The Gatekeeping Function of

Online Newspaper Editions

5303 Fall 2007

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Introduction

Since the introduction of the Internet, newspaper publishers have scrambled for ways to compete. The steady decline in newspaper circulation since the inception of the television has only increased in recent years due to the astounding growth of its online counterpart. The trend that the Internet is playing a larger and larger role to the vitality of newspapers is definite. Traditionally, newspapers have existed with an ominous presence that dictates the 'important' news to their respective communities. However, with the rise of the Internet and its interactive instantaneous information, newspapers struggle with their cyber-identity. As newspapers turn to the Internet to publish information, they must reevaluate their role in delivering information to the public as well as learn new ways to convert their offline system to the Web. Therefore, editors are forced to reconsider their traditional gatekeeping role, taking into account the entire scope of users' often elusive and ambiguous reasons for using the Internet in the first place. To understand and capitalize on the Internet's potential, newspaper editors must also understand the limitations and expectations of the new media.

As newspapers shift to the Internet, they are faced with a different set of obstacles. Since little research has been conducted regarding uses and gratifications of the Internet, habits for online news gathering is still somewhat unclear. Therefore, online editors must engage in certain forms of trial-and-error publishing while realizing that Internet users are not using the Internet solely for information gathering. As a traditionally print and photographic medium, newspapers may now incorporate sound, moving picture, interactivity, and constant updates via RSS feeds over a relatively limitless space. Editors and publishers no longer have to worry about limiting their use of photos, color, or cutting stories short that do not fit the print layout. Instead, they are able to incorporate more news than ever before on a constant and often boundless platform.

However, this abundance of options causes newspaper executives to be faced with more decisions on how to effectively reach their audience.

This study is important because it examines the role of online gatekeepers while searching for a common framework from which to base their editing decisions. Unlike a print newspaper gatekeeper who is able to effectively target his or her audience and their reasons for subscribing, editors and publishers of online content have little to work with. Once an effective set of characteristics and structure for decision-making can be established, newspapers can easily become forerunners in the new media industry. While other mediums also suffer from the onset of Internet obscurities, newspapers may be the first to successfully determine these solutions to retain current readership as well as gain visitors to their online forums.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to determine how online gatekeepers select news stories for publication onto the print newspaper Web sites, analyze their editing habits, and discover their attitudes toward Web writing and editing. While researchers continue to study the Internet and its effects on traditional media, few have determined characteristics of online gatekeepers compared to print gatekeepers. This research is based on the theory that gatekeepers regulate the flow of information and that mass communication gatekeepers (editors, publishers, bloggers, etc.) control the content of their medium. Using interviews from a San Antonio Express News Online Editor and a Dallas Morning News Editor, this study will attempt to understand how editors recognize online content and relate to their respective print news editors. More specifically, this study will explore why certain stories get chosen for Internet publication, the

amount and depth of their coverage, and their conversion from print to the Internet. It will also determine if Internet gatekeepers provide more or less information on the Web.

Since the Internet is such a new technology, the lack of a traditional gatekeeping role has allowed for a more democratic forum. Therefore, the Internet allows for a wider variety of information and thus, more coverage on news stories with a broader range of opinions. The information gathered in this study will aid in our understanding of the current purpose of the gatekeeper on both mediums and speculate future roles of the gatekeeper on the Internet.

Background

The gatekeeping theory is one of the oldest in the field of mass communication research (Shoemaker 2001). Coined by social-psychologist Kurt Lewin, gatekeeping is "the process by which a vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media" (Shoemaker 2001). These news messages must each pass through a number of gatekeepers, such as news editors and reporters, before making it to publication. Thus, a story's success is subject to the decisions of its many gatekeepers who operate at different levels in the process. This "hierarchy of influences" explains "how news gets constructed – by individuals – within a social and occupational setting" (Reese 2001). In addition to the gatekeepers themselves, Lewin held that items have "forces" which either facilitate or constrain their passage through the process (Lewin 1950). These forces (newsworthiness, trustworthiness, etc.) can be positive or negative and may vary in intensity (Shoemaker 2001).

Lewin's "theory of channels and gatekeepers" was first used to explain how food items came through certain "channels" and passed through different "gates" before ending up on the dinner table (Lewin 1950). Upon discovering this idea, David Manning White took the reins and became the first to apply this theory to a journalism context (White 1950). In his study, he saw how subjective judgments influenced editorial decisions of a wire editor for a morning daily newspaper (White 1950). In an analysis of White's study, Reese and Billinger state that the experiment focused on individual gatekeepers' traits and judgments and that the proper operation of each gatekeeper would yield unbiased news, putting more power on the gatekeeper than a story's "forces". Another study by Warren Breed concluded that a publisher's news policy sets the agenda for which stories would get printed, and social forces created by "the more or less consistent orientations shown by a paper" serve as gatekeepers in their own right (Breed 1950). Subsequent studies showed that a journalist's self-perception as the gatekeeper is deeply ingrained (Singer 1998), illustrating the notion that news is what the gatekeepers say it is (Reese 2001).

