what they thought of the levels of interactivity on News24.com. Consisting of 15 questions, the first 11 focused on the discussion forums with the remainder dealing with e-mail. The second survey, e-mailed to News24.com editorial staff and consisting of 12 questions, attempted to determine what sort of importance was placed on making use of the interactive tools that were featured on News24.com. As with the first survey, the first portion (eight questions) dealt with the discussion forums with the remainder focusing on e-mail.

3.3 Discussion forums: The nature of the communication processes

Two of the 18 discussion forums on News24.com, “General” and “Zimbabwe”, were analysed qualitatively for a period of four months, from October 1, 2003 to January 31, 2004. Every alternate week during this period all the messages that were posted (the original posting and all the replies) on these two discussion forums were downloaded.

The thread of each discussion, that is the original (first) posting and the replies to it (in other words, the chain of interrelated messages) were then analysed. The content of the discussion forums were analysed using the following six criteria: exchange of opinions, level of interactivity, rational discourse, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive equality and inclusion.

The strength of a study such as this one is that it took into account two key aspects of online interactivity. First is the perspective from those people who actually read and interact with the content that is published on News24.com. Though only 11 people responded to the questionnaire – which may be seen as a rather small sample considering the high number of unique users which visit the website - the results were arguably representative of a wide range of views that are raised in the literature. These include the domination of the discourse on the forums by certain participants, the exclusion of the views of some based on race, gender or religion or the lack of civility (netiquette) associated with the anonymity of computer-mediated communication.

Second, the content of the forums provided a comprehensive document into how people behave, communicate and interact with each other via their computers using the Internet.

Finally, the study combined a content analysis approach to measuring interactive capacity with an analysis of how these interactive options were actually used by the readers of the website.

However, the study did have some limitations, one of which was unintended. The unintended limitation of the study is that, since the 18 separate discussion forums were scrapped in favour of the one "catch-all" forum, the study will not be able to be replicated or elaborated on in the future. Another limitation of the study concerned the design of the interview guides. More information could have been gleaned from the respondents had there been more open-ended questions. This might have been dealt with in a more comprehensive way had the researcher been able to conduct separate e-mail interviews with individual readers.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 The interactivity of News24.com

4.1.1 Interactive capacity

News24.com offered one general e-mail address to contact the newsroom under the link "Contact Us" (question 1). This link formed part of the overall layout[8] and design of the News24.com website, which meant that on every "page" of the site - be it the homepage, the front page of a main section such as Sport or an individual article - readers were able to contact the newsroom. Readers, therefore, did not have to return to the homepage to submit a comment. Clicking the link brought up a posting form in which comments could be written. The "Contact Us" link, next to the "About Us" and "Advertising", was not very prominently displayed – it was situated bottom centre of the page in a small font, in light grey, on a white background.

While News24.com provided a list of the editorial staff (from the "About Us" link), the names of the editorial staff members were not hyperlinked (question 2), which meant that they could not be e-mailed directly. In much the same vein, it was found that News24.com did not attach personalised e-mail links to the writers of articles or to the name of the editorial staff member who edited the article (question 3). News24.com does not employ its own writers, but when the website publishes an article that appeared in the print edition of one of the newspapers in the Media24 group (for example *Beeld* or *Die Burger*) it does include the name of the writer. The name of the News24.com editorial

[8] The overall design of the website includes elements like the navigation bar from where a reader can click to a different section of the site, such as Sport, Finance or Entertainment.

staff member who edited the article is mentioned at the bottom of the article. It was found in both cases, however, that there was not personalised e-mail link to either the writer or the copy editor.

News24.com did not provide any synchronous chat facility (chat room) at all (question 4). The website did offer a poll for readers (question 5). The poll question was linked directly to a recent story on the website and invited readers to read the article before placing their vote. The topic of the poll – which dealt with a wide variety of topics - would change almost daily and normally had between three and five answer categories. The poll did contain a disclaimer to the effect that it was unscientific. Readers could only vote once in 24 hours and were able to view the results of the present vote as well as previous votes via a link on the poll tool.

During the period of analysis, News24.com offered a vast array of discussion forums[9] (question 6), from politics to news to business. There was even a space for South African expatriates to share their experiences of a new country on the Expats forum. In order to post a comment, readers had to register with an e-mail address and a password. As a matter of course forums were linked to articles that provided some sort of context for the discussion. However, as will be dealt with in more detail below, the forums could be, in the words of Schultz, be characterised as "reader playgrounds" (1999:12) since they were

[9] 18 different discussion forums were provided, but these were later scrapped in favour of one, all-purpose forum where readers could post comments on any topic. According to the website, "News24 has reduced the number of discussion forums available to a single forum – this is due to the high incidence of hate speech and foul language used by certain posters. News24 has implemented a code in our discussion forums to keep a record of the IP addresses of people posting messages. If we regard a person's postings as

largely unmoderated, had no editorial staff/journalistic participation and generally contained a very low level of intellectual debate.

News24.com did publish letters to the editor – a traditional form of reactive feedback. The website also employed an interactive tool which enabled the reader to e-mail an article to someone else, while the top five stories in a particular category where displayed in a drop-down box at the end of the page under the heading "Also in this section". The design layout of News24.com is such that there is space for one main photograph on the homepage (question 8). The photograph is situated on the right side of the page, opposite the lead story. Very often there was a link at the end of the photo caption saying "Full story" which led the reader to a published article explaining the story in more detail. If an event was deemed newsworthy enough, a photo gallery of the event would be published with the main photograph on the website being a "teaser" for the reader to view the gallery. This was also usually accomplished with a "Full story" link, both on the main photograph and also on each individual photograph in the picture gallery. There was no audio or video content available on the website.

4.2 Attitudes towards interactivity

4.2.1 News24.com readers

The overwhelming majority (91%) of the 11 respondents to the questionnaire were aware of the discussion forums on News24.com (question 1), while 88% had at some point posted a comment on one of the forums (question 2). One respondent indicated both

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serious abuse of the forums we will contact the Internet Service Provider concerned to take action at the offender."

"yes" and "no" to question 2. The reasons given for the "no" part of the answer (questions 3) had to do with the forums being used as a "chat room" or the "posters portraying themselves as 'racists'". The respondent said:

> Most of the posters use these forums as a 'chatroom', and when we post, as it should be, our postings become a joke OR most of the posters portray themselves as 'racists', I am sorry to say this but the moment they come to know that you are a non-white you become their victims of religious and racist comments. After many of these incidents, I do not visit these forums anymore. I complained to the editor about this as well – but nothing had changed when I did visit again so I stopped altogether.

Another respondent who said that she had not posted a comment to one of News24.com's discussion forums said she had not done so because she had "never felt the need to".

As to question 4 (How often, on average, do you visit the News24.com discussion forums?), three respondents said they visited the forums once a month, two said they visited the forums more than once per day, while two never visited the forums. One respondent visited the forums once every fortnight and one visited the forums one per day. Two respondents did not select one of the options on the questionnaire, with one saying they "hardly ever" visited the forums and another saying they visited the forums "very rarely". Ten of the respondents said that they had visited the forums without

posting a comment (question 5), with one having never visited the forums without posting a message.

The sixth question on the questionnaire, an open-ended question, was aimed at finding out why some people visited the forums without posting a comment. Here there was a wide array of responses. One respondent simply cited his reason for not posting a comment as “idiot ANC attention seekers on the forum”. Another said “interest in debate”, which would likely mean that he was simply interested in following the debates without necessarily making a contribution himself. One respondent said she did not post a comment “for fear of the racist & religious comments made against me”. Another reason cited was: “not always interested to post a response for something I can’t change. “Don’t have time” was another reason put forward. “Nothing of interest was written” was yet another reason offered by a respondent. Another respondent cited more than one reason for not posting a comment on the forums: “Some people don't respect other people opinions and use rude language. One also wonder [sic] how many people actually read these comments and take them to heart, and also it’s seem to be the same group of people who post comments.” Another response was as follows: “I don’t (though would like to) see comments from the discussion forum becoming a headline on the web page/news; and to see something done about what the people think. I feel that no matter what is said in the discussion forums it is still ignored, because it is not ‘voiced’.” Another response was: “just to read what the other people are discussing at the moment”.

The overwhelming reason (six out of 11 respondents) for visiting the forums was to voice their opinion on a particular issue they had read on the News24.com website. This is significant since it would seem to indicate a high degree of interactivity in terms of users making use of the available resources to interact with the content on the site. One reader mentioned three reasons for visiting the forums: "To voice my opinion on a particular issue I read on the News24 website", "to debate about issues of the day with my fellow users" and "to 'chat' to my online friends". One respondent simply replied "N/A". One respondent said he visited the forums "to debate about issues of the day with my fellow users". One reader listed two reasons for visiting the forums: "to voice my opinion on a particular issue I read on the News24 website" and "to post a comment to the News24 staff". One respondent did not answer the question.

According to the majority of respondents, the purpose of the discussion forums (question 8) was for discussion and debate. One respondent said that the purpose of the forums was to "interact and discuss the way of the day, the world and politics" and to "hear a different view". Another respondent thought that the forums served no purpose, saying "Zilch – because they become self-serving & News24 is far too dictatorial in what may or may not be used". Yet another reader said "as above", referring to question 7 to which she answered "to voice my opinion on a particular issue I read on the News24 website" and "to debate about issues of the day with my fellow users". She added in her response for question 8 that the purpose of the forums was "also to see what other people think of maybe a new headline for that day". Another respondent said the forums were there

"mostly for News24 to find out what the public opinion are around a certain topic". Yet another purpose given was "to voice opinions and for people like yourself to see what the trends are". One reader believed the purpose of the forums was "to get a view of how people in general view about current issues in our society. Some people seem to use it for dialogues which pisses me off". Another reader thought the purpose of the forums was "to voice the common idea of the readers back the general public". One person simply said "discuss a topic or story". Another reader cited the same reason for him visiting the forums as the purpose of the forums – "to debate about issues of the day with my fellow users". There were two no-responses to the question.

Of the 11 respondents, seven believed that the forums should not be moderated, three believed they should be moderated while there was one "no comment" (question 9). This is a clear indication that people feel that the forums are there for them to put their views across which would be uncensored. When asked why the forums should be moderated (question 10), one respondent commented:

> Obscene Languages are used frequently. Racist statements are made to people who are just giving their input on a subject. There are this group of posters (when I used to go on I remember GRNLDR, ZIM, - names i actually remember because of my experience with them) who never had anything nice to say if you were a non white, and especially if they came to know that you were a Islam person, you had it with every religious insult that they could find

Another reason offered for the forums to be moderated was as follows: “I've seen swearing and abuse by angry readers (which does happen and does not bother me), but if it is to be voiced then it has to be moderated”. One respondent said: “You don’t want people to start an online chatroom and talk about stuff that has nothing to do with the site.”

Eight of the 11 respondents said that they would like to see News24.com staff take part in the forum discussions (question 11), with two saying they would not. One respondent did not provide an answer.

Seven of the 11 respondents said that they had never sent an e-mail to the News24.com editor or the writer of a news report, while four said they had. In response to Question 13 (Do you think that the staff at News24.com responds to e-mail from readers?), six said no and four said yes. One respondent said he wouldn’t know. That said, though, 10 respondents did expect a reply from News24.com if they had sent an e-mail to the website (question 14). Five of the respondents expected a reply within a week, three said the same day, two said immediately and one respondent said “I don’t expect a reply” without giving a reason.

4.2.2 News24.com editorial staff

Of the 10 editorial staff who responded to the questionnaire, only one said that it was common work practice to participate in News24.com’s discussion forums (question 1). When asked about whether it was common practice to monitor/moderate News24.com

forums with specific reference to deleting offensive postings (question 2), half of the respondents answered “yes” while the other half answered “no”. One editorial staff member said “no”, but added “also it should be”. Another said “no – I don’t”. Another said “no – someone does it, but not me”. When it came to how often the editorial staff visited the forums (question 3), the responses were varied; of the nine editorial staff who answered the question, two said “never”, two said “once every fortnight”, two said “daily”, and one each chose “once a month”, “once a week” and “more than once per day” respectively. One of the respondents who said they visited the forums once every fortnight added “if I get a chance more often”. One person said daily, but added that this was “no more than a fleeting glimpse, though”.

