

# **Conversing the Audience: A Methodological Exploration of How Conversation Analysis can Contribute to the Analysis of Interactive Journalism**

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that conversation analysis (CA) has much to offer studies of online interactions and, particularly, online interactive journalism. CA provides a methodological opportunity to closely investigate the structure of public discourse in new media platforms, and power relations between journalists and audiences in instances of interactive journalism. The paper introduces CA and discusses how it may be combined with other methods in order to pinpoint the characteristics of online interactions in general and interactive journalism in particular. In the second half of the paper, the CA-inspired methodological approach used to analyse a case study of an interactive live blog in the Norwegian online newspaper *VG Nett* is presented.

## **Key words**

Participatory journalism, interactivity, methodology, conversation analysis.

## **Introduction**

Journalism has always relied on a certain degree of audience participation. From letters to the editor, to text messages during a public affairs programme on TV, audience participation has taken a variety of forms across time and different technological platforms. The rise of the

Internet with its many differing digital and interactive media has, however, increased the focus on and the significance of audience participation – not only in journalism, but in all forms of mass-mediated communication. Influential works on ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 1992, 2006, 2009), ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996), ‘interactive media’ (Rafaeli, 1988), ‘community media’ (Howley, 2005), and ‘grassroots’ media (Gillmor, 2004) have dominated the academic discourse on digital media and new communication technologies and practices. One common claim in this discourse is that what used to be clear-cut borders between producers and consumers of mass-mediated communication are now blurring. That audiences are no longer passive and anonymous masses is articulated in catchphrases such as ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2006) and ‘produsage’ (Bruns, 2010).

In journalism studies, researchers concerned with the effects of the Internet and interactive media on the practices and ideologies of journalism use concepts such as ‘participatory journalism’ (Singer, Hermida, Domingo, et al., 2011); ‘public journalism’ (Friedland, 2003; Glasser, 1999; Haas & Rim, 2006; Nip, 2006); ‘civic/citizen journalism’ (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Friedland & Nichols, 2002; Nip, 2008; Schaffer & Miller, 1995); ‘networked journalism’ (Beckett & Mansell, 2008); and ‘crowdsourced journalism’ (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010) to describe and analyse the presumed blurring of borders between producers and consumers of journalism, especially in the online media.

There is, in other words, no lack of interest in or variety of approaches to the study of the empowering of the audience in digital, mass-mediated communication – and yet several scholars argue that studies of the renewed relationship between producers and consumers of journalism suffer from a lack of methodological and theoretical reorientation (Deuze, 2008; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). According to Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, ‘this stream of research has been limited, at least in part, by its overwhelming reliance on data gathered through surveys of contributors and content analysis of their contributions’ (2009: 577). Few

have addressed exactly what kind of relationship is shaped in, for instance, online newspapers, when journalists and their audience interact, or when members of the audience interact with each other in the space of an online newspaper. The aim of this paper is therefore to explore a new methodological approach to the analysis of interactive journalism and other forms of digital interaction where the boundaries between producer and consumer are blurring. This methodology borrows concepts and ways of analysing from conversation analysis (CA) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the dialogical relationship in such interactions.

The paper argues that a CA-inspired content analysis constitutes a valuable methodological approach to investigating the types of relationships and communities that emerge in online media: social media interactions, online discussion forums of all kinds, or journalist-audience interactions in online newspapers' 'live blogs'. The paper starts with a brief discussion of recent trends in interactive, participatory journalism before it introduces CA and discusses how this methodology can contribute to the analysis of online interactions in general and in interactive journalism in particular. In the second half of the paper I will present the methodology used in a case study of journalist/audience interactions in an online newspaper. The case, which is analysed thoroughly in 'Author, A', is a live football blog in the Norwegian online newspaper *VG Nett* – the largest online newspaper in Scandinavia. As the online flagship of the media company Schibsted – which is considered one of Europe's most successful and digitally innovative news media companies – *VG Nett* is in the forefront of journalistic adaption of new technology and new media practices (Barland, 2012). This online newspaper, along with many other online newspapers worldwide, has in recent years increasingly implemented software such as *Cover it Live* (CiL) to cover live events while engaging in dialogue with the audience. Such software creates an interface where journalists and users can interact in a live and synchronous chat-like blog. The technological affordances

of a CiL blog-chat in an online newspaper include a low threshold for participation (no registration is required, and anonymity is possible); writing turns at talk in a space within the CiL blog frame; and the ability to interact with others within the interface of a popular public space.

