Gatewatching, Not Gatekeeping: Collaborative Online News

Prediction 52:

In the future, everyone will be a news reporter.

— Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Future* (1998: 202)

For a long time, gatekeeping has provided a dominant paradigm for journalistic news gathering and news publishing in the mass media, both for journalists' own conceptualisation of their work and for academic studies of this mediation process. In media such as print, radio, and TV, with their inherent strictures of available column space, air time, or transmission frequencies, it is necessary to have established mechanisms which police these gates and select events to be reported according to specific criteria of newsworthiness, such as Galtung & Ruge's news values (1965). Following Lewin and White, McQuail defines gatekeeping as 'the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the "gates" of a news medium into the news channels' (1994: 213).

Lately, however, the effectiveness of gatekeeping has been questioned from a number of perspectives: on the one hand, increasingly 'the practice of journalism is being contaminated from outside. The "fourth estate" is in danger of being overwhelmed by the "fifth estate", the growing number of "PR merchants and spin doctors" influencing the news agenda' (Turner *et al.* 2000: 29, following

Franklin) and undermining the reliability of the gatekeeping process itself. This is also related to the fact that ever since the emergence of 24-hour broadcast news services and even more so since the advent of online news the reporting speed required of news services has also increased steadily, which has made gatekeepers even more likely to rely on prepared material from this 'fifth estate' rather than spending time and money on their own, independent research.

Indeed, McQuail notes,

the gatekeeping concept, despite its usefulness and its potential for dealing with many different situations, has a built-in limitation in its implication that news arrives in ready-made and unproblematic event-story form at the 'gates' of the media, where it is either admitted or excluded. The gatekeeping framework is largely based on the assumption … that there is a given, finite, knowable reality of events in the 'real world', from which it is the task of the media to select according to appropriate criteria of representativeness or relevance. (1994: 214)

Further, the addition of the World Wide Web to the media mix has meant that news consumers are now far less reliant on what passes through the gates of the mainstream news organisations, but can bypass these altogether and turn directly to first-hand information providers; further, such information providers now also often include

news consumers themselves – as Keshvani and Tickle note, for example,

> technological advances are opening up opportunities for individuals to express themselves to a wider audience. The consumer is turning producer as the affordability and ease of operation of digital recorders, still cameras and DVCs emboldens non-journalists to record and transmit coverage of news events (a recent example is the on-the-spot footage of New York's Twin Towers attack). (2001: 5)

This disintermediation has meant, therefore, that online the gates are now located with the information providers (ultimately, with anyone who publishes a Website with potentially newsworthy information) as well as with the end user, who in navigating the Web constantly acts as their own gatekeeper – but no longer necessarily with the news media organisations. (For a useful summary of the challenges to news journalism in what they call 'the new Mixed Media Culture', see Kovach & Rosenstiel 1999: 6-8).

Against this backdrop, of course, sceptics have pointed out what they perceive as an abundance of junk information that is now available on the World Wide Web, and have posited traditional gatekept print and broadcast news services as a more reliable alternative which will survive the online craze unscathed (see e.g. Talbott 1995) – as Singer writes, 'the value of the gatekeeper is not

diminished by the fact that readers now can get all the junk that used to wind up on the metal spike; on the contrary, it is bolstered by the reader's realisation of just how much junk is out there' (1997:80). However, such views may be built on an overly narrow definition of news as 'hard news', that is, on a belief that there is a common core of news items which objectively are and should be of interest to everyone. By contrast, in online as well as offline media there exists an abundance of more or less specialised news categories from 'hard' and 'soft' news to political, economic, human interest, sports, and science news to even more tightly defined niche categories. Expanding the 'news gates' metaphor, then, not only is there a multitude of gates through which potentially newsworthy events and information emerge into the public arena, but there also exist any number of criteria for evaluating newsworthiness for specific audiences, *and* (especially online) there is a vast range of media outlets which are engaged in some form of 'news' reporting, policing their own gates.

Thus, for the online context gatekeeping may no longer be the most appropriate newsgathering paradigm; instead, it is possible to find new forms of newsgathering which have developed entirely new organisational structures. Replacing what Paul Levinson calls 'the rusted gatekeeper' (1999: 199ff.) is a new approach which offers an alternative to gatekeeping altogether: *gatewatching*.

