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ONLINE TELEVISION FORUMS: INTERACTIVITY, ACCESS, AND TRANSACTIONAL SPACE

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Abstract. In online television forums hosted by Television Network Websites (TNWs), viewers are invited to interact with both those involved with the television network and/or other viewers/users. This paper is a preliminary investigation of the enormous range of new interactive spaces and practices. Current online television forums in US, UK and Australian TNWs are analyzed in terms of their interactivity and access. The forums are found to allow individuals increased and more immediate access to television products and personalities, the ability to determine their own news values, and the possibility of joining with others as transitory online communities rather than remaining an audience of individuals. While those who gain access and participate must agree to both rules and moderation, some users manage to subvert officially designated purposes or rules. Nevertheless, the provision of online television forums ultimately extends the traditional media sphere.

Introduction

Various levels of interactivity relative to a conversational ideal (from noninteractive, through quasi-interactive or reactive, to truly interactive) seem to characterise forms of both the traditional media and the newer media (Rafaelli, 1988). While opportunities for interactivity have existed in letters to the editor and radio and television talk shows, it is the online environment that has produced new and exciting possibilities for high interactivity through dynamic feedback channels (Newhagen, 1997). Television Network Websites (TNWs) in the USA, UK and Australia have hosted online forums since the mid 1990s. Online television forums constitute a specific form of interactivity whereby television viewers are invited to become internet users and interact with both those involved with the television network and/or other viewers/users. Requiring only a web-browser, participation pays off in the form of increasingly direct and guaranteed access to the appearance of celebrities, journalists or newsmakers. Where the appeal is not direct access, other television network specific inducements can be offered, such as the provision of a commercially-sanctioned space for interest-groups to gather and access fan-materials, topics for online discussion, or more novel forms of interactivity such as questionnaires or polls with instant results. This paper is a preliminary investigation of what is fast becoming an enormous range of new interactive spaces and practices.

History of Media Interactivity and Media Access

Interactivity in the sense of the facilitation of dialogue between mass-media producers and audiences has been seen as one of the most anticipated and desirable goals of new media technology (Marshall, Luckman & Smith 1998 p. 65-66; Pavlik 1998 p.137). Interactivity in this wide-ranging sense is, of course, not new and remains epitomized in the letter columns of the daily newspapers. Letters to the editor have a long history of providing opportunities for the expression of opinion in the public arena of the print medium. However, the scope of this opinion is quite narrowly focused because as Simkin and Nicholson (1987) argue, relatively few people take the time and trouble to write, only a small number of the letters received are published, and their selection is ultimately dependent on editorial perceptions of newsworthiness. It is difficult to determine the rules for what is considered newsworthy for publication but they are probably based on a combination of topicality, readability, brevity and the degree to which the letters are in keeping with the editorial policy of the particular newspaper (Hall et al 1978, p.120-121; McKay 1993 p. 101). Historically, the letters column has provided an outlet for the readers to interact with media content and the issues of the day, and has been an important public forum for the community (Cole 1992; Botan 1992).

Crisell's analysis of phone calls to talk radio suggests that these shows function differently for the producers and the audiences. He argues that for the broadcasters the main function is phatic and metalingual as they strive to emphasize the impression that radio is a two way medium (Crisell 1994, p. 189). While the callers are part of the listening audience, the listeners themselves may find they have an extremely ambivalent attitude to those who call in on-air. The caller, according to Crisell, uses the phone-in as a way of communicating personality or as a means of influencing others (1994, p.192). Crisell suggests that while the audience might identify with the caller as 'one of them', they may also experience a sense of detachment as they eavesdrop on what can appear to be a private conversation (Crisell 1994, p.195-197). This apparent contradiction does not resolve and is a feature of the interactivity possible in this medium and the entertainment values of this form of unscripted dialogue. Talk radio assumes and constructs contemporary media communities, or in Beniger's (1987) terms, "pseudo-communities", albeit from the loose and often minimally coordinated participation of unrelated listeners (Katriel 1998, p.133).

Television talk shows include a range of formats of live audience participation from current affairs forums where members of the studio audience (often selected from a range of political representatives and community interest groups) are invited to speak on the heavy duty issues of the moment (like *Insight* - SBS (Aust.)) to shows with a more everyday, psychosocial edge filmed in front of a large studio audience (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*). In some shows, the broader viewing audience may be asked to participate by phoning to give their opinion, often as a simple yes/no vote with the results posted after the show (as in the phone-ins after important televised political debates), in others there may be the opportunity for the audience at home to phone in as synchronously involved participants (a concept popularized by Phil Donahue). A format more closely resembling the radio talk program is the call-in political television show (especially in the US prior to presidential elections). While callers' questions are incorporated into the show giving the candidates the opportunity to respond and even engage in conversation, the sense of intimacy between the citizen and the candidate is illusory (Newhagen, 1994).

Television Network Websites (TNWs)

TNWs began to appear in the mid to late 1990s, capitalizing on the explosion in popularity of the world wide web that resulted from the advent of graphical web-browsers. (ABC Online (Aust. (<http://www.abc.net.au>)) and PBS Online (USA (<http://www.pbs.org>)) in 1995; ABC (USA (<http://abc.go.com/>)) and BBC (UK (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>)) in 1997). Initially TNWs were built around the concept of purely static promotion of programs and celebrities, with content derived from promotional materials over which they had copyright or affiliated access. Other services available included airing timetables, publicity materials for current and future television shows, and news headlines and stories taken from the text of broadcasts. Smaller (and often public) broadcasters such as SBS (Aust. (<http://www.sbs.com.au>)), PBS Online (USA), and the ITV (UK (<http://www.itv.co.uk>)) continue to offer largely their own program-based materials on their websites with limited other materials (although PBS Online (USA), in particular, has some exceptions at the program-level (e.g. *The Online NewsHour* (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour>)). Around 1997/1998 TNWs produced in partnership with technology industry partners began presenting content derived not only from their own sources but also (a) content produced specifically for the website and (b) links to online services both related and unrelated to their advertisers and/or affiliates, mirroring the rise of the one-stop-shop web-portal concept (pioneered by Netscape (<http://www.netscape.com>)). Both ninemsn (Aust. (<http://ninemsn.com.au>)) and MSNBC (USA (<http://www.msnbc.com/>)) are partnerships between networks and Microsoft, although it is interesting to note that NBC now has a second partnership TNW called NBCi (<http://www.nbc.com>). ABC Online (Aust.)

and BBC Online, both national public broadcasters, began to evolve into a similar concept around this time (Martin 1999), Australia's newest TNW, *i7* (<http://www.i7.com.au>), is also following this model. The web-portal TNWs offer links to categories of information such as youth, sport, jobs, news etc., while the network's actual television programs form a just one, albeit crucial part. CNN (USA (<http://cnn.com>)) offers a somewhat more focused portal to news and current affairs, but again through the notion of categories of news (politics, entertainment, sport etc.) rather than through specific programs.

