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Community Building through Communal Publishing: The Emergence of Open News

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INTRODUCTION

The open source software movement has made some significant gains in recent years – some of the software packages it has produced have become virtual industry standards, in specific fields even gaining an edge over proprietary solutions produced by the likes of Microsoft and other major commercial operators.

Well beyond the field of actual software development, open source ideology itself has also become increasingly recognised as a possible alternative to, or at least alteration of, standard corporate production models, and using open software has become a form of stating one's resistance to the corporatisation of key electronic services. Open source ideology is now beginning to be translated to activities other than programming, with sometimes surprising results.

One key field where this has led to significant developments is that of online news reporting. Sites such as Slashdot.org (“news for nerds, and stuff that matters”) with its 450,000 registered users publish what might usefully be termed ‘open news’, more or less explicitly adapting existing open source principles of collaborative software development to arrive at a highly successful form of collaborative news coverage. Many other sites, often using the Slash code, Slashdot's open source Web engine, or similar packages like PHP-Nuke or Postnuke, have copied this model and applied it to a wide variety of new topics. At least one site, Openflows (also running on the Slash code), makes this connection to the open source movement even more explicit, by referring to its activities as ‘Open Source Intelligence (OSI)’: “for us, OSI is the application of collaborative principles developed by the Open Source Software movement to the gathering and analysis of information. These principles include: peer

review, reputation- rather than sanctions-based authority, the free sharing of products, and flexible levels of involvement and responsibility” (Stalder & Hirsh 2002, 1).

Indeed, starting from generally accepted definitions of open source software it is not difficult to translate such principles to other forms of engagement with information. Opensource.org 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.

(Opensource.org 2003)

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 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 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 MOVE TOWARDS OPEN NEWS: AN ALTERNATIVE TO GATEKEEPING

To a large extent, the collaborative information-processing practices of open news are a response to what are perceived as the shortcomings of today’s commercial news media, coupled with the emergent DIY ethics of special interest communities which see themselves enabled by new Internet technologies. Some seven years ago, White assumed that

the emerging media systems will result in a diminution of the kind of power which had been exercised by the controllers of scarce broadcasting channels in the past. It could be argued that this power will be diluted so that large and small organisations

without any previous involvement in the media, together with the powerful and powerless, will find themselves on more equal terms when it comes to the distribution of information and entertainment on the abundant channels of the future. (White 1996, 5)

This, certainly, is the intent of many open news operations, much as it is that of the open source movement in its field. The lack of scarcity on the Net – White’s ‘abundance of channels’ – has its downsides in the fact that there are now no controllers, no gatekeepers of information who decide what is and what is not worth publishing: as Nunberg notes, “media like the Web tend to resist attempts to impose the sort of solutions that enable us to manage (even imperfectly) the steady increase in the number of print documents – the ramification of discourses and forms of publication, the imposition of systems of screening or refereeing, the restriction of the right to speak to ‘qualified’ participants” (Nunberg 1996, 126). Instead, the Web realises the McLuhanite vision that ‘everyone’s a publisher’, for better or for worse.

While gatekept systems are significantly flawed, often putting people into gatekeeping positions who are insufficiently qualified or influenced in their decisions by commercial rather than journalistic considerations, good gatekeepers do perform a useful function – “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” (Singer 1997, 80), and so there remains a demand for some form of gatekeeping. Open news systems provide this service, but without employing dedicated editors or a strict dichotomy of ‘suitable/unsuitable for publication’, as it exists for example in print or broadcast news. In fact, we will see that rather than keeping the gates, they merely watch them.

These new ‘gatekeepers’ online (if we stick with that term for now – we will see later that it is no longer fully accurate) might call themselves ‘Net guides’, or ‘editors’, or (in some cases, such as mailing-lists) ‘moderators’, but to some extent they perform traditional gatekeeper duties of highlighting the material supposedly of greatest interest to their specific audience. Frequently, they are limiting themselves to a particular field of information, and provide structured overviews over major news topics and developments in a field. In some cases, the ‘gatekeeping’ service is offered as part of a site which is itself run by a provider of primary content in the field.

