

## A Study of Comments in On-line Newspapers

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*The 'On-line newspapers' have provided facilities to give comments about news in various manners. The present paper gives an analytical description of comments given in 'On-line' newspaper.*

**Key words:** - On-line newspaper comments, readers, Feedback Study

We nline newspaper is also known as web newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of online newspapers have been listed on the web media.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, all major newspapers have their online presence on web media where people can give their comments as feedback.<sup>3</sup> Feedback is defined as the comment on the message that is fed to the source from the receiver that tells source some things about how his or her message being received. 'Letter to the editor' has been a very familiar column in printed newspapers for giving feedback. All newspapers give some space on their editorial page for readers to express their views. Pathaknama, Mailbox, Chitthi Charcha, are some such columns in different Hindi newspapers. Similarly, English newspapers also have letter columns on their editorial page.

Traditionally, the feedback in mass media, especially in print media, is defined to be indirect, delayed, cumulative, institutionalised and quantitative. This was due to the particular format of mass communication and non availability of those technologies and facilities which are so easily available nowadays. At present, with the advent of online newspapers, several new trends have also developed. It has brought changes at various levels. At the same time, the behaviour of readers is also changing.<sup>4</sup>

On line newspapers have changed several traditional formats of activities in newspapers and also brought corresponding changes in giving comments by the readers. Now, newspapers' feedback can be given through e-mails and in the case of online newspapers, feedback has further converted into comments and interactions. Comments are considered to be the modern day equivalent to the letter to the editor.<sup>5</sup>

At present, almost all e-newspapers have facilitated to give comments on news which they give in their online editions. Several discussions about the importance of comment are going on in different blogs.<sup>6</sup> Feedback may be in different ways. It may be negative or positive. It has several other forms.<sup>7</sup> Negative feedback doesn't mean only bad one and similarly positive feedback cannot be considered always to be a good one. After all, it gives an opportunity for improvement in the qualities of messages and brings corresponding change in them. A useful feedback should be clear, immediate, honest and meaningful. Feedback allows the speakers to know if their messages are being received properly. It regulates the messages. The most important thing of these kinds of feedback is that they give equal opportunity to all people. Now it depends on the wish of the readers about how to give a feedback.

Despite the availability of various technologies, on-line newspapers are still providing the facility for comments only in text form. It means, visitors can not give their feedback in the format of photo, audio or visual, as is given on social sites. So, all kinds of presentation can be done only in text format. Even the fonts are also limited. However, the online feedback system has certainly democratised the functioning of newspapers at least for readers. It is available for all persons without any discrimination. Comments and interaction are new forms of feedback. The technology has provided new opportunity to give feedback and write comments about various news given in online newspapers.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

Now, comments are different from traditional 'letter to the editor' columns as they can be given immediate, in any length, at any time and about any news. There is no restriction of space and number of comment. Readers can also give reply on the comment of any other person. The technology has made it an interactive one.

However, In spite of increasing use of digital technology, online newspapers have followed the traditions of print newspapers for defining their boundaries in design purpose and other kinds of use.<sup>11</sup>

### Importance of the study -

The feedback in mass communication has always been considered to be very important for mass media. They give the idea about how people are taking messages. This form of comments is very interactive. The visitors are free to make comment not only about any news but also can give reply to any comments already given at any time and in any length in every news item.

The easy availability of technology for giving comment on news has certainly increased the number of such comments. How are the facilities provided by online newspapers for giving feedback being used by readers? It is really a matter of study.

Online newspapers have almost displaced print newspapers in developed countries. Its popularity is continuously increasing even in India. At the same time, the participation of readers and the number of comments are also increasing. How are these comments being given? Such study will give idea of opinion about various news in online newspapers. Keeping in view the above fact, the study in the field of online newspapers is very useful and important.

### Literature review -

Different kinds of research about the habit and use of reading pattern have been done.<sup>12</sup>

But there is a little study about the pattern of giving comments in online newspapers in latest edition of International Journals.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Similarly, the review of Indian literature indicates that no recent study has been done in the area of feedback and comment in on-line newspapers in India.<sup>16</sup> Whatever study has been done in online newspaper, are all concerned with other areas in online newspapers.