The purpose of the case study was to investigate the function and value of the chat; what kind of community of football fans it constituted; how (or if) coherence and meaning was constructed; who was talking to whom and in what way; and how power was distributed among participants. To gain knowledge on these aspects, I used a combination of content analysis and CA in a five-step methodological approach:

1. Preparing the blog-chat for analysis.
2. Determining what variables should be further analysed by content analysis and CA.
3. Coding each turn at talk based on the variables found in the previous step.
4. Analysing the findings of the content analysis.
5. Conducting CA of selected sequences in order to get an in-depth understanding of the findings of the content analysis.

In the concluding parts of the paper I will argue that such a methodological approach can be used to analyse a variety of online interactions, such as social media interactions and threaded comment fields, in blog posts and online newspaper articles.

### **Interactive journalism and live blogging**

The variety of concepts that flood the literature on interactivity and audience participation related to new media journalism have caused confusion as to what is understood by interactivity and participation. One example of such confusion is the distinction between interaction and interactivity, on which Jensen (whose definition of interactivity is commonly cited) draws. Jensen defines interactivity as ‘a measure of a media’s potential ability to let the

user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication' (1998: 201). This is mainly a technological definition where the social dimension of interactivity, which is commonly referred to when one speaks of interaction and participation, is minimised. Consequently, many studies of interactivity in journalism fail to take this social dimension into account and focus only on the media's (the online newspapers') interactive *features* (such as to what degree online newspapers offer readers blogging opportunities, discussion forums, comments to articles, and so on), which are analysed mostly through content analysis and surveys ('Author, B'). However, an important finding in recent research is that even if these interactive features seem to be increasing in online newspapers, editors and journalists are reluctant to open up all stages of the journalistic production process to the audience (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Karlsson, 2011; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). Editors and journalists are still guarding the gates (Singer, Hermida, Domingo, et al., 2011).

There are, however, several developments in recent years that make it apposite to study the social dimension of interactivity more closely. The diffusion of social media in society at large, and the ways in which news organisations implement social media, is one good reason for changing focus from the technological to the social dimension of interactivity. Another trend is the increasing popularity of live blogs in online newspapers and other outlets. Live blogs encourage interaction to a greater extent than do, for instance, comments to news stories. A live blog is defined by Thurman & Walters as a 'single blog post on a specific topic to which time-stamped content is progressively added for a finite period – anything between half an hour and 24 hours' (2013: 83). Major news producers such as *The New York Time* and *The Guardian* use live blogs to cover rolling news events, and comments from outsiders may be included as part of this coverage. A live blog is therefore a developing and highly immediate news story, which may be co-produced by journalists, sources and audiences. The catalyst for the fast diffusion of live blogs in online newspapers

was the software *Cover it Live*, which was launched in 2007. Online news sites quickly began using this software, first and foremost to cover sports events, since the software allows for a blog-like and time-stamped presentation of bits of content presented within a dynamic frame that updates automatically. Furthermore, *Cover it Live* makes it possible to integrate user-generated content into the same frame, thus opening it up for interactions among contributors. In recent years, many online news sites have developed their own live blog software, which manage the same tasks as does *Cover it Live*, but in more sophisticated ways.

This paper presents a methodology suited to capturing the social dimension of interactivity promoted, for instance, by live blogs and the implementation of social media in journalistic practice. This methodology is suited to an analysis of the interactions that take place between journalists and users within such spaces, and it therefore borrows concepts and ideas from a methodology designed to analyse interactions: conversation analysis. CA is quite an uncommon methodology in journalism studies generally, an exception being studies of broadcast talk (such as television interviews and talk shows), which has been the subject of some studies (see for instance Hutchby, 2006). In an article to introduce CA to journalism studies, Ekström argues that the lack of interest in CA is ‘remarkable considering that CA represents one of the most developed approaches for research on interaction, and that journalism is so intimately associated with public interaction’ (2007: 971). Ekström shows how CA can be applied to investigate, in particular, three themes related to journalism: power relations in journalism; how journalists maintain legitimacy in their everyday communication with their audience; and the structure of public discourse related to different media formats. All these themes are highly relevant to the analysis of interactions between journalists and users in live blogs, as such types of journalism potentially alter the power relations between journalists and the audience, and as they construct a relatively new form of public discourse.

Given the unfamiliarity with CA to new media research in general, and journalism studies in particular, in the next section I will provide a brief introduction to this methodology and some of the concepts that I believe are fruitful when analysing interactions in new media.