Additionally, many of these sites also serve as resource archives, becoming what I have elsewhere termed Resource Centre Sites (Bruns 2002). Users can survey the latest news in a synchronic fashion, or follow developments diachronically by perusing the news archives. In this interweaving of news and archived information, or of what Mackenzie calls the real-time and archive drives, the structure of the sites’ content database also plays a significant role: “not only does the structure of the archive increasingly determine the coming into existence of its contents, these contents exist as real-time deferred”, and “come into existence solely in view of a possible presentation on the screen, a presentation that will be governed by the horizon of real-time. To summarise, real-time is the archive drive becoming-time; the archive drive is real-time becoming-space” (Mackenzie 1997, 68).

To some extent, then, in highlighting the importance of their archives open news sites take an approach that has more in common with the role played by librarians than that played by gatekeepers. Already in 1980 Smith suggested

that the information revolution of the 1980s and 1990s offers us a step toward a new kind of Alexandria, i.e. towards an abundance of information, or universal availability, but one in which the constraints arise from the modes of storage and cataloguing, rather than from the more traditional constraints of censorship and governmental control. In other words, the librarian or the librarian's computerised successor becomes a more crucial guardian of knowledge than in the past, and the individual researcher/writer is more dependent upon the skill of searching for information than upon the skills of composition. (Smith 1980, xiii.)

LIBRARIANS, NOT GATEKEEPERS?

To speak of open news sites as 'librarians' rather than 'gatekeepers' on the Web might in fact be more productive: where gatekeepers screen information and (as part of a publishing organisation) allow readers access only to that portion of all they survey which they deem of sufficient interest or quality, librarians (who are not publishers themselves) ideally point library users in the right direction (that is, the direction most suited to their needs), but cannot and do not attempt to limit users' access to all the other works contained in the overall library. The shift from 'reader' to user in this description is significant: Levinson notes that "humans want to both lead, and be led ... The rise of electronic media in general, and digital personal computers in particular, has accentuated and focussed" the desire "to make our own decisions, rather than be spoon-fed by central authority" (Levinson 1999, 91), and librarians suit this notion: they assist, but do not lead.

Librarians, too, frequently specialise in a certain field, possibly out of prior personal interest; often they themselves are amongst the chief information seekers in the field. Internet 'librarians' (if we use this term to replace the previously used 'gatekeeper') are usually similarly personally involved, 'of the people', and partisan; they support the case of those seeking information rather than that of the information providers or controllers.

This 'librarian' position contrasts markedly with that of the traditional ideal of the 'objective', 'impartial', and 'disinterested' gatekeeper-journalist. As McQuail describes it, in journalism "the normal standard of impartiality calls for balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation of news – separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgments or emotive language or pictures" (McQuail 1994, 255). But this ideal norm in itself has (with few exceptions) usually remained exactly this – an ideal – even in more traditional forms of journalism, due to the pressures of commercial media forms and of practical, everyday journalistic experience; especially recent news media have offered only vague attempts to uphold some form of journalistic integrity, independence, and responsibility.

This 'librarian' position does not claim to aspire to such norms in the first place – open news sites are often clearly biased –, but at the same time in refusing to keep the

gates it also commits to upholding the right to free speech even for those speakers it strongly disagrees with. Librarians may comment or advise on, or warn about, some of the contents of their library, but they do not censor them.

GATEWATCHERS

That these supposedly ‘librarian’ sites are themselves part of the ‘library’, and can be found in its catalogues (the search engines), indicates that the librarian metaphor, too, breaks down at this point: in contrast to real-life librarians, the online ‘librarians’ are themselves necessarily also publishers, as everyone providing information on the Web is perforce a publisher. The sites described here, therefore, are neither in the traditional sense gatekeepers (since in contrast to their print and broadcast counterparts they do not have exclusive control over the ‘gate’ through which information passes to the reader/user) nor librarians (since they are not merely keeping track of what is published in their field of expertise and advising users about it, without themselves being part of an operation publishing selected content), but rather combine aspects of both models into a new form of content tracker and advisor which might usefully be termed gatewatcher: They observe what material is available and interesting, and themselves provide condensed content guides and selected material. As Levinson describes it, compared to traditional editors “the online editor thus becomes an endorser rather than a door dragon, as the ... process of filtration is severed from the classic editorial mandate” (Levinson 1999, 130).

