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User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space

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Abstract
This article explores implications of the transition to an environment in which users have become secondary gatekeepers of the content published on media websites. This expanded user role, facilitated by technology and enabled by digital news editors, includes assessment of contributions by other users; communication of the perceived value or quality of user- and journalist-produced content; and selective re-dissemination of that content. The result is a two-step gatekeeping process, in which initial editorial decisions to make an item part of the news product are followed by user decisions to upgrade or downgrade the visibility of that item for a secondary audience. Preliminary empirical evidence indicates these user gatekeeping capabilities are now pervasive on US newspaper sites.

Keywords
Gatekeeping, online audience, online newspapers, social media, user-generated content, visibility

As more people create, customize, and share information online, old definitions of 'journalists' and 'journalism' become less useful. People who work inside a newsroom now produce and publish only a fraction of mass-mediated 'news.' Formats that emerged outside the newsroom, such as blogs and various types of social media, have become integral to the work of news organizations and their employees.

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Journalists have responded largely by emphasizing normative practices, such as pre-publication verification, and principles, such as post-publication accountability. Despite internal pressures created by resource constraints and external pressures created in part by increasingly widespread use of social media, journalists have claimed that the cultural understandings informing their occupational function as gatekeepers safeguard the credibility and quality of the content they create (Singer, 2010; Witschge and Nygren, 2009).

Yet at the same time as journalists are asserting this somewhat repositioned gatekeeping role, they are passing off to online users a growing range of related tasks. Users' active participation in assessing the value – and in doing so, determining the visibility – of what is published on a media website goes well beyond previous journalistic conceptions of what audience members can or should do. Users now have the capability to make and implement what essentially are editorial judgments about what is worthy and what is less so, about what others should read and what they might as well ignore.

This article explores implications of the transition to an environment in which users, arguably for the first time, are serving as secondary gatekeepers for the content published on media websites (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). This expanded user role involves assessment of contributions by journalists and other users, communication of the material's perceived value or quality, and re-dissemination – both broadcast and narrowcast – of selected content. Through these assessments, users make some items more visible to others and other items less visible or even invisible. Preliminary empirical evidence from a diverse sample of newspaper websites in the US supports the contention that this shift in user activity has become pervasive.

Gatekeepers – and more gatekeepers

Journalists have long seen the task of making particular information available to the public, and determining that other information is not worth viewing, as central to their occupational duties (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Weaver et al., 2007). This role as gatekeeper, a sociological construct first applied to journalists more than six decades ago (White, 1950), rests on an interaction of influences from the ideological to the individualistic (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996), resulting in choices that are organizationally efficient and culturally acceptable inside and outside the newsroom. Gatekeeping is a 'regime of control' over what content is allowed to emerge from the newsroom and enter public circulation (Bruns, 2005: 11). A journalistic gatekeeper determines not just the quantity of information that reaches the public but also its quality according to particular definitions, shared among members of an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1993), of what news is or should be.

Interactive environment

In the open and unbounded online environment, where a limitless volume of information is available, the distinction between quality and quantity is especially important. Arguably, if there are no gates, there is no need for anyone to tend them (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2000). Former gatekeepers become what Bruns (2005) calls 'gatewatchers,' engaged primarily in publicizing particular bits of available information that seem

interesting, a role greatly enhanced by the advent of social media. Journalists themselves seek to differentiate between publishing, which anyone can do, and journalism, a patch of occupational turf (Lowrey, 2006) they say relies on news judgment, norms, and practices such as verification to determine the merit of what is published.

But however it is defined, the gatekeeping process as an attempt to separate the worthy from the unworthy must involve far more participants in an open media environment than in a traditional one. As early as the 1990s, journalists were beginning to think about 'gate opening,' moving tentatively away from closed content selection practices and toward efforts to foster user participation (Boczkowski, 2004). They began by enabling users to comment on website content – and have moved steadily and substantially on from there.