The majority (60%) of the editorial staff said they had never posted a comment on one of News24.com’s discussion forums (question 4), either in their own capacity or as part of their job. One respondent said that they had posted a message in their personal capacity, while three said they had done so as part of their job. When asked why they had not posted a comment (question 5) – either as part of their job or in their personal capacity – one editorial staff member said “I do not think it is appropriate for us to take part in discussions on News24”, another said they “don’t have time”, yet another said “I hardly ever have a chance”. One editorial staff member said “I have a mental list if things to do, and surfing the forums never get to the top of the list”. Another reason given for not posting a comment was “prefer not to get involved in that kind of thing”. There was one no-reply.

The majority of respondents (60%) said that feedback or comments from readers either via the forums or e-mail (question 6) were “useful”. Twenty percent thought the readers’ feedback was “interesting”, while one respondent thought that receiving readers’ feedback was a “waste of time”. One respondent did not select a specific option, instead saying “all of the above”. She also gave reasons for her answers. She said that feedback was useful since “some reader comments, esp. constructive criticism, are essential”, interesting because “some are funny” and a waste of my time because “the volume of spam is a waste of my time”.

There was a unanimous response from editorial staff when asked if it was common work practice to invite comment on stories from News24.com’s users (question 7). All 10 respondents said that it was common work practice to do this. When asked how this was achieved, five editorial staff members said “linking forums to stories”, two said providing a link to forums as well as including an e-mail link in order for readers to send in their comments, while one each said linking the forum and online poll to a story and linking the forum and the author’s e-mail (“Adding email add (sic) links of writers/reporters … this helps in the development of a story and allows for interactivity”). There was one no-reply. One of the respondents who highlighted linking forums to stories added “providing links inside and outside the story.” Another said “providing links inside the story”. Another who also highlighted the practice of linking a forum to a story said “a link to the forum will always accompany an interesting story”. Another who mentioned providing links to forums added “also with polls”. One respondent simply said “links, usually with a witty question”.

Six respondents said that receiving e-mail (question 9) is “always welcomed”, while four said that receiving e-mail is “sometimes welcomed”. No respondent said that e-mail is “never welcomed”. One respondent who said that receiving e-mails is always welcome added “don’t get many, tho”.

Eight respondents believed the amount of e-mail received (question 10) was “manageable”. One respondent said the amount of e-mail was manageable , adding “DON’T GET ANY”. Another respondent said “I answered ‘manageable’ here, but this is only a recent development. We no longer provide an email address on the site, but have instead replaced this with a feedback form, which has completely eradicated robot-generated spam”. Two respondents did not provide an answer.

The majority of respondents felt that the e-mail they did receive from readers (question 11) was generally “constructive”. One respondent did not select an answer but rather replied “sometimes constructive, sometimes not”. One respondent, who said that receiving e-mail was constructive, added that it was “sometimes hilarious”. There were two no-replies to this question.

There was also an overwhelming “yes” (nine “yes” responses and one “I don’t know”) to question 12: Does News24 use e-mail to inform users of new features on the website, competitions or breaking news? One editorial staff member added that “I feel too seldom/people get too used to a newsletter (twice a day) only”.

4.3 Discussion forums: The nature of the communication processes

4.3.1 General forum

4.3.1.1 Exchange of opinions

The idea behind hosting a General Forum was for readers to have their say on matters of their choice and thus it was not surprising to find a high level of discussion on a wide variety of issues during the four-month period of analysis. In many cases the discussions could be said to be mirroring face-to-face communication. The many threads of discussion addressed national and international politics, religion, sport, news and current affairs, popular culture and sex.

There was overwhelming evidence of the forum being used as a platform to make "small talk" or "chat" with other forum users. The majority of the content of these interactions tended to resemble the sort of "chat" one might expect to find in a synchronous setting such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and not on an asynchronous platform like a web discussion forum. For example, on Fridays forum participants would share their plans for the weekend (a weekend preview), while on Mondays it was common for users to discuss what they did on the weekend, what kinds of alcohol they preferred to drink or their everyday experiences like going to the cinema (weekend review). In keeping with a "chat room" style, in which there is little space to write comment and where the discussion resembles offline conversation, the exchanges were generally very rapid and the

messages short. There was little evidence of messages being supported by published sources, such as articles from News24.com (though this did happen on occasion), newspaper articles or statistics. Whatever the characteristic of the conversations, though, it was found that there was nevertheless a high degree of exchange taking place among the forum participants.

4.3.1.2 Level of interactivity

A cursory glance at the thread of discussions may suggest that there is a high level of interactivity taking place. However, a closer look at the content of the messages and the participants shows that the communication is mostly reactive. A characteristic of reactive communication is that it is two-way, where a sender becomes a receiver and vice versa. The thread of messages sometimes revealed a dialogue between two people taking place, but most often there were more than two people involved in any discussion. In interactive communication, the degree to which communication transcends reaction is the key factor. If later messages recounted the relatedness of earlier messages then full interactivity is taking place. While it was certainly not commonplace, there were a number of times where full interactivity was reached. One example of where a high degree of interactivity was evident occurred on November 14, 2003 and centred on the controversial plan to rename South Africa's capital Pretoria to Tshwane (see Figure 1).

The first posting of the thread by Visionary states:

The ANC government and its people have no vision and only want to change names to put their stamp on cities founded by people in the past because they cannot create new cities or initiatives where they can rightfully claim that they have founded or created it from its origin. What have the ANC government created in the last 9 years? Absolutely nothing. What have they spend (sic) on visionless campaigns? Millions and we have nothing to show for it although it's our taxes that they are spending.



Figure 1: Thread of messages dealing with the renaming of Pretoria

This post is followed up by three "bite-sized" postings that really do not take the discussion forward, but then Raven continues the conversation by stating in his/her

opening line “I would just like to add the follow (sic)”. This message recounts the four earlier postings and then adds that the money spent on changing Pretoria’s name could be better utilised by the government:

> I think that money wasted in this manner is sick and that our government should look closer to home and start with the basic stuff … No Pretoria Should stay Pretoria and they can use the money for something desent! (sic)

The follow-up post then expands on the idea that the government is falling short in serving its people. Hadenough writes: “Why should they face the nation and explain the poverty, crime, aids etc when it is so much easier to bitch about the past [sic]”. The renaming debate quickly turns into a discussion in which the government comes into the firing line and with the then 2004 general election just months away, PeterH takes the opportunity to urge people on the forum to register to vote (“ANC must go – Pretoria”).

4.3.1.3 Rational discourse

The majority of the messages posted on this forum were not more than five lines long. This, together with the rapidity of the exchanges, meant that rational discourse was almost non-existent. Many times only the subject line was used to type a message, and in some cases the message in the subject line was followed by ‘nm’ which signified to the other forum users that no message had been typed and they therefore need not bother clicking on the link to read the message.

Another factor which had a negative impact on rational discourse on the forum was the non-linear structure of the conversations. The topics of discussion would either mutate or change completely – and very quickly - which meant that new threads would be started before a previous discussion was resolved. However, it was found on the odd occasion that forum participants would return sometimes a day later to a previous discussion to make their contributions. But this was more the exception than the rule. Judging by the structure and the content of the message threads, it can also be said that participants very rarely changed their position when confronted with a more plausible argument. There was indeed a lot of talking going on, but not much listening. This resulted, at times, in very rapid topic decay where a debate would quickly degenerate into a vicious, personal attack (flame) on a participant or end up in a "flame war" between participants.

Much of the content of the forum was made up either of meaningless, idle chatter or abusive, racist comment. Thus, there was a small amount of discussion around issues and a low level of information. There were, however, a number of instances in which rational debate about interesting topics did emerge. One example, on the perennial problem of the number of deaths on South Africa's roads over the festive season, is highlighted below (Figure 2) indicating the initial message and the replies. Other topics in which rationality was the order of the day included, among others, the merits/non-merits of hunting animals, child pornography, the high costs of medical aid, the war in Iraq, and the publication of a picture of a suicide victim on the front page of a daily tabloid newspaper.

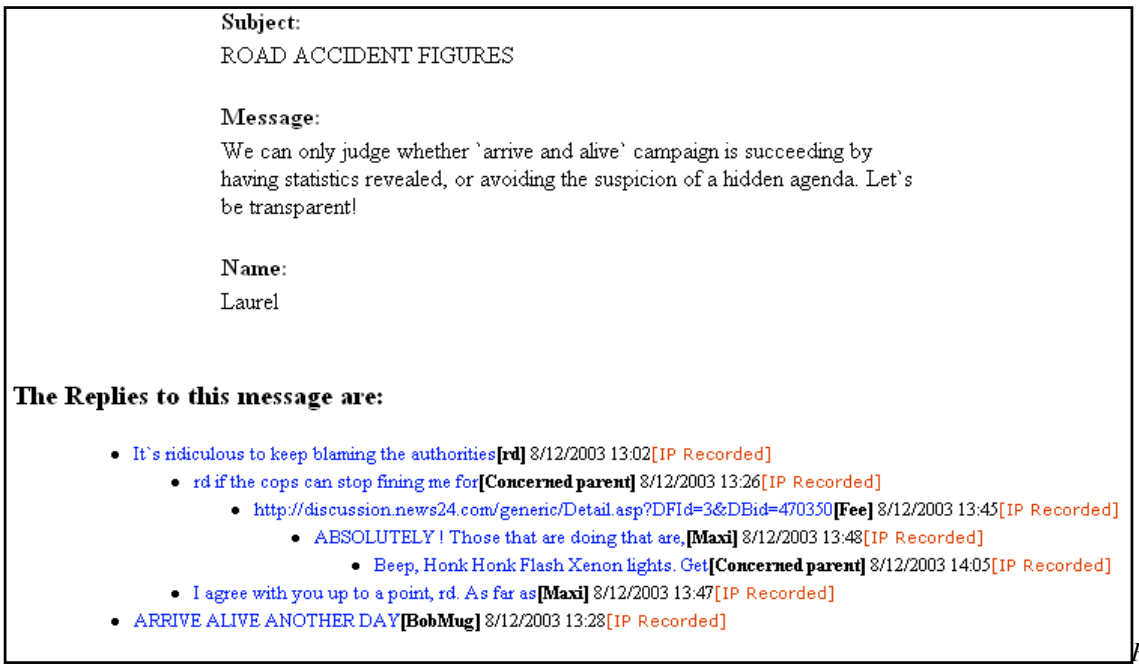


Figure 2: Rational debate on South Africa's road death toll

4.3.1.4 Ideal role-taking

Generally, there was little attempt on the part of the forum participants to try and understand views that were expressed that were culturally, socially different from their own. This resulted in like-minded participants "ganging up" on those whose views they did not share. More specifically, many of the views aired were dismissed on the basis of race. Notably, the views of a few black participants on the forum were often the subject of ridicule and sarcasm by the other, presumably white, forum users. Conversely, many messages that criticised the South African government or the ruling African National Congress (ANC) posted by whites were not well received or positively dealt with. This polarisation between black and white participants often resulted in shouting matches or "flaming wars" and what talk there was, was tantamount to hate speech. This appeared to be as a result of the participants' frustration at their views not being understood.

By publishing a set of rules on the website, the management of News24.com attempted to instil some kind of 'netiquette' among its users. However, this had little impact on changing the behaviour of the forum participants (across all the forums), even after the message "IP recorded" appeared next to each message link as a warning to potential transgressors that they could be banned from using the forums[10].

Below is an example of two posters from different race groups and social backgrounds attempting to find some common ground between them; a white, female participant called Colleen had this to say:

> I've said it to you before and I've said it to M-Afrika, from the bottom of my heart, you have to believe that there are good in all people. We, as young South Africans can not undo the wrongs of the past, but we can strive to ensure that we do not repeat the actions of those who did. But if there is now going to be reverse racism, don't you think that it is going to illicit the same feelings of antagonism from young whites in the future? We are being hated for things we had nothing to do with.

The reply to this message is from Dreamboat, a black woman:

[10] This was formalised during the period of analysis.