### Objectives of the Study --

The main objective of the study is to know the present trends of giving comment in on-line newspapers. It is a basically trends study of giving comments in online newspapers. The answer of following questions will mainly be analysed--

- How do people give feedback and comment in on line newspapers?
- What is main format of presentation of opinion and feelings?
- What is the number of people in newspapers?
- What is the location of people who are giving feedback?
- Language used by the people for giving feedback.
- Length and repetition of comments.
- Subjects and areas of comments.
- Time and duration of comments.

### Methodology of the study -

It is a case study of a newspaper. For the purpose of this case study, Navbharat Times newspaper has been taken. Descriptive research approach has been adopted for this study. It gives basically qualitative description about the comments being given in online newspaper. However, simple statistics have been adopted in some cases.

### Sampling -

News stories given in online newspapers of various days have randomly been selected to see the comments and feedback of readers. Convenient method has been adopted for sampling of news. In all, the observation of news was done for 15 days in online newspaper in the month of November 2012, and in this period a total, of 300 news stories were taken for the study. These stories have been taken from different hours of different days of two weeks duration. The comments presented at the end of the story have been taken for the purpose of the study. The contents of these comments have mainly been analysed in a qualitative way.

### Navbharat Times Newspaper -

Navbharat Times is a renowned Hindi newspaper of India. The pilot study of comments of various online newspapers and news portals reveals that in comparison to other newspapers, Navbharat Times has more number of comments. It has also been found that other newspapers do not have enough comments for the proposed study and a meaningful study cannot be done with the help of the samples available in other online newspapers. In this reference, name of different news sites may be taken. Some news sites are very popular in India but they do not get feedback and comments from readers.

The observation of various newspapers reveals that there is occasional comment about news in online edition of these newspapers. At the same time, online version of printed newspapers does not provide facilities for giving such comments.

### **Analysis of Data -**

The observation of the contents of comment indicates that every news loaded on the site of Navbharat Times does not have comment. But main stories published on the home page of the site have more regular comments than other news which are at the other locations in the news site. In all, 30 to 50 percent stories do not have comments at all. But this number varies on different days and times due to fluctuations in the loading of updated news. The comment may also be given later on and even after many days, as some stories are very popular and they remain on site for a long time than other news.

It is not possible to keep the observation in all the way. For the convenience of the study, only those feedback/comments are considered which were given within 5 to six hours from the time of loading of news.

The comments are normally given both on controversial and non controversial issues which in one or other way affect the normal life of society. But controversial issue gets more comments in comparison to other news. People express their comments on a issue on the basis of their view which they hold in their minds. Sometimes there is also effort by the visitors to give some data and other kinds of facts in support of their views in the comments. But it is occasional. Some people are more expert in these kinds of presentation which can be observed by their repeated comments.

Personal experiences are often shared by readers while giving comments about different stories in online newspaper. The comments reveal that people keep a general opinion and knowledge on maximum national and International issues and want to share them with other people once they read news about them. Almost one fourth of them are expressed in a very logical and meaningful way. But in some cases, the differences in the frame of reference, prevents them in giving correct comments.

The interest and welfare of society is the one very broad and common objective which readers keep in their mind while giving their comments. This is one such wide area of subject on which all people have similar opinion .But the approach of solving the problems differs from person to person. Similarly, readers express their anguish over the inefficiency of various organizations which are responsible for maintaining law and order in the society. Visitors of site immediately give their opinions on those events and issues which are of social concern and where there are violations of social norms and ethics.

People give different opinion and adopt different approach on different other issues. Among these, religion is an important issue on which there is a clear division of opinion among readers and they are mainly in three groups. First and second groups are of the followers of their religions and third group are of those people who adopt secular approach on such issues. These kinds of people are from all religions. The followers of Hindu religion are more expressive and are in majority as far as the number of comments is concerned. These three groups express their opinion accordingly. Many times, readers often make hot arguments among themselves in the name of religion. They describe their religion to be superior to others. They express their views on emotional grounds. A comparison of thoughts, actions and several other aspects between Hindu and Muslim religions can often be seen in different comments.

