

## **Gate-keeping and the phenomenon of news content from non journalists. Is Gate-keeping relevant in online media?**

### **Summary**

This section defines the concept of gatekeeping in the media, looks at the changes with new media formats emerging online and argues that gatekeeping is still relevant even in online digital media

Newsrooms and traditional media organisations filter news they gather before they publish or go on the air. They generally receive and gather a lot more news than airtime and space can allow them to use and go through a selection and preparation process called gatekeeping

“At it’s most basic, gatekeeping simply refers to a regime of control over what content is allowed to emerge from the production processes in print and broadcast media; the controllers (journalists, editors, owners) of these media, in other words, control the gates through which content is released to their audiences.”<sup>1</sup>

This gatekeeping process takes place at several levels. In *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*, author Axel Bruns says there are three gatekeeping stages in the media:

“... two gates are controlled in news organisations: one at the input stage through which news and information is allowed into the news production process, and one at the output stage through which news reports emerge into the media”<sup>1</sup>

Bruns says the third form of gatekeeping takes place after the publication of the initial news report and relates to audience responses where gatekeeping practices “manifest themselves as letters to the editor are accepted or rejected for publication”<sup>1</sup>

These stages apply to traditional print and electronic media, but not to new digital media like the World Wide Web where “all three gates kept by news organisations can now be bypassed.”<sup>1</sup>

However, gatekeeping seems to apply on websites run by traditional and professional media companies. These websites are extensions, if you like, or complementary to traditional media platforms. The BBC website for example will always apply gatekeeping as they have a standard to maintain. Alternative or independent sites however can potentially bypass gatekeeping as some of them do indeed.

Besides gatekeeping, some online media are now involved in a process which Bruns terms ‘gatewatching’. Bruns says ‘gatewatchers’ “fundamentally publicise news (by

pointing to sources) rather than publish it (by compiling an apparently complete report from the available sources). Bruns gives websites like Slashdot and Kuro5hin as examples or models that fit the description of ‘gatewatchers’. Such websites feature headlines of stories and links to the original stories.

The process itself means that a ‘gatewatcher’ monitors news on other sites and publish relevant summaries and headlines of what other sites are publishing.

As part of gatekeeping, before output, the media filters content for bias, fairness and balance using experienced and tertiary-qualified professionals, who collectively apply their skills and tools to judge, weigh and decide what news to publish. Besides a wealth of experience, their tools include in-house codes of practice, style guides plus legal advice in some cases

## **1 Gate-keeping-the new functions on online digital platforms**

Traditional media has always practiced gatekeeping in order to maintain accuracy, balance, fairness, sensitivity and to protect itself from potential legal issues that can arise from publishing harmful or incorrect stories. But independent and alternative online media seems to have different ways of doing things

### **1.1 Unedited and unfiltered news**

The banner on CNN’s [iReport](#) website boldly states “Unedited.Unfiltered.News” A note on the site warns ‘iReport.com is a user-generated site. That means the stories submitted by users are not edited, fact-checked or screened before they post. Only stories marked "On CNN" have been vetted for use in CNN news coverage”

This is typical of some of the new news websites that are on the internet, sites like <http://www.indymedia.com> which have no gatekeepers and feature user generated content contributed by users, loosely defined as citizen journalism.

These sites range from commercially and privately owned sites, to communal and individual news blogs and have been on the increase since 2004 when the Web 2.0 platform was introduced.

With the massive amounts of space available online, gatekeeping for space constraints is no longer a concern. This is beneficial as news items and speeches can now be easily published in full without any mediation.

“People can now easily see the full news as its being projected. In some cases you find journalists conveniently covering certain aspects of a speech, the sensitive parts of the speeches, leaving out interesting things that may not be deemed controversial. But with the advent of other forms of media like the internet, people can now look into the whole speech and make their own opinions.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Lesser barriers for publishing content online

Having less stringent rules and requirements for contribution of content means lesser barriers for participation. This ease of participation is potentially turning what was once a passive media consumer base into a tech-savvy user base with the capability of doing in theory what only journalists or broadcast journalists could do.