As audiences have gained the ability not only to comment on information presented by the journalist but also to share it with others, 'journalists' perceptions of the newsworthiness of an event interact with the reader's perceptions of its personal relevance,' as Shoemaker and Vos (2009: 124) explain. Therefore, they add, 'we must conceptualize readers as having their own gate, and they send news items to others in the audience when the interaction between newsworthiness and personal relevance is strong enough.'

In selecting items for re-dissemination, users make editorial judgments about what may be of interest to an audience made up of other users. This new 'user-generated visibility' is not the same as a reporter's concentrated effort to gather fresh information; nor is it typically undertaken with the same amount of thought as an editor's decision about what to place on the front page. However, it is a deliberate action based on explicit content assessment nonetheless, part of what Goode (2009) calls a 'framework of mediation' (p.1291) that encompasses a wide spectrum of news-making practices in a media environment in which 'visibility and attention, if not information, remain scarce resources' (p.1295). The value of news content in this environment 'will be increasingly determined by the interactions between producers' rather than by intrinsic merit of the product itself (Deuze, 2008: 860).

Of course, it is one thing for journalists to recognize such a significant shift and quite another to change their occupational ideology and self-referential professional culture (Deuze, 2005, 2008) to accommodate it – especially when such a change in self-perception and practice demands acceptance of the fact that journalistic authority and even values are being diluted along with control over the product (Robinson, 2007; Thurman, 2011). A recent study of BBC journalists' responses to user-generated content, for instance, found that 'while traditional barriers to news selection have been made more flexible, editorially UGC is very carefully moderated. … Moderation ensures that there is little sign of UGC changing or challenging the BBC's editorial values' (Harrison, 2010: 253).

In the meantime, however, the extent to which some website users have moved beyond their role as relatively passive consumers of traditional media is striking. While relatively few seem eager to do the hard work of generating their own news content (Boczkowski, 2010; Singer, 2010; Thurman, 2008), rapidly growing numbers enjoy both personalizing and redistributing content that already exists (Thurman, 2011). News has become 'a shared social experience as people exchange links and recommendations as a form of cultural currency in their social networks' (Pew Research Center's Project for

Excellence in Journalism, 2010). These active redistributors see as a natural part of their digital news experience the ongoing process of determining not only what is valuable to them as individuals but also what they believe will be important, interesting, entertaining, or useful to others. Although news may not necessarily dominate the content that they share (Baresch et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2012), there is evidence that users do like having the option; significant numbers report that one factor in choosing where to get their news online is whether it is easy to share the site's content (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). In addition, particularly for smaller news organizations, social distribution has become a significant driver of website traffic (Gordon and Johnson, 2012).

In other words, while audience members may continue to rely largely on journalists to serve as the initial gatekeepers, they expect to be able to refine the journalists' choices by determining their interest or relevance on a case-by-case basis. The participatory online environment thus facilitates a two-step gatekeeping process involving both visibility and value, as Shoemaker and Vos (2009) suggested. Users have become 'active recipients' of the news (Singer et al., 2011: 179).

Traditionally, journalists decide what content to publish based on a generalized conception of a relatively undifferentiated mass audience. The journalist serves as gatekeeper for this mass audience, selecting a subset of items to make visible; the role has newly intensified public feedback loops today but otherwise has changed little over the years. However, individual members of that audience now serve as secondary gatekeepers for a different group of people, some perhaps among the media outlet's original audience and others likely not.

That secondary audience among people the user-as-gatekeeper knows may be smaller in number than the one reached by the original media gatekeepers, but it is likely to be composed of individuals who find the item of particular value because of the targeted process through which they received it (Baresch et al., 2011). In this case, the news outlet benefits from user connections with the recipient that not even the best marketing strategy can deliver.

Alternatively, the re-dissemination of information may reach an audience larger than its original one, as in the case of items from a small news outlet shared through a widely used social bookmarking site such as Newsvine. In this case, users are essentially serving as gatekeepers for a mass audience different from, yet not ultimately unlike, the one the original outlet serves – a large and unknown group of people who might be interested. Particularly given the increased newsroom attention to web analytics, along with the significant and growing importance of website 'traffic' in news organizations' economic calculations (Singer, 2010; Usher, 2009; Vujnovic et al., 2010), this user-instigated boost in visibility may have great concrete value.