Interactivity on Television Network Websites

Television network websites initially offered little interactivity apart from email access to the network, much the same as physical letters to the network. As both the Internet and the Web increased in sophistication, however, TNWs began to invite viewers to email particular shows, the results of which might or might not be discussed at some future date (Newhagan, Cordes & Levy 1995), through to more immediately interactive forums during or directly following the broadcast of particular television programs, and ongoing forums about television programs and the issues they had generated. TNWs may also have been influenced toward incorporating interactivity by the huge number of unofficial online television forums in various internet media, including USENET newsgroups and forums provided by Internet Service Providers such as America Online. At the time of writing (late 2000), TNWs are taking a far more active approach to integrating viewer/user interaction with and within their transactional space. The mere presence of a forum is no longer a novel or irregular addition to individual program websites, so a multiplicity of forum types have evolved to appeal to the different program audiences, and even different sections of a television show's audience. Both news and current affairs programs such as *60 Minutes* (Aust. <http://ninemsn.com.au/sixtyminutes>)), and reality-television programs such as *Treasure Island* (Aust. <http://treasureislandi7.com.au/>), run multiple forums with and without guests, creating specific reasons to log on to the site after the programs but also allowing for increased 'contact' with the program away from its airing time.

Television programs were initially far more likely to have forums than the television networks themselves. Of these, news, current-affairs, documentary or issue based (history, science) television programs were - and still are - the most likely to be supported by forums (*The Online NewsHour*, PBS (USA <http://www.pbs.org/newshour>); *60 minutes*, ninemsn (Aust. <http://ninemsn.com.au/sixtyminutes>); *Australian Story*, ABC Online (Aust. <http://www.abc.net.au/austory>)). Fictional television was historically less supported by forums on network websites, although, as mentioned above, it has always been well-supported by fans in various forums (the classic example, also from soap operas, is the USENET newsgroup rec.arts.soaps (Baym 2000)). With the rise of online television forums, many TNWs now offer message boards for very popular/syndicated fiction programs (ABC (USA http://abc.go.com/abc/community/mb_primetype.html)). Soap operas, in particular, are very well supported (*Home and Away*, i7 (Aust. <http://homeandawayi7.com.au/>)). Perhaps most interestingly, television talk shows - the media format most explicitly similar to online television forums - are online (e.g. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Online with Oprah <http://www.oprah.com/>)), but while connected to the program by topic, talk show forums are often not direct links to interactivity during or after the broadcast. Increasingly likely to be supported by forums, and with more interactivity, are 'reality-television' shows in which, under the constant gaze of television cameras, 'contestants/cast-members' must survive both group living in difficult circumstances and various challenges, until only one is left to win the prize (*Survivor*, CBS (USA <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/>); *Big Brother*, Channel 4 (UK <http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/>); *Treasure Island*, i7 (Aust. <http://treasureisland.i7.com.au/>)).

In line with their web-portal approach, TNWs such as BBC Online and CNN offer forums that do not necessarily have close ties with television programs. CNN has several regular online forums with journalists who host television shows but the forums themselves are distinct from the television shows, and also several kinds of unmoderated forums that may or may not include input from CNN staff. In so doing, TNWs are actively attempting to establish something akin to 'community' through various forms of interactivity (Cunningham & Finn 1996, p. 91; Calhoun 1998, p. 379-381). They hope that viewers/users become significantly involved in the culture of the TNW's transactional space, certainly as participating viewer/user with the programs or the network as a whole and possibly with each other. The label "community" is actually used on many TNWs (Ten Network and ABC Online (Aust.); ABC and Oxygen (USA)), as the link to all forums offered. Other TNWs, such as i7 (Aust.) and BBC Online (UK), in keeping with their portal-type nature, may use a "forum" or "chat" link to direct users to archives of forums, but are also interested in directing users to 'appropriate' forums through the use of categories such as "sport", "history", "nature" (BBC Online (UK)), "jobs", "dating", "personal finance", "knowledge exchange" (i7

(Aust.)).

Perhaps one of the major benefits of forums for TNWs is their use for content-generation - perhaps the greatest challenge facing TNWs and, indeed, all mass-media in the prevailing climate of the ever-increasing desire for information (Cunningham and Finn 1996 p. 90). Transcripts provide a readily-available and easily understandable resource that can be quickly uploaded. Forums do double duty both as interactive entertainment and later as archived searchable content, although forums involving media guests etc. are more likely to provide useful ongoing content for a TNW than archives of user message-boards. This will, however, also depend on the technology used to hold and thus archive the forum, and difficult to read forums will be less attractive as future resources. Whether a network broadcasts its television free-to-air or on a paid basis, all TNWs and their forums are currently free to access although some at least require active registration (*Big Brother*, Channel 4 (UK <http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/>); *Adult section* - Channel 5 (UK <http://www.channel5.co.uk>); *Ricky Lake* (USA <http://www.spe.sony.com/tv/shows/ricki/>). Currently one might not see an interview with a newsmaker because one does not subscribe to a cable service like CNN, but can theoretically access an interactive forum with the newsmaker at CNN on the web, potentially getting more direct access than a CNN 'viewer'-only. This situation may not last, particularly as television networks and internet providers increasingly form large multi-media conglomerates.

