

CHAPTER 7

Ask a Journalist: Roles, Relations and Subjectivity in Online Reader–Journalist Dialogues

Yngve Benestad Hågvar, Associate Professor, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Norway

If you could ask a journalist anything – what would it be? The Norwegian online paper VG.no was not sure what to expect when it launched its general “Question and Answers” forum in 2014 as an integrated part of a complex live studio. In this chapter, I examine which topics the readers raise and how the journalists respond to them in samples from 2014 and 2016. I also discuss which roles the journalists take on when acting as studio hosts, and to what extent these micro-dialogues contribute to a more open or even subjective kind of journalism. The analysis shows that the hosts throughout both periods alternate between four main roles: the neutral news oracle; the online pathfinder; the comforting psychologist and the like-minded buddy. The hosts mirror the styles and relationships suggested by the readers, unless the readers ask for their professional or private opinions. In that case, the hosts step back into a traditional news discourse. The relationship between each individual reader and the answering journalist therefore remains pseudo-intimate, as the host might get personal, but not subjective. However, the textual environment turns more hostile during 2015, and in the 2016 material the readers take a more critical stance towards VG.no’s journalism in general, and immigrants in particular. Consequently, the hosts increasingly act as verbal sparring partners, which constitutes a fifth and somewhat more confrontational journalistic role.

Keywords: Digital journalism, interactivity, genre development, interpersonal meta-function, social semiotics

Introduction

“I am reading somewhere else that there is a fear of attacks in Europe now. How realistic is this? I am terrified and troubled by anxiety. Best, Anna”

The question above is posed in the “Question and Answers” forum of Norway’s leading online paper *VG.no*, 4 July 2014.¹ The person who is supposed to answer is neither a psychologist nor a terror expert. She is a young, freshly educated journalist who at this moment happens to be studio host for *VG.no*’s fledgling round-the-clock news forum. How can she best respond to the scared reader? *VG.no*’s own news on the subject could definitely cause fear: American Intelligence claims that al-Qaida is in the process of developing an “invisible” bomb for terror attacks on airplanes, something that is currently causing stronger security checks than usual at European airports. Repeating the story may scare the reader even more. The intimate style of the question may rather call for a comforting answer, for instance by persuading the reader that she has nothing to worry about. But what kind of journalistic role would such an answer imply? What kind of relations are journalists expected to establish with their readers?

Both nationally and internationally, *VG.no* is considered a spearhead in experimenting with new ways to engage their readers. The media house has a long tradition of innovative online experimentation by trial and error, in particular when it comes to interactive features (Barland 2012, Lund 2013, Lund, Olsson & Hågvar 2016). *VG.no* frequently argues that the readers as a group always know more than any single journalist can know, and that dialogue therefore will bring more information to the news table. Moreover, dialogical features may enhance the readers’ engagement and loyalty to the newspaper, particularly if the readers perceive themselves as really noticed as individuals and treated with respect (Hermida & Thurman 2007). Anna’s question above also illustrates that being in touch with the newsroom can make a real difference to the individual reader’s perception of the news. In this context, *VG.no*’s Q&A forum is a highly relevant case for studying interactive innovations in online news media.

In this chapter, I will examine what kinds of questions *VG.no*’s journalists choose to answer, and what strategies they tend to use in their responses. I am

¹ For brevity, I will hereafter refer to “questions and answers” as “Q&A”. Readers’ nicknames have been altered.

Figure 7.1. VG Direkte Nyhetsdøgnet 5.7.2014 10.37 a.m. Facsimile reproduced in accordance with the Norwegian Copyright Act.

particularly interested in the implicit text norms for interpersonal symmetry and subjectivity. My research question is: *Which interpersonal relations are established between journalists and readers in VG.no's Q&A forum, and how subjective are the participants?*

Background: From terror trial to general breaking news

VG.no's Q&A forum is an integrated part of a complex live studio called "VG Direkte Nyhetsdøgnet" ("VG Live 24-hours News", hereafter "Nyhetsdøgnet"). In 2014, the studio also included a running news feed with short updates, a video section with the potential for live streaming, and a Twitter feed dominated by statements from the emergency services (figure 7.1).

The first version of this studio was designed to cover the trial of the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik in 2012. The idea had been circulating in the newsroom for some time, and the important trial gave VG.no the opportunity to realize it (Lund et al. 2016). For the next few years, the studio covered selected breaking stories. In May 2014, however, VG.no decided to open the studio on a permanent basis, turning it into a more general news format that provided short, immediate updates on a

diverse mix of breaking news. An important motive was to strengthen the bond with the readers, according to VG's Executive Editor Christian Brændshøi:

A crucial idea is that VG-journalists would be available for questions and input from the users at all times, and that we will make this communication visible on the front of VG Nett and VG Mobil. [...] At the same time, we open up more communication and interaction, and have the opportunity to be personal in our dialogue with the users. Being open about our journalistic practice ties us closer to people and adds an extra dimension to VG's distribution of news (Glesnes, 2014, June 11).