## **Introduction to conversation analysis**

CA is a qualitative methodology based on an understanding of language as linguistic action rather than linguistic form (Austin, 1975). The methodology was founded by the sociologist Henry Sacks in the 1960s and is commonly defined as ‘the systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction: *talk-in-interaction*’ (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998: 13, original emphasis). The principle of CA is that the use of language in interactions is best studied as structured ways of achieving sense-making. Natural occurrences of what people do when they talk to each other are studied in detail to understand how sense-making is organised sequentially in turns at talk. The subject of CA is therefore to analyse interactions in social context; turns at talk in conversation, or talk-in-interaction, as it is most commonly referred to – how, for instance, agreements and disagreements are articulated, how openings and closings of conversations unfold, and how conversations are organised (Mazur, 2004: 1077).

The methodology was initially utilised to analyse transcripts of telephone calls, like Sacks’s formative analysis of calls to a suicide prevention centre in San Francisco (Sacks, 1995, part 1) but has also been widely used to analyse (transcripts of) face-to-face interactions in a variety of fields such as doctor-patient interactions (Drew, Chatwin & Collins, 2001) and classroom interactions (Seedhouse, 2004). Such analysis is based on the notion that ‘talk is seen as organised and orderly’ (Liddicoat, 2007: 9) and the subject of CA has therefore been to understand how such order is established in interactions. Crucial in such an analysis is the notion of ‘recipient design’ (Liddicoat, 2007: 6) – conversational

contributions are designed with a recipient in mind – and the understanding of talk as ‘context-shaped’. Every turn at talk in an interaction is shaped by the context in which it occurs, and the context is renewed as each new bit of talk ‘constrains and affects what follows and influences how further talk will be heard and understood’ (Mazur, 2004: 1077). Within this classical tradition of CA the unit of analysis is the turn construction unit (TCU) – a potentially complete unit of talk. A TCU may consist of a single word (‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘hm?’), a full or incomplete sentence, or several consecutive sentences (as is the case in storytelling). At the end of a TCU speaker change may occur. The order of speaker change, or the system of turn-taking in conversations, is constrained by two techniques of turn allocation according to Sacks et al. (1974): turn allocation may occur as either a ‘current speaker selects next’ technique, or as a ‘next speaker may self-select’ technique. However, if the current speaker in a conversation uses a ‘select next’ technique and someone else self-selects as the next speaker, it is regarded as an ‘accountable action’ which is ‘misplaced in this context’ (Liddicoat, 2007: 67).

In group conversations it is quite common for participants to be ruled out and turns at talk concentrated among only a few members of the group. Consequently, such conversations may split into several parallel conversations with their unique turn-taking system (Liddicoat, 2007: 72). Furthermore, a conversation is normally also divided into clusters of turns at talk, or conversation sequences, where the relationship between turns at talk are coherent and orderly. Such sequences are often organised in what Schegloff has labelled ‘adjacency pairs’ (greetings and questions and answers). The first part of an adjacency pair (for example, ‘How are you?’) is labelled ‘first pair part’ (FPP), the second (for example, ‘I’m fine, thanks’) ‘second pair part’ (SPP). In addition, adjacency pairs have a ‘normative force’ in the organisation of conversation, implying that they set up ‘expectations about how talk will proceed and if these are not met then the talk is seen as being problematic’ (Herritage, 1984,

cited in Liddicoat, 2007: 107). Analysing the occurrences of conversation sequences and adjacency pairs might therefore be a way of determining the coherence and thus meaningfulness of the conversation.

Although CA has traditionally been applied to the analysis of naturally occurring talk-in-interactions it may also be used to analyse other speech exchange systems (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) such as debates (with a pre-ordered turn allocation system), interviews, meetings and – of particular interest here – online discussion forums and similar online speech exchange systems. Such CA is commonly referred to as ‘institutional CA’, which implies a wider perspective not limited to the structures and orderliness of talk-in-interactions. The focus of institutional CA is ‘to use basic CA as a resource to understand the work of social institutions, such as the police, law, education, medicine, mass media, and so on’ (Heritage, 2005: 105). The primary aim of institutional CA is therefore not to investigate the orderliness of talk-in-interaction *per se*, but to investigate what such orderliness says about the institution of which the talk-in-interaction is part; to analyse a TV or radio interview on a public affairs programme by using institutional CA implies searching for answers to questions related, for instance, to the roles of journalists and interview subjects within the institution of such programs.

### **Conversation analysis and online talk**

CA has been applied to the analysis of some forms of online talk, especially those related to e-learning and to online chats between teachers and students. In an overview of CA research related to such a digital speech exchange system Mazur argues that:

The chat window and the distance between client and server machines affect turn-taking and the sequential organisation of the on-line ‘typed’ talk. These characteristics of the talk-in-interaction relate to the affordances of the technologies used and these

affordances need to be considered as part of the context of the conversation (2004: 1081).