Gatewatching

The practice of gatekeeping evolved largely in response to the scarcity of existing news channels. The 'gates' this metaphor refers to are the publishing technologies controlled by the media organisations; gatekeepers police these gates to ensure that only suitable information is allowed through to be transferred to the audience. In the print and broadcast media, however, gatekeeping selects not only 'all the news that's fit to print', according to the gatekeepers' intuition of what their audience is interested in, but more precisely 'all the news that's fit to print and that can be made to fit into the available channel space'. News coverage in traditional news media is always limited by the technical and commercial limitations of broadcast and print news channels; hence the need for journalists and editors to combine the reports of various news sources into a single news story following the 'inverted pyramid' style (and thus prepared for further truncation if the available channel space further decreases due to breaking news). The same scarcity of channels also places significant responsibility on the proprietors of such channels: since the threshold of entry to such news media is prohibitively high, journalists working in the resulting small number of channels are obliged to report objectively and impartially.

In the online environment, space is anything but scarce, since cheap electronic storage space means that new Web pages can always be added. Minor issues of limited audience interest might be covered just as well as major news stories, therefore – space considerations provide no immediate reason to stringently police the gates of online news publishing, and indeed the Web's tendency to attract niche

communities might mean that news organisations limiting their content to major news only might find their users going directly to sources with a wider coverage range. The hyperlinked nature of the Web also means that it is possible for reports to refer directly back to their online sources or to further information off-site, reducing the need for news reporters to amalgamate and summarise all available information in their own reports. Rather, their coverage of an issue may consist simply of an introductory report with further links to more detailed information and to various contrasting views on the issue. The availability of this multitude of alternative viewpoints as expressed in other Websites also means that there exists what McQuail terms McQuail terms 'external diversity'; following Westerståhl he notes that 'under conditions of "external diversity"' the call for impartiality in news reporting 'does not apply (although that of factualness does), since the assumption is that there will be alternative media to tell the story from another point of view. For instance, a strongly partisan newspaper in a partisan system is not expected to present the reader with all points of view, although the reader still expects reliable information' (1994: 147).

Online news operations are therefore not primarily charged with an obligation to report objectively and impartially, or to work to a set amount of column inches or airtime, but rather with the task of evaluating what is 'reliable' information in all the topical fields they cover. Due to the abundance of potential news sources in the networked environment of the World Wide Web, such information

evaluation becomes a critical task, and for many online newsgatherers their role is less similar to that of the traditional journalist than it is to that of the specialist librarian, who constantly surveys what information becomes available in a variety of media and serves as a guide to the most relevant sources when approached by information-seekers. This 'librarian' position contrasts markedly with that of the traditional ideal of the 'disinterested' gatekeeper-journalist – instead, Internet 'librarians' (if we accept this term for now) are usually personally involved, 'of the people', and partisan; they support the case of those seeking information rather than that of the information providers or controllers.

The librarian remains a gatekeeper of sorts, however, by virtue of their control over what to include or not to include in their library. Librarians are also fundamentally news- or information-*gatherers*, not *reporters*, and so their activities provide only an incomplete model for online news operations. Rather, in their work the staff of many new online news operations combine aspects of the roles of both gatekeeper-journalists and specialist librarians to arrive at a practice which can usefully be termed *gatewatching*. As we will see, gatewatching has become the underlying paradigm for a variety of online publishing efforts from blogging to open news publishing; it is a practice which is highly suited to the overall informational structure of the World Wide Web.

Gatewatching completes the shift from a focus on summarising the information contributed to a news story by a variety of news sources,

while at the same time positing one's own story as the primary source of information replacing these sources, to a concern with pointing out (and pointing to) those very sources *as* primary sources, and positioning one's own piece simply as a key node connecting the reader to this first-hand information, but in itself only as a secondary source. Gatewatchers are unable to *keep* the gates through which news and information passes – and indeed, as we move away from a mass media 'information-push' news model to an individualised 'information-pull' approach, these gates no longer allow news to come to us, but enable us to access the news contained within. Therefore, as the term implies, gatewatchers keep a constant watch at the gates, and point out those gates to their readers which are most likely to open onto useful sources.