The gatekeeper's role in traditional media has continually been compared to White's 1950 experiment, showing its effectiveness and ease (Petrow 1982). For example, in Bleske's 1991 study, he found that although the newspaper gatekeeper of 1989 (called Ms. Gates) was nearly triple the size of White's gatekeeper (called Mr. Gates), with less control over news content, now a woman, and with equipment differences, they still work in very similar ways (Bleske 1991). For example, since 1949, three main categories of news have consistently accounted for 63-65 percent of the input from three wire services – human interest, international politics, and national politics (Bleske 1991).

Traditionally, researchers have understood that news judgment and selection has been based on professional, organizational, technological, and cultural influences (McCombs 1976). These influences either stem from the individual or routine forces (Shoemaker 2001). Individual forces are characterized, in their most basic form, as personal views while routine forces include the roles of media workers and media routines, media organizations, external pressures, and ideologies (Shoemaker 1996). For example, in White's 1950 study, he found that the news editors preferred stories "slanted to conform to [their] editorial policies" (White 1950). However, routine forces can be positive as well. In Shoemaker's 2001 study, for example, she found that the newspaper routine of determining newsworthiness predicted the amount of coverage Congressional bills received from U.S. newspapers (Shoemaker 2001). Across studies of newspapers, traditional news values tend to be mentioned frequently as reasons for selecting or rejecting news releases (Abbott 1980).

At a typical newspaper, news releases are generally sent to at least two gatekeepers to make the final decision (Abbott 1980). Newsgathering is typically left up to "staffers" (reporters) whose attitudes and interests are often more liberal than the "executives" (editors) (Breed 1950). Therefore, a reporter will learn the policy of the news organization and his editor to get the stories he wants published. Often, this "policy" is unwritten and learned through trial and error (Breed 1950.)

Literature Review

As the media have evolved since the inception of the gatekeeper theory, researchers have posed new questions about this theory's application to the media's messages (Reese 2001). For

example, with the launch of the Internet, Singer's 1998 study asks, "What happens when the gate keeper goes away?" The Internet is the first mass communication medium to serve a dual purpose - not only does it provide a source of information, but it is also an interactive tool for personal utility and research. "In 1998 about 99 percent of the nation's largest newspapers and most medium-sized papers have an online presence" (Haring 1998). Today all editors and publishers grapple with the notion of how to maintain their gatekeeping roles on the Internet. The majority of the research regarding online gatekeepers goes in two different directions. First, it analyzes how current newsrooms are utilizing the Internet and how they are deciding what and when to post news online. Second, the research identifies bloggers and how they respectively act as new gatekeepers.

Newspaper convergence has affected almost every market and will only become more important as time progresses. "Multimedia convergence refers to one reporter's ability to report, write, and disseminate content across two or more media platforms (Dailey, Demo, and Spillman, 2005). Their choices of what to publish online and what to keep in the primary print product will continue to be scrutinized. In a recent study, there was no hard evidence that newspapers created daily news content specifically for the Web (Singer, 2001). Although this study is before the rise of the blogger it still indicates that the majority of newspaper content online is simply a regurgitation of what it prints. "Nearly all the online production staff members were called 'editors' and said they believed their primary function was to select and reformat rather than write original stories" (Martin, 1998). In another study, by Lindsay Hoffamn, she concluded through a content analysis of mobilizing information in online and print newspapers that online newspapers provide content that simply reinforces print content. This

"shovelware" model of newspapers to post information online appears to be a reoccurring theme in order for newspapers to maintain the flow of information through the gate.

In considering how editors decide what to publish online Arant and Anderson asked if the newspaper online editors support traditional standards. Their study found that 98 percent of the editors agreed that journalism ethics and standards should be the same whether publishing online or in print (Arant and Anderson, 2001). The implications of their study illustrate that newspaper editors want to maintain the same ethics and standards of their print product to their online product and by doing so need to control the flow of their online information. In a study by Daniela Dimitrova, she proposed that hyperlinking could be important to Web users because they increase the user's ability to control the information-seeking process. This ability to navigate from source to source puts the gatekeeping power in the hands of the user and away from the traditional media. "This study showed that online newspapers are not taking full advantage of the Internet in the general and hypertext in particular. Thus, the role of online editors as gatekeepers remains strong" (Dimitrova 2003).