Technology, in other words, is crucial as context for online communication and as such it plays a significant part in the shaping of the communication. A first step in doing CA on online talk-in-interactions should therefore be to map the technological affordances and how they affect the communication. Do participants have to register? Do they use nicknames or real names? Do participants have different roles and does someone moderate the interaction? Are interactions structured thematically in threads or in similar ways? Are the interactions publicly available? Are they archived? What means of expressions do participants control other than text (pictures, video, audio, graphical emoticons)?

Asking these and similar questions reveals that different technologies and interfaces promote different conventions for interaction. For instance, Hutchby (2001: 183–184) has identified four ways in which technology shapes online chat in a different way from spoken communication:

1. Participants can only take a turn by entering text in the text line box and pressing the 'enter' key.
2. There is a temporal lag. The 'turn' reaches others only when the sent message is accepted and distributed by the remote server.
3. The lag described in Point 2 results in disjointed sequential relationships between when talk is produced and when it is 'enunciated' or displayed on the public talk space.
4. While all this is happening the conversation is conducted in a scrolling window on the shared public space. Depending on the volume of traffic to the server, prior contributions tied to a specific response or turn may scroll off the screen by the time it reaches the public display.

These four points illustrate the difficulties with tracing conversation sequences and thus coherence of turns in online chats. It would, however, be a mistake to simply regard online chat as incoherent because of the disjointed sequential relationship between turns. Herring (1996) demonstrated as early as the mid-1990s that participants in online chats develop conventions in order to overcome these conversational problems. One such convention is cross-references or what Werry has labelled 'addressivity', for example, starting a turn with the user name of the intended recipient (cited in Mazur, 2004: 1094).

As in spoken talk-in-interaction, participants in online interactions might take a variety of roles, which might also be influenced by technological affordances. Burnet (2000) has suggested a typology of behaviour in virtual communities related to information exchange that is relevant to other kinds of online talk-in-interaction. He recognises the importance of non-interactive behaviour: that is, participants who are not contributing with talk. For instance, studies of audience participation in online journalism have revealed that non-interactive behaviour constitutes the largest part of audience behaviour. Bergström (2008) found that even though online newspaper readers appreciate user-generated comments to stories, only 16 per cent of the readers had actually contributed with comments themselves. It is difficult to assess how this might influence the communication but it seems a reasonable assumption that active participants who are aware of the fact that the majority of recipients are not willing to take part in the interaction might frame their turns at talk differently because of this knowledge. When you know that most of your readers/listeners are passive, and will remain so, you might lower your expectations of getting replies. This might lead to a high degree of one-to-none/one-to-many turns at talk that are not related to each other. The aim of such utterances might therefore be to reach out to an audience instead of inviting others to interact. A consequence might be that several turns at talk are not directed towards contributing to or obtaining information.

## **Combining CA with other methods**

CA is a qualitative method suited to conducting in-depth investigations of certain features of interactions, and cannot be used to make general claims about the distribution of specific features throughout conversations. It can therefore be of significant value to combine CA with other methods such as ethnographic approaches, interviews with participants, statistical analysis, or content analysis – the last two being especially relevant for the analysis of large group conversations with many participants involved in multiple sub-conversations. Because online interactions are digital they may also easily be downloaded/copied into spreadsheet or database software such as Excel or Access, thus opening them up for statistical analysis.

Such triangulation of methods may, however, cause some problems, as the aim of CA is to analyse the relationship between turns-at-talk, not single turns-at-talk by themselves.

However, Zemel et al. (2005) argue that CA can be combined with statistical analysis if one finds an

[...] appropriate way to code data such that the requirements of valid statistical and quantitative analysis can be met without violating the requirements of preserving the sequential organisation of, participants' perspectives on and relevances with respect to emergent, unfolding action sequences (2005: 13).

In their study, Zemel et al. started out with a statistical analysis of conversations in chat groups where students interacted in order to solve a maths problem. The statistical analysis yielded some surprising results, which could only be explained by a qualitative investigation of specific features of the interaction. Consequently, the researchers used CA and discovered that they could obtain a 'far more nuanced explanation for the observed grouping of chats' (2005: 13). This prompted them to re-specify the coding scheme of the statistical analysis before running it again. The methodology was therefore best described as a

hermeneutic process where the quantitative approach was used to identify specific aspects of the conversations, which needed to be analysed qualitatively in order to improve the quantitative analysis.

The methodological approach to be presented in the second half of this paper is based on a similar hermeneutic process. It relies on a combination of content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) and CA, but the point of departure is CA, and variables that were coded by content analysis were drawn from CA. However, the approach was top-down, as it started with content analysis and moved on to CA, so it may best be described as CA-inspired qualitative content analysis. The rationale behind this approach will be explained in the next sections.