> and I have no doubts in my mind that young white San's are doing their very best to try get things working, but denying the past or for ppl to pretend it didn't happen is asking us to live a lie, we have emotional and psychological scars as a result (and it is only fair this is dealt with thru dialogue etc), allow us the space and time to feel and heal our pain, and the past must be used as reference to not repeat same mistakes.

As happened all too frequently on this forum, the efforts at addressing the concerns of one another (in this case a black female and a white female) came to a fiery end courtesy of some "flaming" from the established white, male posters.

"Kill the boer, kill the farmer says Dog Breath. To me this slogan is like the Fight Back and Coalition of Change," writes M-Afrika, a black participant. "Shows what a retard you are", says Gandalf (white), to which Tsar (white) adds: "No ways, it's the long term effects of meths and sniffing glue." The final flame comes from Dog Breath, who had been called to task by M-Afriak for his "Kill the boer, kill the farmer" message:

> There you go! Waving the same flag – you're unable to think at all, never-mind independently. Even that decrepit, dung-beetle in your head is a racist – it's lost the ability to paddle all together and is now just sitting on his cork, floating in circles … Some one PLEASE shut the door and turn out the lights – there's no hope here!!!

In this example, “Gandalf” tries to defend the position of those white forum participants whose efforts at debating, he claims, are undermined by racist, reactionary messages:

> We’re not saying it’s only whites being affected by crime, we’re not saying all blacks are bad. Most of us here actually have a very middle-of-the-line attitude to life. But what pisses us off is that the moment we criticise a govt minister for sheer incompetence, we get accused of being racist. If we complain that the crime levels are too high and the govt doesn’t seem to be doing anything concrete, we get called racists. That’s the knee-jerk reaction we get met with time and time again. Personally I don’t give a hoot WHAT colour the person I’m complaining about is – I’d still feel the same way if he/she was white, coloured, Indian, whatever. The skin colour is not the issue here, it’s the ATTITUDE. And stop accusing us of always looking at colour - read M-Afrika’s posts - 99% are based on racist comments. If we choose to attack those posts, it’s because they deserve to be attacked, along with that racist attitude.

4.3.1.5 Sincerity

Did forum participants present themselves sincerely? Two major findings emerged in this regard. Firstly, it was found that for an online context where it might be expected that people would value their anonymity, there was indeed a quite a large degree of openness. Many of the more seasoned and “senior” forum users seemed quite willing to exchange personal information such as e-mail addresses and photographs. There were many

instances where personal interactions between participants went beyond the confines of the forum. Participants would sometimes engage in a one-to-one discussion, with one asking the other whether they had received an e-mail. Thus, personal information was also traded on this forum. And judging by the content of the forum, there was much extra-forum activity on the part of these individuals. Also, there were many examples to be found of participants sharing their life stories with their fellow users. The following message, posted by Colleen on January 23, proves that some of the participants keep in contact via e-mail:

> "I admit that I will definately [sic] be back, but can't spend the time that I have been spending on here without it biting me in the ass very soon. Will correspond with you via e-mail."

Secondly, and a finding which somehow is at odds with the first finding, is that the "sincerity" of the forum was often undermined by the more "senior" forum participants. Many examples could be found of this so-called trolling[11], where messages were intended to provoke, gossip, trivialise the forum contributions and/or contributors. In the following example, from October 17, the issue of baby rapes in South Africa is brought up by Maxi. She writes:

> A colleague and I were chatting the other day about this baby rape issue, and we came up with a magic idea. ALL rapists, instead of being jailed and set fee

[11] Dahlberg (2001:4) defines trolling as "identity deception in cyberspace" which aims to "embarrass anger and disrupt".

> again cause of lack of space, etc, should be imprisoned on Robben Island (it's already got facilities) and the key thrown away. That way they can't rape anybody without Aids ever again, and they can end their lives in the company of others who are just as revolting as they are.

The replies, from Concerned Parent ("Think of the poor seals!") and Colleen ("I have a better idea. Let's put them into a closed room and smoke em slowly, then just before they vrek [die], we revive them, and do this over and over"), trivialise a very serious matter and provoke more inane replies.

4.3.1.6 Discursive equality and inclusion

In the period of analysis, 181 different usernames names were counted on this forum. This, however, does not necessarily mean that this many different individuals contributed to the forum discussions since registered users could possess more than one username. Also, if someone was banned from using the forums because they were serial transgressors of the forum rules, they could always re-register using a different e-mail address and new password.

It was found that the forum came to be dominated by as few as 10 participants. In general, these participants, mostly men, behaved as though the forum was their own personal "cyber playground". They played to their own set of rules to which "newbies" – those participants who had not previously contributed - were introduced, conversed

mainly only among themselves, and steered the course of the discussions. In this example, “ANGRY” has a brief introduction for a new poster:

> Can see you’re new here! Well welcome from an old poster - and sis to everyone who hasn’t been teaching you manners! When you are only posting in the subject line, you finish with nm (like "no more") - so that people know that they don’t have to open your post and find nothing further!

At times, some participants seemed to become frustrated with the way the discussion was going and made attempts to steer the conversation in a new direction. In this example, posted on October 14, “rd” tries to start a new discussion on Pop Idol, the reality TV talent search:

> Can’t you people move on from this racist democratic, black/white thread!!! There’s more to life than all this. Just think Jacques is out of Idols!!! The end of that show is nigh, what will some stooge conjure up to replace Idols not big brother 3 surely? (sic)

Here, “Dreamboat” urges “Tsar” to “grow up” (October 28):

> Tsar, just get on with it, or do you want the continuation of verbal abuse? in this case M-AFrika has done nothing that warrants that kind of response from you, ppl like you log on to stir and you get angry when same is returned, pliz

> grow up, show us some of that 'alleged' high IQ you're supposed to have . . . [sic]

There were also pleas for a moderator to step in: "MR MODERATOR, please get rid of this shit stirring pest [sic]", asked Colleen on October 17.

There were many examples when it seemed as though the participants simply posted messages because they could and not because they had anything much to say. The forum came to be used as their personal domain and as such was more a place to chat with "forum buddies" than conduct a rational debate. And it also appeared as though it was a popular place to interact with like-minded people. One participant, named Maxi, admitted to the forum being "like a drug".

Overall, it was found that women and black people, and most of all black women, were often the target for racist, sexist and other forms abusive postings by the more dominant (mostly white and male) participants. The few (known) women on the forum often attracted the attention of men who posted sexually suggestive or flirtatious messages. However, on many occasions these messages were "warmly" received by the women who playfully responded.

Figure 3 below is a typical example of how a conversation – this one about one of the participants going horse riding - turns into a cyber flirtation, with "Ice" saying "Honey....If I was rubbing it in your face you wouldn't be sending me away.....that's for

dam [sic] certain!!!!" and "Gandalf" replying, "Well, I AM kinda [sic] 'hands-on', so of course I'd feel obligated to help you out . . ."

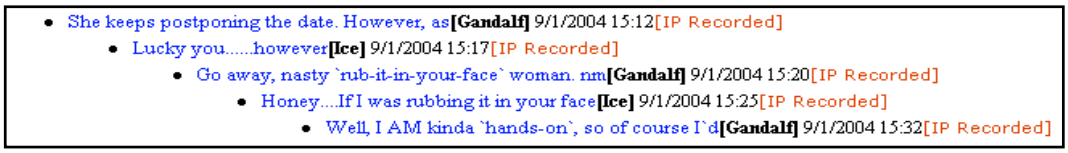


Figure 3: Flirtatious talk

"Dreamboat", interacting with "SubZero III", takes exception to the lack of respect shown to women by him on the forum:

> You're not speaking to ppl [sic] you abuse them and you throw yourself at them you're annoying, and degrading to females at least those who are foolish enough to think you have something to offer!!

Those participants who were new to the forum and tended to post messages that dealt with current events or were looking to debate with their fellow participants were sometimes ignored or dismissed by the more established contributors. There are countless examples from the data where somebody new to the forum would post a comment, only to have either very little or no response at all. In most of the cases the new participants posted messages in response to news stories. However, there were also cases where a new topic introduced by a new participant would be taken up by the more "senior" members of the forum and debated. One example was the case of Pretoria being renamed (see above), while another topic was the banning of smoking in public places. But this was generally more the exception than the rule.

4.4.1 Zimbabwe forum

4.4.1.1 Exchange of opinions

The political, social and economic situation in Zimbabwe has been a strong focus area for of South African media for the last five years or so. The unstable socio-economic climate and political intolerance in that country has, and continues to have, an impact on South Africa. Following from this, a dedicated Zimbabwe discussion forum was set up to give News24.com readers an opportunity to discuss the news and goings-on in that country.

Since this forum is topic-specific, it is not surprising to find that there was less activity here than on the General forum where readers were invited to discuss any topic. Nevertheless, there was a high degree of communication which, compared to the General forum, could be said to be more formal. That is, there was less "chat" of the kind that mirrors face-to-face discussion. In general the messages were longer and there was less volatility in terms of the subject of the conversations compared to the General forum. Also, though this is really only applicable to a few of the forum participants, many of the messages that were posted were supported by published sources (mainly from the United Kingdom) and also from independent sources within Zimbabwe. Notably, the forum also came to be used by the publicity department of the Movement for Democratic Change, the main opposition political party in Zimbabwe as a means to distribute its information. The major topics of debate included, amongst others, the land reform policies of President Robert Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic

Front), the advantages and disadvantages of colonialism, Zimbabwe's position in the Commonwealth, Zimbabwe's relationship to South Africa and the role of President Thabo Mbeki and the issue of press freedom.

4.4.1.2 Level of interactivity

The level of interactivity was very high to start with on this forum, but over time it gradually decreased to a point where the conversations were mainly reactive. The level of interactivity was generally higher than that observed on the General forum. One of the best illustrations of interactive discussion on this forum is that of an Australian who was scheduled to visit the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, but expressed concern after an Australian tourist was murdered in the country. "soon2bTourist" writes:

> I live in Australia and will be travelling to Zimbabwe very soon to the beautiful 'Victoria Falls' can't wait . . . but all we hear over here is all bad news especially with that recent murder of a Perth man by ACID. I have no idea what to expect, is Victoria Falls safe? Is anybody that's white in danger, and if you're a tourist r u in more danger . . . Is there a general hatred to Australians now becoz [sic] of Howard, and has there been any recent murders or kidnappings in Vic Falls that I haven't heard about??? Please give me a general idea of the situation in Zimbabwe . . .

The thread of replies (21 in total) to the original message are reproduced below in Figure 4. The first reply, from "Klipkop", advises "soon2bTourist" to stay away. The follow-up

message by “self-liberator” claims that this was simply an isolated incident and that Zimbabweans are “peaceful people”. “Self liberator” then proceeds to discuss the expulsion of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth and, making an Australian connection, the plight of the Aborigines. Besides the obligatory racist remarks the discussion flows, with the follow-up messages constantly referring back to the original post.



Figure 4: Interactivity on the Zimbabwe forum

4.4.1.3 Rational discourse

There was generally more rational discussion taking place here than on the General forum. The topics addressed had a longer “shelf-life”, that is, they changed less frequently, no doubt because there was less activity on the forum. In contrast to the General forum, it was found that there was a higher amount of discussion around issues and a fairly high level of information. Many of the messages were well written, clearly argued and well informed. And in some instances, participants were urged by their fellow forum users to improve the level of debate and provide justifications for their positions on

certain topics. A writer in Zimbabwe, Cathy Buckle, posted essays and letters which provided details on what life was like in that country. Here is an extract posted on January 25 from one of her letters:

> This week there was hope though because our only independent daily paper, The Daily News, was back in print. Our Minister of Information immediately filed urgent applications with the Supreme Court to have the paper closed again so we don't know how long it will last. Even if it doesn't last, the mere fact that the Daily News have never given up and have fought every step of the way for freedom of speech, is cause for enormous hope for us all. With people of such enormous courage and determination in our society, how can there not be hope for a new Zimbabwe.