Cultural boundaries

A considerable body of work over many years has sought to delineate who is a journalist and who is not. In deconstructing the constituent elements of journalistic culture, Hanitzsch identifies a series of dimensions that include institutional roles; epistemologies related to the fundamental norm of truth-telling; and what he terms 'ethical ideologies' (2007: 378) or ways of responding to ethical problems. For instance, journalists are concerned with

how truth can be obtained and justified, with some cultural norms foregrounding an empirical presentation of facts and others highlighting analysis and evaluation of those facts.

These dimensions are well-suited to professional news production, Hanitzsch concludes, but not to 'alternative communication activities' (2007: 380) that include citizen journalism or other participatory forms. As journalists incorporate these newer communication modes, he suggests, they need to accommodate the idea that audiences can be active as well as passive.

Journalists do increasingly see audiences as at least potentially active – but their activity does not fit comfortably into journalism's cultural structures. Obviously, audience members do not work within a newsroom, and they generally are not paid by the news organization. The arm's-length relationship encourages journalists to draw boundaries around themselves and their work. Most of those boundaries rest on claims of quality deriving from what journalists describe as professional work standards that they feel audience members generally fail to meet.

Indeed, virtually all the research published to date about journalists' reactions to user-generated content highlights such distinctions. In particular, journalists have expressed concerns about the credibility of user contributions – or, more precisely, the difficulty in ascertaining their credibility – and about some users' propensity for abusive discourse. A far from exhaustive list of examples includes the following:

- A belief that user contributions have the potential to damage the media outlet's desired brand identity of credibility and trustworthiness (Thurman, 2011), particularly because of the difficulty of verifying user-supplied information (Hermida and Thurman, 2008).
- A greater willingness to rely on users for soft news, local information, and lifestyle material rather than information about matters of greater public significance, coupled with concerns about biased and insufficiently credible material from users (Domingo, 2008; Örnebring, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008).
- Concerns about a lack of balance, decency, and taste – as well as about an arguably inappropriate overall 'tone' – of user contributions (Thurman, 2008).
- Similarly, characterizations of user-generated content as inaccurate, irrelevant, offensive, and/or badly written – 'gibberish from chronic whingers,' as one British journalist at a local newspaper put it. Other respondents in the same study agreed that users' general lack of accountability for what they write was problematic (Singer, 2010: 134).

In looking at journalists' perceptions of the ethical issues raised by user-generated content, Singer and Ashman (2009) found credibility and civility to be uppermost in the minds of practitioners. Their study at Britain's *Guardian* newspaper offers one of the clearest expressions of a perceived differentiation between journalists and users along ethical lines. For instance, journalists felt confident they took adequate steps to ensure that what they wrote was credible but felt helpless to either assess or improve the credibility of user input. They also cited the ability of users, unlike journalists, to provide content anonymously as contributing to the too-often uncivil tone of online discourse.

These studies and others have highlighted journalists' claims that as formal gatekeepers, they occupy a higher ethical ground, one that yields a better-quality product whose hallmarks include credibility, trustworthiness, and civility of expression. Yet despite using such criteria to differentiate themselves from users, journalists have implemented policies with the goal of narrowing the perceived gap.

Virtually all online publications that allow user contributions seek to control those contributions by demanding adherence to explicit legal and ethical guidelines. This overt oversight reflects persistent concerns about the news outlet's reputation for trustworthiness, as well as worries about legal liabilities (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). For some, monitoring precedes publication; under this system, the journalist retains a gatekeeping role over user material. For a majority, however, checking every comment before releasing it for publication has long since proved an impossible task, as expanding user participation has coincided with shrinking newsroom budgets and staffs. Instead, most news organizations use a system of 'post-moderation,' in which user contributions are published more or less immediately, then (perhaps) reviewed – by journalists and, importantly, by other users (Singer et al., 2011).