### **Case study: Interactions in a live blog**

The *VG Nett CoveritLive* (CiL) blog chat I analysed took place on 25 April 2010 during a round of Norwegian and English premier league football. It is no coincidence that the selected blog chat is an example of sports journalism. Live blogging is more common in sports journalism than in any other field of journalism, and the coverage of sports events tends to attract a high degree of audience participation (Boczkowski, 2010: 153). The analysed CiL blog chat was embedded within the interface of *VG Nett's* 'live' section – a section where ongoing football matches are covered.

The analysis followed a five-step approach. In the following sections I will explain these steps with regard to the parts of the analysis that I believe are of value to other kinds of online interaction analysis: the principles that structured the discourse, the coherence of conversations and the power relations between participants.

### **Step 1: Preparing the chat for analysis**

In order to get an overview of the blogchat and open it up for content analysis I copied it into an Excel spreadsheet and did some simple computing – the number of participants and posts, how many posts each participant wrote, average word length per post, and so on. An interesting feature of the blog chat was that more than half of the participants, 36, took only one turn at talk during the whole session. In other words, the majority of participants were rather passive. The journalist was by far the most active participant (83 turns at talk).

After this pre-analysis a hypothesis emerged concerning the role of the journalist and power relations among participants: the journalist is in control of the conversations. He is the one who initiates conversations, and he is the one to whom the other participants want to talk. Investigating this hypothesis therefore became an important aspect of the next step.

### **Step 2: Defining variables for content analysis**

To determine the structure of the discourse, and thereby the coherence of the blog chat, I needed to single out conversations. In order to pinpoint what was, or was not, a conversation in the blog chat, I employed the following criteria: a) someone must initiate a conversation in a turn at talk that has a recipient design relevant to the context; b) consecutive turns at talk that relate thematically to this initiation belong to the same conversation. I decided that a turn at talk that did not relate to any previous turn should be regarded as a new conversation even if the turn was not followed up in consecutive turns. This allowed me to identify attempts at conversation that failed.

Step 1 revealed that the relationship between the journalist and the audience was of particular interest. It therefore became vital to find out who is talking to whom and in what way, and I decided to categorise each turn at talk in terms of what type of speech act it belonged to. Speech acts are related to a functionalist view of language use and define its purpose and meaning. Broadly speaking, speech acts are all the acts we perform when using

language, all the things we do with words when we communicate (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 129). I categorised the following speech acts: *initiate* a conversation, *agree/disagree* with a previous turn, *follow up* on a conversation, *repair* an accountable action, *close* a conversation. A *misplaced* turn was one that did not relate to a cluster of turns and was not intended to initiate a new conversation.

I also decided to identify the frequency and characteristics of adjacency pairs, and whether there were any turn allocation techniques involved. Three variables were therefore added to the spreadsheet as columns: ‘adjacency pair’ (with the attributes ‘0’, ‘FPP’ and ‘SPP’), ‘turn allocation talker’ and ‘turn allocation recipient’ (both with the attributes ‘select next’ and ‘self-select’). The last variable would make it possible to identify the degree of addressivity in the blog chat, which is important for coherence.

### **Step 3: Coding the blog chat**

All the variables described in Step 2 would require qualitative judgments by the coder. Consequently, the method that would be used was *qualitative* content analysis, implying close reading of turns at talk and subjective evaluations of how each turn related to the variables. It implied registration of not only manifest content, but also *latent* content – content that could be found ‘in-between the lines’. My use of content analysis was therefore in line with Krippendorff’s definition of the method as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’ (2004: 18). The strength of this definition is that it relates content analysis to context. The content of a turn at talk may therefore be seen as something that emerged from reading the turn within the given context of the live blog and *VG Nett*. Each turn was read over and over again in reliance with previous and consecutive turns, the context thus shaping how it was coded.

The qualitative nature of the coding process made it a highly subjective and coder-dependent process. One could therefore argue that there should have been several coders in order to give reliable results. However, the very quality of qualitative methodology rests on a hermeneutic process, where the context, both empirical and theoretical, informs and is informed by the unit of analysis as the researcher codes. The reliability of coding was therefore best secured by coding the same turns at talk several times so that the patterns emerging from the coding created a new context that made it necessary to code the turns once more. This is a methodologically complex process which is shaped by the aim of CA, since CA is the analysis of relationships *between* single units of analysis – that is, turns at talk. For instance, the coding of which conversation a single turn at talk belonged to was constantly renegotiated as new conversations were discovered within the blog chat. Because the blog chat was unthreaded, turns at talk belonging to different conversations were woven together in a seemingly chaotic mosaic of interactions. This disjointed sequential relationship between turns belonging to the same conversation forced me to reconstruct and ‘rediscover’ conversations over and over again. The filtering tool found in Excel proved to be vital in this process. By creating a filter for the column ‘conversation number’, turns at talk that had been coded as belonging to the same conversation could be read in sequence. I was surprised to discover the coherence emerging between turns at talk by such filtering.