In comparison to the Dimitrova study, Singer claims that modern bloggers utilize hyperlinks as a check-and-balance on the gatekeeper role on the Internet. "In particular, she discovered, that the overwhelming majority of links led to other mainstream sites" (Singer 2005). This study indicates that at least so far, most journalist are 'normalizing blogs to maintain control over the information (Singer 2005). Another study regarding the gatekeeping role of bloggers specifies that bloggers rely on peer review from other bloggers to point out mistakes that can be easily and prominently corrected (Johnson and Kaye 2004).

Research Questions

The first research question of this study seeks to discover any common newsworthy characteristics that online editors look for when selecting news. The answer to this question will illustrate which news qualities are more prevalent online than offline.

RQ1: Do online editors have a specific framework that assists in their selection of news stories?

Based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that while online editors and publishers have similar frameworks for what constitutes news, the ambiguity of Internet use will cause online gatekeepers to utilize somewhat different frameworks for selecting news.

H1: Online editors have different frameworks for news selection among each other.

Secondly, this study aims to understand how much content is being covered compared to similar print versions of the same story. The answer to this question will shed light on any space or content constraints that online gatekeepers must contend with as well as whether or not these stories are being edited to conform to their online audience.

RQ2: Is more information covered in online news Web sites than on traditional print articles?

Due to the relatively unregulated and unrestricted nature of the Internet, it is believed that online articles are not subject to the scrutiny and more strict control of print newspapers.

H2: More information is covered online than on traditional print articles.

The amount of online content that online gatekeepers allow shows that online editors can be either more or less selective on the content they allow. For example, more content and discussion on a blog will lead to a diminished role of the online gatekeeper and a stronger audience presence.

RQ3: Do online gatekeepers allow for a more democratic forum online than print gatekeepers?

Based on the tenet that the lack of Internet regulation affects all outlets, even online companies and businesses, it is hypothesized that print newspaper websites allow for a less controlled environment.

H3: Online gatekeepers allow for a more democratic forum than print gatekeepers.

The significance of this research is that the role of the gatekeeper could be changing for the better. While current studies are beginning to show that audiences are seeing the Internet as more credible than other sources (Choi, Junho H.; Watt, James H.; Lynch, Michael), news sites may only benefit from their perceived honest and open forum.   Perhaps Internet gatekeeping methods can spread to other mediums such as television or print. Internet trends have yet to be studied in depth, and this study can give insight on where the medium is going in the future. It will also give understanding regarding user habits as well as their reasons for using the medium.

Methodology

Information was gathered via recorded interviews with online editors of two local Texas newspapers: The San Antonio Express News and the Dallas Morning News. The interviews consisted of five pre-determined questions which regarded news qualities they looked for,

editing procedures, and their opinions and attitudes about online content versus print content. These interviews were conducted over the phone during one week in November. The participant from the Dallas Morning News was Tom Erickson, the weekend editor of DallasMorningNews.com. The second participant was Executive Producer Eric Braun of the San Antonio Express News website, Mysa.com. Erick Braun edits and assigns news stories to 11 reporters. According to Mysa.com, he is "responsible for setting the editorial direction of the site and improving the overall user experience" (MySA.com, 2007). These two participants were e-mailed and accepted a short interview, while online editors of the Houston Chronicle and the Austin American Statesman did not respond.

Results

After interviewing these two editors, many of their comments answered the proposed research questions. H1 proposed that online editors have different frameworks for news selection among each other. Tom Errickson from DallasMorningNews.com answered that he looks for timeliness and proximity when assigning or publishing a story. He also mentioned that online readers prefer stories relating to crime, weather, and sports. However, Erick Braun from MySA.com looks for stories that inspire comments. He indicated that he looks for stories with the typical news qualities, but he also tries to choose stories that will cause people to talk online. Therefore, H1 was supported. Editors, while preferring similar news qualities to publish stories, also search for other, non-traditional characteristics that often differ among editors.

In addition, H2 supposed that more information is covered online than traditional print articles. To measure this, a question was asked regarding whether print articles are taken

verbatim and posted on the website or if the stories are edited for content or space restrictions. Tom Errickson mentioned that he believes that stories are longer on the web than in print. For the most part, he said that stories in their print version have comments at the end that tell readers to go to DallasMorningNews.com for longer versions of the story. Erick Braun said that 95% of the stories he publishes online are exact replicas of the print versions of the story, showing that no more or less information is provided online. According to Erick Braun, "Most of the stories on the newspaper come across edited so we don't have to touch them." Therefore, H2 is partially supported.