This move toward post-moderation has been undertaken largely for logistical reasons, as well as in response to court rulings, particularly in the US, that have suggested legal liability is incurred only if a company employee had a role in deciding whether an item should or should not be published. Yet post-moderation of comments marks a significant step away from journalistic control and toward user control of material published under an organization's aegis – and its logo. Post-moderation, then, is another indication of a shift toward increased user ability to shape the content of news websites, with users making decisions about what others are to see or not see.

The rest of this article considers the dimensions and implications of this shift. Three aspects, giving users progressively greater control and an extended scope of oversight, are considered: gatekeeping decisions about what constitutes *responsible* content from other users, primarily involving the assessment of user comments just discussed; decisions about what constitutes *valuable* content from other users and from journalists; and decisions about what constitutes content so engaging that the user is willing to *re-publish or re-disseminate* it.

The ways in which these decisions are being made on US newspaper websites can be framed as a primary research question with three sub-questions:

RQ1: To what extent are US online newspapers enabling users to act as secondary gatekeepers through actions that enhance the visibility to users, both individually and collectively, of content provided on newspaper websites?
RQ1a: To what extent are gatekeeping decisions about what constitutes *responsible* content from users being shared?
RQ1b: To what extent are gatekeeping decisions about what constitutes *valuable* content from both users and journalists being shared?
RQ1c: To what extent are gatekeeping decisions involving the *re-dissemination of content* from both users and journalists being shared?

Data collection

The researcher visited a sample of US general-interest newspaper websites in February and March 2011. Newspapers were selected as the medium of choice because of their wide range of sizes, variable ownership structures, and scope of innovation relative to other legacy media, especially local news outlets. Of particular interest was whether approaches to user contributions at larger outlets, including nationally distributed publications such as *The New York Times* or *USA Today*, were observable at regional newspapers and those serving local communities.

To construct the sample, the author first created a list of all daily general-interest, English-language newspapers by state, drawn from the Audit Bureau of Circulations' 'eCirc' database (http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newsform.asp); the two national papers also were included. Circulation audits for the period ending September 30, 2010, were the most recent available at the time of the study. Newspapers that published, in print, at least five times a week were included and their highest circulation figure – typically for the Sunday edition – recorded. A total of 675 newspapers constituted this initial sampling frame, which excluded 10 daily general-interest newspapers that did not file circulation data during the period, as well as papers not included in the ABC audit.

Newspaper Association of America categories were used to assign each newspaper to a category based on size: 250,000 print circulation or more (Category 'A,' 38 daily newspapers in all); 100,000–249,999 circulation ('B,' 55 newspapers); 50,000–99,999 circulation ('C,' 92 newspapers); and below 50,000 circulation ('D,' 490 newspapers). Print circulation figures were used because of their ready accessibility and because they are a useful proxy for online reach.

To construct a sample with a wide geographic representation, each state was considered separately. A list was generated, displaying each newspaper in the state in order of descending circulation and assigning it a number and a letter. (For instance, Arizona's seven listed dailies were assigned 1A, 2B, 3D, 4D, 5D, 6D, and 7D.) If the state had only one daily newspaper in a circulation category – the 'A' and 'B' papers in the Arizona example – it was automatically included in the sample. If a state had two or more newspapers in a circulation category – papers 3–7 in Arizona – an online random number generator (http://random.org) was used to select one paper from the list. If the state had no newspapers in a given category or categories – 'C' in the case of Arizona, which had no listed newspapers with a maximum circulation between 50,000 and 99,999 – that category was skipped for that state.

The appendix shows the 138 newspapers selected for inclusion in the study. Of these, 48 dailies had circulations below 50,000; 36 had circulations between 50,000 and 99,999; 30 had circulations between 100,000 and 249,999; and 24 had circulations over 250,000. Only the two national newspapers had circulations of more than 1 million.

