CHAPTER – III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Research on online news thus far was on the integration of interactive features of the new media and still in its beginning stages in India. The approach to interaction was important because it paves way for understanding the sum effects of interactivity on online news production. This research however examines one feature – users’ comments in the Mainstream News sites. The study focuses on the influence of users’ comments as a tool to agenda building at one fold and as a tool to bring about changes in the individual and thereby in the society as whole due to the ability to post comments on the news sites facilitating interaction between individuals and the journalists.

3.2 Statement of the Problem

User comments, in the online news of Mainstream News Sites as a tool to agenda building in the production process of online news and its influence to bring about changes in the society through the interaction between individuals and the journalists.

3.3 Rationale of the study

This research concentrates on the user perspective of media participation by looking at the widespread feature of reader comment sections on news websites of five popular Mainstream online news sites. The researcher has classified the five news sites as Mainstream taking in to account definition of (Mark Deuze, 1999) “The mainstream news site was the most extensive form of news media production online,
in general it offers a selection of editorial content either be it shoveled from a linked medium or originally created for the Web and a minimal, often considered as a moderated form of participatory communication”. The focus primarily on users’ comments was because of it distinct features as a facilitator for an open forum for public discussion and also because users comments were recently adapted in the news sites and in India online news was still in its nascent stage and thus have yet to receive much attention in Literature

3.4 Objective of the Research

Goal of the research was to study the role of user comments as a tool to Agenda Building and to identify the impact of reader’s comments to promote thoughtful and meaningful changes in the society.

3.4.1 Objectives

1. To identify the nature of user comments and how the space provided to the users was used.

2. To identify if such a space has opened up new opinions among the user for the betterment of the society.

3. To identify if the nature of conversation among the users challenges the journalists

4. To study the pattern and nature of comments and its influence on the journalist and also to identify if these comments acts as a source for the journalists.
3.5 Hypothesis

**Ho1** – Users do not utilize the space provided to them in the mainstream news sites to disseminate new information to the public and to enrich the news content.

**Ho2** - The user comments does not influence the presentation and agenda of the news organization which was otherwise sole property of the journalists.

**Ho3** - User comments does not help the users to participate and debate on issues of interest thereby binging about changes in the society.

**Ho4** - The demographics such as age, education, gender, income and occupation of respondents were not key factors in influencing users to express opinions in the area provided to them in the online news forum

3.6 Research Design

Mix method strategy was less well known than either quantitative or qualitative approaches. The concept of mixing different methods originated in 1959 when Campbell and Fisk used multi methods to study validity of psychological traits. Recognizing the limitation of all methods researcher felt that biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of other methods. This study has adopted Triangulation data sources – a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods. For an empirical exploration of the ways in which people make use of the opportunity to comment on journalistic content, there were two ways to look at, one the users themselves and two the text they produce. As in the first case, a researcher, using interviews or a survey, can ask individuals directly for their motives for commenting and their interaction with others - an approach applied for example by (Light and Rogers, 1999) and (Schultz, 2000),
which was adapted in this research to obtain a self-reports of the behavior of the respondents in an online media. Yet this survey will not necessarily describe the actual activities of respondents. A text-based approach, in contrast, records naturally occurring data and thus avoids a bias towards ‘socially acceptable answers’ (Bauer, 2000). For this reason a content analysis like (Milioni, 2012) was taken at the textual level. Content analysis was a ‘technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages’ (Holsti, 1969: p. 14) could be considered to serve this purpose well. Another reason for following a textual based content analysis method was due to the fact that the direct inquiry of commentators was not possible since most of them choose not to publish any personal information, not even e-mail addresses. Another advantage to undertake a content analysis was because the researcher was able to locate not isolate individuals but to analyse comments in context to the article in which it was commented and the comment thread in which it occurs which makes a marked difference to the reason for interaction. Moreover the researcher was interested in analyzing as many comments as possible in different articles rather than on single topic as in (Milioni, 2012) studies, to understand the motivation to comments and to draw broader conclusion on the readers perceptive in voicing their opinions.