This change redefined the social function of the Q&A forum. Previously, the readers had asked about the specific story the studio was set up to cover. Now, the readers could ask whatever they wanted.

Nyhetsdøgnet proved itself viable. Towards 2016, *VG.no* narrowed and simplified the interface and included commercials, while keeping the mix of news updates, tweets and questions and answers (figure 7.2). Overall, Nyhetsdøgnet settled in as an integral part of *VG.no*. An important part of this process was the continuous and implicit negotiation between readers and journalists about which kinds of questions and answers they considered relevant and appropriate, and which interpersonal style they were supposed to use.

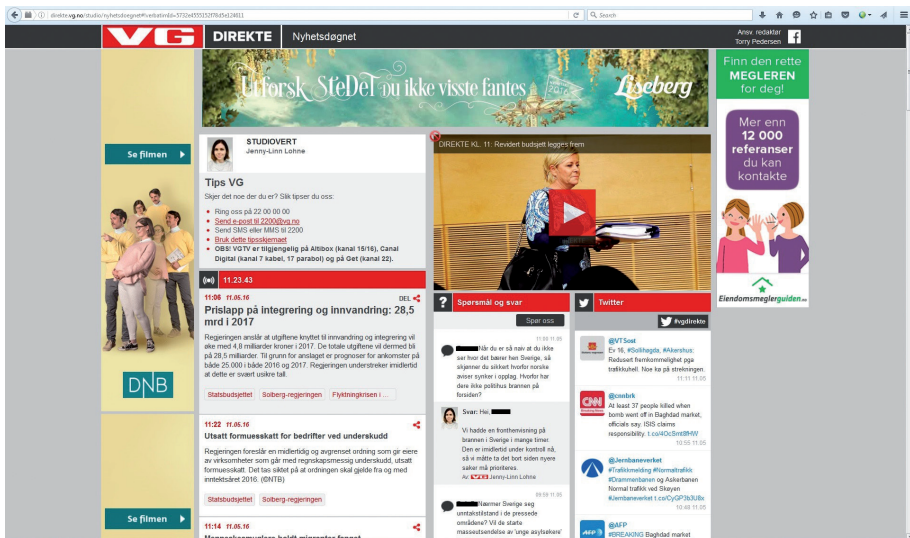


Figure 7.2. VG Direkt Nyhetsdøgnet 11.5.2016 11.25 a.m. Facsimile reproduced in accordance with the Norwegian Copyright Act.

Theory, method and material: Building relations through text

When analyzing how interpersonal relations are represented and constructed in texts, *social semiotics* is a suitable theoretical framework. Halliday (2014) argues that any use of language serves three metafunctions: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. These metafunctions can be applied to multi-modal texts as well (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, Baldry & Thibault 2006). The *ideational* metafunction is the text's quality of constructing a certain representation of the world. For instance, the angle of a news story will inevitably affect the readers' perception of what has happened. The *interpersonal* metafunction is the text's quality of constructing a certain relationship between the communicative participants. For instance, a news text might construct the journalist as more powerful and knowledgeable than the readers, or it can establish a more symmetrical relationship by reaching out to the readers and asking for their interactive contribution or even help. Finally, the *textual* metafunction refers to the applied principles of cohesion and coherence that enable the text to be perceived as meaningful. For instance, we may ask how and to what extent the distinct elements of *VG.no*'s online news studio fit together to make up a coherent whole.

In the case of *Nyhetsdøgnet*, the interpersonal metafunction is crucial, as the main purpose of the text is to stay connected with the audience. We can identify different kinds of relations by analyzing features like style (formal or informal), modality (the degree of reservation or commitment to what is said) and speech acts (stating facts, making evaluations, making promises, asking questions, etc.). However, the ideational metafunction is important as well, as the social roles are closely connected to which kinds of questions the readers raise, and how they frame them. Some world views qualify as legitimate by receiving a proper response from the host, whereas others are met with discursively circuitous answers – if they get published at all. In the end, this also affects the textual metafunction, as the range of questions and social roles may or may not entail a coherent set of text norms. If the hosts act inconsistently when deciding which questions to answer and how to answer them, the readers might struggle to grasp the social meaning of the studio, and vice versa.

The coherence and stabilization of text norms is furthermore a matter of genre. According to Miller (1984), genres are rhetorical strategies developed

to handle the exigency of recurrent rhetorical situations. Thus *VG.no*'s initial terror trial studio was not a genre; it was merely an innovative format. But as the format evolved, it has gradually achieved a more stable and general social function, namely the combined task of providing immediate news updates and strengthening the bond with the audience. The analysis below will therefore also describe the formation and evolution of a new genre, as suggested above.