As mentioned above, some participants used outside source material to either present an argument or defend a position. In this example "Scratby Hud" makes reference to the National Geographic of October 1998 to illustrate his point of how the agricultural industries in Zimbabwe have declined in the past five years:

> Only three countries in Africa were shown to be net exporters. They were Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Burundi. Apart from its own production of the commodities, South Africa was shown as a net importer requiring 1-20% as aid. Now isn't it amazing that Zimbabwe now relies on food aid because half of the population is starving . . . According to recent agricultural reports, in

> 2000 they were producing 2.4 million tons of maize per annum (much more than their domestic requirements). This was prior to the farm invasions. This year the yield was down to 800,000 tons (far short of their domestic needs). That is a decline of 60%. North American, Argentina, most of Europe including Australia and New Zealand were dominant as net exporters.

Some participants clearly valued the debates and discussion they were having on the forum and felt they had to say something to keep the conversations on track. Here "RogerP" has his say:

> Nobody is trying to suppress your views, BUT most of the time your replies to postings are not relevant to the contents of the posting itself. You bring in irrelevant diversions like a consummate politician. A debate cannot move forward if we can't face prickly issues in a rational way. My suggestion is that you post such messages, as many as you like, as new threads, and I'm sure they will receive appropriate attention from the forum.

All of the above examples would seem to suggest that rational discourse was the order of the day on the Zimbabwe forum. However, there were also many times when rational discourse was clearly absent and where some extreme viewpoints and vitriolic responses were posted. This example illustrates the cynical racism that did emerge on the forum:

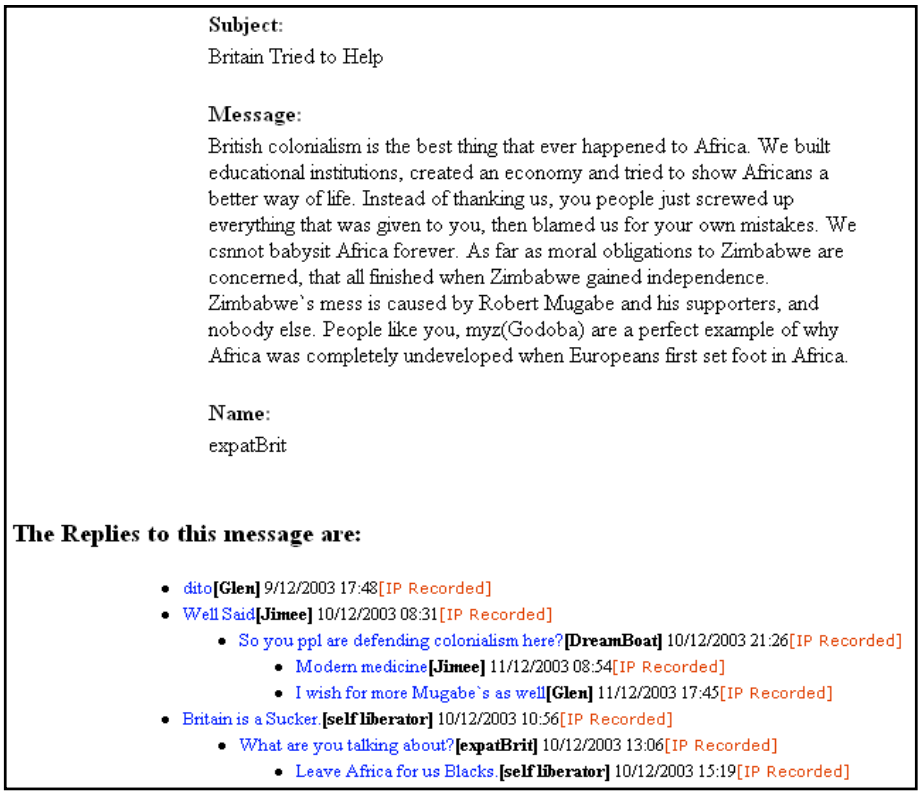
“Dog Breath” writes, “Given the current situation.... it makes me feel like I’m already IN THE ZOO - more Primates and Neanderthals around here on the outside, than you could imagine!!” to which “Dreamboat” replies, “in that case why not go book yourself in, surely the primates are lonely with out you!!”.

4.4.1.4 Ideal role-taking

As was the case on the General forum, participants on the Zimbabwe forum made little attempt to try and understand views that were culturally and/or socially different from their own. On this forum there was a general anti-colonial, pro Mugabe stance among the black participants and a tendency to promote and defend the “successes” of colonialism and among the white participants. The white participants were also very critical of Mugabe and his government. This broad generalisation can also be extended to those participants living in Zimbabwe. There were also a few white participants whose racist taunts and jibes made no meaningful contribution to any of the discussions. In this message from October 3, “Dreamboat” laments the fact that those with different views “must go”:

> There a lot of people who are chanting here who are expats, as long as people start having different views they must go, they are hounded and insulted etc? Is that your idea of a civilised debate? And the fact that you people thrive on silencing opponents tells me that you’re dictators of the worse kind, you just hate competition cause apartheid has taught you too well how to cleave your opponent.

Figure 5 and 6 (overleaf) illustrate the debate on colonialism:



Subject:
Britain Tried to Help

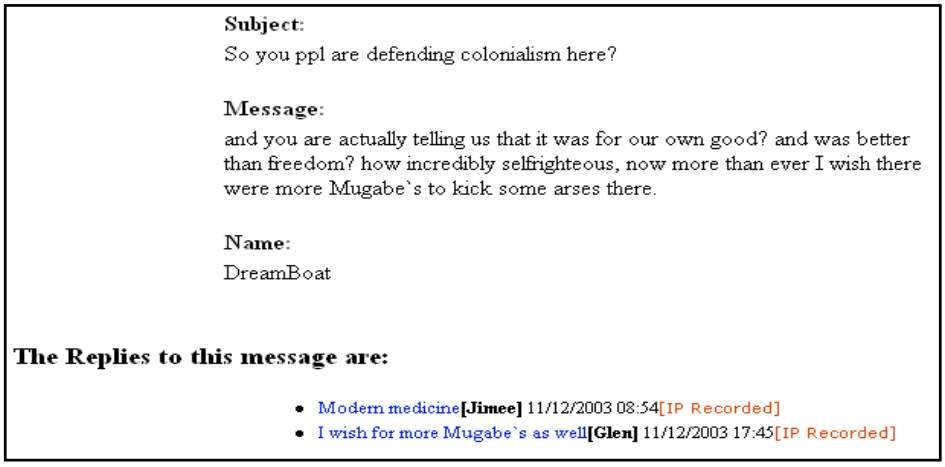
Message:
British colonialism is the best thing that ever happened to Africa. We built educational institutions, created an economy and tried to show Africans a better way of life. Instead of thanking us, you people just screwed up everything that was given to you, then blamed us for your own mistakes. We csnnot babysit Africa forever. As far as moral obligations to Zimbabwe are concerned, that all finished when Zimbabwe gained independence. Zimbabwe`s mess is caused by Robert Mugabe and his supporters, and nobody else. People like you, myz(Godoba) are a perfect example of why Africa was completely undeveloped when Europeans first set foot in Africa.

Name:
expatBrit

The Replies to this message are:

- dito **[Glen]** 9/12/2003 17:48 [IP Recorded]
- Well Said **[Jimee]** 10/12/2003 08:31 [IP Recorded]
  - So you ppl are defending colonialism here? **[DreamBoat]** 10/12/2003 21:26 [IP Recorded]
    - Modern medicine **[Jimee]** 11/12/2003 08:54 [IP Recorded]
    - I wish for more Mugabe`s as well **[Glen]** 11/12/2003 17:45 [IP Recorded]
- Britain is a Sucker. **[self liberator]** 10/12/2003 10:56 [IP Recorded]
  - What are you talking about? **[expatBrit]** 10/12/2003 13:06 [IP Recorded]
    - Leave Africa for us Blacks. **[self liberator]** 10/12/2003 15:19 [IP Recorded]

Figure 5: Pro-colonialism



Subject:
So you ppl are defending colonialism here?

Message:
and you are actually telling us that it was for our own good? and was better than freedom? how incredibly selfrighteous, now more than ever I wish there were more Mugabe`s to kick some arses there.

Name:
DreamBoat

The Replies to this message are:

- Modern medicine **[Jimee]** 11/12/2003 08:54 [IP Recorded]
- I wish for more Mugabe`s as well **[Glen]** 11/12/2003 17:45 [IP Recorded]

Figure 6: Anti-colonialism

4.4.1.5 Sincerity

It follows that a relatively high degree of rational discourse would result in a forum in which the messages are more sincere than not, and this was the finding in this regard. The preponderance of messages that were posted from other sources, the press releases from the MDC and the many attempts to keep the debates at an "intelligent" level are all factors which point to the sincerity with which News24.com readers participated on this forum. As with the General forum, there were examples of meaningless contributions which would otherwise have derailed the conversations. However, on this forum some genuine attempts were made to bring some direction into the debates or to call "wayward" contributors to task. In contrast to the General forum in which the more "senior" participants would undermine the conversations by using misplaced humour, racist remarks and the like, the dominant participants on the Zimbabwe forum were clearly interested in conducting a meaningful discussion on Zimbabwe.

4.4.1.6 Discursive equality and inclusion

In the four-month period of analysis, 88 different usernames were counted on this forum. As was the case with the General forum, this does not necessarily mean that there were this many individual participants on the forum since registered users could possess more than one username. It was found, for example, that the writer Cathy Buckle used more than one username ("Impi" and "The Wizard").

It was found that there was much less of a hierarchy on this forum than on the General forum. It stands to reason that some participants were more talkative on the forum than others. However, the clique so evident on the General forum was absent here. The result was that certain groupings of participants did not "gang up" on others. Some of the other characteristics of the General forum were also conspicuous by their absence. There were no induction rules for new participants, those participants who contributed more frequently did not dominate in terms of setting an agenda for the conversations and they generally welcomed new ideas. Overall, it was found that participants posted messages only if they had something concrete to say. They did not post messages simply because they could. This resulted in much more listening on this forum than on the General forum.

In one example, from December 24, "Truworth" suggests a good candidate for the Zimbabwean presidency is businessman Strive Masiyiwa. "Dreamboat" asks "Truworth" to post some extra information on the man so that she could have a better understanding of "what you are talking about". "Truworth" obliges by posting several links to websites containing more information on Masiyiwa and even posts a short biography on him. Further on in the thread, "avwhitemale" says, "positive comment, now we're talking".

Chapter Five: Analysis

5.1 Interactive capacity

In his analysis of 100 online US newspapers, Schultz (1999) deemed the presence of certain interactive tools more important than others. On his index of feedback options Schultz (1999) gave more weight to certain interactive elements, such as a chat room hosted by journalists in which journalists participate and discussion forums in which journalists participate. According to Schultz, these were weighted more heavily than a quick poll or a general e-mail address to the newsroom since they made "further discursive attempts more possible" (1999:9). Online newspapers could at best score 15 points (for making the maximum use of the interactive tools available) and at worse 0 (for having no tools for interactivity). In his analysis, Schultz concluded that "the higher an online newspaper scored, the more likely it was to offer different and sophisticated feedback options, which may encourage interactive communication" (1999:9).

Using Schultz's index of feedback options, News24.com scored seven out of a possible 15 points. It can be argued - using this as a guide - that News24.com does present the reader with some tools with which to interact with the editorial staff and the content on the website. However, the website does lack some of the more sophisticated tools which would arguably enhance its levels of interactivity. For example, News24.com does not host a chat room in which journalists participate. And while it does offer discussion forums, the potential for increased interactivity in this regard is lost because the forums were not moderated nor did they involve the input of journalists. There were no links to

articles' authors or copy editors, nor were there any links to politicians or officials. Similar findings on the user interactivity on news websites have been made by Outing (1998 cited in Dibean & Garrison 2001) who determined that a number of sites did not offer a way for readers to interact with staff by including e-mail-linked staff listings (News24.com lists the names of editorial staff, but does not provide an e-mail link making it impossible for readers to interact directly with staff). Outing also found that matters of interest to local readers, such as obituaries and birth notices, were absent from news websites. The number of interactive features present on News24.com is generally in line with the findings of Dibean and Garrison (2001) who analysed the extent to which US daily newspapers were using technologies available for the development of websites. They found that the majority of online newspapers had forums and e-mail but there was very little use of chat rooms or polls with instantaneous updates[12].