Filing, uploading and getting content published on a site like <http://www.indymedia.com> for example is so simple; on their homepage there's a clickable link "[post your news](#)" which takes you to an upload page where you type details of your story, your name and contact details. The sixth and last step says "Please press submit only once! It (your story) will appear in a few minutes on the main page" It's that easy.

CNN's iReport home page on the other hand boasts that they had ['378 547 iReports worldwide in August, 2009 with 724 of these featured on CNN'](#). There are many more websites of this nature, perhaps with lesser numbers of contributions, but collectively they represent very strong participation in the news process.

Such participation potentially means more user generated content online. Breaking stories anywhere in the world can be submitted and published with a minimum of fuss. Websites like [iReport](#) are sure letting users know what's in it for them:

"At the site of breaking news? Snap a picture or video and send it directly from your phone to iReport.com at [ireport@cnn.com](mailto:ireport@cnn.com). You may be the first person to break the news worldwide!"

Such type of news coverage can potentially keep the news current. It can also keep the costs of news coverage down for some particular stories as news can be submitted by audiences and eyewitnesses and not by reporters flown over to the scene of an event way after it has occurred.

## 2 Gatewatching

"A traditional tenet of journalism has been the role of the journalist as the prime mediator or gatekeeper-the provider of the information and analysis required by the public to function effectively in an advanced democracy."<sup>3</sup>

That tenet seems to be falling away or changing due to fundamental changes in the media as authors Kovach and Rosenstiel explain:

"The proliferation of outlets diminishes the authority of any one outlet to play a gatekeeper role over the information it publishes. Information is moving so fast, news outlets are caught between trying to gather the information for citizens and interpreting what others have delivered ahead of them"<sup>4</sup>

This resonates with Bruns' concept of 'gatewatching' where some websites now feature headlines of the latest news and information and point links to the original source.

'Gatewatching', according to Bruns "is to watch the output gates of as wide a range of traditional publishers of information as possible, with a view to using this information as source material in news reports"<sup>1</sup>

However, 'gatewatchers' do not publish the full story on their site. According to Bruns, they "publicise" and link stories to original sources.

### 3 What happens where there are no gatekeepers?

There are fears that anyone can now hide behind journalism and push their own agendas or opinions as fact into these emerging news sites or publish them on their own sites or blogs. There are also real fears of possible scenarios where an inaccurate report published on the internet can potentially cause untold damage.

"It presents many threats to the most cherished values and standards of journalism. Authenticity of content, source verification, accuracy, and truth are all suspect in a medium where anyone with a computer and a modem can become a global publisher."<sup>5</sup>

CNN's [iReport](#) website is an example of a website with no gatekeepers and the risk of this business model were highlighted when a user who goes by the name "Johntw" posted a false story claiming that Apple CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a severe heart attack and had been rushed to the ER. The potential damage was huge, according to journalist Reyhan Harmanci of the San Francisco Chronicle who described how Apple's share price dropped as a result of the story.<sup>6</sup>

According to Reyhan Harmanci, this incident "sparked debate about the accuracy of reports from these web sites and showing how it takes only a few minutes for a scurrilous rumour, placed on a site without sufficient editorial checks, to inflict damage."<sup>6</sup>

The original report by "Johntw" which is no longer available on iReport but is cached online including [here](#) said

"Steve Jobs was rushed to the ER just a few hours ago after suffering a major heart attack. I have an insider who tells me that paramedics were called after Steve claimed to be suffering from severe chest pains and shortness of breath. My source has opted to remain anonymous, but he is quite reliable. I haven't seen anything about this anywhere else yet, and as of right now, I have no further information, so I thought this would be a good place to start. If anyone else has more information, please share it"<sup>7</sup>

Under traditional media ethos, such a story would not have seen the light of the day without any gatekeeping or verification with Steve Jobs's office.