Obviously, *Nyhetsdøgnet* shares several features with existing genres. It is closely related to journalistic live blogs, as studied by Thurman and Walters (2013) and O'Mahony (2014). Several online papers launch such blogs to cover specific stories in real time, very much like *Nyhetsdøgnet* did between 2012 and 2014. The above studies confirm that the format² is increasingly used, and ask whether live blogs will eventually supplant traditional news stories online. What distinguishes *Nyhetsdøgnet* from most live blogs, however, is the intention of covering a full range of news simultaneously, the complexity of features within the interface, and the close dialogue with the readers. From previous studies of interactive journalistic formats we know that hosts may need to take on a complex journalist role in order to meet different kinds of questions with relevant responses (Beyer et al. 2007). A study by Steensen (2012) suggests that both the host and the audience might prefer to assign the host the role of an expert, taking control over the conversation. We might therefore expect the reader–journalist dialogues to differ somewhat from the discourses of social media or news stories' commentary fields, which are sometimes found to be quite confrontational or hostile, and more focused on stating personal views than asking for others' evaluations (Winsvold 2013, Hughey & Daniels 2013).

The analysis below is based on two samples of questions and answers from the forum, and two qualitative interviews with selected studio hosts.

The main text sample consists of all questions and answers posted between 28 June and 14 July 2014, just a few weeks after *VG.no* had launched the round-the-clock version of the studio. By then, the readers had had some time to get to know the new format, whereas the text norms were still not properly settled. This means that journalists and readers found themselves implicitly

2 Both O'Mahony (2014) and Thurman and Walters (2013) refer to the live blog as a *format*, but I believe there are good reasons to rather consider it a *genre*, cf. Hågvar (2016).

negotiating how the studio in general, and the forum in particular, should be used. I will therefore analyze the sample qualitatively in order to identify topical and relational patterns.

For comparison, I have retrieved a second sample between 7 and 11 May 2016. Due to increased reader activity, this shorter period contains about the same amount of posts as the 2014 material (ca. 50). The 2016 sample can indicate whether the text norms have changed since 2014, possibly evolving towards a more stabilized and manifest genre.

To be able to understand how the studio hosts perceive their own role, I have also conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with one of the hosts from each sample. I will be referring to the 2014 host as «host A» and the 2016 host as «host B». Both hosts were active in both periods, but they were more active in respectively 2014 and 2016. They were interviewed separately in December 2016.

2014: Six kinds of questions

In the early months of Nyhetsdøgnet, none of VG.no's journalists were specifically employed as studio hosts. Instead, they volunteered for this role in turns. According to host A, those who wanted to be hosts were often young shift workers in temporary positions, whereas the most experienced journalists preferred other tasks. The host was responsible for what was published in all sections, including answering the readers' questions. Host A recalls no specific guidelines for selecting and answering the questions. She would make running decisions in dialogue with her news editor. Thus, the following patterns of representations and relations reflect continuous journalistic evaluations rather than a predetermined strategy for how the studio should be used. The questions from 2014 fall into six main categories.

1. Questions about news stories

Some readers ask about matters they find insufficiently covered in the news:

Mr. Hansen: Hi, what are the charges against Sarkozy?

Jamilah: Dear Vg, what is going on in Palestine right now is very sad and inhuman. And they need all the help they can get. Will any relief organizations be sent, like the Red Cross etc.?

Ayan M: Hi, vg, I wonder if Israel wants peace?

As we can see from the examples, the questions range from simple requests for facts (Mr. Hansen), via fact requests combined with expressing an attitude (Jamilah), to more overarching questions that call for a more elaborate and possibly subjective view from the journalist (Ayan M). In general, questions about the news are answered in the impersonal style of the common news discourse, often supplied by links to previous stories on *VG.no*. For instance, the host answers the tricky Israel question by recommending a previous interview with the embassy's spokesperson. The host obviously takes care not to step into the opinion journalists' domain of interpreting and explaining the news. Still, there seems to be a small opening for general empathy, as the initial sentence of the answer to Jamilah indicates:

Hi Jamilah,

Such a conflict is sad for all parties involved. From what VG knows, Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross are supposed to be in the conflict areas. [...]

2. Media critical questions

A distinct group of the questions are mainly rhetorical ones, aimed at ridiculing or criticizing certain aspects of *VG's* journalism. For instance, Sunniva believes one of the police tweets published in the studio suffers from imprecise language:

Cf message from the police at 07:17 about the fire in Sel; Guess it's not often the police announce that they are about to start a fire?? Or that they are planning to commit a crime ;-)?³

The police tweet read:

Regarding forest fire in Sel. Watches on the location during the night – helicopter on stand-by – planned start up again at 0900 today.

There is of course a slight possibility that Sunniva really has misunderstood the tweet, but it is unlikely. The studio host must therefore choose whether she should join in on the joke or clarify what the police meant. She does the latter:

3 I have tried to keep the original grammatical errors etc. in the translation of the quotes.

Good morning!

These messages can be a bit cryptic as Twitter demands you to limit yourself to maximum 140 signs. As I understand it, what was planned to start up again was further extinguishing, but now it turns out it is not necessary. The local newspaper Gudbrandsdølen Dagingen reports that the fire is out: followed by URL

Sunniva's attempt to establish a common, implicit humor fails. Maybe she has missed the genre; ironic comments of this kind are rare. However, quite a few readers explicitly criticize VG's writing or coverage of particular stories:

Arne: Oh I pity you poor, poor Oslo folks, it was raining more than this in Bergen yesterday, where was VG then?