5.2 Debate and discussion

There were less than 200 forum participants on each of the forums analysed which, judging by the readership of News24.com[13], appeared to be a little low. However, of the 11 readers who responded to the questionnaire posted on the homepage of News24.com, 88% said that they had at one time or another posted a comment on one of the forums. Despite the relatively low number of participants on the forums, it can be said that there was nevertheless much activity.

[12] This study, conducted in 1999, showed that only 53% of newspapers presented forums and only 69.7% offered an e-mail address.
[13] Statistics for October 2003 show that 554919 'hits' were recorded on News24.com and 553804 pages viewed at an average of 17 864 pages per day.

The findings from the interviews suggest that the forums enabled readers to discuss and debate, and in particular enabled them to voice their opinions on a particular issue they had read on News24.com. This is significant since it indicates a high degree of interactivity in terms of readers making use of the available interactive resources to interact with others about the content on the website. And although the discussions were at times driven by the latest news – and this was more evident on the Zimbabwe forum than on the General forum – there were clearly other factors that contributed to the communication processes on the forums. Chatting with online friends and posting a message to the News24.com editorial staff were less popular reasons cited in the interviews for visiting the forums. However, evidence from the General forum suggests that chatting with friends online was one of the main reasons why readers, in particular the regular posters, ventured into the forums in the first place. This apparent inconsistency could be explained in two ways; either the forum participants did not understand the difference between debating and chatting, or those who engaged in forum chat did not respond to the questionnaire. The latter scenario is more likely.

One question that emerges from the findings on the forums is why some people kept coming back for more discussion, debate, or to be subjected to more bouts of "flaming". The Internet is a medium in which users are faced with almost unlimited choice about what websites to visit; so what kept some of the participants coming back? As Norris points out, "to avoid cognitive dissonance, it is simpler to "exit" than to try to work through any messy bargaining and conflictual disagreements within the group" (2004:33).

According to Stromer-Galley (2003) there are two main reasons why people behave the way they do in online discussion contexts, and both may have negative consequences. One reason, in what can be called the diversity perspective, is that people from diverse backgrounds converge online to share information and opinions and to argue with one another. This, in the view of Stromer-Galley, may lead to talk that is "unruly, irrational, and far from the ideals of public deliberation" (2003:4). The second – called the homophily perspective – involves people coming online and finding people with shared interests. Here, notes Stromer-Galley, "people expose themselves only to like-minded perspectives" and "can become more as part of the social interaction with those like-minded others" (2003:4).

The results of the questionnaire produced some interesting results on what the readers viewed as the purpose of the discussion forums. Not only were the forums there for people to voice their opinion, the findings suggest, but also to get a sense of how people viewed current issues and to be exposed to different views from their own. This relates to the findings of Stromer-Galley (2003) that people enjoy the ability to encounter perspectives other than their own. Stromer-Galley (2003) also found that people enjoyed the opportunity to survey the public opinion or mood of the country, a sentiment that was expressed in the interviews of this study.

The debate and discussion that occurred on the forums was a product of the available technology, but it was also arguably as a result of the work practices of the News24.com editorial staff. The results of the interviews with News24.com editorial staff members

indicate that it was common work practice to invite comment on stories from News24.com readers. The most popular way to enhance interactivity on the website was by providing a link from a story to a related discussion forum. Other ways of increasing the interactivity on the website included providing an e-mail link for readers to directly contact the newsroom; creating a link from the online poll to a published article; and linking the author's e-mail address to a published story. But during the period of analysis there was no evidence of this.

However, as the findings from interviews suggest, there was little or no contribution from the News24.com editorial staff as far as the content of the debates and discussion was concerned. Only one out of 10 responses from the interviews said that it is common work practice to participate in the forums. The finding, also from the interviews, that three out of 10 editorial staff members posted a message as part of their job seems to suggest that generally there is no clear company policy on the role of the News24.com editorial staff in respect of the forums. It appears as though it depends on the individual journalist as to whether he/she actually even visits the forums; 20% of the editorial staff had never visited the forums, while some did so periodically ("once a month", "once every fortnight"), and some "daily". The finding that online journalists make a limited contribution to the discussions and debates on the websites for which they work is supported by Schultz's findings from his research on *The New York Times* on the web. Schultz (2000) found that 12 out of 19 surveyed journalists from *The New York Times* did not even visit the Times' own online forums. One can suggest that the messages that were posted by the editorial staff had less to do with participating actively in the forum

discussion and more to do with issuing warnings to participants who were transgressing the forum rules. Indeed, 50% of the editorial staff believed it was common work practice to monitor and/or moderate the forums. That the editorial staff performs more of a moderation and maintenance role - deleting postings that did not conform to the News24.com forum guidelines as far as the kinds of activity most – is echoed by Schultz (2000: 214)

> At best, the special online staff that produces the Web sites will take notice of what readers discuss on the forums. But often staff interest will be limited to technical problems, control of the content (so that participants do not violate laws) and decisions about what topics to offer.

There is little doubt that the two forums under investigation on News24.com produced distinct arenas of discourse between the readers. However, it appears as though a great opportunity to extend the interactivity between the editorial staff and the readers was lost because of the staff's lack of participation. And the results suggest that the input of the staff would be welcomed, with eight out of 11 respondents saying that they would like to see the News24.com editorial staff taking part in the forum discussions. According to Schultz one of the advantages of discussion forums provided by the professional news media is that they can be protected against abuse, resulting in a "high quality of discussion" (2000:215). But, says Schultz (2000), it would make much more sense if the

online journalists did not only play policeman, but also engaged in the discussion process. They could then link the online discourse to their usual work[14].

According to the perspectives of readers and editorial staff of News24.com, e-mail seemed to have a limited use insofar as it enabled discussion and debate. The majority of the readers had never sent an e-mail to News24.com and a slight majority believed that the editorial staff at News24.com did not reply to e-mails from readers. The editorial staff generally welcomed the e-mail from readers and believed it was "constructive". Feedback, either via e-mail or the forums, was mostly deemed to be "useful" by the editorial staff. The interactive potential of e-mail does not seem to be fulfilled on News24.com. It seems as though it is used primarily as a means to inform readers (one-way communication) rather than as a space which is characterised by a measure of interactivity or dialogue communication.

5.3 Does the debate and discussion promote democracy?

5.3.1 Interactivity

It has been shown that there was a significant amount of activity on both the "General" and "Zimbabwe" forums. But what of the levels of interactivity? The findings show that interactivity was indeed present on both forums. In other words, many of the messages that were posted were related to those messages that preceded it. While this study did not quantitatively measure the amount of interactivity occurring on the forums, Schneider (1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:153), in his study of a Usenet discussion group dealing with the issue of abortion, calculated that each contributor

[14] Here Schultz is referring to print journalists.

interacted with around 35 other authors. In another study, Wilhelm (1999 cited in Dahlberg 2001:6) determined from a content analysis of 10 political newsgroups that only 20 percent of a random sample of 50 messages were actually directed to a previous message. Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997), on the other hand, found a high degree of interactivity in their study. The study, in which 44 randomly sampled bulletin boards were sampled, showed that more than 60 percent of 4 322 messages responded to previous postings. Ultimately, the results of the research into interactivity depend to a large extent on definitions and counting methods. The nature of the interactivity[15] and the communication processes observed on both the forums seem to fit, to a differing degree, the characteristics listed by Dahlberg (2001). These characteristics that tend to inhibit interactivity include "bite-sized postings", the non-linear structure of conversations and the rapidity of the exchanges (Dahlberg 2001:7).

The reasons why computer-mediated communication may take this form have to do with what Millard calls "chrono-economic stress" (cited in Dahlberg 2001:7). That is, the length of online postings is restricted by "the psycholinguistic effects of an online writer's awareness of the limits of time, bandwidth, money, attention and any other resources that he or she can devote to any given piece of discourse" (Dahlberg 2001:7). This "chrono-economic stress" has an impact on the nature of the discourse that it produced and is particularly relevant in a South African context where these issues, especially with regard to time and money, have a role to play in how people come to use and experience the Internet. Because of the high costs associated with accessing the

[15] Dahlberg and Schneider make use of the term "reflexivity" in their studies to indicate interactivity.

Internet in South Africa, one may find that many of the readers accessed News24.com and the site's forums from their places of employment. However, free time is limited in the work environment which arguably is one of the main reasons behind the preponderance of "bite-sized" postings. Indeed, time pressure was one reason given in the interviews for readers' non-participation in the forums. It is also a likely reason for many readers simply scanning the contents on the forums and not making any contribution to the discussion[16]. On the other hand, readers who access the Internet from home face the dilemma of having enough time to perhaps make more lengthy contributions on the forum, but then have to deal with the extra costs involved. These factors directly influence the levels of interactivity and as such may retard the enhancement of the public sphere online.

In terms of the two News24.com forums under investigation, Dahlberg's list of characteristics that may hamper interactivity are much more applicable to the General forum than to the one dealing with Zimbabwe. The postings on the General forum were notably short, there was quite a high degree of topic decay and the topics of discussion would mutate rather quickly. The Zimbabwe forum, by contrast, tended to involve fewer participants who posted less frequently, while the posts were also generally longer. In this case the nature of the communication exchanges appeared to facilitate interactivity more so than that in face-to-face communication. As Dahlberg notes:

> The effort it takes to put forward arguments in written form, in comparison with spoken communication, often encourages participants to think more

[16] The concept of 'lurking' is dealt with in more detail later in this chapter.

> carefully about their positions. This reflection is aided by the record of exchanges often available participants in online debate which allows for careful consideration of the development of ongoing arguments. Furthermore, online interactions are largely asynchronous exchanges and thus provide participants with time for reflection before presenting their own contributions (2001:7).

It can be argued, however, that both forums fell short of what is demanded by the notion of the public sphere. In line with the Dahlberg's general views of the nature of online forums, many participants on the News24.com forums put across and defended their viewpoints, but few would accede to the "better" argument or change their views leading to a situation where "debates often turn into repetitive exchanges between dogmatic interlocutors unprepared to reconsider their positions" (2001:9).

4.3.2 Barriers to participation

A common thread within the Internet literature is that which celebrates the 'equalising' potential of the medium. The belief is that social hierarchies and power relations are removed or levelled out by the anonymity of cyberspace to bodily identity, thus allowing people to interact as if they were equals (Dahlberg 2001:15, Slater 2002:536). The notion that virtual existence is separate from real life has been called an "illusion" and a product of these "mainstream celebratory discourses about new technologies" (Gajjala 2001:113). These celebratory discourses have begun to give way to those which argue that the

rhetoric on electronic networking needs to recognise the "intrinsic relation between technology and its social context" (Kole 1998:357, Gajjala 2001). These studies claim that identity becomes just as salient online as offline, and the way in which authority and power are reconstituted in the online environment may adversely affect the formation of the public sphere is terms of the requirement of discursive equality and inclusion.

The analysis of the factors that hinder participation in online discussions does not include the issue of access to the necessary equipment, such as a personal computer with a modem which can be connected to a network. And while access to the Internet is clearly limited because of issues like poverty, poor telecommunications infrastructure and state censorship, for those who are online the Internet does provide possibilities for participation and equality. But, as Dahlberg notes, given exclusions such as those listed above the Internet can "at best support an elite public sphere" (2001:15). Also, once people do become engaged in online discussion forums there is no guarantee that that will automatically experience equality and inclusion. Hunter refers to this as the "dark side" of online conversation, where anonymous participants cannot be held accountable for their words (1998:7). This results in much online communication being abusive and vitriolic and thus appears to contradict the issue of equality which is a necessary component of an ideal public sphere. New users, women and non-white ethnic groups are especially vulnerable in an online context (Dahlberg 2001).

The findings from the interviews suggest numerous reasons as to why readers do not contribute to the forum discussions. Some of the reasons given include those who just

wanted to read what others had posted[17] to more serious concerns about being victimised on racial and religious grounds. Others felt that participating on the forums was pointless since their comments were "ignored" and "not voiced" and would not "change anything". Another respondent said she did not have the time to make contributions. Yet another respondent mentioned that "idiot ANC attention seekers" made him not want to contribute to the discussions.