Forum Technologies

There are two main types of 'messaging' CMC systems used to provide forums in TNWs, although in a broader sense interactivity can be provided through other systems such as polls or questionnaires. The two kinds of messaging forums are distinguishable primarily by the directness of interactivity between users: asynchronous message-boards (similar to USENET newsgroups) and quasi-synchronous real-time chat rooms (similar to IRC). The distinction can become blurred as some message-board systems are used to host short forums with guests after a show, and messages are sent back and forth very quickly (although still definitely asynchronously, particularly when moderation is heavy).

Both kinds of forums can be offered in moderated or unmoderated forms. In moderated forums, all messages are screened by a representative of the TNW. They are used when a media guest is available for discussion with viewers/users directly after a television program (*Australian Story*, ABC Online (Aust. <http://www.abc.net.au/austory>)) or in special section of the TNW devoted to holding forums (*Talking Point*, BBC Online (UK http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_point/default.stm). Typically these last approximately one hour, and the resulting transcript is made available to the public shortly thereafter. Unmoderated forums are used to facilitate interaction between viewers/users within the transactional space of the television network. They are either relatively permanent and ongoing forms of public opinion about the **network or programs in general** (Network Ten (Aust. <http://www.ten.com.au/webCh10/Admin/SwitchedOn/bbs/bbs/topics.asp?PromotionID=637>)) or about specific programs (*The Drew Carey Show*, ABC (USA http://boards.go.com/cgi/abc/Request.dll?LIST&room=a_Drew_Carey)), or long duration - one or two week - issue-based forums offered within the context of 'news' (CNN (USA), BBC Online (UK), ABC Online (Aust.)).

Message Boards

Asynchronous message boards, very similar to USENET newsgroups, are probably the most prevalent type of forums offered. When available as moderated forums after a program, viewers/users log on to the television program site and connect to the forum (although theoretically any internet user might find out about the forum and log on). All audience members are invited to send a message with the unspoken limit of one message each to the television show guests/personalities (users are not invited to address each other - this is not even mentioned as an option). Forum moderators decide whether incoming messages will be given to the guests/personalities for answering. The guests/personalities answer selected messages and move on. While each message has a defined 'subject', enabling the possibilities of subject threads (discussions with common or linked topics), moderators will actively end longer exchanges to 'give everyone a chance'. The real-time serial nature and limited screen space of the forum is actually not very conducive to either ongoing threads or audience-audience interaction, as the message subject frame can usually display only ten to twenty message subjects, and only one actual message can be viewed at a time. There is a sense of queuing for one's chance at accessing the guest/personality rather than participating in a group interaction. These kinds of forums are popular with TNWs as they allow the network maximum possible access and gatekeeping of guests/personalities, focusing attention on the guest/personality while limiting user-user interaction.

Chat Rooms

What we have termed chat room forums are those which work on a similar principle to Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (Reid 1991; Rintel and Pittam 1997, Rintel, Mulholland & Pittam 2001). In the default interaction paradigm, users type their length-controlled messages in a small area at the bottom of the screen, and press the 'Enter' key to transmit it to the public arena which comprises the rest of the screen. Messages continuously scroll up the public area of the screen. Chat rooms such as IRC are termed quasi-synchronous (Garcia and Jacobs 1999), for while all users are co-present in real-time (typing in front of their computers) and interaction takes place with very little time delay, messages are composed before transmission and then appear in the serial order in which they were received by the server.

Chat rooms therefore provide for a different feeling of interactivity than asynchronous message boards, a feeling more like face-to-face chat. That being said, when a guest is available in a chat room situation, moderation of the chat room reduces some of the interactivity both in terms of following up questions and user-user interaction. Most TNWs host regular moderated chat rooms, and like message boards, these may be connected to television programs, completely unconnected, moderated or unmoderated, and short-lived or ongoing. One major difference between chat room and message board forums is the resulting transcript. Chat rooms produce one long page of transcript that reads like a drama script, providing a future resource that is easier to read and search than the message board format.

Forum Rules

In keeping with their nature as commercial transactional spaces designed to capture as wide an audience as possible and facilitate the generation of content suitable for posting, TNWs often provide sets of rules for interaction in forums. They can do this because they are a commercial, not a public, space (Dutton 1996). Rules are usually not explicitly flagged as 'rules', a label with both negative and positive connotations, but as "How to Chat" (BBC Online (UK <http://www.bbc.co.uk/livechat/popups/howto.shtml>)). Online with Oprah simply uses "house rules" for message boards but for chat rooms uses the more phatic, community-oriented "Want to feel at home on ichat? Read the specific house rules to ichat on Oprah.com" (USA http://www.oprah.com/com/com_landing.html). CNN.com, in keeping with its more serious image, uses a link called "Chat standards" to go to a page called "Community Standards" (<http://www.cnn.com/discussion/standards.html>).

The rules themselves are quite similar, incorporating warnings, legalistic disclaimers, and general advice on how to post questions. ABC Online's rules are typical, beginning with "Messages that are abusive, defamatory or off-topic will be deleted" (ABC Online (Aust. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/forums/default.htm>)). Some rules, such as those of BBC Online, go further for their moderated forums, and explicitly ask audience members not to interact with each other, under the guise of facilitation:

Why can't I talk to the other people in the audience?

To keep things organised only the host and the guest are allowed to talk to everyone. If everyone in the audience could chat to each other, chaos would reign. But don't worry. The team can see your questions even though the other people in the audience can't. You can only talk to other people if it is an open chat room and other user names are listed on the right-hand side of your screen.

(BBC Online (UK) - Live Chats - How to Chat - (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/livechat/popups/howto.shtml>))

Most other TNW forums, moderated or not, do not particularly encourage user-user interaction, but on occasion this does occur (short interactions are common in forums on ABC Online (Aust.)). That being said, news-based forums such as the Online NewsHour (PBS (USA)), *TalkingPoint* (BBC Online (UK)), and featured forums on CNN (USA), consist of extended question-answer contributions between users and guests, effectively excluding user-user interaction. Despite the overuse of terms such as 'community', forums that do not allow interaction between users keep the user group fragmented, retaining an audience subject position as a mass of individuals without a real sense of group identity.