#### **Step 4: Analysing the findings of the content analysis**

The findings of the content analysis showed that the live blog comprised 38 different conversations containing two or more turns at talk, and six attempts at conversation (initiation speech acts) that were not followed up by consecutive turns at talk. The content analysis revealed two striking features – the disjointed sequential relationship that seemed to dominate the conversations; and how adjacency pairs were constructed – which had to be mapped for further analysis.

### *Creating a conversation timeline*

Most conversations were marked by disjointed sequential relationships. The different conversations were woven together, and what in ordinary spoken conversations would have been tightly joined adjacency pairs were in these conversations split up by intervening turns at talk belonging to other conversations. To visualise this finding I decided to attempt to make a conversational timeline of the chat, where the *y*-axis would be the conversation number, and the *x*-axis the time of posting turns at talk. Using this matrix, I was able to create a chart in Excel, as seen in Figure 1.

*[Insert Figure 1 here]*

The chart in Figure 1 illustrates that all conversations were interrupted by other conversations resulting in a seemingly chaotic choir of several conversations. Conversation Number 11 in Figure 1 for instance, was initiated by turn Number 34 in the whole blog chat and ended with turn Number 107. This conversation comprised 13 turns at talk that were interspersed between 58 other turns that belonged to 13 different conversations.

### *Adjacency pairs*

The findings of the content analysis seemed to indicate something odd about how adjacency pairs were constructed. The coding had identified many more SPP turns than FPP turns, suggesting, for instance, that a question yielded not one answer but several answers unrelated to each other. The findings also revealed that the most frequent turn allocation technique was self-selecting, indicating that participants rarely addressed one another directly. These findings had to be analysed further by CA of single conversations, but I was able to do some

calculations to learn more about what they meant. First of all, I wanted to know more about who initiated conversations and who controlled them. By looking at who posted FPP turns that yielded SPP turns, and who were most frequently allocated as next speakers, I was able to find the most dominant – and probably most powerful – person of the chat. As was hypothesised in Step 2, that person turned out to be the journalist. Not only was he the only participant who was involved in *all* of the 38 successful conversations, he was also the only person who was selected as the next speaker by the other participants. Not once during the whole chat did a participant other than the journalist directly select a next speaker who was not the journalist. In other words, the journalist was the king of conversations. He was the one to whom all others wanted to talk, and he was the one who initiated most conversations.

#### **Step 5: CA of selected sequences**

The last step of the methodological approach was to conduct CA of single conversation sequences in order to acquire more knowledge about some of the characteristics found by the content analysis. From the content analysis I was able to identify a typical conversation in terms of number of turns and participants, length of turns, turn allocation techniques, and so on. One such typical conversation is what in Figure 1 above appears as conversation Number 14, which consisted of the following three turns:

18:38	‘Martin’:	How was the Liverpool game, actually? Was it as the result suggests? Didn’t catch the game, unfortunately.
18:40	The journalist:	Hi Martin. No, Burnley impressed me (...). 0-1 was a big blow since Gerrard’s shot deflected off a centre half. 0-2 was world class from Gerrard. 4-0 does’t reflect the play of the game, but after the first goal it became difficult for Burnley

to retaliate.

[*Four intervening turns*]

18:40 'Alien': Neither did I. I know that Gerrard scored 2 goals and Maxi one and Babel one.

**Extract from Chat 1: Conversation 14. This conversation relates thematically to the English Premier League game Burnley-Liverpool, which was played earlier the same day. The game ended 0-4. [Translated by author]**

The conversation in the extract from Chat 1 was initiated by a participant ('Martin') in the form of two direct questions, which formed a potential FPP turn of an adjacency pair. This initial FPP turn did not allocate an explicit recipient (which, as revealed by the content analysis, was a common characteristic of the blog chat), so anyone might have self-selected to give 'Martin' a reply. The one who did self-select was the journalist, and he did so immediately (there were no intervening turns at talk belonging to other conversations between the initial turn and the journalist's reply). The content analysis had revealed that the journalist was the author of most SPP turns to audience-authored FPP turns so this was a common feature of the live blog chat, which I labelled *the rule of preferred recipient*. This rule established the convention that if no next speaker is allocated in a turn written by a member of the audience the journalist/moderator was the preferred next speaker.