Torgeir: Can someone in VG tell me why you have 20 stories on a totally meaningless football match as top stories, when there is a war in the Middle East which concerns millions of people's lives?

In such cases the host generally answers in a fair and polite way:

We are monitoring the situation on the Gaza strip continuously, and we will continue to do so. At the moment we have several stories on the situation in the Middle East on our front page.

However, if the readers make too problematic assumptions, the host may dispute them:

Stig: Hi, reading your new update from 05:56. Why have you not included the information that civilians were flocking towards the building after the Israelis had sent warnings of a bombing?

Answer: Hi Stig. What are your sources that this was the case?

The forum does not allow Stig to reply directly, but he passes on documentation via another question and actually gets the information included in a subsequent story on *VG.no*. Such instances of real dialogue with readers providing useful material are still very few.

3. Questions about the weather report

One of the largest group of questions in early July 2014 was about the weather. There is no reason why *VG.no*'s journalists should have any better meteorological

skills than the common reader, and readers who are able to post questions online, should presumably be capable of using online weather services as well. Nevertheless, there is a stream of questions like this:

Sonia: Hi. I wonder if there is going to be a lot of rain and thunder next week in Oslo? Have checked the forecast, is it as bad as the last time? I'm very scared of thunder and lightning. Is there any chance it will change?

Ronald: Hi, how is the weather going to be in Asker today, have heard there is going to be rain is this correct?

Again, some questions merely require facts (Ronald), whereas others expose an additional need for comfort (Sonia). The host tries her best to answer in a supportive way:

Hi, Sonia!

Sadly, it seems to be quite rainy, and possibly even thunderstorms, from Monday on. According to the current forecast, anyway. On *pent.no* [*VG.no*'s own weather service], you can follow and compare the forecasts from both Yr and Storm: [URL]

We should be aware that the sample is from a period when parts of Norway were flooded, and there had been a number of news stories about the weather. Still, the majority of questions are not related to extreme weather at all. It rather seems like the readers inspire each other; if one of them asks about the weather at his or her whereabouts, it is often followed by similar questions from others.

The fact that readers prefer to ask *VG.no* a question and wait for an answer instead of checking online weather services right away, is puzzling. Still, a similar feature occurs in the fourth group of questions: traffic related ones.

4. Questions about traffic and driving directions

Because of the current flood, several roads were closed or hard to drive on at the time I collected this sample. This may be the initial reason why a great deal of the questions are about driving directions:

Filip: Going up to Skeikampen tomorrow – and am not very well acquainted with the local area. Starting in Vormsund... How do I drive?

These readers obviously believe that the journalist is updated on which roads are closed or not. Occasionally, the host tries to link to the traffic advice from highway authorities, but nevertheless ends up searching in Google Maps on behalf of the reader: “I am not familiar with this area, but Google Maps suggest you drive Rv3 and E136 from Hamar.” Sometimes even Google cannot solve the issue:

Vilde: Driving to Ålesund tomorrow morning. Which road should we take?

Answer: Hi Vilde. Hard to tell, where are you driving from?

In general, the readers often seem to prefer asking *VG.no* about their everyday problems instead of checking with the primary source of information, which may be only a phone call away:

Grete: Is Strandtorget shopping mall in Lillehammer closed? Lies close to the E6 and the parking lot is usually flooded. Q is then if the water has risen a lot?

Answer: Hi! They are open!

5. Questions about the host’s private life or working conditions

One reader has picked his nickname from a song by the Norwegian veteran rock singer Åge Aleksandersen from Namsos, and has noticed something striking about the young, female host’s profile picture:

Levva Livet: You look a bit like Åge Aleksandersen. Are you related?

Answer: Hi, you! Do you mean me? No, but I’m also from Namsos, and I am of course a big fan of Åge :)

It is fairly common that readers try to establish a private conversation like this with the host. Contrary to the failed attempt to make fun of the police’s tweet, the hosts answer posts like these in a personal and humorous style. Thereby, the readers are implicitly assured that questions like this lie within the genre:

Jon “Karl” Pettersen: Hi Stein-Erik! Why don’t you tell us a bit about how things are rolling at VG now in the middle of the night? Is there still a huge bunch of you there, or are you all alone? Can you put your feet on the table and sleep, or is it work?

[New message:] Some extra information: Here at Marbella the weather is nice and warm, and I am having a cool lager on the veranda before I hit the sack. Would like to hear “Africa” with Toto if possible.

Answer: Hi, Jon. What’s rolling in VG now is that I’m sitting here trying to keep you updated on what’s happening around the world during the night, together with the nice and pleasant Victoria. Things aren’t cooking as much as in the daytime and evening, but I can’t write here that I put my feet on the table, in case my bosses should read it. I would be happy to change Akersgata for Marbella, too. Hehe, you can at least get a link to the song on YouTube, we have to be that service-minded. [URL]

Being private in this kind of question is apparently not in conflict with the journalistic mission. The host may chit-chat and play along, and may even share her music preferences, as long as she does not state subjective views on news matters.⁴

6. Questions about what to ask

The readers obviously have some problems grasping the social function of the live studio. The last group of questions is a kind of meta-discourse – readers asking what they are supposed to ask about, or how the studio really works:

Ola: Fascinating, this service. How does it work? Is there a person who picks and writes everything? A bit like Twitter. How many keep the site open now? How many are the most on a regular day?