Online television forums cannot be easily categorized for two reasons. First, regardless of their technology and relationship to television programs, they are all designed to be maximally integrated into the

transactional space of the TNW. Second, TNWs are now taking maximum advantage of improvements in technology, so they change very rapidly.

Perhaps the most obvious distinctions at the moment are made in terms of how participants use their access and interactivity. Again, this involves access to the network (programs, celebrities, guests, journalists etc) and access to other users and the degrees of interactivity that these might entail. This paper provides an overview of online television forums using data from US, UK, and Australian TNWs. Since the sites themselves are still proliferating our coverage is representative but preliminary, perhaps best viewed as a historical snapshot of the TNW development process in those countries. The examples cited are quoted verbatim, complete with idiosyncratic grammar and spelling. User ID has been removed where not already anonymous/pseudonymous. URLs were correct at the time of writing.

Interactivity with the Network

Both MSNBC and ABC have a general section in which questions or comments can be put about anything within the purview of the network's transactional space (MSNBC (USA, in the '[Letters to the Editor](#)' section, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/440001.asp>); ABC (USA, in the '[Ask ABC](#)' section, <http://abc.go.com/abc/community/askabc.html>). MSNBC's letters tend to be about current issues, while ABC's tend to be program related even though the programs themselves may have specific forums. "Ask ABC" (USA) solicits "burning" questions and posts selected questions and replies "Each week we'll select a few of the e-mails we've received -- and get hot on the trail for an answer. Of course, we can't promise to respond to every query. But we may just post yours! So, check back soon" (ABC (USA) - AskABC - <http://abc.go.com/abc/community/askabc.html>).

A typical question addressed to the network, but in this case about the program *Spin City*, follows:

Q. How much input does the cast have in script changes during the Monday read-thru and/or rehearsals; do they stick to what the writers come up with or can they make alternative suggestions?

A. Creating a hit series is a collaborative process and sometimes the actors do make suggestions.

(ABC (USA) - AskABC - <http://abc.go.com/abc/community/askabc.html>)

Australia's Ten Network has general on-going program [message board](#) which asks "What do you like about the shows that are on TEN?" This attracts general comments such as:

Why is Perth always ignored? Ok so it isn't a message about programmes but this is:

GNW debate and Charmed ROCKS.

(Network Ten (Aust) - Community message boards - The Programs - <http://www.ten.com.au/webCh10/Admin/SwitchedOn/bbs/bbs/topics.asp?PromotionID=637>)

In its [community](#) section, ABC Online (Aust.) lists a number of initiatives designed to allow users to contribute to its TNW:

ABC Online invites you to participate...

Australians Online

In 2000 the ABC will be working with communities across Australia to develop a network of web sites to enable anybody with access to a computer and the internet to publish their own stories for free.

Australia Talks Books

Contribute to in-depth and open analysis of books, ideas and writing both on radio and on-line.

Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki

Dr. Karl is an answer in search of a few thousand questions. Here you'll find selected questions and answers from his most recent radio segment, and if you'd like to add something to what has been said - you can !

Link Up

An online international event designed to showcase the creativity of young people around the world in their use of interactive media.

Net 50

Net 50 is Australia's only Internet driven music countdown show. Cast your votes each week and listen to them being counted down on Saturday nights between 6-10pm.

Reviews

Find out what our reviewers across the ABC have to say about the latest in books, music, films, games and more. Send your own views and let us know what you think is hot and what's not.

Scribbly Gum - Events in Nature

An interactive forum for people who love nature.

Splatt - The Tall Story

Write the next part to a story which authors, Margaret Wild and Libby Hathorn have begun.

(ABC Online (Aust) - Community - <http://www.abc.net.au/community.htm>)

Networks also use general forums, unrelated to specific programs, in which the audience can interact with each other in a discussion of current events and issues. These are available in a range of categories (news, sport etc) and tend to persist as open forums online for a week or so before being archived. The News section in ABC Online (Aust.) Online runs two ongoing **forums** each week. On the week of 18/10/2000, "Globalisation" was of current interest due to the World Economic Forum being held in Melbourne. The discussion was opened with focus questions ("The World Economic Forum is a gathering committed to improving the state of the world". But is globalisation improving the state of the world? Its proponents argue globalisation is inevitable but protesters believe there are real alternatives.") and links to background information (such as the S11 site).

Although not limited - and not answered - in the same way as turns in talk radio and television talk shows, posts tend to follow similar rhetorical strategies in those media as those found by Hutchby (1999) - taking one turn to situate an argument, make a case and then round off the argument (p. 253):

Subject: Hit and run motorcycles

[Post id]

While the police deny doing anything wrong, the photographic and video evidence provide solid proof that the police were operating outside the law.

[GRAPHIC]

Consider the image of a police motorcycle running over a cyclist - the motorcycle is on the wrong side of the road and there is no evidence that the cyclist has done anything wrong or is even involved in the protests. It's also worth noting that the motorcyclist gave the bike rider a kick but didn't stop to exchange name and address as required by law.

[...]

Subject: erm...

[Post id]

If a civilian throws a ball bearing at a police officer, this is assault. This warrants arrest. This does not, however, warrant being beaten with a baton. Especially so if the offender is not wielding a knife, club, firearm or other weapon. Where exactly are we living? South Africa during apartheid?

While there were protesters who engaged in such deplorable and violent activities, I feel that many protesters who didn't were on the receiving end of the police baton charges.

While the police should not make a distinction between rich and poor in the execution of their (the term is used loosely) duty, do you think they should - just perhaps - make a distinction between guilty and innocent before they mete out violence?

[...]

Subject: Anybody got a 'super' policy?

[Post id]

If any of the S11 protesters have worked in the last 8 years there's a good chance that they have a super policy. How many of them have actually stopped and acknowledged the fact that they themselves indirectly own parts of these "corporate menaces" they seek to discredit. Go to your funds managers and be certain to push for a clean, green, ethical fund because otherwise you're just another bunch of hypocritical, chardonnay-drinking socialists looking for the next bandwagon to follow in your pollutant kombi.