H3 proposed that online gatekeepers allow for a more democratic forum than print gatekeepers. Based on Tom Errickson's comments, online readers have different interests than print readers and look for stories that affect them while they are reading. By revealing that the DallasMorningNews.com works their online stories into their print edition, it shows that more information is available online. Whether or not this points to less restriction is a judgment call. However, Erick Braun said that MySA.com receives about 40 blog posts every day. He stated, "Our goal is to start conversations." This leads to the assumption that more personal opinion is also available and encouraged online. However, while the blog posts and online comments may provide additional information, editors still edit every entry based on content and grammar. This shows that even this extra information is sometimes limited by the gatekeeper. Therefore, H3 is partially supported. While the Internet provides somewhat of a more open forum, the gatekeeper still seems to be active in editing comments and articles.

Discussion and Conclusion

By analyzing the role of the online gatekeeper, this study attempts to discern their current identity and future implications. Obviously, the similarities between online and print gatekeepers show that online news is gathered in similar ways; however each medium has separate roles in disseminating that information. This study interviewed two major metro newspaper's online department to discover this role of Internet gatekeeper and how their quality control function is adapting with the new technological trends. This study also opens the discussion as to what differences exist in the qualities of news content when deciding where and how to publish specific information.

The above information indicates that while online editors have similar functions to their print counterpart, their elusive new medium is forcing them to change some traditional habits. For example, while they look for news qualities common to print articles such as timeliness and proximity, these online editors are taking them a step further. Online editors are looking for stories that will elicit feedback and are updated regularly. However, these changes are not only prevalent when converting to an online forum. The fact that online gatekeepers also hold somewhat inconsistent frameworks between each other illustrates the current trial-and-error period that is currently plaguing them on the Web. Because of the limitless space restraints, interactive abilities, and real time information the online news selection differs from what will publish in print. Moreover, while both online and print editors prefer similar news qualities to publish stories, online editors also search for other, non-traditional characteristics that will aggregate a community conversation.

This study questions if online gatekeepers allow for a more democratic forum than print gatekeepers. Online editors still need to amend comments and articles prior to publishing them online. However, they still have nontraditional gatekeeping concerns that facilitate a more active

involvement by the readers. Due to the Internet's interactive capabilities the new media storytellers engage the readers in an open dialog conversation. Interactivity forces the online editor to make different decisions that they traditionally would make. When considering that their space is unlimited and their audiences are different, it is no surprise that the role of the online editor has slightly evolved.

In broader terms, this study attempts to resolve the issue of which edition provides more information to its readers. The study discovered that although the online forum provides virtually no space restraints, the majority of information that is published comes verbatim from the print edition. While editors are using different gatekeeping techniques, the flow of information remains the same. Internet blogs comments, for example, can be compared to a traditional "letter to the editor," which is still subject to publication edits. In general, this study supports earlier research indicating that the gatekeeping functions of online editors remain strong. The idea that the Internet is more democratic opposes the observation that online newspaper readers are still only given specific choices.

Future implications of this study reveals that newspapers are, at least, attempting to evolve with technology. Newspapers bring their brand identity to the Internet that people trust and rely on for information. As newspapers adapt their business model for online communications, the role of information gatekeeper must also change to meet the new requirements. Although the new medium demands the changing of the traditional functions of the gatekeeper, newspapers cannot discard their professional reputation and standards of accuracy when they shift from print to online.

Limitations

While many of the findings of this study are accurate, limitations may have skewed some information. First of all, the qualitative nature of this examination may have resulted in biased or inaccurate measures of how gatekeepers function. Answers were based primarily on personal experience and opinion and can not necessarily be applied to all gatekeepers from every newspaper outlet. A quantitative survey, studying several hundred newspapers around the United States may have provided more reliable information. Secondly, due to time constraints and difficulty with participation, only two individuals were interviewed. This may have heightened inconsistencies between their answers and led to exaggerated conclusions. In addition, these interviewees were from the same state with similar circulations. This only provided partial, restricted information regarding the gatekeeper's role as well. Perhaps a paid survey would have helped gain additional and more heterogeneous respondents which would have yielded more applicable, well-rounded results.

Third, while these interviews were insightful, they lacked some depth and explanation. Because of the fast-paced style of their jobs, these questions were meant to be short and to-the-point so as to get more respondents. However, this also created some limitations on question variety and details that may have proven to be useful. For example, explanations as to exact news qualities and styles typical of Web stories may have allowed for more conclusive results. Finally, this study would have benefited from interviewing print editors as well. By doing so, not only could the discussion have analyzed the online gatekeeper's role, but it could have compared that role to the traditional role of print editors, publishers, and producers.