The six categories presented above suggest that the Q&A forum is receptive to a wide range of ideational meanings. It is evident that the discourse differs distinctly from the discourse of conventional user commentaries in online newspapers. As mentioned above, research on debates in online news has shown that posts are often conflict oriented, in the sense that it seems more important to argue for one’s own point of view and criticize the opponent’s arguments than to seek mutual agreement. The conflict may include conspiratorial thinking, personal attacks and other forms of domination techniques (Winsvold 2013, Nising 2013, Trygg 2012). In *Nyhetsdøgnet* anno 2014, we do not find much of this. One reason could be that the forum is pre-moderated,

4 For simplicity, I refer to the host as «her» or «she» when I am not aiming at one particular person. In reality, the hosts are both male and female.

which enables the host to pick the questions she prefers. However, one of the hosts states in an answer that he “tries to answer most questions”. Another explanation could be that because the reader has to direct the question at a specific, identified individual, the interpersonal relationship encourages popping a real question instead of tossing another opinion into the crowd. This brings us to the investigation of the interpersonal metafunction, and the exploration of which roles the studio host needs to adjust to.

2014: Four journalistic roles

To answer the six kinds of questions, the host needs to interchange between four distinct roles.

1. The neutral news oracle

We have seen above that questions about the news are often answered in a quite neutral, distant voice resembling that of a news story. Sometimes, the answers look like short news items in themselves, except for the personal opening greeting, which seems to be mandatory:

BoGo: Has Lebanon made any statement about Israel’s military action? Heard earlier that two rockets from Lebanon were shot towards Israel, but have there been any further actions/statements besides this?

Answer: Hi BoGo, Thanks for your question. Friday morning an area in northern Israel was hit by a missile shot out from Lebanon, according to the Israeli army. The spokesperson for the Israeli Defence Forces said that the country has responded to today’s rocket attacks from Lebanon with artillery. Israel suspected a Palestinian group sympathizing with Hamas to be behind the attack. This is according to NTB. At the same time, a source from Lebanese security confirmed that up to three rockets were sent from their side of the border.

The answer is stripped of any evaluation of the kind we would expect to find in a more personal narrative (Labov and Waletzky 1967), such as “As you can see, the fight goes on.” Furthermore, even though BoGo asks an explicit yes/no question, the answer is implicit. BoGo might not even find it relevant: He already knows about the rockets and is asking for the Lebanese view, but the answer only provides new information about the Israeli reactions. The text is

also inconsistent when it comes to deixis – ways of referring to the situational context. Even though the answer is published on a Friday, the answer initially refers to “Friday morning” before continuing with the deictic marker “today’s rockets”. The “Friday” reference is probably influenced by the traditional news discourse, as naming the weekday instead of just stating “today” would make the dating more precise for late readers. Altogether, these features make the answer impersonal and construct an asymmetrical relation between the uninformed reader and the well-informed, impersonal and professional news medium – in accordance with the relationship we can observe in ordinary news stories.

The host may also turn to the role as neutral news oracle when she needs to answer angry or sarcastic comments, and when the readers ask for her interpretations or opinions. The discursive discrepancy will then be a signal that the questions in some way violate the text norms of the genre, thereby receiving another kind of response than they expect.

2. The online pathfinder

Often, the host answers a question by providing a link to a website with more information. This is usually the case when readers ask about something they could have figured out themselves online. However, the role can also be a strategy to avoid answering questions that are vague or too private:

Hi. What do you “journalists” earn ? :): Hi wondered how much you journalists these days make a year?

Answer: Hi, Here you will find an overview of the salary statistics for Norwegian media corporations in 2013: [URL]

When the readers prefer to ask *VG.no* about the weather forecast, opening hours and traffic directions instead of searching for the answers themselves, the interpersonal function of the forum comes to the fore. Questions and answers of this kind both presuppose and construct a relationship of trust between the newsroom and the readers. The same mechanism can be observed in other online fora where the users share a common interest or identity: “Going out for a night on the town, does anybody know when the bars close tonight?” (*Kvinneguiden.no* 25.5.2015). It establishes a quite intimate discourse community (Swales 1990) with more symmetrical relations than we

found for the role of the neutral news oracle. In this sense, *VG.no*'s ambition of bringing the readers closer has succeeded.

Obviously, the relationship is also determined by the host's reaction. And the host does tend to write in a more personal style when answering "pathfinding" questions than when answering general news questions:

Nice to hear that you would like to subscribe. For more information you can enter this site: [URL]

[...] Have you tried VG's weather service www.pent.no? Here you will get the forecasts from both weather services at the same time. :)

[...] But there is always a possibility that E6 will open again tomorrow. Follow the traffic messages here: [URL]

Contrary to the news oracle, the online pathfinder may personalize her answers with smileys and slightly lowered modality. However, because the host merely functions as an intermediary, the personalization is modest. An analogy could be the smile and appearance of a friendly clerk at an information desk. In fact, host A mentions "the service-minded" host as a sub-category of the pathfinder, since an important task is to answer general customer questions about *VG*, like the subscription example above.