All of these responses in some way reflect the broader issues that may hinder or, at the very least, influence participation. Dahlberg (2001), Hunter (1998) and Schneider (1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000) have all noted the various ways in which the domination of discourse contributes to the notion of the public sphere not often being realised. According to Dahlberg (2001), the domination of discourse takes place in three ways: abusive postings, monopolisation of attention, and control of the agenda and style of the discourse.

5.3.2.1 'Flaming'

A well-entrenched culture of the Internet is "flaming". A "flame" is defined in the South African Concise Oxford Dictionary as "a vitriolic or abusive message distributed electronically through a computer network". And since there are fewer limitations on expression in cyberspace, single flames can quickly escalate into "flame wars". The data collected from the forums indicates that, at times, debates or discussions degenerated into vicious personal attacks on participants and was, more often than not, racially motivated.

[17] The act of reading the comments without actively participating in the discussion is called 'lurking'.

This is despite attempts made by News24.com to curb abusive talk by publishing a set of forum rules.

Since the "flame fests" were not analysed quantitatively for the purposes of this study, it is not possible to state what proportion of the comments posted were indeed flames. Previous studies have produced varying results as to the level of flaming on online forums. Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) determined from their research into interactivity on Usenet that "content on the net is less confrontational than popularly believed". In their study of online political discussion groups, Hill and Hughes (1998 cited in Dahlberg 2001:10) found that 39% of Usenet debates and 32% of AOL chat could be defined as a "flame fest". The respondents in Stromer-Galley's study did not "paint an entirely rosy picture" of the experience of online conversation, saying they disliked being exposed to views to which they were strongly opposed and having to listen to what they felt were racist, extreme and "backward" views (2003:12). And in this study, two of the 11 respondents highlighted racial abuse on the forum as a reason not to post a message. One respondent said that she no longer posts messages for fear of being victimised. She noted:

> Racist statements are made to people who are just giving their input on a subject. There are this group of posters (when I used to go on I remember GRNLDR, ZIM, - names i [sic] actually remember because of my experience with them) who never had anything nice to say if you were a non white, and especially if they came to know that you were a Islam person, you had it with every religious insult that they could find.

This supports Dahlberg's claim that "such abuse can be extremely upsetting for participants of online proceedings and can lead to their silencing and even withdrawal from cyber-interactions" (2001:16).

5.3.2.2 Monopolisation of attention and control of discourse

One aspect that clearly emerged from the analysis of the forum contents was the establishment or the continued development of status. This leads to a situation where the discourse tends to be dominated by a few voices. In the present study, 181 participants were active on the General forum but the majority of the messages were posted by as little as 10 people. The same can be said for the Zimbabwe forum, though to a far lesser extent. This appears to be characteristic of online discourse and is well documented in the literature. Schneider (1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:153) found that of the approximately 3 000 contributors to a Usenet newsgroup on abortion, about 150 (0.05 percent) were responsible for more than 40 percent of the 46 000 postings. Or put differently, some five percent of the contributors posted almost 80 percent of the articles. In another study, Bonchek (1997 cited in Hunter 1998:7) found that 28 people accounted for half of the messages sent to the MN-Politics mailing list. Some of the responses in the present study support these findings. One respondent who said he had visited the News24.com forums without posting a comment did so because "it seems to be the same group of people who post comments" and "some people seem to use it (forums) for dialogue which pisses me off". The same feelings were expressed by another respondent who said that "most of these posters use the forum as a chat room".

It is not always the fear of being put down or not being listened to that leads to people lurking on the forums. And it does also not necessarily mean that "lurkers" or infrequent posters are unengaged, passive or non-participating. That they may be as "committed, actively listening and engaged" as Dahlberg suggests is borne out by some of the responses in this study (2001:16). A few respondents who said that they had visited the News24.com forums without posting a comment offered reasons around time pressures and lack of interest in the topic under discussion for their non-participation. As indicated earlier, it is likely that many News24.com readers access the website from work and as such do not have the time to read every new post and post numerous messages themselves. A likely scenario is that these people quickly scan the discussion threads and perhaps submit a message if they are interested in the current discussions. They would then likely return to the forum a few hours later to see if their message has drawn any responses.

5.3.2.5 Gender

Much of the literature on the Internet and the public sphere highlights the case of female users where it has been shown that the "inequalities of face-to-face interaction migrate online, where women speak less and are less likely to have their topics pursued" (Baym 1996 cited in Hunter 1998:7). However, one of the most interesting findings from the interview results is the absence of comment from women who felt marginalised from the forums on the basis of their gender. It is also not clear, for obvious reasons, from the analysis of the content on the forums how many women chose not to participate in the

discussions for fear of attracting the unwanted attractions of men or being sexually harassed. However, as Gajjala critically notes, cyberfeminist researchers have up to now assumed that silence online implies a general lack of offline voice and power, and they therefore "conflate power with having a visible presence online and being comfortable with using digital technologies" (2001:115).

It was evident on the General forum that there was indeed a fair amount of "cyber-sex" talk, that is, postings that were flirtatious or sexually suggestive. However, the overall nature of this "chat" could not be said to be derogatory. Rather, it was good-humoured and light-hearted. Indeed, instead of exiting the forum because of the sexual overtones in the conversations, the regular female participants often "played along" with their male counterparts[18]. This finding represents a different perspective on the view that women, who become tired of being harassed within online discourse leave the forum, become passive observers, post self-censored messages for fear of reprisal or start women-only groups. Indeed, on the General forum there was a core group of women who were the target of much of the sexually suggestive postings, but who nevertheless played a very active role in many of the discussions.

On a more general level, Herring (1999) argues that gendered inequalities in online discourse occur as the result of a 'male style' of interaction. This style is characterised by "messages that are longer and more frequent, issue-oriented, assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic and self-promoting" (cited in Dahlberg 2001:17). On the other hand,

[18] There is much written about how a person's online identity can be vastly different from their real identity. Here it is the online identity which is being referred to.

notes Herring (1999), the female style tends to be "shorter, personally-oriented, questioning, tentative, apologetic and supportive" (cited in Dahlberg 2001:17). It is contended by Dahlberg that the dominance of the male style of interaction impedes women's participation more than men's, given that "women are on the whole less accustomed to and willing to engage in such forms of interaction" (2001:17).

The findings from both the General and Zimbabwe forums tend to support this idea of a gendered discourse where the male style of interaction is dominant. This is also most likely since there were more male voices on the forums than female voices. While it would be difficult to draw any firm conclusions on the gendered style of the discussions because this aspect was not a main aim of the study, it is possible to speculate about some exceptions. In the first place women, and especially those who posted frequently, posted just as often as did men. Secondly, women were also responsible for posting messages that were issue based. This was particularly evident on the Zimbabwe forum. Thirdly, the contention that men post longer messages than women would also have to be questioned based on the analysis of the forums' content.

5.3.3 Quality

The quality of the discourse can be considered "as a measure of the ability of contributors to remain engaged with the topic at hand" (Schneider 1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:153). In his study on the topic of abortion on a Usenet group, Schneider (1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:153) found that the issue of quality was lacking and as such did not contribute positively to the notion of the public sphere.

Schneider also found that the most frequent contributors to the debate were least likely to post messages that dealt with the topic at hand. Since the General forum was open to discussion about any topic, it would be difficult to strictly apply Schneider's definition. The findings from the Zimbabwe forum, however, indicate a high measure of quality. Though the topic was very broad – readers were encouraged to post their comments on Zimbabwe and not on any particular aspect such as human rights abuses or the government's controversial land reform policy – the bulk of the talk was very relevant to the topic at hand. In fact, it could be said that the discussion hardly ever veered off topic. A likely reason for this is that the most frequent contributors to the Zimbabwe forum, those who kept the discussion moving, did not themselves go "off topic".

Arguably, it was the domination of the discourse by a few participants on the General forum which had a negative impact on the quality of the discussion and, consequently, on the forum measuring up to the standards required by the public sphere. One of the major reasons for the relative lack of quality on this forum lay in the fact that those people new to the forum – and the new topics and issues they addressed – were often ignored by the more established contributors. In this way, new topics of discussion and alternative views were not given an opportunity to develop.

Another factor which contributed to a lack of quality on both forums – though it was better managed by the participants on the Zimbabwe forum – was an inability to listen, respect and understand the perspectives of others. On the General forum this resulted in a limited amount of rational-critical debate, which is required to enhance the public sphere.

The amount of abuse calls into question Dahlberg's claim that "although they feature disagreements, virtual communities are often based upon people getting together with similar values, interests, and concerns in order to provide emotional support, companionship, and advice" (2001:11). A more accurate assessment, of both forums, would be in a similar vein to Wilhelm's observation that "sustained dialogue among all participants on a single topic or line of inquiry is uncommon" (cited in Dahlberg 2001:11).

5.3.4 Diversity

The issue of diversity refers not only to the range of topics under discussion, but also to the spectrum of opinions that are expressed on a particular subject. Since the General forum was formed for participants to discuss any topic, it was unsurprising to find a myriad of topics under discussion. These ranged from macro-level international political issues such as the Iraq war, to issues more relevant in a South African context, like medical aid contributions, and micro-level topics such as participants' hobbies or favourite films. And while there was much conversation about many topics, the spectrum of opinions on those topics under discussion was, in the main, particularly narrow. One likely reason for this has to do with the issue of quality, addressed above. There were significant amount of "bite-sized" postings on the General forum and often replies to a post would simply endorse the contents of the previous message and not add or contribute another angle to the discussion. Dahlberg notes that a "digital record"[19] of exchanges is normally available which helps "participants follow and examine ongoing debates

critically in their own time and in their own way" (2001:7). But this was rarely the case on the General forum; the discussions moved very quickly and a message was unlikely to be read by the active forum participants, although it may have been read by a lurker.
A slightly different picture emerged on the Zimbabwe forum, where the discussions were far more diverse – not so much in terms of the amount of topics since the forum was focused specifically on Zimbabwe, but definitely in respect of range of opinions expressed. Here, the discussions were not only focused on time-worn debates such as the impact of colonialism, but were continually fuelled by the latest news coverage from the country, like the government's land reform policy, its crackdown on the independent media and the comings and goings of President Robert Mugabe.

There was a wide spectrum of contributors on the forum which resulted in a wide range of opinions being expressed; the forum was used by both black and white people living in Zimbabwe who had different opinions on the way the British (Western) media was portraying the country; there were former Zimbabwean citizens now living in South Africa or overseas who were regular, articulate participants; the opposition MDC party used the forum to disseminate its press releases. The rapid rate of exchanges seen on the General forum, which was a likely factor which reduced the diversity of discussion, was absent on the Zimbabwe forum and this arguably allowed people more time to consider their point of view before posting.

[19] One of the duties of the News24.com editorial staff was to maintain the discussion forums. So while there was a list of postings, the forums were periodically "cleaned up" where older messages were deleted from the bottom of the list.

As in Schneider's study (1996, 1997), there was a consistent group of regular contributors on both forums as well as a "subset" of participants which was continually changing (cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:153). In terms of the diversity perspective of online communication, this proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the regular contributors could be relied upon to have an opinion and so keep the discussion going, thus adding to the diversity of topics (Dahlberg 2001). On the other hand, the new users who brought new ideas to the discussion were often ignored which, in turn, stifles the diversity of opinions.

5.3.5 Freedom of speech versus moderation

Three of the better known commercial Internet service providers in the US – CompuServe, America Online (AOL) and Prodigy – have all been involved in legal disputes regarding freedom of expression in public forums (Fernback 2002). Similar to News24.com, these service providers have attempted to enforce public-posting guidelines for years but have run into trouble following attempts to exercise control over the content of messages posted by subscribers. Fernback highlights the passing of the Communications Decency Act in the US in 1996 which made it a crime to post "indecent, obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy material on the Internet in an attempt to protect minors from accessing it" as landmark legislation in this regard (2002:47).