The objective of the research was also to find out the ways the journalists react to the user comments. Some research has found that journalists were concerned with the consequences these features may have on the profession and tend to hold on to their traditional media routine (Domingo, 2008).

On the other hand, (Chung, 2007) identifies three types of attitudes toward interactivity that can be placed on a continuum. On one side there were the ‘innovators’ who welcome the incorporation of interactive features on news sites. On
the opposite side were the ‘purists’ who follow the one-to-many traditional model of communication. Chung however finds that the majority of the online editors and managers were ‘cautious traditionalists’. These interviewees expressed considerable uncertainty about how they should deal with the unique characteristics of the medium (Ibid).

Finally (Hermida and Thurman, 2008) explore the UGC features in the BBC sites. Their study clearly showed a distinct difference in the adoption of UGC in the BBC sites. They found that many journalists were adopting to open their websites to such features as comments. Also they argue that journalist were concerned with quality of comments produced by the readers which has prompted them to rely on the traditional gate keeping process by using a moderation method and by creating a clear separation between the journalistic and user contents (ibid).

Previous research predicted various opinions on the user comments and “talk backs” of (Nagar, 2011) the researcher’s goal was to explore the attitude of Indian journalists towards the user comments for which a semi structured interview was adapted. The researcher had planned to conduct an in-depth interview which was not feasible as it was hard to fix appointments with the journalists as some of the websites were hybridizing to become completely online as in the case of Economic Times and the others whom the researcher approached preferred to have a semi-structured questionnaire followed by a telephonic interview.

3.6.1 Identifying the role of users as Agenda Builders through journalists’ interviews

(Bruns, 2008) suggests that qualitative studies can play an important role in understanding how citizen journalism was integrated into processing of news,
especially in consideration of the limited tools and methods of research established so far. Semi structured interviews with journalists was conducted to receive purposeful sample interviewees with the experience and knowledge suitable for addressing this research’s goal, which includes exploring the gate keeping and agenda building of online newspapers that were open to user comments.

Although the focus was to interview journalists who worked completely for the online newspapers, the task of choosing samples was difficult because such journalist were few in number as the transition from the print to online was in its nascent stages in India. Economic times according to one of its journalists were in the process of moving completely online. In India the journalist worked for both the print and online media and therefore journalists were short listed using snowball techniques irrespective of the years of experience in the online media.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their position and availability and were strictly representative in nature of their category of their roles in the publication. However, because the sampling frame constitutes a large proportion of the population under study, the qualitative research interviews provide the basis for a useful initial exploration of the topic and for the development of hypotheses for further research. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from recordings made on location. (Weiss, 1994) issue-focused methodology was used as the basis for the interview analysis.

The actual study interviews used the questionnaire as a starting point, but the researcher asked follow up questions that explores the attitude and opinions of journalists to user comments especially as a tool to agenda building.

During the interview the journalist were asked to opine on online news and interactivity. The journalists shared their point of views on the issues of open forum
and the online news. Also they commented on the threat to professional status as news now was not the sole property of the journalist as in the traditional times. Users were constantly uploading news, photographs, video clipping and the nature of scoop news or exclusive news was slowly vanishing. The journalists were then asked the process of incorporating user comments in their sites, the levels of moderation and news as source to do follow up stories of similar kinds. Finally the journalist evaluated the user comments and also discussed the reasons for not responding to the comments posted by the users.

3.6.2 Survey of Users of Online News

To give a holistic approach to the study the research employed methodological and conceptual understanding focusing on the user’s attitude in general and user comments in particular.

3.6.2 a. Sampling Framework

For the quantitative survey, the target respondents were from the age group of 16 to 60 years. Students, people doing business and those working in Government and private organizations were covered. The participants were mostly under graduates, post graduates and professionals. The survey was employed to identify the using pattern of online news. Further the survey also helped to understand the consumer authored content as a means of shaping the media’s editorial policies. Also in an increasingly competitive market where the readers have an array of tools ranging from remote controls to RSS (Real simple syndications) to polls and surveys to their preferences and news to their choices to the users or readers of news use the space provided to them for the critical evaluation of societal impact.
3.6.2. b. Sample Size

A sample of 230 respondents was taken of which 200 respondents were users of online newspaper and 30 were non-users. The sampling technique used was non-probability purposive sampling method.