3. The comforting psychologist

Some of the readers have bigger worries than finding their way to Ålesund or deciding whether to bring an umbrella or not. They are in search of a mutually understanding journalistic voice, hoping the host can bring some comfort or reassuring facts. The question I mentioned in the introduction is in this category:

Anna: I am reading somewhere else that there is a fear of attacks in Europe now. How realistic is this? I am terrified and troubled by anxiety. Best, Anna

The host tries her best to ease the reader's fear, while at the same time staying on the subject:

Answer: Hi, Anna. I guess you are referring to the note of concern that American Intelligence has published, in which they suspect that terror groups in Syria and

Yemen are in the process of making a new kind of “invisible” bomb – which neither metal detectors nor bomb dogs can discover. From what we know so far the threat is not very specific.

In the concluding sentence, the host downplays a story that most newsrooms presented as a much more serious threat the day before. *VG.no*’s own story was headlined “Fear ‘invisible’ plane bomb. Stronger security check at several European airports”. In the text, *VG.no* points to “intelligence information” saying that “bomb experts from the Yemen-based al-Qaida group AQAP have travelled to Syria to meet members of Jabhat al-Nusra – another group affiliated with al-Qaida – to develop a bomb that is not exposed before the terrorist is on board the plane”. The story stresses that “the al-Qaida group AQAP has been responsible for several of the most sophisticated attempts to strike on a plane in the last few years”, and these attempts are then carefully listed. When the press contact at Oslo Airport claims that they have not received any instructions on stronger control, it appears almost like a dangerous exception, since “a range of European airports” have sharpened their security at the USA’s request. *VG.no*’s closest competitor *Dagbladet.no* dramatizes the story even more. Their headline reads “Al-Qaida’s best chemist has developed a bomb that is not discovered in security checks”. Above, we see two disturbing pictures of the dangerous chemist, the caption starting with the word “FEARED” in capital letters. The lead follows: “Fearing attacks in Europe now: Here is the story of Ibrahim (32).”

Newspapers often use such rhetorical techniques to trigger the readers’ emotions, in this case a sense of fear. When conversing with the readers directly on the forum, though, the journalists may have to do the opposite. In the 2014 forum, it is hard to find signs of exaggerations, strong bias, personification, contrasting, polarization and other features we often associate with a “tabloid” news discourse. The studio host cannot answer: “Yes, we really have to watch out for this extremely dangerous bomb maker from Yemen!” Instead, the forum fills a unique role as a counter-discourse to the most speculative aspects of the news. Host A recalls:

There were several such questions. [...] I understand well that she got nervous. It is interesting that you call it “the comforting psychologist”, because I have not thought about it that way. But you may be right, the idea behind [answers like that] might actually have been to comfort.

The host may get even more personal than in the above example. Here, another girl is afraid of thunderstorms:

Lise: I just cannot figure out those weather reports. See they vary a lot from yr and storm. Live at Romerike and hate thunder and lightning. Do you know if anything like that is coming here and how long it will last? I am scared.

Answer: Hi, Lise! I can see thunder is predicted at Romerike, but yes, the forecasts seem to vary a bit. If you use pent.no you can compare Yr and Storm and possibly learn some more. I guess you just have to steel yourself and prepare for thunder and lightning. It is not much fun, but then again, it usually turns out just fine :)

In this role, the studio host balances acting as a comforting friend and a provider of information. As long as she does not give any personal advice, the text norms apparently allow expressions of empathy and comfort. In retrospect, though, host A believes that in some cases a better solution would be to cite a reassuring source instead of taking on the comforting role herself, as she could be at risk of stating facts that have not really been confirmed. Still, for questions like Lise's above, there is obviously a need for a certain intimacy that exceeds the role of the ordinary news journalist. I call this role "the comforting psychologist" to highlight the focus on mental issues, although one could also argue that the relationship just as much resembles one between friends. Fully symmetrical relations between pals, however, are best described through the host's fourth possible role, outlined below.

4. The like-minded buddy

"We have a somewhat more personal tone at times", says Executive Editor Christian Brændshøi about the live studio. He uses the expressions "informal tone", "loose format" and "personified style" and draws parallels to social media (Hågvar 2016, p. 494). It is not hard to find examples of the studio host acting like the reader's buddy. The journalist who is compared to Åge Aleksandersen, responds in a lively manner with both a smiley and personal information, and the host who is encouraged to tell what is "rolling" in VG during the night, does it with humor and self-deprecation on the reader's terms. Oral phrases like "Hehe, you can at least get a link to the song on YouTube" resemble the style of social media.