The findings from the interviews indicate that the majority of respondents felt that the News24.com forums should not be moderated. Arguably, this reflects one school of thought among those who engage in computer-mediated communication that freedom of

expression on the Internet is essential to liberty and free will. Perhaps it also informs Schneider's argument that editorial control in online discussion contexts might "reduce the range of topics to those deemed suitable by the editorial gatekeeper" (1996, 1997 cited in Jankowski and Van Selm 2000:154). The anti-moderation stance of the News24.com forum participants contradicts Fernback's belief that most members of a computer-mediated communication collective see moderated newsgroups "not as censorship or prior restraint but as a concession they are willing to make to ensure the "common good" of the group" (2002:49). And the responses from those readers who said they would like to see the forums being moderated suggest that it is the "common good" that is being jeopardised by a few abusive individuals. Also, it is clearly this minority who see that free speech principles can only go so far when unmoderated forum discussions degenerate into flame wars, propaganda or utter nonsense.

Schultz notes that what many forum participants see as censorship or moderation can be used advantageously by the professional news media (2000). However, judging by the amount of abusive content on the forums and considering that the News24.com editorial staff claim to be involved in monitoring the forums and deleting offensive postings, his assertion that the forums could be protected against abuse and therefore host a relatively high quality of discussion may not always hold true.

While there was a strong anti-moderation stance among the respondents, there was a strong call for News24.com editorial staff to become involved in the forum discussions. The participation of journalists in online forums, other than the reasons of controlling the

content and sorting out technical problems, holds some advantages. Not only would they fulfil a more active moderating, regulating role, in other words, regulating the discussion but they could work the sentiments of the online talk into the content that they produce (Schultz 2000). As Dahlberg notes, "forum management can shape discourse by the way it chooses to police the rules of communicative exchange and by taking a lead role in setting the tone of the discourse" (2001:19).

5.4 The overall picture

Be it in chat rooms, discussion forums or through e-mail, cyberspace is overflowing with communication. On a daily basis, millions log on to the Internet to interact, talk, share ideas and, regrettably, abuse their fellow netizens. And one such space where vibrant exchanges take place is on the discussion forums of News24.com. From an analysis of the content on the website's General and Zimbabwe forums, it is evident that South Africans living in their own country, expatriate South Africans and foreigners come together to debate and discuss. But this interactivity would not be possible had the available technologies and interactive tools not been implemented.

A content analysis of the interactive features provided on News24.com proves that there is interactive capacity in new media and that these interactive tools facilitate debate and discussion. The main tool for interactivity on News24.com was found to be the discussion forums, with e-mail playing a far lesser role. By comparing the interactive features on News24.com with an "interactivity index" it was determined that there was an acceptable amount of interactive options available to the readers but that these could be enhanced.

This could be done in very rudimentary ways. For example, hyper-linking the e-mail addresses of the editorial staff would enable readers to interact directly with them. Using a discussion forum as a space where not only reader-reader communication, but also reader-journalist communication could take place, will arguably improve the standard of the existing interaction by introducing a moderating factor.

The study was also concerned with attempting to establish whether the significant amount of debate and discussion on the two forums actually promoted democracy. After all, much has been written about the possibility of two-way, decentralised communications in cyberspace providing sites where rational discourse can occur and therefore extend the broader public sphere. The framework for the analysis focused on those factors, first theorised by Habermas, which needed to be present to meet the requirements of the public sphere. These included the exchange of opinions, rational discourse, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive equality and inclusion.

This study has illustrated an exchange of opinions occurs in online discussion forums and the presence of these communicative acts confirms that in some measure the Internet is facilitating a discourse which in some ways approximates open debate and discussion in a mediated sphere. In some ways too the structure of rational-critical debate – another requirement of the public sphere – was replicated. This emerged more clearly in the case of the Zimbabwe forum. Here there was more discussion around issues and a fairly high level of information compared to that on the General forum. It was argued that the availability of a topic, albeit a broad one, was instrumental in guiding the debate and

keeping the discussions “on topic”. The General forum, on the other hand, was an open forum and it was, arguably, as a result of this that the level of debate seen on the Zimbabwe was not replicated here.

Though some exceptions have been noted – particularly the belief that women are continually and systemically silenced through the abusive postings of their male counterparts – the data from the General forum, and to a far lesser extent the Zimbabwe forum, appears to support the notion that the Internet is often given to inequality, an overabundance of meaningless information and vitriolic, irrational discourse. This goes some way to further dispel the utopian view of an egalitarian online world where it is believed information and conversation lead to a new and better democracy.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This study has highlighted the phenomenon of computer-mediated communication and presented concrete examples and analyses of how people conduct themselves and interact with one another in online discussion forums. It has made a contribution to the existing literature which deals with the democratic possibilities as well as the limitations of the Internet. It has clearly illustrated that the Internet provides a space where online debate and discussion can flourish, especially with regard to online media. However, the study raised questions as to the claims that this interactivity leads to equality and democracy.

More importantly, however, the study has laid the foundations for further research. In many ways, this work was only exploratory in nature, using broad brushstrokes to paint a picture of online discourse in a South African context. However, it has raised numerous questions that could form the basis for future enquiry. On a broad level, the impact of new technologies on traditional journalism and the role of the online media in encouraging and fostering participatory democracy is a topic for further exploration. Also, a comparison between the nature of political conversation stemming from a South African news website and that from a site in another part of Africa, or the world, holds much promise. On a smaller, yet no less significant scale, the twin issues of race and gender on the forums of various South African online media would merit further examination. In terms of interactivity, there is room for future studies which involve the quantitative analysis of interactivity and related variables, such as discourse quality and equality, across various websites for long time periods.

Given that more and more people are coming online, it will become increasingly important to understand the Internet and its potential for maintaining and producing new public spheres and spaces for information, debate and participation which can invigorate democracy. In this sense online journalists, forum moderators and participants have an important role to play in transforming the antagonistic style inherent in netiquette to one which promotes rational-critical debate. Only then will cyberspace be able to rid itself of Streck's (cited in Dahlberg 2001:9) label that it is "about as interactive as a shouting match".

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide: News24.com users

The broad aim of this interview guide is to gain an understanding of how interactive the News24.com website is, according to those who use it. In other words, what do users think of the levels of interactivity on News24.com?

1) News24 has a variety of discussion forums. Do you know this?

- Yes
- No

2) Have you ever posted a comment on one of News24's discussion forums?

- Yes
- No

3) If you answered "no" for Question 2, could you explain why you have not done so?

4) How often, on average, do you visit the News24 discussion forums?

- Never
- Once a month
- Once every fortnight
- Once a week

- Daily
- More than once per day

5) Have you ever visited the forums without posting a comment?

- Yes
- No

6) If you answered "yes" to Question 5, could you explain why?

7) Why do you visit the News24 discussion forums?

- To voice my opinion on a particular issue I read on the News24 website
- To debate about issues of the day with my fellow users
- To "chat" to my online friends
- To post a comment to the News24 staff

8) What, in your view, is the purpose of the discussion forums?

9) Do you think that that the discussion forums should be moderated?

- Yes
- No

10) If you answered "yes" to Question 9, please provide reasons why.

11) Would you like to see News24 staff take part in the discussions?

- Yes
- No

12) Have you ever sent an e-mail to the News24 editor or the writer of news report?

- Yes
- No

13) Do you think that the staff at News24 respond to e-mail from readers?

- Yes
- No

14) If you sent an e-mail to News24, would you expect a reply?

- Yes
- No

15) And how soon?

- Immediately
- Same day
- Within the week
- Within the month
- I don't expect a reply

Appendix 2: Interview guide: News24.com editorial staff

The aim of this interview guide is to gain an understanding of the importance of interactivity from the perspective of the News24.com editorial staff.

1) Is it common work practice to participate in News24's discussion forums?

- Yes
- No

2) Is it common work practice to monitor/moderate News24's discussion forums? In other words, delete offensive postings.

- Yes
- No

3) How often, on average, do you visit News24's discussion forums?

- Never
- Once a month
- Once every fortnight
- Once a week
- Daily
- More than once per day

4) Have you ever posted a comment on one of News24's discussion forums, either in your personal capacity or as part of your job?

- Yes, in my personal capacity
- Yes, as part of my job
- No

5) If you answered "no" to Question 4, could you provide a reason/s

6) Feedback or comments that you receive from users either via e-mail or discussion forums are:

- Useful
- Interesting
- A waste of my time

7) Is it common work practice to invite comment on stories from News24's users

- Yes
- No

8) If you answered "yes" to Question 6, could you elaborate on how this is achieved? For example, providing links to discussion forums.

9) Receiving e-mails from users is:

- Always welcomed
- Sometimes welcomed
- Never welcomed

10) The amount of e-mail you receive from readers is:

- Manageable
- Unmanageable

11) The e-mail that you receive from users is generally:

- Constructive
- Of no help

12) Does News24 use e-mail to inform users of new features on the website, competitions, or breaking news?

- Yes
- No

Appendix 3: Published interview guide on News24.com



Interview guide: News24 users Page 1 of 3

news24 . assist24 . auctions24 . finance24 . food24 . health24 . property24 . shopping24 . smalls24 . subscribe

news24.com

Tips for Trevor
Help the Minister of Finance give South Africa reason to smile in this year's Budget by sending him an e-mail.

A brand n
News24 has new logo - fi look is all ab

My home page | FAQs on Sign Me In

SIGN ME IN

News sections

Homepage
South Africa
News
Politics
Aids Focus
Hefer probe
Matric 2003
Sport
World
Africa
Sci-Tech
Entertainment
Finance
Health
Backpage

Special Reports

Iraqi Dossier
Aids Focus
Hefer probe
Zimbabwe
More

Special Focus

Assist24
Auctions24
Finance24
Food24
Smalls24
Property24
Health24
Shopping24
Subscribe24
Women24
Wheels24

Weather

Cape Town **23°C**
Durban **25°C**
Johannesburg **27°C**

Click for more

Lottery Numbers

2 6 10 25 29 48 **31**

Click for more

Horoscopes

Select starsign:
Aries

Submit

SOUTH AFRICA : NEWS

Terms & conditions

Looking for affordable car & household insurance ? click here

Interview guide: News24 users

27/01/2004 10:19 - (SA)

Print article email story

Former News24 staffer Greg Rule is now writing an Masters thesis on interactive media, and would appreciate your input on News24's forums. The results of the survey will be made available to News24.

First there was OUTsurance

Please copy the following questionnaire into an email message, select your responses, and send your completed survey to grule@mweb.co.za .

Interview guide: News24 users

The broad aim of this interview guide is to gain an understanding of how interactive the News24 website is, according to those who use it. In other words, what do users think of the levels of interactivity on News24?

1) News24 has a variety of discussion forums. Do you know this?
- Yes
- No

2) Have you ever posted a comment on one of News24's discussion forums?
- Yes
- No

3) If you answered "no" for Question 2, could you explain why you have not done so?

4) How often, on average, do you visit the News24 discussion forums?
- Never
- Once a month
- Once every fortnight
- Once a week
- Daily
- More than once per day

5) Have you ever visited the forums without posting a comment?
- Yes
- No

http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_1474670,00.html 2004/02/03

Afrikaans

Beeld
Die Burger
Volksblad
Rapport
Sake
Finansies &
Tegniek
Landbou
Litnet
Streekkoerante

Partners

Natal Witness
City Press
Finance Week
Carte Blanche
SASI
SA Gateway
Moneymax
Community

6) If you answered "yes" to Question 5, could you explain why?

7) Why do you visit the News24 discussion forums?

- To voice my opinion on a particular issue I read on the News24 website
- To debate about issues of the day with my fellow users
- To "chat" to my online friends
- To post a comment to the News24 staff

8) What, in your view, is the purpose of the discussion forums?

9) Do you think that that the discussion forums should be moderated?

- Yes
- No

10) If you answered "yes" to Question 9, please provide reasons why.

11) Would you like to see News24 staff take part in the discussions?

- Yes
- No

12) Have you ever sent an e-mail to the News24 editor or the writer of news report?

- Yes
- No

13) Do you think that the staff at News24 respond to e-mail from readers?

- Yes
- No

14) If you sent an e-mail to News24, would you expect a reply?

- Yes
- No

15) And how soon?

- Immediately
- Same day
- Within the week
- Within the month
- I don't expect a reply

- Send your answers to grule@mweb.co.za

Discussion Forums - Have your say about this article

View our various picture galleries

Win a BMW M3 driving course. Enter the Wheels24 Get Up to Speed! competition.