(ABC Online (Aust) - News forums - <http://www.abc.net.au/news/forums/default.htm>)

Many TNWs include polls (for those interested in rough guides to other users' opinions) alongside ongoing message boards. These might include current events polls covering news issues ("Poll: Do you support Greenpeace's anti-nuclear protests?" ninemsn (Aust. - [News polls](http://www.ninemsn.com.au) - <http://www.ninemsn.com.au>)) or entertainment issues ("Harrison Ford's new film "What Lies Beneath" is now out in cinemas. But what's the best film he's been in so far? [List of films]" (BBC Online (UK) - [Polls](http://www.bbc.co.uk/entertainment) - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/entertainment>), or might be more program-specific but presented in a general poll section ("Who says your opinion doesn't count? Vote in our online polls." Sample [ABC \(USA\) polls](#) include:

Politically Incorrect: Take the PI Poll

[...]

The Practice: You Be the Judge

[...]

The View: Question of the Day

[...]

All My Children: Weekly Poll

(ABC (USA) - Community Polls - <http://abc.go.com/abc/community/polls.html>)

Direct access to those making the news, celebrities etc. is also provided through general forums on TNWs. These can be extremely varied in their choice of guest, and users may suggest future guests. Recent guest in BBC Online's [Live Chat](#) section include:

A1 - Top boy band A1 give the gossip!

[...]

Gerry Anderson
Creator of Thunderbirds gets chatty.

[...]

Professor Philip Bath
Expert advice on strokes.

[...]

Sir Christopher Bland
The BBC Chairman talks about the Annual Report 2000.

[...]

Dr. Mark Davies
All about volcanoes, from TalkWales.

[...]

Kylie
Aussie's favourite export talks about her life in the limelight.

[...]

Ken Livingstone

Ken talks about his bid to become Mayor for London.

[...]

Jamie Oliver

The Naked Chef talks about food, life, and his wedding.

[...]

Dr Ros Taylor

Expert advice on coping with death and bereavement.

(BBC Online (UK) - Missed Chats -

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/livechat/transcripts/index.shtml>)

In such forums, the likelihood of one turn each, as in talk radio and television talk shows (Hutchby 1999, p. 245), leads to quite short opinion airing or, more often, questions (which do not require as much rhetorical ability). As might be expected, the nature of the questions tended to mirror the image of the guests. Jamie Oliver, (young star of cooking program *The Naked Chef* BBC (UK)), faced a barrage of personal questions, including:

Marsh Man - Are you a lager boy or a wine boy these days?

Jamie Oliver - Whatever. I am not fussy, I'm from Essex.

[...]

Jacqui Thomson - Will you be wearing something funky for the wedding or top hat and tails?

Jamie Oliver - Sky blue, fine cord, slightly bootlegged, snake skin loafers and a pinkshirt. Sounds repulsive but its a beautiful, beautiful thing. 1970s pimp is what we arelooking for.

(BBC Online (UK) - Live Chats - Chats Missed -

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/livechat/transcripts/transcript5.shtml>)

In the aftermath of the 'Love Bug' computer virus, ABC (USA) News.com held a forum with convicted "Former Hacker" Kevin Mitnick. This particular forum was a little unusual in that it had to comply with restrictions placed on Mitnick's access to the internet. The moderator began the discussion saying that:

The terms of Mitnick's probation require that for the next three years he keep his hands off all computers, cell phones, Internet-connected televisions and any other electronic devices that would give him access to theInternet. As a result, our ABCNEWS.com moderator will read him your chat questions over the telephone and we'll have a typist submit his responses.

(ABC (USA) - ABCNews.com chats -

http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/chat_000508mitnick.html)

Participants who used this highly moderated forum could only interact with Mitnick on a question-answer basis, rather than discuss Mitnick's situation, or the Love Bug, amongst themselves:

Moderator at 12:51pm ET

Mr. X asks: In what way has your incarceration changed your views on computer crimes such as the proliferation of viruses?

Kevin Mitnick at 12:52pm ET

I don't believe my incarceration really changed my views with anything, except with my opinions of the federal government. In today's justice system, incarceration is for punitive purposes only and not rehabilitation. They simply warehouse you. They don't put you through any programs to rehabilitate you - it's just punishment.

(ABC (USA) - ABCNews.com chats -

http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/chat_000508mitnick.html)

http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/teel/DailyNews/Chat_000000main00k.html

Taking celebrity chats to extremes are i7's "celebrity minisites", in which the TNW functions as an extension of the tabloid media in the construction and perpetuation of a "cult of celebrity" (Lumby 1999 p. 15). Kimberly Cooper, a cast member of Australian soap opera *Home and Away* (Seven Network (Aust.)), has her own minisite with fan materials and the occasional live chat. Some participants have difficulty dissociating the actor from the character - referring Cooper's character by name (Gypsy), even though her name is clearly written in front of every message and appears all over the site. In the following example 'MissDance' and 'simba' refer to Cooper's real name/identity or the real names of other actors in the program, while 'Alf' refers to her in her role as Gypsy:

Kimberley - Hi everyone, I'm here and ready to chat!

MissDance - Hi Kim!

Kimberley - Hi!

simba - Is Zac Drayson there, Kim?

Kimberley - No, thank god!

[...]

Alf - Gypsy: What happened when you were kidnapped? Was your life continually threatened and you were continually taunted by Robert? Was that all that happened? I think we missed the episodes of when you were held and Joel etc. were looking for you.

Kimberley - There were no missed episodes - it was all told in flashbacks.

(i7 (Aust.) - Kimberly Cooper - <http://kimberleycooper.i7.com.au/>)

For fans, the accessibility of such direct forums means that they have a chance to become more acquainted with their idols than they would through conventional fan clubs/sites perpetuating an illusion of intimacy between themselves and media personalities. Thus, the forums facilitate what Cerulo & Ruane term "target convergency" (1998 p. 410), as individual fans develop personal bonds with their chosen figure. In turn, the celebrities gain increased publicity and promotional opportunities, but at the cost of blurring the boundaries between their public and private lives (Turner, Bonner and Marshall 2000 p.12).