Such gatewatching is not necessarily per se open news: it could be done by appointed staff members just as well as by collaborative efforts involving the entire user community. Levinson believes that “the question for gatekeeping in the digital age will be: with the Web removing the technological and economic reasons for the pre-sorting of information, will the public still look to gatekeepers to provide an imprimatur of what is best to read, see, and hear, or will audiences seek out and ratify a more direct relationship with creators?” (Ibid., 12). From the preceding discussion it is already clear that the answer proposed here is that in the form of gatewatcher sites a middle ground, between the filtration and censorship of traditional models of gatekeeping and the mainly self-directed, random access of user-driven information-seeking as it is possible in a library, has begun to emerge and will gain enough significance to reach a status of importance similar to that of the traditional gatekept forms of older media. Levinson himself foreshadows this by noting “our continuing need for centres” (Ibid., 102).

COLLABORATIVE GATEWATCHING: OPEN NEWS PRODUCTION

Indeed, gatewatcher sites frequently also become quite literally central gathering points for their users. As in the case of Slashdot, large user communities can form around such sites. Where this is the case, it enables the sites to make the crucial step from ‘closed’ newsgathering approaches (done by a clearly delineated team of ‘editors’) to truly open news, involving the users of a site as gatewatchers. The divisions between producers and consumers online are increasingly blurred in practice, which has caused Alvin Toffler to coin his famous term ‘prosumer’ – to avoid the overly commercial tone of this neologism, however, perhaps it would be better to speak of ‘producers’.

Some Web participants predominantly produce information, by publishing Websites, submitting news, spreading press releases and other reports, while others mainly use information, receiving and processing it in private and to their own ends. The vast majority of participants, however, will employ some combination of both approaches (those who are in the main users might also produce small amounts of information by publishing their own homepages, etc.), and at the heart of open news (as well as open source) processes are those participants who combine both on equal terms and at a high level of engagement: hence, producers.

We can then say that open news sites are – or more precisely, present – the outcome of gatewatching, done by their users in their role as producers: the community of producers evaluates what information is or becomes available through other resources in its chosen field of interest (often employing criteria similar to those used by its gatekeeper or librarian counterparts elsewhere), and presents this information through the site in ways that are geared to be useful to novices seeking entry into the field, experts updating their knowledge, and/or regular visitors checking for recent news, developments, debates, and rumours. In this process, therefore, gatewatchers must sometimes show a certain degree of disregard for confidentiality or copyrights to present ‘scoops’ or cover the field completely, while at the same time they also need to protect their relationship with useful sources amongst institutions or communities in the field (this is once again similar perhaps to investigative journalists).

The hypertextual nature of the Web makes dealing with this dilemma easier than it is for their colleagues in other media, however: rather than lifting wholesale interesting material they have found on other sites, they can simply link to it. Open news content therefore consists most of all of an extensive and highly structured array of very precisely directed links to information on other Websites, organised according to topics, ranked by relevance, usefulness, and degree of sophistication, and especially pointing out recent additions. This requires careful judgment on part of the gatewatchers: they must include enough to inform, but not overwhelm their readers, and must thus learn to accurately assess the importance and relevance of information.

Also of crucial importance is the acknowledgment of an information source, and so links pointing to items deep within another site are frequently accompanied by links to the site’s main point of entry, for example. This is one feature of what may be identified as an overall ‘code of ethical conduct’ (unstated though it may be) generally observed by gatewatchers. Such ready acknowledgment of other operators in the field – rather foreign to other media forms – may also lead to some form of direct cooperation between these and the gatewatchers, who may thus become privy to advance and inside information on a regular basis (in turn also conjuring a danger of information dependence, however).