In other words, gatewatchers fundamentally *publicise* news (by pointing to sources) rather than *publish* it (by compiling an apparently complete report from the available sources). While maintaining the benefits of gatekeeping (specifically, the ability to provide readers with an overview of current key news), this addresses several problems inherent in the gatekeeper approach:

- stories have the potential to be more deeply informative, since readers are able to explore the source materials directly, and in full;
- the speed of news reporting increases since new stories can be posted as soon as source information is found anywhere on the

Net, without a need to wait for journalists to file their stories or gatekeepers to complete their evaluation;

- the newsgathering process becomes more transparent, and readers are not prevented from checking a report's sources for themselves, but instead *encouraged* to do so;
- the newsgatherer's personal bias may still affect their own report, but since readers are more likely to consult original sources this bias will have a reduced effect;
- gatewatchers do not require significant journalistic skills, but instead need to have more general online research skills.

This is linked to the new media-driven shift from news as information to news as myth, as Jack Lule perceives it:

The information model of journalism, already in great di\srepair, will be dismantled by the marriage of myth and new media. News is losing whatever franchise it had on whatever information is. … Information is everywhere. …

Yet information overload offers opportunities to news: as myth. In the throes of all this information, the need for myth increases. People grapple with the meaning of rapidly changing times. People seek out ways in which they can organise and change the world. People need stories. Myth has long played these roles.

(2001: 198-9)

Gatewatchers may be seen as publicising news items which suit their and their audiences' mythic construction of the world.

Some downsides are clearly visible, however: gatewatching relies almost entirely on the availability of existing news sources – it evaluates and publicises news, but does not create news reports itself. Misinformation and bias in the original sources will therefore be passed through to the reader (but, we should note, can be moderated by gatewatchers' comments as they publicise these sources). Gatewatching also requires more work of the reader, who (in line with general trends for online audiences) is really an active *user* rather than a passive recipient of news, and takes on some of the role of the traditional gatekeeper-journalist themselves: by passing through the gates pointed out by the gatewatcher, the user in their search for information and their evaluation of what they find becomes their own gatekeeper. Finally, gatewatching also continues to rely on the gatewatchers' intuition of what news topics might interest their users. News as myth *is* myth, after all – but at the very least the plurality of gatewatcher sites enables a plurality of divergent myths. 'People are increasingly able to seek out stories and storytellers who challenge and reject views of the state scribes [i.e., of the major political and economic interests]. People have the ability to find others who share and confirm their views of the world. … They tell each other news – as myth. … Digital technology thus has the possibility to nourish a far-reaching medley of voices and stories' (Lule 2001: 200).

An Overview of Gatewatcher Site Models

A wide variety of what could loosely be described as 'news Websites' employ this gatewatching model, in several distinct flavours. We might classify them according to a number of characteristics – most importantly, the extent to which participation in the gatewatching process is open to the users of these sites, and the degree to which contributions by individual gatewatchers are distinguished from one another.

Closed Collaborative Sites

Most gatewatcher sites are produced with the clear aim of reporting the news. Usually, sites focus on a specific field of information in their endeavours, in keeping with overall trends on the Net which have seen the emergence of a multitude of often very topic-specific interest communities that are supported by mailing-lists, newsgroups, and Websites. Most such gatewatcher sites rely on the efforts of a team of contributors rather than on only one enthusiast; one model for this form of collaborative gatewatching, then, is to work with a dedicated staff of gatewatchers who constantly traverse the Web and other sources for relevant news, and then publicise such news through reports on the site.

This model is perhaps closest to that of traditional news media – it is easily possible to imagine a traditional news Website's move to

gatewatching by relaxing its policy of strict gatekeeping and instead posting more articles which chiefly point to primary news sources off-site, rather than provide a complete account of a news item on-site. The bilingual online magazine *Telepolis*, for example, frequently points to off-site links and automatically attaches discussion functions to its articles. (In practice, however, commercial and legal considerations might prevent established news organisations from making this move: they may fear the loss of viewers to competing sites by way of links pointing off-site, or worry about the legal implications of pointing to non-proprietary material.) Conversely, such closed collaborative gatewatcher sites could also turn to more traditional modes of news reporting by making the reverse move of editing their articles more tightly and reducing the amount of links to primary news sources.