The journalist starts the turn with a TCU ('Hi Martin'), which in spoken conversation is known as a part of a 'generic pre-sequence. The aim of such pre-sequences in spoken conversations is to establish contact and make sure there is a recipient available for conversation. Such pre-sequences in spoken conversation therefore take the form of an adjacency pair where an FPP ('Hi Martin') is followed up with an SPP (typically 'Hi [name of recipient]') before the conversation proceeds. If no such follow-up SPP occurs then the conversation is likely to be compromised. In a chat, however, no such SPPs are required, and pre-sequences are quite uncommon. In fact, those who tried to initiate a conversation with a

generic pre-sequence FPP turn did not succeed – that was a common characteristic of the six failed attempts at conversations. The findings of the content analysis allowed me to deduce that this lack of pre-sequences was a common feature of the live blog chat, and I therefore concluded that the blog chat’s turn-taking system was dominated by a *rule of efficiency*: If a turn was not an immediate contribution which pushed a conversation forward it was likely to be ignored.

One last feature of the blog-chat had to be further analysed: the high amount of SPP turns compared to FPP turns. The following sequence from Conversation 10 in Figure 1 above is an example of this feature:

18:27 The journalist: The United fans are happy that Liverpool won today and still has fourth position within reach. The match against Chelsea will be very exciting. If they didn’t have anything to play for, do you think Liverpool could lose on purpose to Chelsea just to spoil things for United?

*[Five intervening turns]*

18:31 ‘Kris’: Liverpool is not a team that bail out, they will fight to the bitter end to win fourth position!

18:32 ‘United’: I doubt Liverpool would lose to Chelsea on purpose, they have a quite important position to fight for! If they don’t achieve 4th place I wonder what’s gonna happen with Torres and Benitez and the others!

18:32 ‘DFEADSD’: Doubt that Liverpool would lie down and lose, no team are like that in premier league, in addition the fans would go crazy if they chicken out.

18:32 ‘Chelsea’: Will be a tough game against Liverpool in the end but I believe Chelsea will win :)

18:32 ‘ChelseaFan’: As long as Chelsea wins I don’t care what Liverpool does.

18:32 ‘Sturla’: Yes, they would have played worse on purpose.

**Extract from Chat 2: These turns are part of Conversation 10 in the analysed chat. The first turn by the journalist is a FPP turn of an adjacency pair, while the following turns are all different SPP turns responding to the initial FPP turn. [Translated by author]**

This sequence is initiated by a question the journalist poses to the audience. Six readers respond to this question, and every one of these responses qualifies as an SPP turn to the journalist’s FPP. Each of the responses therefore forms an individual, coherent adjacency pair with the journalist’s FPP. This is a type of conversation sequence that is not unique to online interactions; it is also found in spoken interactions. Think, for instance, of a classroom situation where a teacher poses a question to the students without allocating a specific next speaker. Several students may then raise their hands and have turns at talk that functions as SPPs to the teacher’s FPP. But in such a situation the context is changed each time a student replies with an SPP; the next speaker might therefore adjust his or her turn to the previous speaker’s turn and the conversation is therefore more likely to construct new, sub-adjacency pairs where the students interact as much with each other as with the teacher. What is different in the blog chat is that the readers probably write their SPP responses more or less simultaneously, thus talking turns at talk without any knowledge of a changed context. I therefore concluded that this feature of the chat might be expressed as the *rule of multiple SPPs and delayed recontextualisation*.

## Conclusion

The CA-inspired content analysis described in this paper proved to be a useful methodological approach to assessing the coherence, and thus the meaningfulness, of a journalist-audience interaction in an online newspaper; how power was distributed among the participants; who was talking to whom and in what way; and how journalistic legitimacy was maintained. The analysis revealed that what seemed at first glance to be a messy, incoherent and meaningless discourse was in fact a discourse that constructed coherence and meaning through a set of conventions: the rule of preferred recipient; the rule of efficiency; and the rule of multiple second pair parts (SPPs) and delayed recontextualisation. These rules empowered the journalist and his role thus became the role of an expert with whom the audience interacted (see Author 1 for a broader discussion of these findings).

Such a methodological approach addresses some shortcomings of previous research into interactivity and audience participation in the analysis of the characteristics of interactions, the social dimension of interactivity and strategies for maintaining journalistic legitimacy when audiences are co-producers of content. It must however be noted that the case – a blog chat related to ongoing football matches, and how it was analysed – has some limitations. In the first instance, journalist-audience interactions in sports journalism might be very different from similar interactions in other fields of journalism. Sports journalism and sports in general tend to attract participation and audience involvement, and sports journalism is on the softer, more entertaining side of journalism – which might also attract a different kind of audience involvement than do hard news stories.