FROM PUBLISHING TO PUBLICISING

In the main, then, open news sites are not usually publishers of original information: rather, they publicise what is already available in various scattered locations elsewhere – and was discovered during the gatewatching process. They are thus secondary information disseminators, but because of their offer of conveniently centralised information resources often constitute a primary source for information seekers. In addition to these results of gatewatching, and to balance out and further

illuminate such republished, republicised material, gatewatchers also accept extensive commentary from their users, which is attached immediately to the source material. This user commentary is a way of achieving an annotation of the Web, as postulated for 'ideal' hypertexts but not provided for directly by World Wide Web technology (see e.g. Barrett 1989, xiii-iv). Again, contributors are openly acknowledged here, which at once gains the community's respect, motivates further users to contribute, and helps to legitimise their views and concerns by making them more 'official' through publication. This may also improve institution-community relations, and thus places open news sites in a truly intermediary role.

Their continued in-depth, communal engagement with a field makes open news sites particularly knowledgeable commentators. Their openness and their discursive mode of news coverage is a key aspect of attraction for their users, who may be disenchanted with the highly policed, sanitised content of more traditional information sources. The broad and continuous coverage of more than just 'official' news thus appeals to users' real-time drive, and can probably be mildly addictive; to cater for such users (and bind them to a site even more closely), many sites thus offer facilities for email notification of users if 'new' news is published on the site, or even provide additional email news services directly.

On the other hand, the archive drive is also already catered for, of course, since open news sites are in their very nature also archives of news, rumours, and other information. Of greatest importance, however, is that these sites address what in extension of Mackenzie's terminology we may call the interactive drive: not only by interacting with users through search functions and aforementioned options which offer users email notifications and allow them to submit their own news, rumours, or commentary, but also by enabling users to participate as gatewatchers and to interact amongst themselves in discussing, evaluating, and critiquing news items. Appealing to their users as producers is the crucial factor determining an open news site's success.

DEVELOPING OPEN NEWS SITES

Rather than expect open news sites to emerge in great numbers from established institutions (which may be concerned about such high levels of user-as-producer involvement), then, we can see them grow out of community endeavours, such as small-scale private and community homepages which gradually become elaborate and organised enough to be regarded as open news sites; thus,

this is a revolution that will be driven by users (consumers) rather than by media corporations. It will be users – individuals, groups, and organisations – as the critical drivers for the development of multimedia and interactive applications who will determine the value and the impact of information superhighways. It will be this impact that will ultimately shape, in a profound way, the political, social, and economic force of the increasingly digital world in which we will live. (Emmott 1995, 3)

Such rhetoric should be familiar to anyone involved in open source, of course. Indeed, aspects of organisational control, ethics, and ownership can already be seen as potential problems for maturing open news sites. Early in their life, in any way, such

sites often emerge under the leadership of already established central figures in a community – often termed Netizens – who may be able to exploit a pre-existing network of contacts and their own well-developed knowledge of the field to gather the informational supplies necessary to set up and maintain the site. There is also an obvious reliance on community involvement, which requires user-friendly interfaces and backend technologies which can deal with high levels of produser participation.

As these sites develop, they slowly move away from an ad hoc style of discussing and presenting issues important to these groups, towards somewhat more structured forms both of communication and of informational organisation. During this move, the site's operational policies are developed virtually on the fly, which can be a pitfall; compared with sites set up by existing organisations of institutions, however, which must work hard to shed rigid operating policy restrictions imposed by their institutional controllers, such a lack of top-level control and established structures is also likely to be experienced as liberating and empowering for site creators, and indeed explains much of the continuing enthusiasm amongst Web content producers outside the institutional realm.

Central to the creation of an open news site is the design of the structuration and presentation principles for information contained within it; as Agre writes, “a worthy goal for design for new media ... is to support the collective cognitive processes of particular communities. The principal object of design ... is the genre ... – that is, an expectable form that materials in a given medium might take” (Agre 1998, 79). Open news sites are part of such a design genre for the presentation and publication of materials on the Web: these sites and others like them, taken from a wide variety of fields, operate according to the same general principles in spite of their disparate content. As one, they:

- * provide up-to-date news, rumours, information and commentary from a variety of sources, catering for the real-time drive; the gatewatchers behind these sites thus function like human “‘knowbots,’ the little personalisable pieces of software that will go rooting around like truffle-hunting pigs in the incomprehensible, and exponentially expanding, vastness of the online universe to find content that matches users' identified interests” (Singer 1998, n. pag.),
- * and they make public their findings, combining aspects of gatekeeper, librarian, editor and reporter in their work;
- * offer a vast backlog of past news reports and structured overviews of resources (on- as well as offline) for further and background information and interaction, thus serving the archive drive;
- * in response to the interactive drive, invite and provoke direct and indirect ‘official’ input and information as well as initiate and facilitate community participation and feedback; this joins site owners, produsers, and users in a shared ‘virtual community’: “a necessary condition for virtual communities is the existence of a virtual-place” (Jones 1997, n. pag.), and open news sites provide this ‘virtual-place’.

In short, open news sites attempt to be seen as the first and only point of entry into a field that users will ever need: while users will move from a site's pages to view the information available on other sites to which the site links, those pages are framed by the site (that is, made part of the site's structure of content organisation), not by the Website they ‘really’ belong to. Another way to describe what gatewatchers do would

be to say that they attempt to construct a meta-site spanning all that they consider important to know about a particular field of interest, by bringing together material from many different actual sites. By analogy, this is akin to creating a topical encyclopedia by collating and annotating pages ripped from other books on the topic (but in a far less crude way, without damaging the other books, and with constant updates).

While there is generally a significant (and healthy) amount of scepticism about the accuracy of information available online, the convenience and ease of use of well-run site makes it easy for their users to give up their sceptical distance and accept what they find on their favourite site as ‘the important information’ and ‘all the important information’, much as this happens with media institutions elsewhere (newspapers, television programmes) when they accumulate an apparently unblemished track record. Online as well as elsewhere, this is a major cause for concern: in other media, too, quality checks fail all too often, but online few such controls are even in existence in the first place; at the same time, however, the online audience – especially where as in the case of open news sites they also participate to significant extent in the operation of a site – may possibly be regarded as more generally vigilant than audiences in other media.

OPEN NEWS AND THE FUTURE

Nonetheless, where they are successful in their endeavours (attracting a sizeable and engaged audience), open news sites may also command tremendous influence on their audience: if users do come to accept that what is available from a site is indeed all they need to know, and arranged in just the way in which they need to know it (suggesting an objective ranking of importance, and clear causal connections between individual pieces of information, for example), then this must inevitably influence their process of knowledge- as well as opinion-formation, affecting both their long-term world-view and their short-term political views (with ‘political’ used here in its widest possible meaning). Much like their gatekeeper, librarian, and editor colleagues elsewhere, gatewatchers can thus become powerful opinion leaders and trend-setters. Perhaps in contrast to these other opinion leaders, however, gatewatchers appear less removed from their audience, by virtue of their appeal to the involvement of users as producers.

To the extent that they also receive support (in terms of funding or direct access to internal news and information from the companies and institutions which they report about), open news sites tread a fine line between the competing – and often contrary – interests of communities and institutions, which may manifest itself in a variety of ethical and legal dilemmata: institutions might attempt to use their arrangements with gatewatchers to police rumours or leaked information after publication, by threatening libel or defamation proceedings or simply a withdrawal of support. Voluntary as well as involuntary (through being quoted or linked to) content contributors might also try to claim copyright on information disseminated through the site; this is an obvious problem with leaked institutional content, but is also often overlooked as sites grow out of private or community Websites but retain a core of privately-produced and -owned content at their centre. Contrary to open source, the open news movement still operates very much ad hoc and without clear intellectual property frameworks –

eventually it may become necessary to develop an 'Open News Licence' in analogy to the 'Open Source Licence' to address IP issues.

Further, where conflicts over the conduct of site owners arise, they may throw into some doubt the overall authority of open news sites, and highlight the fact that for all the involvement of users as producers the site owners remain especially privileged members of the site community, by virtue of their control over the site's underlying technology. In the case of open source an entire project is 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. For open news, 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.)

A different issue still to be resolved by the open news movement is the question of the extent to which it is truly able to affect mainstream attitudes. In many ways, this is a problem shared with the open source movement: while the user base of sites like Slashdot with its 450,000 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 dump Microsoft Windows and other proprietary software packages in favour of, say, Linux, and the readership of open 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.

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