Worth a mention for creating a very direct link to the TNW's transactional space (although at the extreme end of the notion of forums) was the 'Ripley' character available during Channel 7's broadcast of the 2001 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia (i7 (Aust. <http://www.i7.com.au>). Ripley was a computer-generated female character (one saw her head and shoulders, and heard her speak) loaded into a window on the user's system and who seemed to act independently of the TNW. If left running and connected to the internet, Ripley alerted the user to Olympic highlights, news headlines, stock quotes and "anything else of interest on the i7 network" (Ripley). Ripley could be sent email or even telephoned, and each day Ripley read out a selection of email and telephone messages to 'her', or to any potential Ripley user. This was in some senses an extreme form of guestbook. Ripley was controlled by programmers, but in the future, services such as Ripley may become semi-autonomous intelligent assistants to both the network and users, creating an interesting interactive situation, not to mention a continuous and ongoing link between the television network's transactional space and individual viewers/users.

Interactivity with Specific Programs

Apart from feedback through regular email, individual programs often have public guestbooks. Messages range from expressions of congratulations through to requests for specific information in response to particular episodes/stories. Writers may receive a short comment about their entry from the producers. There is usually no interaction between guestbook entries. Most programs on ABC Online (Aust.) feature guestbooks. The [guestbook](#) of the science program *Quantum* is representative of most of the guestbooks on ABC Online, and of the varied nature of entries:

Congratulations:

[Name]

[Email]

Visit Time 13:08:56 12 Oct, 2000 EST

Remarks Quantum is an excellent programme and the ABC website featuring Quantum and Landline etc is of great benefit to me. More people should know about the website especially country folk. Keep up the good work and good luck to all

involved.

Moderator comment Thanks for your feedback - its much appreciated.

Regards,
Quantum.

Request for information:

[Name]

[Email]

Visit Time 10:34:10 09 Oct, 2000 EST

Remarks last week on the program you made a brief mention of a new device that repels sharks. apparently it is electronic and attaches to your surfboard emitting an electromagnetic pulse that sharks dont like.Can you supply more info especially where you can obtain one.

Moderator comment For more info on this story go to the Lab's science news site at:
http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/scitech/SciTechRepublish_189494.htm

Regards,
Quantum.

(ABC Online (Aust.) - *Quantum* - <http://www.abc.net.au/quantum/guestbk.htm>)

One ABC (Aust.) program, the current affairs program *Four Corners*, offers "**Open Letters**" as "the place to share your views on the program and our approach to current affairs. Four Corners is your leading current affairs program. Raise issues, comment, take a stand - Open Letters puts your feedback before the Four Corners community." Open Letters are frequently long contributions which engage both with issues raised on the program and, on occasion, with previous contributions.

[Name]

[Email]

Visit Time 22:31:21 17 Oct, 2000 EST

I must agree with the previous two posters, although perhaps in diferent terms. Send a message to the world that Australia is a soft target, and we will quickly have millions arriving. What then ? Why didn't your program canvass THAT angle. The conditions you showed these people to be living in ? Get real - take off your leftish glasses - there are thousands of AUSRALIAN citizens living worse - and I fear, thousands more soon.

Why pontificate from your ivory towers ? How many refugees are your lefty producer sympathisers putting up themselves ? I have an idea - why don't you lead by example and put a few dozen of them up in the offices of 4 Corners, hmmm?

(ABC Online (Aust.) - *Four Corners* - <http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/guestlist/guestbook.pl?4corners>)

The Web Review (ITV (UK)) offers viewer/users a complex form of guestbook, called a "**discussion forum**" but consisting of very generalized forms of interactivity. The four parts of the "Viewers' Feedback discussion forum" are:

Discuss the show and the website. What's good, what's not so good and suggestions for improvements

Viewers' Web Tips - Got any useful internet tips you'd like to share with others? Post them here.

Chit-Chat - A general forum to talk about anything you like.

Favourite Websites - Post your favourite websites here!

(ITV - *The Web Review* - <http://www.thewebreview.com/cgi-bin/Ultimate.cgi>)

The first of these is most similar to the simple guestbooks discussed above. The three other parts do not offer interactivity with the television program or the website, but facilitate discussion of both, as well as general 'opinion airing'. Taking this somewhat further, two programs on ITV (UK) - *The People Versus*

(<http://www.thepeopleversus.co.uk/>) and *Jonathan Dimbleby* (<http://www.jonathandimbleby.co.uk/>) - encourage viewers/users to contribute to the content of the show. The former is a game show in which users supply questions on the contestants' chosen area of expertise; users may suggest future guests and questions to ask them on the latter.

Specific programs are now encouraging interaction with other users. Individual stories within many current affairs shows are supported by various combinations of chat forums, message boards, polls and advertising. The long running and well-respected Australian current affairs show, *Four Corners* (self-described as "investigative journalism at its very best") gives its viewers opportunities to interact with panels of presenters and guests after the show as well as via a guestbook for comments after the forum is closed. A recent example illustrates the possibilities for participants in a *Four Corners* forum. "**Surviving Cancer**" (screened on 9 October 2000) describes pioneering Australian research into how cancer survivors cope with the aftermath of recovering from the disease and find that their lives and relationships have been profoundly changed by the experience. The forum, opened immediately after the program, involved a moderator, the reporter, her producer, the research team leader, two recovered cancer patients and the husband of one of those patients. There were 719 posts covering topics like requests for more information about the research or self help groups, details about personal experience with the disease and comments about the usefulness of the show. Gratefulness for the program was a common theme and Dianne's contribution (post 43) is typical:

Thank you so much for that programme. I am a breast cancer survivor and I had a relationship breakup and I related to other things like re-constructing yourself for your new circumstances. I am single and 47 now. I had money problems too plus changed my career after the chemo. I am grateful for my new life - but some days have been hard. Again thank you for the programme.

(ABC Online (Aust.) - *Four Corners* - Surviving Survival - <http://www2c.abc.net.au/4corners/sforum33/default.htm>)

Some participants made extended contributions throughout the forum, disclosing details about their illness, offering advice to others and trying to make contact with people in similar situations. For example, Angela made 8 contributions (posts 31, 205, 268, 304, 339, 361, 483, 499). Three of the posts refer to details of her medical history and the problems she still has in dealing with her condition after 18 years. She asks for contact with a counselor or support group (31) and even specifically for local contact (304) ("P.S. Is there anyone in the Parramatta area who would like to meet for an occasional coffee and chat?"). Not all of her contributions are focused on herself. When she interacts with others in the forum she offers help and guidance through supplying a web address for a support workshop (post 205), and giving advice and hope to a single woman with the disease (339) (<http://www2c.abc.net.au/4corners/sforum33/default.htm>).