Many comments are not directly associated with the contents of the news. Instead, the content of the news become just a means for expressing their own opinion which they hold on any issue.

It is also surprising to see that many comments are against the style of functioning of newspapers. They blame newspapers for violating journalistic and ethical norms, biased reporting and for giving unverified stories. They strongly oppose the views and news published in newspapers and gives very logical facts for the same.

Many times, the readers express their feelings in different forms like irritation, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, or in some other ways. The comment of one reader often becomes the issue for discussion to other visitors which they give in their replies. They also motivate, guide, aware people through their comments.

It is very difficult to present the contents of feedback and comment in a very organised manner specially keeping in view the wide variations of their nature in a online newspaper .However, attempts have been made to give the description in a systematic manner. Following are important analytical description of the content.



## Location of readers -

The comments given by different people on the site are from different locations of India, especially from Hindi states. But they contain mainly metropolitan and other well known cities, as New Delhi, Mumbai, Haiderabad, Aligarh, Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Lucknow etc. are some such places from where comments are given. The participation of people of foreign countries is also found in the list of comment. It includes Dubai, Toronto and Riyadh. But more than 70 percentages of comments belongs to people living in Delhi and Mumbai. Many participants have not revealed their location. So it is not possible to identify their location. The names of small city or districts are hardly found in the comments. However, the comments indicate that online newspapers have their access in all parts of the country and the world and person with technical facility can easily view them.

## Time of feedback -

It is not easy to give the time of feedback of each news. It has been found that online newspapers can update their stories at any time. The majority of the Indian visitors still have a certain pattern of lifestyle in which they read newspapers either in the morning or in the evening. If news stories are updated late in night or early in the morning, they do not have immediate comments. Similarly, the maximum comments are given within one to two hours from the time of loading of the news. But the newspaper continuously update news and it is very difficult to describe the correct duration of giving comment in all cases. The news loaded after 10 pm has hardly any comment on the same day. Similarly, news given on other location of the news site does not get comment.

Maximum comments are uploaded within one hour of the publication of the news. But it is not true if news is loaded at odd hours. Morning comments begin normally after 6 a.m. and this continues till around 8 a.m. The comments before 6 a.m. are very small in number. It is around 1 percent or even less than that of the total comments. Normally, the comments are given till 10 p.m. The frequency of giving comments rapidly decreases after this. The news which is uploaded in late night doesn't get any immediate comment.

## Reply to comments -

The online technology has also provided the facility of interaction among readers. Now they can give feedback or reply on the comments of visitors. Many a times, this goes in multistep in a chain style. It has also been found that such replies are given to show-agreement or objection to the comments. Sometimes it is also given as a complement to the comment. Many times, the people of different faith, religion and opinion involve themselves in hot discussion and give various kinds of arguments in favour or against any comment. People also tease through these comments. People give more reply on those comments which have some teasing nature or show superiority upon someone in any way. These comments often use very ugly language. They often abuse each other. This happens in case of political and religious issues. Many times, the readers, in reply, give a detail report for or against the view expressed by the other readers.

It is clear that they take the material from some places and paste at particular place of comment. It contains a detail report of the events. It has also been found that sometime the replies do not have any link with the comments given in online newspaper.

## Doubt about the truthfulness of news-

There are several occasions when the people express doubt about truthfulness of the news on the basis of several facts. Similarly, the readers have also blamed newspapers for biased reporting and publishing paid news. They also evaluate news for its news value and its other aspects and they boldly criticize it for alleged violating ethical norms in their opinions. This reveals that readers have their own way of evaluating the events. They give several other interpretations of an event which in itself has some particular approach in its news presentation. Similarly, they also comment about the criteria of the selection of news, accusing newspaper for publishing useless kind of material.

They also raise doubts about those aspects of events which are not clarified and raise doubts about various points. They point out such aspects of events which are not clarified by newspapers but they should have been given. The readers show their irritation on incomplete news.

## Language of the Comments-

Hindi is the language of comments for which Hindi font is used. But English words are often used. However, some comments are given even in English language, but they are less than one percent of the total comments given at the end of any news in online

newspaper. The language of comments has different kinds of grammatical mistakes. Some mistakes are due to the typing error and some are due to lack of knowledge and ignorance of language of those readers who give these comments. The structures of many sentences are full of error which indicates that newspapers do not give enough care to edit the material which is loaded in the online newspapers by the readers.