One example for the closed collaborative approach to gatewatching is MediaChannel.org, a global media 'supersite' which combines reports on media-related issues from its network of over 1,000 affiliate alternative media outlets around the world. Indeed, MediaChannel's central motto is 'we watch the media' – for their impact, to provide additional information and alternative perspectives, and to inspire debate and action on media issues. As MC's Senior Editor Aliza Dichter puts it, 'we are helping users connect to the most important and valuable media-issues content we find on the Web' (2001: email interview). MediaChannel's staff, in other words, are gatewatchers primarily focussed on the gates of their affiliate outlets, but also taking note of material published elsewhere where this is

relevant. According to the MC FAQ, its 'editorial staff selects relevant material to highlight on MediaChannel; links from these summaries provide direct access to the complete, original articles', which clearly demonstrates its embrace of the gatewatching model. In addition, however, 'MediaChannel also publishes original news, reports and opinion from leading media professionals, journalists, scholars and critics' (2003: n.pag.), which serves to underline the close connections between this flavour of gatewatching and more traditional journalistic approaches.

Open News Sites

As an alternative to this 'closed' model of gatewatching, which relies on dedicated staff (and for a professional-standard site is therefore likely to require a significant amount of ongoing personnel funding in addition to the costs of hosting the Website itself), a large number of gatewatcher sites have opted for a more open approach which involves their users as contributors to the gatewatching process. The extent of this involvement varies amongst sites, from merely allowing users to suggest links to interesting new information, which then may or may not be incorporated into news stories by the site's editors, to enabling users to post their own news stories which are immediately made available on the site without any editorial intervention. In sites which are fully open to such participation, therefore, users themselves serve as gatewatchers, removing the need

for dedicated gatewatchers amongst the site's staff altogether. At the same time, however, such fully open models are clearly also opened to accidental misinformation or deliberate abuse; conversely, of course, sites which retain an editorial element also retain a need for staff editors.

One of the most popular 'open' gatewatcher sites is the ICT news site Slashdot.org, which by its own definition covers 'News for Nerds, and Stuff That Matters' and has managed to attract around 500,000 registered users since its launch in 1997. It serves 'from zero to 1.2 million pages per day, with an average of 230k unique IPs per day' requesting content from the server (Bates 2001: email interview). While today employing an almost totally 'open' approach to gatewatching – allowing any user to submit pointers to interesting news –, it has largely managed to overcome the problems inherent in allowing users to contribute freely: Slashdot articles (as well as the responses readers are able to immediately attach to any posted article) are subject to an elaborate communal moderation system which enables random users to rate the quality of their peers' contributions. Based on such ratings, articles and comments are displayed more or less prominently, or even disappear from view if their rating falls below a threshold which can be set by each individual user as they adjust their personal preferences for the site.

This combination of user comments and ratings ensures that on average, the quality of Slashdot content is remarkably consistent. Poorly researched or written articles are soon moderated down or

augmented by more insightful commentary; misinformation or other shortcomings in the primary news sources which Slashdot articles point to are also quickly addressed through the commentary attached to the articles, often also by supplying pointers to further news sources. Taken together with their commentary, Slashdot articles, in other words, provide a view of gatewatching in process, and underline the ephemeral, continuous nature of any news reporting process. Far from the closed-off published output of the traditional gatekeeping model, this form of gatewatching produces a much more open, discursive form of news-in-progress. In contrast to the sender-receiver setup of mainstream print or broadcast news, such gatewatching news media turn viewers into users, and even (co-) producers of news – a role which (building on Alvin Toffler's 'prosumer', but removing its overtly commercial undertone) might be best described as that of a *produser*.

Open news, because of its creation of collation by a wide range of produsers, also approaches the idea of multiperspectival news which Herbert Gans has advocated – a more representative form of news and news media, 'presenting and representing as many perspectives as possible' (1979: 313). Indeed, his description of multiperspectival journalism (1979: 314-6) includes many of the key characteristics of gatewatching.

Slashdot's large userbase means that it can rely almost entirely on these gatewatching produsers as content contributors – as of 2001, it still had only '8 people working on it …, not including salesforce

people and sysadmins', yet dealt with some 500 story submissions each day (Bates 2001: email interview). This high level of submissions, and the even more significant amount of commentary attached to posted stories, combine to produce a highly effective, up-to-date and in-depth coverage of issues which are of interest to Slashdot readers. Indeed, one of the side effects of Slashdot stories is that some Websites featured in new articles experience an immediate access overload as Slashdot readers follow the link to their address and the Websites' servers cannot keep up with demand – this has become known as 'getting slashdotted'. Slashdot staff are mainly involved as editors of the site's front page, which features the most important stories selected from everything that is published in its range of specific topical sections each day; fundamentally, however, stories submitted by users constitute '100% of our news gathering', according to its co-founder Jeff 'Hemos' Bates – and so it would be fair to say that in spite of having developed this form of gatewatching, Bates and the other Slashdot staff are now no longer *themselves* working as gatewatchers, but merely maintain the environment for their users to act as produsers of the site. (Also see Anita Chan's work for a more in-depth study of Slashdot; 2002)