Angela's interactions demonstrate the flexibility of this type of forum. She is able to directly comment on the program for panelists, participants and an audience to see, but she is also able to use the opportunity to gain information for herself and to offer advice to others. While her request to meet someone for coffee and a chat was not taken up, nevertheless within the paradigm of the forum this request is at least possible.

Both these post-program and ongoing forums are intended to give viewers the opportunity to discuss issues in broadcast stories/programs. However, on occasion the participants may use forums to criticize aspects of stories/programs, a refocusing akin to de Certeau's (1984) "*la perruque*" (p. 25). Ray Martin on Australia's *60 Minutes* recently interviewed Olympic sprinter, Michael Johnson. The broadcast interview was titled "**Stars and Strife**" and promoted the 'difficulties' of interviewing a superstar (Johnson ended the interview by walking out). The associated message board suggested the direction of the discussion with:

Welcome to the STARS AND STRIFE Discussion Board.
Do you think drug taking is rife among Olympic athletes?
Have your say.

(ninemsn (Aust.) - *60 Minutes* - http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/01_stories/2000_10_08/story_245.asp)

However, instead of discussing the topic the forum was overwhelmingly used to negatively evaluate Martin's interview technique:

Subject: ray, you pathetic imbecile

From: [name] Date published: 14 Oct 2000 09:34

After your display in that MJ interview, I hope that the crew of channel nine are competent enough to think twice in letting you interview someone of that profile again. It was obvious that your intelligence could not be matched with with MJ

(ninemsn (Aust.) - 60 Minutes -

http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/01_stories/2000_10_08/story_245.asp)

Individual participants also constructed a sense of themselves as part of a pseudo-community in opposition to Martin's approach by assessing the discussion as heavily weighted against the presenter's tactics even quantifying participant sentiment. There is, of course, no guarantee that those involved in the production of the program read this forum so the message board was made available for public access rather than any serious attempt for feedback. Although the board was available for a fortnight, new messages were not posted after the first few days and in common with ninemsn's usual practice, the forum was not archived and was removed soon after. In contrast to chats with guests, there would seem to be little return on archiving user-user message boards for the long term.

The recent spate of 'reality television' shows have provided TNWs with multiple possibilities for interactivity. *Survivor*, *Treasure Island* and *Big Brother* provide examples of diverse approaches. Both *Survivor* and *Treasure Island* are based on surviving life on tropical islands, competing in challenges both contrived by the program and those arising as a result of the circumstances. *Big Brother* is set inside a locked compound.

Amongst these, the *Survivor* website offers the least degree of interactivity. Users could participate in polls such as "Of the final four, who is most likely to voted off first"; "Will Susan and Kelly realign?" and "Could you have made it into the Final Four?" although these had no effect on the outcome of the program itself (CBS (USA) <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/survivors/polls.shtml>). Users could also answer a short questionnaire about their own ability to cope in the *Survivor* situation. Selected questionnaires were posted on the site. Questions included: "Would you want a chance at being the winning survivor? Do you think you could make it? Why, or why not?" One respondent, Wendy, answered: "Nope. I know where I belong, and it's not out there on an island, no matter how tempting. I wouldn't mind visiting... :)" (CBS (USA) <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/buzz/questionnaire-responses.shtml>).

Finally, users could send emails to unsuccessful contestants who would later be interviewed by Brian Gumble and asked selected questions from the emails. Despite the indirect nature of the interactivity, viewers/users were able to use the system to find out behind-the-scenes information. When Colleen Haskel was interviewed, she was able to explain how the father of one of the contestants happened to pose as the captain of a yacht in one episode. It turned out that the appearance of the father was not pre-scripted, but a result of an unexpected circumstance not mentioned in the show (http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/survivors/colleen_v.shtml).

Despite these limited levels of interactivity, the popularity of the *Survivor* site demonstrates that viewers/users are interested in the opportunities afforded by an expanded transactional space. A somewhat similar Australian reality television program, *Treasure Island*, exploits the more recent modes of interaction in the form of live chats with ousted contestants and user-user message boards. Although heavily moderated, participants in live chats do make use of the high speed of interaction by taking several turns to ask questions, as in the following example:

TREASURE_ISLAND) Angel has the next question for Justine. Do your feet still hurt?

(Justine) Yes they do ... my surgeon wasn't happy I went away and did this.

[...]

TREASURE_ISLAND) Angel has another question for Justine. Angel would like to know who you liked the best in your group?

(Justine) Hard question! They were all so nice! Angel - I'd love to name one person but I can't because everyone was wonderful. We keep in touch ... nearly every day we talk to someone on the team!

(i7 (Aust.) - *Treasure Island* - <http://treasureisland.i7.com.au/>)

More interesting, though, are *Treasure Island's* unmoderated message boards, in which users not only take multiple turns at interaction with each other, but also construct themselves as having intimate knowledge of the program - either through claims to insider information or the claim that they were a contestant. In the following example, of the "If you were on the island, who'd be going first?" forum, 'westie' and 'coconuts' contest the validity of each other's claims to having been contestants on the program, attempting to convince other users ('Nikki', 'Annie' and 'Iknowwhaturtalkingabout') in the process:

RE: ADELAIDE??

Author: westie
Date: 08-10-00 21:45
Dear Iknowwhaturtalkingabout,

I was really on the show, I can certainly talk to you, but unfortunately if you want any inside information about the show or who goes and who stays then I will not be able to give you any.....I have been sworn to secrecy!!

"westie"

[...]

RE: ADELAIDE??
Author: Nikki
Date: 08-10-00 22:02

Hey there WESTIE! My name is Nikki and I am from Brisbane... You say that you have been on the show... RITE!! R u for real? Could you let me know abit about yourself PLEASE!

[...]