The researcher visited the website of each selected paper during the two-month period in early 2011. Pages consulted at each site included the home page, a section front, a story, and a comments page (if separate from the story). Although a formal content analysis was not conducted for this preliminary investigation, she logged the presence or absence of the ability to:

- report abusive comments from users (RQ1a);
- rate comments, commenters, or both (RQ1b);
- display journalist-produced items by popularity among website users, such as the ability to click a tab to display 'most read' or 'most emailed' stories (RQ1b);
- email a story to another user (RQ1c);
- share a story using one or more social bookmarking tools (RQ1c).

In addition, she identified whether updates were provided through the two most widely used social networking tools, Facebook and Twitter, which offer opportunities covered by RQ1b and RQ1c. In most cases, this was apparent from the newspaper home page; however, she also checked the Facebook and Twitter sites to verify that content was updated regularly.

Because so many US newspapers are owned by chains, which have implemented similar (although not necessarily identical) policies and features across their properties, she also logged the ownership for each sampled site. If the information was not readily available on the website, she used the *Columbia Journalism Review* 'Who Owns What' page (http://www.cjr.org/resources/). If the newspaper was not included among the company listings there, she used Google search to track down the information.

It should be noted that most websites require registration and log in to comment. Some also require log in to access user profiles or other information. The researcher did not wish to comment herself, nor was she interested in actually seeing user profiles; her interest was merely whether such capabilities were available through the website. Therefore, she did not register or log in to collect the data.

Findings

All 138 of the daily newspapers included in the study offered multiple gatekeeping opportunities to their online users. While larger papers were more likely to provide a greater range of options, even the smallest papers – and 13 of the sampled papers were tiny, with print circulations under 10,000 – offered some.

Despite the much-publicized prevalence of corporate ownership (Bagdikian, 2004), small groups, private owners, or families owned a considerable number of the newspapers in this sample. Of the 138 papers, 49 (35.5 percent) were outside the orbit of large media corporations. Among the 89 that were part of newspaper chains or other large media enterprises, such as the Washington Post Company, a quarter (22 newspapers, or 15.9 percent of the total sample) were owned by Gannett; McClatchy and Lee Enterprises each owned 11 newspapers (8 percent of the total sample for each company). MediaNews, Advance, and The New York Times Company owned seven or eight sampled newspapers apiece; other media corporations, such as Tribune, Morris, or Hearst, owned three or fewer.

Gannett and Lee Enterprise papers offered broadly consistent user gatekeeping options across all their properties. Newspapers under other ownership displayed more variation, with larger outlets generally offering a more diverse set of options, as described below.

The rest of this section considers each of the research sub-questions in turn.

Table 1. User capabilities related to comments by other users.

	Over 250K	100K–250K	50K–100K	Under 50K	Total
Report abuse	21 of 24 (87.5%)	27 of 30 (90%)	26 of 36 (72.2%)	31 of 48 (64.6%)	105 of 138 (76.1%)
Rate comments or commenters	20 of 24 (83.3%)	22 of 30 (73.3%)	21 of 36 (58.3%)	19 of 48 (39.6%)	82 of 138 (59.4%)

RQ1a: responsible content from other users

Ever since stories published on media websites were opened to comments years ago, journalists have sought to encourage, or even force, users to abide by legal and ethical publication standards. As summarized above, these standards broadly emphasize civility and are intended to preserve the decorum of a communal space.

However, most online editors soon realized that taking on all the moderation themselves was an enormous task. This study supports the widespread recognition that users themselves can be afforded the primary responsibility for seeing that those standards are met. Although journalists or their designees typically retain the ultimate say in determining what constitutes a serious enough violation to warrant removal from the website, they have given users the ability to play an active role in ensuring that other users behave as responsible members of the online community. Among the 138 newspaper websites in this study, 105 (76.1 percent) asked users to report abusive comments. Table 1, which provides a breakdown by circulation size, indicates that users were more likely to be assigned this gatekeeping task at larger papers; however, two-thirds of even the smallest sampled outlets encouraged users to flag abusive comments.

RQ1b: valuable content from other users and from journalists

Two sets of data address the degree to which online newspaper users have opportunities to communicate their assessment of the quality or worth of content available on the website. The first involves content produced by users; the second involves content produced by journalists.