Communal Blogs

Where the focus on up-to-the-minute news reporting as it exists for open news sites like Slashdot subsides, but the communal aspect of

contributing remains, gatewatcher sites can also be found amongst the Weblogging community. Communal blogs are based around common issues rather than specific authors (but often attract regular contributors nonetheless) – so, for example, the blog *User Not Found* deals 'with the death of online friends', and its creator Dana Robinson explicitly invites contributors 'to share your personal experiences and stories in the comments when appropriate' (2003: n.pag.), while other blogs are even multi-authored by definition: MetaFilter, for example, one of the largest communal blog sites, bills itself as 'a community of users that find and discuss things on the web. The topics run the gamut, and tend to run intelligent and civil' (2003: n.pag.).

Many blog authors refer to material that they have come across elsewhere on the Web, citing it and linking to it (and most blogging softwares and Websites now support this activity directly). Especially these referring activities can be classed as a form of gatewatching, then: while possibly in an irregular and non-systematic fashion, blog authors do watch the gates of news sources which interest them, and publicise and comment on the material they find there; furthermore, like open news sites these communal blogs involve their users as produsers of the site.

One example of such blogs is the communal anti-Iraq war blog *Stand Down¸* whose users frequently point to news items as starting-points for their own commentary (2003). Such blogs are not necessarily concerned with reporting *news*, however, but rather cover just about anything that any of their contributors found worth noting.

Alternatively, we might say that while open or closed collaborative news sites are usually focussed predominantly on 'hard' news, blogs often contain a higher percentage of 'soft' news, as such categories might be defined by journalists.

Personal Blogs

Blogs vary in format from topically focussed public commentary on specific issues of interest, with an option for readers to comment and discuss these issues with the blog author(s), to what are in essence personal yet public online diaries, updated on an irregular basis by authors who share their personal or professional experiences with the Web community. With the emergence of a strong blogging community, individual blog authors also frequently comment on one another's blog entries, so that much like communal blogs the individual blogs interlinked in this way become part of a discursive network rather than remaining an essentially monological activity.

Where multiple blogs are joined in a discursive network, then, some or all of them may make reference to a specific news source, leading to the publication of a variety of viewpoints on a particular news item. By and large, however, such blogs (to be found, for example, at sites like Blogger.com) remain the work of one or a group of individual authors – the gatewatching process is closed to outside participants, and the efforts of individual gatewatchers are clearly

distinct from one another. (For more research into blogging, see e.g. Jill Walker's research blog; 2003.)

Resource Centre Sites

The Websites described here (whether produced by open or closed gatewatching approaches) are usually also archives of themselves – a feature common to many online publications, which due to a lack of storage scarcity can afford to keep published content online indefinitely. Often, these archives are never *purely* archives, but in most gatewatcher sites remain open for new commentaries to be added, and so can turn into something more akin to a collection of resources; indeed, in some cases this function as a useful resource collection can even become more important than that of covering current news and events. Therefore, some of the major gatewatcher sites can also be described as resource centre sites, regardless of their 'open' or 'closed' participatory nature, or in some occasions indeed regardless of whether they still continue to be updated regularly (cf. Bruns 2002).

MediaChannel, for example, points to its 'base of affiliated sites, which constitutes the deepest, highest quality database of media-related news and information on-line' (2003: n.pag.). Similarly, the archives of a site like CountingDown.com, which tracks news about upcoming movie releases and provides some further coverage of films once they have been released, remain a useful source of information on

the history of specific movie projects long after a movie's box-office run is completed.