In the second place, the case study was used to analyse a fairly wide spectrum of characteristics of the interaction: addressivity, turn allocation techniques, power relations, coherence and sense-making. Each of these characteristics is therefore analysed quite superficially; the point is less to get in-depth knowledge of each of them than to show how

such analysis might provide important information about different aspects of online interactions. Further attempts at combining CA with other methods in order to analyse journalist-audience interactions could therefore benefit from taking a narrower approach – for instance, by focusing on power relations alone.

Further, the methodology described in this paper did not include reception studies. The inclusion of interviews with participants would allow for a more sophisticated analysis of how coherence and meaning is constructed, and thus deeper knowledge about the function and value of such practices of interactive journalism.

The methodology described here is not only suited to an evaluation of interactive, participatory journalism, as any kind of online group conversation could in theory be investigated by these combinations of content analysis and conversation analysis. Further research could benefit from exploring the methodological approach in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the function and value of such interactions; of how sense-making is achieved, of how power is distributed and negotiated, and of the overall structure of the discourse. One example is the analysis of social media interactions such as conversations on Twitter. Uncovering the strategies of addressivity, turn allocation techniques and rules of interaction in Twitter conversations might provide valuable insights into the formation of power relations and information diffusion patterns on Twitter. How journalists play their roles and maintain professional legitimacy when interacting with sources and audiences on Twitter might also be analysed with CA-aided methodology. In addition, Twitter interactions have the potential to collapse the divide between group and person-to-person conversations, since person-to-person interactions are publicly displayed. Drawing on concepts and knowledge from previous CA research on the differences between group and person-to-person conversation might be useful when trying to map out and understand the mechanism behind the blurring of borders between private and public interactions on Twitter.

Another area to which a CA-inspired methodology might provide new insights is the analysis of comments on online news stories and blog posts. Such comments are often threaded in conversations and displayed based on algorithms analysing the popularity of comments. CA could help us to understand how technology and the rules of interaction play together in enhancing the visibility – and thereby the influence – of certain comments over others, and it could help in analysing the degree of real interaction: do people really listen and talk to one another, or are such comment fields merely a space for isolated instances of speech?

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# Figures

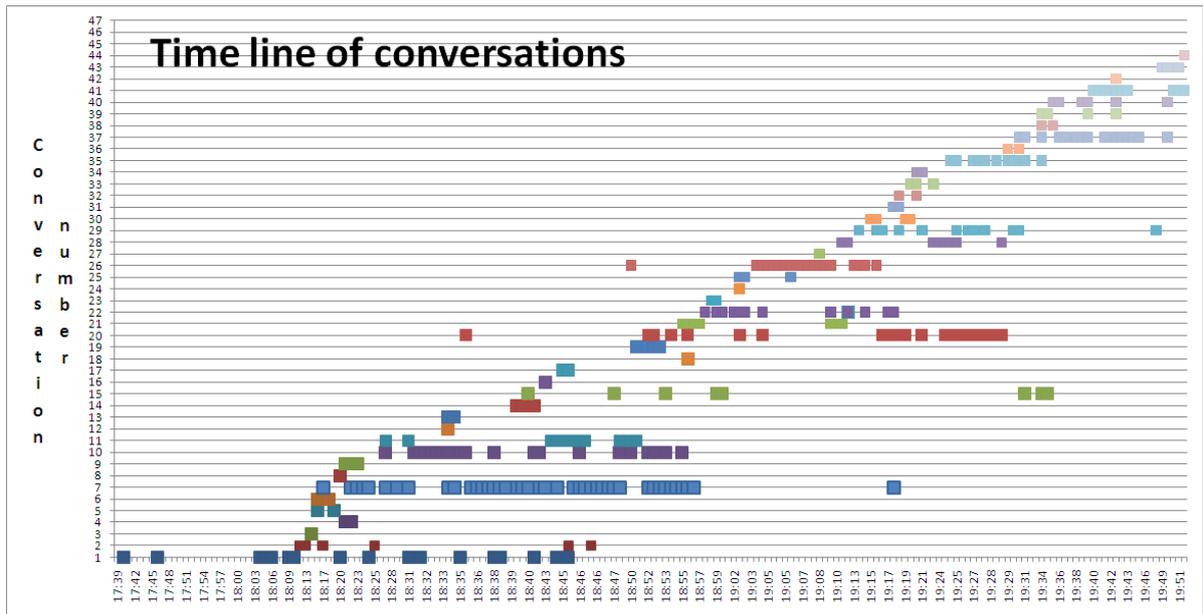


Figure 1: Conversation time line of chat. The chart is not completely accurate since several turns at talk belonging to the same conversation might occur within the same minute.