### **Derogatory language-**

Though Navbharat Times claims to use filter to avoid any kinds of derogatory language, yet a large number of such words can always be seen in different comments given by various visitors. Very objectionable language has been used for various political leaders. Such language has always been prohibited in a civil society. The vulgarity of language really makes a very negative image of not only these readers but also of the newspaper. It also shows the irresponsible attitude of the newspaper in the process of editing of the comments.

But the real identity of readers cannot be found. Sometimes, the style of presentation is in the same way as people talk on the roads during some kind of scuffle. In one way, it can be said that this is very objectionable. Often, quite abusive language is used in the interaction.

### **Fake names in the comment-**

The comments are given in fake names. It is very common especially in those cases where people are giving very hard and critical comments. The names them suggest that they are not real names. For examples some of the names which were found with the comments are following-

Vs (vs),vk, Fact(History), Sant (Delhi), Rr (Delhi), Mu Ali, Om Delhi,

Many Comments in the name of Political leader as Rahul hate congress,

There are some meaningless names, for example, India, Aaj ka topic, New Delhi, Pandit jee, Haridwar, CSP, Mumb. Infact there is a very long list and the fake names in themselves have become the identity of the visitors. Even the person of Indian origin living in other countries, give their fake names just to avoid any kinds of problems in future. Similarly, the names given are in a very casual way, for examples- Dhiru, Anup, Rakesh, Gautam, Prasant and Chanda. Some name is given in a particular term-I love my India, Harry lokomail. It is also that people in these fake names give regular comments and many of these comments are even very logical. But one most important thing about fake names is that these people feel free to say any thing without ant kinds of accountability.

### **Number of comments--**

There is too much variation in the number of comments in different news. It ranges from zero to more than 2 hundred or even more than three hundreds. Controversial subjects have more than 100 comments .The most prominent news gets maximum comment leaving others far behind. But 20 to 40 is normal number of comments in news. Similarly, there is hardly a comment in case of some news. But average number cannot give any idea about the number of comments as there is wide variation in the total number of comment. It depends on the subject of news besides other things.

Similarly, a person may give more than one comment. Sometimes, it has also been found that same person gave more than ten comments in the same news. It seems that he or she continuously wrote or pasted the comment already typed. Normally a person gives one comment with news.

Some people have enough contents and knowledge of concerned subject, so they give more comments on it. Five to ten percent people give rich contents in their comments. While 10 to 20 percent people express their comments which suggest that they are aware of the subject. Comments in the same form are repeated in other stories keeping in view the utility of the comments.

### **Controversial stories with more comments.**

Any kinds of controversial subject have immediate comments. People are quick to say something on it .They express their anguish, irritation and other feelings through it. There is hardly any comment in case of those stories which are simple in nature. Sometimes a sigh of relief and feeling of happiness and satisfaction are expressed by the readers in case the news is positive and good one. Many times they also express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction over the events.

## Sharing of experiences -

Several comments were given by readers sharing their experiences which they thought to be appropriate in the reference of the news. Such types of comments are important in explaining the exact nature of the event. This kind of comments is important in understanding the story in a clear manner.

## Publicity materials with popular news -

It has also been found that readers give publicity materials to such news which they consider to be popular and appropriate in online. Much factual information has been attached with them. They give publicity information with some facts in reference to some news.

## Length of Comments -

Almost 60 percent comments have length between one to four lines. On line comments are more in number. But some readers have kept their own written material which they load as comment once they get appropriate subject of news. At present, this number seems to be around 10 percent of all readers who give comments in such way. They also give the material not as an opinion but in the form of campaign against or in favour of particular person, ideologies, issue or religion. Sometimes such types of material of one person are more than the total material presented by all other people in case of particular news. The average numbers of lines of different days have different values or number. It is very difficult to draw a meaningful conclusion from it. It has also been found that one line comment got various replies of above hundred lines from more than one person.