Automated Gatewatching

While to date gatewatching remains largely driven by human contributors who gather their news in a somewhat *ad hoc* fashion, there are a variety of trends towards an automation of the newsgathering process. Many (and especially alternative) news sites now offer news syndication functions, often by providing a Resource Description Framework Site Summary (RSS) file which contains their latest news items in a machine-readable format; other online services such as News Is Free provide RSS files even for Websites which do not themselves offer RSS feeds for their content. RSS feeds can be amalgamated and used by human gatewatchers to speed up their work; however, using such feeds or other automated methods it is also possible to develop entirely automated gatewatching services such as Google News, which "presents information culled from approximately 4,500 news sources worldwide and automatically arranged to present the most relevant news first. … Google has developed an automated grouping process for Google News that pulls together related headlines and photos from thousands of sources worldwide – enabling you to see how different news organizations are reporting the same story" (2003: n. pag.).

While still in its beta stages, Google News may well develop into a highly effective gatewatching service. Its hierarchical topic organisation may also make it a serious competitor for many topically focussed news gatewatchers; as with the overall Google service, however, it remains to be seen to what extent fully automated evaluation algorithms can rival human efforts. Much in the same way that Google search functions can be added to Websites, at any rate, it is possible to imagine a mixed mode of gatewatching which supplements automatic newsgathering with human-contributed content (thereby freeing gatewatchers from routine tasks). Since "the headlines on the Google News homepage are selected entirely by a computer algorithm, based on many factors including how often and on what sites a story appears elsewhere on the web" (2003: n. pag.), human gatewatchers may well remain necessary to uncover stories not reported frequently or prominently.

Also of note in this respect are the efforts towards the development of a semantic Web (supported by WWW inventor Tim Berners-Lee), 'an extension of the current one, in which information is given well-defined meaning, better enabling computers and people to work in cooperation' (Berners-Lee, Hendler & Lassila 2001: 2), and which would enable a direct integration of manual and conputerised gatewatching efforts. The development of computer-assisted reportage mechanisms is also a key issue for more traditional news organisations (see e.g. Reavy 2001).

Open News and Open Source

In *Future Active*, Graham Meikle describes the site model embraced by the Indymedia network, and specifically by the Sydney Indymedia Centre and its programmer Matthew Arnison, as 'open publishing': 'there are no staff reporters as such – instead, the content is generated by anyone who decides to take part. There is no gatekeeping and no editorial selection process – participants are free to upload whatever they choose, from articles and reports to announcements and appeals for equipment or advice' (2002: 89). My preference for the term 'open news' here implies no disgreement with Meikle's terminology, but rather stems from the present article's narrower focus on *news* publishing rather than publishing in general – Sydney Indymedia's open publishing includes the publishing of open news as a significant aspect of the site. What is common to either term is the implied link with other 'open', collaborative efforts, and especially the open source software development movement. Indeed, beyond the fact that the Webware packages driving sites such as Slashdot and Indymedia are themselves available under open source licences, the practice of open news publishing which results from opening participation in the gatewatching process to all willing collaborators while establishing communally-driven quality controls can be seen as a translation of open source approaches to news gathering and publishing – it turns news open source.

Opensource.org, a key site for the open source movement, states that

the basic idea behind open source is very simple: When programmers can read, redistribute, and modify the source code for a piece of software, the Software evolves. People improve it, people adapt it, people fix bugs. And this can happen at a speed that, if one is used to the slow pace of conventional software development, seems astonishing.

We in the open source community have learned that this rapid evolutionary process produces better software than the traditional closed model, in which only a very few programmers can see the source and everybody else must blindly use an opaque block of bits. (2003: n.pag.)

An equivalent statement of principles for open news could read:

the basic idea behind open news is very simple: When news producers and users can read, redistribute, and modify the source information for a piece of news, the understanding of news evolves. People improve a news report, people adapt it, people fix bugs. And this can happen at a speed that, if one is used to the slow pace of conventional news reporting, seems astonishing.

We in the open news community have learned that this rapid evolutionary process produces better news than the traditional

closed news model, in which only a very few editors can see the source reports and everybody else must blindly use an opaque news story.

Open news systems, therefore, have moved beyond traditional approaches to news gathering and publishing, much like their open source counterparts have developed new models of software development. While in theory certainly not impossible in other media, the open news model is also particularly well suited to operating through Websites, able to take advantage of the Web's specific features as a media form. (Much like open source software development is significantly aided by key Websites such as Sourceforge.net.)

