This dissertation addresses the relationship between journalism and computer-mediated communication by exploring the degree to which newly empowered audience members are using the reader comment forum on newspaper websites to participate in democratic discourse – a key component of civic engagement. Twenty-first century journalism has evolved from the traditional asynchronous, "one-to-many" model into a process involving producers, content and audiences. The interactive capabilities of Internet-based news products have enabled legacy media to connect with audiences in unprecedented fashion. Perhaps more than any other interactive platform, the reader comment forum on online news sites reflects the ideal of the “public sphere,” defined by Jurgen Habermas as a democratic utopia in which all citizens have an opportunity to participate in discussing social and political matters important toward making decisions for the common good. Under a framework of deliberative democratic theory, this dissertation employs a quantitative content analysis of reader comments posted to the websites of six South Carolina daily newspapers to detect themes of democratic engagement. Additionally, the analysis adds to a growing body of research on the motivations behind online content production by examining reader comments for themes commonly associated with uses and gratifications theory. To bring analytical depth to the research, interviews with journalists from each of the sampled newspapers were conducted to assess the effectiveness of reader comment forums as a new public sphere for democratic discourse and the role of journalists in facilitating public discourse. The findings from this dissertation contribute to the literature on online journalism and interactivity by offering new insight into how and why users engage in online news forums, the role of anonymity in public deliberation, and the traditionally detached, and at times contentious, relationship between journalists and audience members.