## Repetition of Comments -

There are a several comments which have been given repeatedly. These comments are written in such a manner which can be adjusted with various kinds of news. These comments may have a special kind of objective. They are in favour or against particular people or organization. Such comments are often very hard in one or other ways and seem to be given in a much organised manner.

## Meaningless comments -

There are several meaningless comments about different news. These comments tell nothing about the subject or about what readers really think about the subject of news. They just make some comments after reading news. They give neither any useful thought nor direction to anyone. These comments cannot be taken seriously in any way. But these meaningless comments have been given without any editing or filtering.

## Normally all aspects of issues in the comments -

There are views on all aspects of the subjects in those cases where a large number of comments are given. Many of the readers are well familiar with certain aspects of the subject and they want to share it with other people. They give their comments on the basis of their experience and knowledge. The accumulation of various informations at one place makes it very useful material. This happens in those cases where serious and meaningful comments have been given.

## Complementary news by readers-

Readers sometimes give very useful complementary information about a news Story. The small information about other aspects of the events balance the news given in the online edition and it also motivates other visitors to give other aspects about it further. There are several stories in which the comments oppose the particular view of the news which otherwise would have been developed in the minds of readers after the publication of the news in the online newspaper. This often happens in case of historical news where the backgrounds of events are important part of the news.

## Comments for satisfaction -

The immediate feelings experienced by reader after reading news are also expressed immediately. It is a kind of psychological relief for them. They express immediately what they want to say. It is not necessary that the comment is meaningful. Similarly, in case of tragic news, readers express sorrow and other kinds of feelings.

## Comments for entertainment -

Many times, the discussion or comments seems to be in a form of entertainment. It seems that they have become a means of entertainment for all the participants. Readers enjoy the discussion not only in blaming other people for adopting a particular opinion but also for being blamed for giving particular comments. They just tease other or those persons who are probably opposite of their views.



It has also been found that some people also make joke of the comments given by others in a very joking style. If someone raises any logical points about any subject, the other one makes joke of that point. Readers often give such stories which are in joke forms. They also make jokes of various political leaders.

#### A comment in Political news -

Political news has maximum number of comments. It contains mix opinions. It draws immediate attention of various visitors. Political debate continues endlessly. Congress and BJP are two main parties about which comments have mainly been sent in the online newspapers by the visitors. The inaction of government on the matter has received strong reactions among the readers of online newspapers. Similarly the ban on the film also created heated debate among readers.

Newspapers normally show the popular opinion given by the readers on a particular time. They reject the view expressed by any person in case of any kind of doubt. The supporters of main political parties can often be found fighting among themselves on different issues. At the same time, the person having secular approach tries to diffuse the tense and hot discussion which often otherwise creates a very negative environment.

#### Major findings and Conclusions-

The analysis suggests that the correct, honest, immediate comment about news is very useful and they have their own impact on the readers, at the same time, meaningless comments reduce the value and importance of news. Main findings can be summarised as below-

- The comments are quite different from traditional letter to the editor column.
- There is still lack of logical serious research based feedback.
- Maximum feedback is given on the basis of prior belief and opinion which the reader holds.
- Comment is normally given without any kinds of editing in online newspaper.
- Controversial subjects have maximum number of comments.
- Politics and religion are very important subjects of discussion in the comments.
- Some political leaders are main centre of discussion in the comments.
- The language used in comments has several grammatical mistakes.
- Abusive language is also used in the comments.
- Most of the comment is given in one line.
- Popular subjects have comments in number from 100 to 300.
- Readers use this place to tell stories which they have seen or realised.
- All stories do not have comments.
- Audience does not take message directly in all the way.
- Some comments are repeated.

#### Suggestions -

The present trend of comment cannot be described in a very healthy condition. It seems that readers are not using the opportunity given to them in an effective manner.

There is a great scope for improvement in giving comment. The readers can help in improving the quality of news in online edition. They should give suggestions more timely.

The seriousness of this column may be maintained. It should not be made a place of campaign for a particular ideology. The language should not be abusive. Newspapers should use effective system of filtering to avoid useless, meaningless and vulgar comments given in online newspaper. They should motivate readers to give meaningful comment.

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