The perception of virtual talkbacks among internet users / Razon, Ayelet

Abstract

This research investigates the talkback Phenomenon. Talkbacks are defined 33 responses Of People to articles that are published on the Internet (Dror, 2006). Since its inception, the talkback phenomenon has steadily increased and is now ubiquitous all over the World Wide Web. Talkback writers can voice their opinions and feelings freely and without any limitation. Through talkbacks, the writer can distribute information to the public and has the potential to influence the readers.

The Talkback phenomenon is one of the most growing recent technologic developments in the Internet. This research studies how the talkback phenomenon is perceived by those who use it, its importance and its influence on readership and ratings.

Two questions were investigated:

1. What are the behavioral patterns of people who talkback in media articles?
2. How do surfers perceive the talkback phenomenon, what is the significance and contribution of talkbacks in their eyes?

Since this research deals with a new phenomenon, The research is based on qualitative methods in addition to quantitative methods because it deals with a new phenomenon that does not have much previous data on which a quantitative research could be based (Corsswell, 2003). This research takes place in Israel among surfers who read and write talkbacks in a variety of disciplines.

Initially, 15 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted. The selection of those interviewed was based on a personal acquaintance with the author, on their talkback routine and on their familiarity of reading and writing talkbacks. These interviews were conducted in a relaxed and friendly manner and lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. All the interviewees were promised anonymity and confidentiality. The gender breakdown was 8 males and 7 females. The professions varied tremendously (a software engineer. a tour guide, a copywriter, a tango dancer, a content editor, a site promoter, an information reconstruction technician, a librarian, a statistician, a fitness guide, a bank employee, a programmer, a website builder and a clothing store manager). After the interviews, the answers were analyzed by the researcher together with a content analysis expert. This analysis guided us in creating the main themes and categories that would be used in constructing the research questionnaire.

The research questionnaire was based on the themes from the in-depth interviews and on published data. The questionnaire included both open and multiple choice questions. The distribution of the research questionnaires was based on the snowball method: 100 participants were randomly selected via Internet advertisements, references given by friends and by simply asking people on the street. Each participant understood what talkbacks were and was willing to fill out the research questionnaire Anonymity and secrecy were promised. Of the 100 participants who filled out the questionnaire, three did not fill it out properly (i.e. did not give personal details or did not answer most of the questions) and were therefore excluded from the study.

The research findings point to several interesting conclusions. We found that talkbacks provide a place where anyone can express an opinion spontaneously, without censorship and without exposing his identity. Talkbacks enable the writer to respond emotionally to a given article and to exchange information with other surfers. In addition, talkbacks serve as a forum where social bonds can be created and knowledge and stances of different people can be obtained. We found that companies understand the potential hidden in talkbacks and are starting to insert their own talkbacks for their benefit.

During the research process, many difficulties were encountered due to the fact that the Internet is a complex, dynamic, and an endlessly changeable medium. For example, talkbacks could be deleted daily, a fact which makes it difficult to follow a specific talkback chain. Nevertheless, this initial research can help in better understanding the talkback phenomenon which is constantly growing bigger and stronger. In addition, this research allows us to study the influences of this phenomenon on public discourse, and to determine if these influences are meaningful (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Morris & Ogan, 1996; Sorovicki, 2006).

As the research progressed, we encountered several questions that could serve as the basis for further research in this field; for example. the talkback phenomenon in different societal sectors such as the Arab sector, the religious versus the non-religious sector, Israelis compared to other countries, etc. In addition, analysis of talkbacks according to different subjects may yield interesting findings. For example, if there are differences between talkbacks on political social, personal, commercial and entertainment subjects. The sampling in this research was random and therefore, the age and education of the subjects were not selected as criteria. Future studies should investigate the effects of age, education and other personal factors in the use of talkbacks. In addition, gender differences and the psychological aspect of talkbacks should be investigated as well.

Undoubtedly, the general public is becoming more aware of the talkback phenomenon and its importance in the online world. Therefore, it is necessary to continue investigating and discussing this phenomenon in order to better understand its future consequences and influences.

System No.
001222747