The Problems for Gatewatching

In a variety of topical fields (especially those with a large 'alternative' or 'nerdy' user constituency), gatewatcher sites of the collaborative closed or open news formats have become credible alternatives to traditional news publications (as is evident for example from the popular success of Slashdot). So far, however, news sites produced through gatewatching have not yet had an impact on general news publications, and so the question of the extent to which they are truly able to affect mainstream attitudes remains. In many ways, this is a problem shared with the open source movement: while the user base

of sites like Slashdot with its 500,000 users, or the uptake of open source software for example for Webservers appears impressive, both have yet to break out of the geek ghetto. Not enough mainstream users have been tempted to replace Microsoft Windows and other proprietary software packages with Linux-based solutions, for example, and the readership of gatewatcher news services pales in comparison with the audience for traditional mass news media. It remains to be seen whether open source and open news can close this gap in the immediate future.

Especially if and when they do, certain moral and legal issues inherent to the practice of gatewatching will also need to be faced. Fundamentally, gatewatching builds on the work of others – of the news sources its articles cite and point to –, and while some such sources (for example, press releases and other information notices) may have been created specifically for this purpose, the inclusion of others (such as news reports on the sites of traditional news organisations) in a gatewatcher's news story might be seen by the original copyright owner as a form of illegitimate republishing. While it could be argued that gatewatcher sites provide a public service by publishing what are essentially news digests on specific topics and affording their users the opportunity to comment on the news, and indeed by driving traffic to the sites which their reports point to, it seems highly probable (especially in light of the related ongoing debate over the legality of 'deep linking' – see e.g. Delio 2002) that legal challenges against gatewatching practices will eventually be issued.

Furthermore, open news sites and other sites which enable their users to submit news stories also obviously build on the contributions of these users as produsers – none more so than Slashdot, which as noted now relies '100%' on user stories. This clearly raises content ownership questions, which – as a result of the *ad hoc* development of many open news sites – have yet to be addressed. Given the fact that Slashdot, for example, is now a commercially owned site and runs banner ads, there is a potential that its owners could reap financial profits from the produser community's unpaid and voluntary work (even if in practice any advertising income is likely to be swallowed by the Slashdot servers' operating costs). Popular sites could also be tempted to sell their userbase data to online advertisers. In keeping with the open source analogy, therefore, it may well become necessary to develop an 'Open News Licence' in analogy to the 'Open Source Licence' to address intellectual property issues and develop an overall code of ethics for gatewatchers.

Further, where conflicts over the conduct of site owners arise, they may throw into some doubt the overall authority of gatewatcher sites, and highlight the fact that for all the involvement of users as produsers in open news sites the site owners remain especially privileged members of the site community, by virtue of their control over the site's underlying technology – even if, as in the case of Slashdot, they no longer contribute to the gatewatching effort at all. This constitutes a significant difference from the open source model, where an entire project is always available to its participants to develop further as they

see fit – the structure of the project's contents (that is, of the source code) is inscribed into the contents themselves, and disputes over future directions often lead to a 'forking' of development into separate projects: from a common original level of development, two distinct descendent projects gradually emerge.

For open news sites, this is not the case: the structure of open news contents (of the individual news items contained in a site's database) is determined externally, by the database and Website technology which supports it. Forking is less likely, therefore: a site like Slashdot, for example, could only be forked by first copying (cloning) the entire Website and database onto a different server and then developing it in a different direction. This could only be done by someone with access to the Slashdot server, however, not by one of its rank-and-file contributors. (Notably, however, the Slashdot source code – and that for similar site models, such as PHP-Nuke or Postnuke – is available as open source: while the databases of open news sites are not available for forking, their underlying technologies are.)

Conclusion

Such questions should not be seen as undermining the gatewatching project altogether, though. The ready availability of Webware packages which support the creation of gatewatcher sites (from the Slashcode and its clones to blogging tools and other content management systems), and the obvious enthusiasm with which many

Web users are becoming produsers contributing to their favourite sites, combine to ensure that in many fields of interest we can now see the rapid emergence of gatewatcher sites (and here especially of those following the open news model). Much in the same way that open source has become the dominant paradigm for Web-based software development projects, then, we might expect to see that gatewatching and especially open news will become the dominant paradigms for Web-based news reporting. Gatewatching as a newsgathering practice is as immediately suited to the characteristics of the World Wide Web as an information medium as gatekeeping has been to the media environment for print and broadcast news. As more audiences shift from these media to the Web for their news, then, it is likely that they will experience this paradigm shift from gatekeeping to gatewatching.

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