3.6.2. c. Sampling Method

The researcher initially deployed a questionnaire on Survey.com and used snowball techniques to collect data. As this method was consuming time and responses were slow, an alternate method was adopted to collect data. The research instrument used was questionnaire and it comprised mostly close ended questions, but also had open ended questions. Also the question applied 3 point likert to 5 point likhert scale to analyze the nature of users. Personal interviews were conducted among the target respondents.

3.6.3 Content Analysis

The most popular news sites in India according to a study by Juxtaconsult were Indiatimes. Com, NDTV.com and Rediff.com, none of these were the mainstream websites of the traditional newspapers taken for the study. Yet as the research objective was to provide insights into the interactivity features of the home pages of five Mainstream online newspapers and to analyze the nature of user comments in these papers. This research basis its analysis on the same methods used by (Milioni, 2012).

The research applied content analysis on five online news papers which had a good circulation in the printed editions. The online newspapers for the study were, the Hindusthan Times, Times of India, The Hindu, The Deccan Chronicle and The Indian
Express. (Papacharisi, 2009) argues that the structure and rules of the website affect the ways in which users engage in online discussion. Thus the samples were drawn from multiple sources instead of single website.

**RQ1 :** Does user comments broaden mass media agenda by raising new issues of public concern.

**RQ2 :** Does user comments enrich mass media content, by providing additional information on reported news?

**RQ3.a :** Do users utilize the space provided by the mass media to express their opinions on issues of public interest?

**RQ3.b :** Do users challenge journalistic opinions by airing oppositional views.

### 3.6.4 a. Sampling

The samples were taken from June 1 2012 – August 30, 2012 to ensure wide range of topics. Then first five articles from each of the newspapers websites were selected comprising of 460 News Articles with 7,36,200 comments. As the aim was to assess the users comments, articles without comments were rejected. Further the articles having more than 30 comments the first 30 comments were selected for the analysis. The decision to further choose the first 30 comments on the articles having more than 30 comments was based on the research study of (Freund, 2011). That was to be able to record interaction in the comments threads; a sequential string of messages instead of random selection has to be examined. Only the first 30 posts were definitely availed in every post. Another distinctive feature of selection of articles was Articles
with more than 10 comments were only taken for the study. Thus the total number of articles for the study was 154 articles 4620 comments.

Why pay specific attention to comments from users? They were typically written by only a small fraction of the people who visit a news website, and it appears that only a minority of people even read comments (Bergstrom 2009, Tausig 2009) Moreover they appear at the tail end of the news production process, at the interpretation stage after most if not all the journalistic decisions have been made and task performed.

There were at least five major reasons for examining this form of participatory journalism.

1. The evolution of participatory spaces

User comments represent a new stage in this evolution of user participation in media–provided spaces. The number of people wanting to make their voices heard was unprecedented: precursors to comments, such as letter to the editor or radio call-in programs, attracted far smaller percentages of the overall audience. Online user comments, which typically were not edited, open up a public forum for more informal, spontaneous and even aggressive and impulsive authorship, most of by people who hide behind the anonymity of assumed screen names.

In addition media gatekeepers turned older participation channels into exclusive spaces. Only those citizens whom the gatekeepers decided were worth hearing were allowed a public voice. Comment threads, in contrast, were inclusive spaces: most comments that do not break explicit rules of participation were included. The former spaces were governed by journalistic logic, while user comments were governed by
broader social standards such as consideration of decency, civility, taste and legality (Thurman 2008).

2. The responsiveness of news.

Comment functions have been a product of trial and error. Media websites initially to steer users to more traditional channels, such as online letters to the editor; special “have your say” sections (which drew relatively little traffic), or opinions columns and blogs (Omebring 2008: Thurman 2008).

It took time and experimentation to arrive at the idea of comment threads, which have proved far more appropriate to the responsive nature of online news. The surprising success of story specific comments indicate what was not clear before. The desire of people to express themselves was often topical and item oriented. Despite the old anecdotal image of a reader so amazed by an item in the morning newspaper that he spits out his coffee in the middle of breakfast, most journalists seem to have been unprepared for the widespread desire among users to let of steam about specific pieces of information.