## **4 So are gatekeepers redundant?**

The emergence of alternative news sites like the [www.indymedia.com](http://www.indymedia.com) or [www.ireport.com](http://www.ireport.com) where stories can be uploaded in minutes, without any changes or corrections or any 'journalistic' gatekeeping has not stopped the gatekeeping processes on online news sites run by traditional media or those run by professional media organisations

### **4.1 Gatekeeping is still a necessary process in new publishing formats**

Gatekeeping is still a necessary function for a number of reasons, including fact and error checking, for clarity and grammar mistakes, structural errors and checking content for any potentially slanderous or libelous issues or insensitivity to people named in stories. Gatekeeping also involves putting a story into a context and this may involve linking a story to a similar one published before or to comments on similar issues or to some background information. However the whole notion and process of gatekeeping is a highly contested debate

“The public's power to choose, compare and publish its own information, and the rapid formation of self-sustaining online communities, has put strains on the traditional “gatekeeper” perception of the journalist's role. As Bowman and Willis (2003) observe: “A democratized media challenges the notion of the institutional press as the exclusive, privileged, trusted, informed intermediary of the news.”<sup>8</sup>

So do the alternatives to gate-keeping that some suggest work?

“World wide publishing without editors, but with a close peer review daily process and in most cases open to comments from readers is the nature of web and weblog publishing.”<sup>9</sup>

Some of these suggestions can only work on the new alternative news sites and blogs and not those run by traditional or professional media companies. The changing of publishing platforms, from offline to online does not mean that the processes that have always helped media companies maintain credibility, accuracy and balance in their news coverage should be done away with.

### **4.2 Gatewatching needs gatekeeping**

The ‘gatewatching’ principle suggested by Bruns may be a good way for online newspapers to link stories to where they were originally published. Bruns says this process is to “fundamentally publicise news (by pointing to sources) rather than publish it” But this has its own issues to do with navigation. If for example, an online news-site called *Daily Gazette* features summaries of stories and links to where the original story was published, it means that each click navigates a reader to another site and means that the reader has to remember coming back to the *Daily Gazette* and repeat the process for each story they find interesting. Done in a limited way, ‘gatewatching’ will work but a website with say thirty or forty stories all linked to other websites or sources makes reading an arduous task

‘Gatewatching’ is essentially aggregation and is comparable to *RSS feeds* (Real simple Syndication) which is a simple tool comprised of an interface like a normal web page which delivers headlines and short summaries of stories

‘Gatewatching’ still relies on copy submitted and published elsewhere. If the ‘gatewatching’ role is to publicise stories and linking to where stories are published as Bruns says, those stories still have to maintain a level of accuracy in detail, facts and sensitivity to anyone named in the story and need to have regard of media laws .This makes it even more compelling to ensure that stories being linked to do not contain inaccuracies.

Given the speed with which information moves online, and how sites link to others, gatekeepers are still relevant in making sure that stories are correct.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruns, A. , (2005). *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* , New York : Peter Lang Publishing pp 11

<sup>2</sup> Cris Chogugudza, Researcher and Political Commentator, London, UK in interview with Vincent Murwira 13 July 2009

<sup>3</sup> Nel, Francois., Ward, Mike., Rawlinson, Alan., Online Journalism., In *The future of journalism in the advanced democracies* , Anderson, Peter J., Ward, (Eds) Aldershot, Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT., Ashgate 2007 pp 121-122

<sup>4</sup> Kovach, B., Rosenstiel, T. (1999), *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*, New York : The Century Foundation Press

<sup>5</sup> Pavlik, J. V. (2001). *Journalism and new media*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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<sup>6</sup> Reyhan Harmanci, *Citizen journalism carries unique pitfalls*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 05/10/2008, pA7,0p <http://www.sfgate.com/c/a/2008/10/04/MNIV13B9E4.DTL>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/2008/10/apple-s-steve-jobs-rushed-to-er-after-heart-attack-says-cnn-citizen-journalist>

<sup>8</sup> Nel, F., Ward, M., & Rawlinson, A. (2007 ) Online Journalism In *The future of journalism in the advanced democracies* , P. J. Anderson & G. Ward, (Eds) Aldershot, Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT., Ashgate 2007 pp 121-122,Citing Bowman, Shayne., Willis, Chris., *We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, The Media Center at the American Press Institute 2003

<sup>9</sup> eCommunication: The 10 Paradigms of Media in the Digital Age presented at a 2003 conference A20 Cost Conference towards New Media Paradigms Content, Producers, Organizations and Audiences by Jose Luis Orihuela, PhD, Professor at the School of Communication, University of Navarra <http://mccd.udc.es/orihuela/cost/> Downloaded on 6 Nov 2008