Question for Westie!
Author: Coconuts
Date: 09-10-00 10:08

Westie , I am sorry to doubt that you are a fello Westie! But I have to ask - What was the descriptive name given to the 1st bottle by our other fello Westie?

Coconuts

[...]

RE: Question for COCONUT!
Author: westie
Date: 09-10-00 10:19

Dear Coconuts!!

I am really sorry, but Im not sure what you are talking about....either that or I have forgotten...my memory isn't all that good at the best of times!!

heres something that might convince you!!

here was something we sang...remeber....

"D**** M***** super star, who the hell do you think you are!!!!"

Oh and remeber this one....

"On the first day of Treasure Island we were so happy.....with a tent erected under a tree!!!"

Now does that convince you?? Can you give me a clue as to who you are???

"Westie"

[...]

RE: to annie
Author: westie
Date: 09-10-00 10:37

Date: 09-10-00 10:07

Annie,

I think your sources are wrong baby...it was CRAIG and TOMMY, that went off the island last night!

"Westie"

(i7 (Aust.) - *Treasure Island* - <http://treasureisland.i7.com.au/>)

Whether or not westie and coconuts were actually contestants is (almost) immaterial, since part of the entertainment value of the forum is that these kinds of situations are possible. For the TNW, such situations are a bonus in terms of providing content and additional reasons for users to engage with the site and the program. Potentially, viewers/users such as Nikki and Annie might leave the forum with the sense of having interacted directly with contestants and will be keen to view the program for further clues as to westie's and coconuts's identities, and may also entice their friends as viewers/users on the basis of this engagement.

In **Big Brother** (Channel 4 (UK <http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/>)), viewers' involvement "revolves around three functions: - the capacity to know everything about the players/characters, through devices such as webcams or online diaries, or to communicate with them; - the capacity to exert an influence on the course of the show, by choosing the contestants, from the beginning to the end (they cast and evict the contestants); - and ultimately, the possibility of becoming a player in the show, which is the ultimate interactive experience" (**Reality Soaps 2000**, Part 6).

Like *Treasure Island*, *Big Brother*'s forums included unmoderated message boards and live chats (with titles such as "Who's copping off with who ??"; "Who's getting evicted this week ??") and individual contestant names (<http://www.bigbrother.terra.com/>). The users in live chat rooms could discuss anything of interest as well as the show itself. In terms of direct interaction during the airing of the show, *Big Brother* both afforded viewers/users the opportunity to view the house on live webcams for 15 minutes per day, and to vote on the popularity of each contestant. Unpopular contestants were evicted from the house, based directly on these polls. Viewers/users were thus directly involved with the final outcome of the program. However, the most interesting aspect about these chat rooms is they were still operating some four months after the program had finished. This may lend some credence to the idea that die-hard fans may create some form of community and enjoy keeping in touch, but it should be noted that this was still occurring within the transactional space of the TNW.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper provides an overview of the levels of interactivity currently available on TNWs starting by acknowledging that the media have provided limited interactivity between producers and users in the past. Both the letter columns of the daily press and talk radio have provided access for readers or members of the audience to make comments, personal statements, and provide opinions. However, by contributing, the readers/audiences are actually working with the media to produce material to fill the columns or the timeslots. Their interactivity is generating content for the interest or entertainment of other readers or listeners.

Forums in TNWs similarly generate low-cost content - where opinion can replace fact (**Shi-xu 2000**, p. 269) - except that the sophistication of the technologies involved provides a stronger sense of ready and immediate access for the users. With the proliferation of forums has come an extension in potential network influence as viewers log on and become users within a vastly expanded transactional space (**White 1997**). TNWs are now taking a far more active approach to integrating viewer/user interaction with and within their transactional space. Chat forums are not just added to individual program websites, rather users are offered a variety of forum types designed to appeal to various groups and to create specific interest in the site after the program has ended. Forums also provide increased opportunities for 'contact' with the program away from its airing time. Many of these are archived for future reference.

With the popularity of online television forums, many TNWs now offer message boards as well especially for very popular/syndicated programs as part of their publicity development. These are not necessarily archived but provide a site for user-user interaction based on common interests. Guestbooks and polls are also offered as places for users to register their comments and share their views. By providing access to forums, message boards, guestbooks and polls, TNWs are endeavoring to simulate and promote a sense of community through the range of opportunities for interactivity on offer. This sense of community is

markedly different from that assumed by contributors to letter columns and talk radio in that it is created within the culture of the TNW's transactional space with its associated commercial and promotional links. While newspapers and radio stations are of course both commercial enterprises, neither offer immediate access to the products they promote in quite the same way as TNWs offer users access to programs, celebrities, and each other.

As we noted above, the real-time serial nature and limited screen space of chat forums together with the presence of a moderator, is actually not very conducive to interaction, which creates a sense of queuing for one's chance at accessing the guest/personality rather than participating in a group interaction. Similarly, message boards are also limited in what they can offer participants since there is no undertaking to respond from the TNW. Both are governed by rules which may limit the use of their formats and both suggest the heavy editorializing hand of the TNW itself. This stands in some contrast to unofficial forums that do not have a broadcast parent, such as fan forums and forums provided by Internet Service Providers. Future research could usefully draw out the comparisons between practices in TNW and non-TNW forums.

From our research it is apparent that in spite of the difficulties associated in accessing the various types of TNW forums, the viewers/users who took the trouble made use of their access to:

- comment both negatively and positively on the network's offerings;
- evaluate the program they had watched;
- solicit behind-the-scenes information, not available from the screened program;
- become involved in the outcome of selected programs;
- become more directly acquainted with celebrities, guests and those involved in producing program content;
- interact with other users;
- leave a legacy through their archived comments for future use.

There are two ways that we might view online television forums. On the one hand, they allow individuals better and more immediate access to television products and personalities, the ability to determine their own news values, and the ability to cohere in various forms of community rather than remain an audience of individuals. On the other hand, they are creations of an extended media sphere based on a transactional space of publicity and promotion, rather than much interest in interactivity from a 'concerned' audience. Further development of these forums, their interactivity and their access, will, to a large extent, depend on the possibilities of increasingly converging computer, internet, and television technologies. Stay tuned, or should that now be 'stay online'?

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