3. The hybrid nature of online news

Web designers usually separate user comments from journalistic content using several ways, such as by their physical placement on the page, their relationship to news items or their typographical presentation. But in reality, these two contents were inseparable. Online items without comments were becoming rare and starting to look awkward, even suspicious. For some users and some items, comments may be no less interesting and informative than the main journalistic texts to which they relate or respond.
4. Their great popularity

Comments were the most popular and widely used forms of participatory journalism among a majority of the web site in our country and in other studies as well (Bakker and Pantil 2009; Singer and Ashman 2009; Omebring 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008). The tsunami of user comments surprised many of the journalists interviewed.

5. The controversy they create

User comments have proved to be quite controversial, not least within the newsroom that enabled them. Areas of concentration include their low quality, uncertain origins and frequently dubious contribution to the public discourse. Journalists have also expressed concerns about the malicious inclusion of profanity or even libel (Sayare, 2009; Singer and Ashman, 2009; Haner, 2006).

3.6.4 b. Variables and Coding Scheme

The coding scheme was based on Milioni’s research. First, to determine whether the UGC broadens mass media agenda by raising new issues of public concerns (RQ1), comments were coded as changing the agenda when the introduced new issues that were not raised by the journalists and were not directly related to the article. As (Milioni, 2012) puts it a significant extent of an agenda-changing activity would suggest that users utilize public space provided to them not to follow the media – defined issue hierarchy but to broach different issues that were of concern to them. Comments were coded as “Reactive” when the topic changed, when comments did not make any sense “Not Applicable”, when users commented on the terms of the discussion “Meta Communication” or communicated with each other about private issues “Personal” communication additionally comments were coded as “Interactive”
when users responded to each other (RQ3a). The comments were also analyzed for challenging the journalistic viewpoints (RQ3b).

3.6.3 c. Moderation

The increased openness, especially in comparison with participatory forms in more media outlets, there was shift in the gate keeping process of the journalists. To protect their websites from abusive comments the journalists employed various practices. Comment management was shaped primarily by two important and typically interrelated decisions, whether the comment was moderated before or after publications and whether users had to register before they had to comment. The identification requirement of the user, the types of moderation used were key to the study.

News Organizations that used pre-moderation assessed every comment that was posted and before it was published. This approach was more like the traditional participatory spaces where every letter to the editor was read and fine tuned to be published. On the other hand post – moderation was after the comment was published which was a more relaxed and open approach. Users could publish freely and the journalists would intervene only if the situation calls for such intervention. The study also looked into the fact the levels of moderation and its effects in trafficking comments. The moderations were classified into three categories.

High Level of Moderation – Pre Moderation.

Medium level of Moderation – Partially pre moderated and post moderation.

Least level of Moderation - Post moderation.
The websites of the mainstream newspapers were analyzed for the registration rules and recorder likewise.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

The data collected by using a multi method such as a content analysis of five online newspapers, a semi structured interview and a survey. For the content analysis the researcher used a comparative analysis of the five newspapers using percentages and weight ages to analyze the data. While the survey was keyed into SPSS and the researcher used Statistical tools such as chi square, ANOVA, t-test and correlation tests to prove the hypothesis and Cluster Analysis to segment the audience to groups to identify significant association of respondents’ different socio economic group. The interview was transcribed and again the researcher applied percentages and weighted means to analyze the data.

### 3.8 Limitations

As discussed earlier in the introductory part the Indian scenario of Online news was slow and the literature for online news sites were still unexplored. This exploratory study did not use random sampling methods and therefore the results cannot be generalized. Online news commenting system has opened up new areas for research. The main limitation of the study was that it did not look at the bilingual dimensions of comments which brought a nativity to the commentators. The users’ comments were not analyzed for participation pattern, the frequency of users and the interaction between regular users and occasional users. Further the study has not considered the News organizations and the expectations to get most individualized values of the comments in the agenda setting process.