-- Top stories in this category --

news24.com

Appendix 4: News24.com forum rules



HELP

- News24's discussion forums are open to all our readers.
- Our forums are for our readers to engage in debate, and to exchange ideas and information.
- Please respect the rights of others using the forums.
- Please do not use racist terms and foul language.
- News24 will remove objectionable material. We will not tolerate racist or pornographic postings. We reserve the right to act against users in this regard.
- Please stick to the topic and do not post advertising material on the forums.
- If remarks by others offend you, e-mail the editor with the name of the forum and the posting.
- News24 has implemented a code in our discussion forums to keep a record of IP addresses of people posting messages. If we regard a person's postings as serious abuse of the forums we will contact the Internet Service Provider concerned to take action at the offender.

News24's forum are:

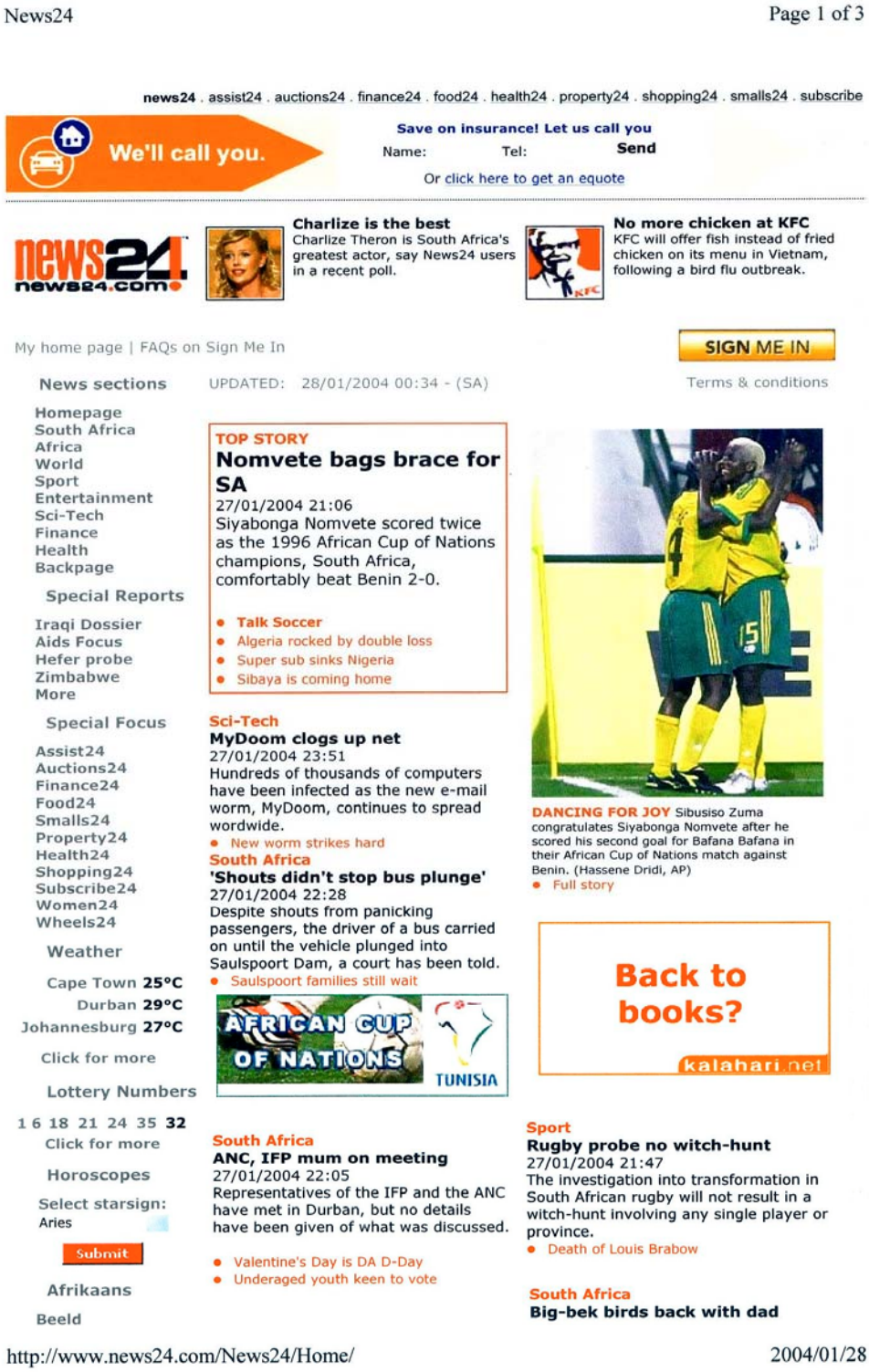
- Debating Chamber - discuss South African politics.
- Expats - South Africans abroad
- General Discussion - any topic
- Discuss Zimbabwe
- Sport
- Talk Cricket
- Talk Rugby
- Talk Soccer
- Talk Sport
- Talk Business
- Discuss Big Brother
- Discuss Idols
- Entertainment Talk
- F1 Chat
- Wheels Chat
- Afrikaans24
- Se jou se (Beeld, Die Burger, Rapport, Die Volksblad)
- Mark Shuttleworth
- Notice Board
- Poll results
- Wartalk - a discussion on the Anglo-Boer War

Letters:

News24 publishes letters from our readers here . Please e-mail you letter to the editor.

Back to the Forum all rights reserved

Appendix 5: News24.com homepage indicating placement of questionnaire



News24 Page 1 of 3

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We'll call you. Save on insurance! Let us call you Name: Tel: Send Or click here to get an equote

Charlize is the best Charlize Theron is South Africa's greatest actor, say News24 users in a recent poll.

No more chicken at KFC KFC will offer fish instead of fried chicken on its menu in Vietnam, following a bird flu outbreak.

My home page | FAQs on Sign Me In SIGN ME IN

Terms & conditions

News sections

Homepage
South Africa
Africa
World
Sport
Entertainment
Sci-Tech
Finance
Health
Backpage

Special Reports

Iraqi Dossier
Aids Focus
Hefer probe
Zimbabwe
More

Special Focus

Assist24
Auctions24
Finance24
Food24
Smalls24
Property24
Health24
Shopping24
Subscribe24
Women24
Wheels24

Weather

Cape Town 25°C
Durban 29°C
Johannesburg 27°C
Click for more

Lottery Numbers

1 6 18 21 24 35 32
Click for more

Horoscopes

Select starsign: Aries
Submit

Afrikaans

Beeld

UPDATED: 28/01/2004 00:34 - (SA)

TOP STORY

Nomvete bags brace for SA

27/01/2004 21:06

Siyabonga Nomvete scored twice as the 1996 African Cup of Nations champions, South Africa, comfortably beat Benin 2-0.

- Talk Soccer
- Algeria rocked by double loss
- Super sub sinks Nigeria
- Sibaya is coming home

Sci-Tech

MyDoom clogs up net

27/01/2004 23:51

Hundreds of thousands of computers have been infected as the new e-mail worm, MyDoom, continues to spread wordwide.

- New worm strikes hard

South Africa

'Shouts didn't stop bus plunge'

27/01/2004 22:28

Despite shouts from panicking passengers, the driver of a bus carried on until the vehicle plunged into Saulspoort Dam, a court has been told.

- Saulspoort families still wait

AFRICAN CUP OF NATIONS TUNISIA

South Africa

ANC, IFP mum on meeting

27/01/2004 22:05

Representatives of the IFP and the ANC have met in Durban, but no details have been given of what was discussed.

- Valentine's Day is DA D-Day
- Underaged youth keen to vote

DANCING FOR JOY Sibusiso Zuma congratulates Siyabonga Nomvete after he scored his second goal for Bafana Bafana in their African Cup of Nations match against Benin. (Hassene Dridi, AP)

- Full story

Back to books? kalahari.net

Sport

Rugby probe no witch-hunt

27/01/2004 21:47

The investigation into transformation in South African rugby will not result in a witch-hunt involving any single player or province.

- Death of Louis Brabow

South Africa

Big-bek birds back with dad

http://www.news24.com/News24/Home/ 2004/01/28

Die Burger
Volksblad
Rapport
Sake
Finansies & Tegniek
Landbou
Litnet
Streekkoerante

Partners

Natal Witness
City Press
Finance Week
Carte Blanche
SASI
SA Gateway
Moneymax
Community

27/01/2004 22:27
When Piet du Plessis's two parrots were stolen, he was devastated - but when one was found, he identified it by its swearing.

Discussion Forums | Newsletters | Photo Galleries | Earlier stories

INDICATORS

Rand/$	Rand/£	Rand/€	Gold/oz	Gold Mining	All-share index	Enter company name
7.0500	12.9100	8.9100	$409.35	0.00 +0.00%	0.00 +0.00%	GO

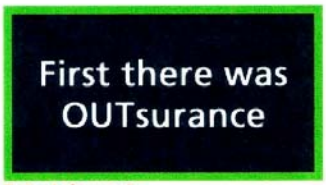
MORE NEWS

Finance
Good forecasts for retailers
27/01/2004 20:02
Financial analysts have upgraded their earnings forecasts for some of SA's leading retailers.

South Africa
14 000 public servants in limbo
27/01/2004 22:31
About 14 000 "redundant" public servants will have to wait for six months to hear their fate.
- Job cuts in the public service
- Money shock for companies

South Africa
'Pay up or lose out'
27/01/2004 23:24
The eThekwini metro council is calling in the long arm of the law to collect bad debt to the tune of about R800m.

World
Tony Blair survives
27/01/2004 21:40
Prime Minister Tony Blair has narrowly defeated a rebellion in his governing Labour Party against plans to increase university fees.
- Blair faces week from hell
- Blair on a knife-edge



Entertainment
Kiwi teen takes on Charlize
27/01/2004 20:36

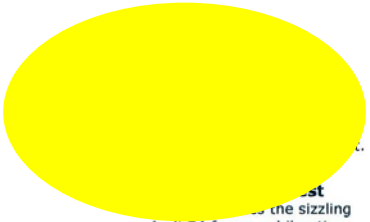
A 13-year-old New Zealand girl, Keisha Castle-Hughes, has became the youngest person to be nominated for a best-actress Oscar.
- Charlize: Now for the Oscar
- Golden Globe sets Oscar tone
- Oscar nominee list

Backpage
Burning down the house
27/01/2004 20:30

A powerful explosion ripped through a house in Germany - just as a repossession agent rang the doorbell.

Backpage
Personal ad solves puzzle
27/01/2004 20:30

Joy Davis is R100 poorer, but a completed jigsaw puzzle richer after her ad in a Cape Town newspaper for somebody to complete her puzzle.



...the sizzling Audi S4 for an exhilarating spin.

Food24:
Nothing tastes as good as Homemade bread.

Health24:
Breast cancer - the facts

Property24:
'Greenies' put a spoke in development





Hear the difference
The symptoms of hearing impairment are often hard to detect. Could your child be suffering?

Wheels24:
PIC, INFO:
Next VW Jetta for 2005

Women24:
If venturing out with a newborn baby seems like the scariest thing, keep this guide at hand.

South Africa

- ANC, IFP mum on meeting
- Big-bek birds back with dad
- Early election upsets law body

World

- Tony Blair survives
- WHO: Bird flu can be beaten
- Iraqi war was 'prudent'

Finance

- Cash boost for Rooibos fight
- Absa 'leads' SA's e-banking
- OM, Nedbank ratings under review

Sci-Tech

- Neanderthals not our fathers
- Rover sends postcard
- 'The insects are coming'

Health

- More carbs, less weight
- Dementia: When to stop driving
- Fat cells fight diseases

Africa

- Zim's Daily News gets reprieve
- SA declines military initiative
- 99 judicial staff on trial

Sport

- Krige out with wrist injury
- Arsenal sign Jose Reyes
- Hill set to resume training

Entertainment

- *Finding Nemo*: Disney in court
- SA movies in spotlight
- Rock icons sell 'freedom'

Backpage

- Jacko's kids questioned
- Hard knock for Viagra frauds
- Personal ad solves puzzle

Wheels

- SiZZling sports coupe now in SA
- New F1 Ferrari - pictures
- Cayenne rescues Porsche

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