Future Areas of Study

Further analysis of the gatekeeping function of online media should expand beyond newspapers and spread to television and radio station Web sites. Studies should be done that analyze workers who are taking over these new gatekeeping roles at station Web sites. A comprehensive survey could ask about certain practices and policies that seem to be the most effective to the audience as well as provide information regarding each gatekeeper's experience and demographics. In addition, a longitudinal panel study incorporating quantitative research of several stations' online visitor growth over a number of years would determine which procedures seem to be the most operative.

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Interview with Erik Braun, Executive Producer Mysa.com

What qualities of newsworthiness do you look for when publishing an article?

We tend to look at stories that inspire comments. We try to run a balance of what is important but will also get users to talk. Our goal is to start conversations.

How often do you edit based on its content?

Most of the stories on the newspaper come across edited so we don't have to touch them. All blog posts we edit for content and punctuation, grammar, that sort of thing, and we edit everything from the television station. And that's around 10 stories a day from the TV station, and anything that's breaking news, we'll edit from either source. And that's about 2-3 stories. On an average day it's about 15 stories, and then on top of that, we'll edit about 40 blog posts.

So if it ran on the newspaper, would it go verbatim onto Mysa.com?

95% of the time, yes

How often do you edit based on space constraints?

We have no space constraints.

Would you say that certain stories belong on the web and not in print and vice versa?

Yeah, stories, especially spot news, say it's a wreck on a highway, it's a story that's basically over by the time the newpspaper's going to come out the next day, but it's really important as people are leaving work to get on the road, because traffic here's horrible. So, traffic stories, or maybe, I worked in Ann Arbor, Michigan where I worked for Mlive.com, and we had a story – there was a bomb threat at a post office. It ended up being nothing, it barely warranted a mention in the briefs in the paper that day, but it shut down traffic all over downtown Ann Arbor. So, really spot news that people aren't going to care about the next day, a lot of that thing is really important to folks online.

Do you ever meet with the editor of the print version?

Well, we are [in separate buildings], but I meet with them all the time. We attend the budget meetings. Somebody from my staff is going to be over there at least twice a day. I meet with Bob Rivard pretty regularly, I meet with the section editors pretty regularly. We stay in pretty close contact.

Do these answers apply to political columns and blogs?

Yes, for the most part, it stays the same, with the exception being during election season. Most political columns come from the newspaper, so we won't end up editing that a whole lot. We share a blog with the Houston Chronicle, and I'm pretty sure they handle the editing on that.

Interview with Weekend Editor, Tom Erickson of DallasMorningNews.com

What qualities of newsworthiness do you look for when publishing an article?

(Paraphrased) Timeliness is huge, proximity

How often do you edit a story based on content?

(Paraphrased) Most of the stories are edited throughout the day. Usually, we work in the opposite way – from online to print. Stories are edited many times on the web until it is ready for the print version. That way, it is updated when it hits the newsstand the next day. We had one story that was edited 15 times by two different reporters until it finally was ready for print.

How often do you edit a story based on space constraints?

…To read a larger version of this story, go to Dallasnews.com, I know our sports staff, if a team plays on the west coast, a lot of times, their game doesn't end until at deadline or after deadline, so the writer may send a brief story to the paper and a longer story for the web. I would say we probably have things longer on the web than we do [in print]. Peoples' patience is kind of thin, so they wouldn't want to scroll forever and read a long, long story. If you were a Maverick's fan and you didn't stay up to watch the game against Golden State, you might want to read a longer story online

Do certain stories belong on the web and not in print and vice versa?

We have different interests online versus print. Online readers are much more interested in crime and sports than print readers are, they're also more interested in weather than print readers are - anything that's affecting them right now, or happening right now. If somebody sees a fire outside, they want to know what it is, so they'll turn to us, because we, at least during the day, cover anything that's happening as it's happening. I think a lot of newspaper readers, especially on the weekends, want to read longer stories and read the paper and take time on Sunday to read the paper versus seeing that stuff online

Do you ever meet with the editor of the print version?

Yeah our staff does, several times a day. We're all in Dallas Moring News building, and we all sit amongst each other. But yeah, the website staff is represented at the various meetings – there's a morning news meeting and an afternoon news meeting. The political editor is at those meetings, so many of their stories are planned well in advance so they're mostly features. When we do elections, we plot out what we're going to have online, and what we do online is basically try to cover the top story on election night and just have links to results and follow up the next day with some longer stories