Compared with the number of papers inviting users to report abusive comments, a smaller but still sizable majority of the sample enabled users to rate or recommend the comments provided by other users and/or to rate the commenter; the latter option typically was facilitated by the ability to access a user profile, including the person's comment history. In all, 82 of the 138 newspapers (59.4 percent) provided this option. Table 1 provides a breakdown by circulation size. There is a more noticeable difference here between the larger and smaller news outlets in the sample; most of the latter did not offer users this gatekeeping function.

Prevalence of this feature reflects the growth of community management technologies such as Pluck (http://pluck.com) and Disqus (http://disqus.com), both widely used among the sampled newspapers. Such tools facilitate user gatekeeping functions. For example, Pluck – the technology of choice for Gannett, the nation's biggest newspaper

chain and the largest single owner of papers in this study – automatically generates detailed user profiles; enables comments to be shared on social networking platforms; and offers the ability to display comments by user activity, popularity among other users, or in various additional ways.

The opportunity to express and communicate preferences regarding the content provided by journalists, however, was widespread. Among the 138 newspapers, 129 (93.5 percent) displayed an automatically generated list of content based on user activities. Table 2 provides details. Of the nine that did not provide this option, five were in the smallest circulation category, three were in the second-smallest, and one was in the 100,000–250,000 group. All two dozen of the largest papers in the sample offered users the ability to see what other users read or otherwise engaged with.

Nearly 82 percent of the newspapers enabled users to display a list of clickable stories identified as 'most popular,' 'most read,' or 'most viewed' – different names for a capability allowing users to make their reading preferences visible to others through the data-processing tools used by newspaper content management systems. The ability to display the 'most commented' stories also was offered by a majority of the sampled papers. Other options are shown in Table 2.

In addition, a large majority of the sampled newspapers had an actively updated presence on Facebook and/or Twitter – 92.8 percent and 95.7 percent, respectively. Of the 10 newspapers that did not provide regular updates on a Facebook wall, nine were in the smallest circulation category and one was in the 100,000–250,000 category. Of the six newspapers that did not provide regular updates through Twitter, five were among the smallest, and one was in the second-smallest group. Because of the ability for users to

Table 2. Newspapers enabling display of journalistic content.

User preference or activity: Most …	Number of sampled newspapers offering feature (*N* = 138)
Popular/read/viewed	113 (81.9%)
Commented	77 (55.8%)
Emailed	34 (24.6%)
Shared on Facebook	22 (15.9%)
Popular photos/photo galleries/video	13 (9.4%)
Discussed in forums	8 (5.8%)
Blogged	2 (1.4%)
Searched	2 (1.4%)
No such features offered	9 (6.5%)

share content with friends or followers through these social networking sites, the dedication of newsroom resources to maintaining these feeds suggests newspapers are not simply facilitating but actively inviting users to publicly assess the value of the content and to serve as redistributors of the information provided.

RQ1c: dissemination opportunities

The third research sub-question considers the extent to which users not only can communicate their content choices but also can actively re-publish their selected material – that is, the extent to which they are fulfilling a traditional gatekeeping role of deciding what information merits dissemination. Two additional sets of data address this issue.

The first is the option with the greatest longevity of any in this study: the ability to email a story to someone else. Only four sampled newspapers did not offer such a capability, three in the smallest circulation category and one in the second-smallest. That means 97.1 percent of the newspapers encouraged users to redistribute their content through email.

The second redistribution opportunity is newer but has quickly become only slightly less pervasive. Among the sampled papers, 129 (93.5 percent) enabled users to 'share' website content through use of at least one social bookmarking and/or social networking tool, as shown in Table 3. Gannett papers, for example, offered a standard set of eight options under a 'share' icon: Del.icio.us, Digg, Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Newsvine, FarkIt, and BuzzUp! McClatchy newspapers provided access to a lengthy list of hundreds of options, as did other papers – both chain and independent – in the study. Here again, smaller papers were less likely to incorporate this innovation; however, several regional newspapers in the study provided limited redistribution opportunities, and one in the largest circulation category offered none.