Most questions in the “private” category are answered in this way; those who approach the host with a personal question get a personal answer in return. It is interesting that the hosts even bother to answer questions like this. The ideational content has probably no interest for others than the submitters, and it has nothing to do with news journalism. When they still do, it could be explained by the interpersonal metafunction: The studio hosts may wish to appear cool, friendly and forthcoming, and maybe also illustrate that they happily receive all kinds of questions. By the summer of 2014, only 4-5 questions were published on a regular day, and the live studio’s social relevance would drop severely if it did not generate traffic and interactivity. Just staying in touch then becomes a rhetorical aim of its own. In Roman Jakobson’s terms we could say that this role highlights the *phatic* function of the language, “messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication” (Jakobson 1960, p. 355).

Host A agrees that the questions could get quite intimate:

I have more than once been proposed to, asked on a date and things like that. I have not let those questions through. However, sometimes it has been like a pleasant break at work to communicate a bit informally. I have never felt any discomfort or had any negative experiences with the personal questions.

In 2014, then, most of the personal and informal questions were quite nice and innocent. During the next two years, this changed quite severely.

2016: Being a sparring partner in a hostile environment

The comparative sample from May 2016 shows signs of both genre stabilization and development. The forum still contained questions about the weather and other trivial issues, and both of the interviewed hosts agree that the four journalistic roles from 2014 still applied. By now, the studio was no longer run by random volunteers. Instead, four journalists were employed as full-time studio hosts, which indicates that *VG.no* was strongly committed to the studio.

The most striking development since 2014 is that the majority of questions were now a response to the current news (70 % of the sample). Furthermore, about half of the questions took a critical stance towards the host and/or *VG.no*’s journalism. Some readers pointed out factual errors or grammar

mistakes in news stories, whereas others expressed their political views, often on immigration:

CharlieRiot: Have you reflected upon that the way you have strangled the debate in Norway for years about immigration (last exemplified by [teacher and Pegida-leader] Max Hermansen), is radicalizing Norwegians. And I haven't even touched upon economy/safety.

Vegard: Why is VG not writing about an attack on the police of Borås, Sweden yesterday where a woman was stabbed. It was a gang of boys and perhaps of boys with an immigrant background since you are ignoring this?

Paul: When you are so naïve that you do not see where Sweden is going, I am sure you can understand why the circulation of Norwegian papers is decreasing. Why don't you put the police station fire on the front page?

Some of the posts were not even questions, but mere statements:

Gentleman: 2.5 billion to the asylum seekers ... there are obviously no limits as to how much money there is for such measures. What about 2.5 billion to old people's homes and dignified aging for the very oldest? Grrr ...

To some extent, the discourse of the Q&A forum had thereby moved towards the conflict-oriented discourse of the readers' comments below ordinary news stories. In most cases, the studio host remained quite neutral and simply referred to published stories on the matter, as in 2014. However, when presuppositions turned too controversial, even the host might answer in a polemic style:

Marius: Why are not Swedish authorities engaging the army to clean out these districts with criminal immigrants?

Answer: Hi, Marius! This is because it would be a massive scandal and a huge tragedy if the authorities intervened and "cleaned out" a certain district where most of the inhabitants probably have not committed any crime at all. Still, it is probably correct that this is a problem the police cannot solve by themselves, but rather something that the society as a whole needs to address. Read more about parallel communities in Sweden here.

Host B recalls that the discourse of the questions suddenly turned more hostile around the summer of 2015 and confirms that it remained so throughout 2016. She believes the main reason is the sudden increase of refugees to Europe:

When I came back from my summer holiday [in 2015], I found that the questions had become so racist that I had a hard time dealing with them, they had turned so mean. So I will say that this has changed a lot. I do not know if it is because of Nyhetsdøgnet itself, or if those who are very active in the commentary fields have just turned to Nyhetsdøgnet.

Towards the end of 2016, the majority of questions the hosts receive are racist or hostile in other ways, often aimed towards media in general or identified journalists. Host B has several times had to report death threats to the police and block specific readers. She estimates that 19 out of 20 questions are not published, often because they violate Norwegian law. Furthermore, the widespread hostile discourse in the questions that remain unpublished, might eventually affect the tone of the answers that *are* published, such as the answer to Marius above:

A lot of this does not get out. And we are sitting there browsing through it, and I can feel that I get emotionally affected myself because it is so coarse, so nasty. Both because it is such a mean way to speak about other people, if they have a different skin colour or whatever, but we are also wallowing in an enormous disgust for the media. So I think that when he answers like that, it is because he has read 20 messages and brings them with him into that answer, and possibly reads even more into that question than is really there. I can sometimes find myself interpreting everything in the worst possible way, that everyone is posting with a racist agenda. So even if it is just a question, when I read “criminal immigrants” I get so discouraged that I ... Then you answer that it would be a “massive scandal” or something like that.

Host B suggests a fifth journalistic role, namely the one “in which we discuss and sometimes even quarrel with the readers”. We might call this role *the sparring partner*. Host B stresses that when stepping into this role, she is careful to base her arguments on facts, not opinions. A lot of the questions build on evidentially wrong assumptions which can be met within a traditional truth-seeking journalistic discourse. However, host A points out that some presuppositions are too unethical to respond to at all:

There are many who claim that so-and-so politician has killed so-and-so. Totally crazy things. And then they ask: “Why don’t you write about that?” Obviously, I

cannot let that question through without also publishing the claim. So we will not answer those questions.

This discourse of hostility was rarely to be found in the 2014 material, even among the unpublished questions, according to host A. In addition to host B's explanation, this might suggest that the studio has been gradually adjusted to previously known genres and discourses, in this case how readers are used to commenting upon news stories in commentary fields below the stories or in social media. At the same time, the hosts answer far more questions than before, and the majority of published contributors seem to agree on discussing the news. As the ideational and interpersonal discrepancies are reduced, we may say that the genre is settling. The impact of the genre was further confirmed when a travel agency copied the interface of the studio and used it for content marketing on *VG.no* in January 2016, and several times later. As the purpose of most content marketing of this kind is to imitate journalistic genres, the example is a kind of "approved" stamp for the studio as a functional genre within the text culture.

Conclusions

I opened this chapter by asking: *Which interpersonal relations are established between journalists and readers in VG.no's Q&A forum, and how subjective are the participants?*

The analysis has found four distinct journalist roles that run throughout the period, and a fifth role that has been evolving since 2015. The four basic roles of the host represent four stages of increasingly symmetrical relations, from the distanced news voice to the buddy-like chattering voice. The host mirrors the style and relationship suggested by the reader, as long as the question does not require her professional point of view. When readers start asking questions of a political or possibly controversial nature, she steps back into the sober news discourse and refuses to contribute any analysis or opinions in her answers. The same thing happens if readers try to engage the host in satire or jokes about news stories.

Host A states that although there are no official guidelines, she is never in doubt about which role to take on: "It is difficult to describe how I make those judgements, but it all comes natural to me."

These findings suggest that there are some stable text norms for the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of the Q&A forum. On the whole, the host is allowed to be *personal*, but never *subjective*. She is clearly not supposed to step over the line to the opinion journalists' domain, although questions that ask for such evaluations seem to have increased during this period. The task of informing the audience is really about collecting and repeating facts that are already published elsewhere, either in *VG.no*'s regular news stories or on other websites. Thus an important part of the forum's function is to recycle old news. However, the development of the hostile readers' discourse towards 2016 has stretched these boundaries to some extent. As the fifth, more argumentative journalistic role has evolved, the hosts have become more inclined to debate the readers, although in a modest way.

Considering the textual metafunction of the forum, internal coherence was strengthened from 2014 to 2016, as the range of topics and discourses narrowed. Somewhat paradoxically, the stream of hostile discourse actually makes it easier for the readers to make sense of the Q&A forum – you know what to expect – whereas the journalists find their roles increasingly challenging.

Do the hosts' diversified roles contribute to further openness about *VG.no*'s journalism, as intended? The answer depends on which kind of openness we are talking about. Host B argues that the forum makes *VG.no* more open about *what* the journalists know, and *how* they know. By 2016, the hosts must regularly defend their stories by pointing to particular sources or confirming that they are aware of certain facts that some readers claim to be lacking. Host B states that “this should be an ambition, because how we have been thinking is not always self-evident”. On the other hand, journalistic *evaluations* of, e.g., a given source's credibility or the choice of a certain angle are rare – in fact totally absent from the analyzed material. At most, stories might be vaguely defined as “important” or “not prioritized today”. The small glimpses readers get of the newsroom's inner life, are utterly trivial: “I can't write here that I put my feet on the table, in case my bosses should read it.” Readers who ask for journalistic judgements, then, are instead met with (often previously known) facts: “At the moment we have several stories on the situation in the Middle East on our front page.”

Therefore, the hosting roles do not serve as grounds for more subjectivity in journalism. If anything, the pseudo-subjective style that sometimes comes to the surface is really about mirroring the readers' style of approach and telling

them what they want to hear – although the sparring partner role represents a slight exception in the 2016 material. The openness, then, does not lie in the ideational information provided, but in the interpersonal style that in certain areas constructs a more symmetrical relationship between readers and journalists.

What *has* turned more subjective, on the other hand, is the role of the reader. The major increase in prejudiced and harsh questions is somewhat unraveling the symmetrical relationship that the journalists strive to establish. Somewhat paradoxically, it has been the readers who have become open about their views and practices, instead of the journalists being open about theirs, as was officially intended.

In a broader perspective, these findings touch upon ongoing scholarly debates about media innovations, genre development, user involvement and journalistic transparency. The evolution of VG's Q&A forum illustrates how current ideas of user involvement and transparent journalism might come in conflict with more traditional journalistic norms and discourses, such as the distinction between news and views. Thus, the present study echoes conflicting discourses on transparency, as identified by Vos & Craft (2016). Moreover, the study raises questions about how the connection with the actively contributing audience might affect the newsroom's conception of the audience as a whole, cf. Barnes' discussion of "the ecology of participation" (2016). Further case studies of similar genres or formats could dig deeper into such matters.

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