Overall, however, US newspaper publishers eager to boost their traffic figures appear to have enthusiastically embraced the ability of their users to share links and thus make

Table 3. Newspapers facilitating content redistribution through social bookmarking tools.

Social bookmark options	Over 250K	100K–250K	50K–100K	Under 50K	Total
4 or more options	21 of 24 (87.5%)	26 of 30 (86.7%)	30 of 36 (83.3%)	37 of 48 (77.1%)	114 of 138 (82.6%)
3 options	2 of 24 (8.3%)	2 of 30 (6.7%)	1 of 36 (2.8%)	3 of 48 (6.3%)	8 of 138 (5.8%)
2 options (Facebook, Twitter only)	–	2 of 30 (6.7%)	3 of 36 (8.3%)	–	5 of 138 (3.6%)
1 option only	–	–	1 of 36 (2.8%)	1 of 48 (2.1%)	2 of 138 (1.4%)
None	1 of 24 (4.2%)	–	2 of 36 (5.6%)	6 of 48 (12.5%)	9 of 138 (6.5%)

the content visible to people who might not ordinarily visit the website. That overwhelming majorities have chosen to incorporate the widget offering multiple social bookmarking options suggests they are seeking to cast as wide a net as possible. In doing so, they are sharing with users the role of publisher. Indeed, with this last innovation, news organizations have given users full gatekeeping responsibilities: Users identify what they see as worthwhile material for their own personal use, communicate that assessment to others, and re-publish or otherwise disseminate their selected items to a mass audience.

Discussion

The active user role suggested by these data in assessing the individual value – and, in doing so, determining the visibility – of what is published on a newspaper website goes well beyond previous journalistic conceptions of what audience members can or should do. Not since 18th century newspapers left their fourth page blank so that people could add their own observations for the benefit of subsequent readers (Singer et al., 2011) have news consumers had this sort of power to make editorial judgments not only for themselves but also for others – and, importantly, to act on those judgments by serving as secondary distributors of the material they deem worthy. As a result, gatekeeping has been transformed from an essentially binary process – information either passes through the journalistic gate and becomes visible to the public, or it does not – to a process that is both more complex and more collaborative. Although journalists can and do boost the visibility of particular items through contemporary versions of long-standing salience cues whose application remains within newsroom control – placing an item at the top of a home page, say, or skillfully optimizing it for search engines to discover – they also are counting on a user's ability to scoop any item into his or her own social net and from there to highlight it, re-disseminate it, or enhance its chances to be seen in some other way.

Moreover, users' active gatekeeping role extends beyond their circle of acquaintances to a more broadly conceptualized public of unknown others – to a mass audience as well as a more individualized or micro one. Social networking tools such as Facebook enable redistribution of content to personal contacts; however, the social bookmarking tools now common on newspaper websites enable users to tag items they find valuable and make them 'visible' to anyone who visits those aggregate sites.

A new permutation of gatekeeping particularly suited to the open nature of a network is thus suggested. In a traditional media environment, items ignored by an editor were not visible to the public at all; they did not make it past the journalistic gate. In today's environment, published items ignored by users will have made it successfully through that gate but may still fail to reach more than a handful of readers. The nature of gatekeeping, then, changes to encompass degrees of visibility in a world in which so much is 'out there' somewhere.

The exploratory data presented here need more rigorous support, through formal content analysis and, ideally, additional methods that can probe for the rationales behind the decisions evidenced on US newspaper websites – and their effectiveness. These preliminary empirical findings are intended as groundwork for that more formal analysis. In the meantime, tentative though they are, they do suggest a reconceptualization of the traditional gatekeeping role that to date has been discussed mainly in theoretical terms (Bruns, 2005; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

This shift can be understood as occurring along a continuum of journalistic control over content decisions. At one end of the continuum is the traditional process, in which journalists make and enact decisions about virtually all editorial content that appears in their product and is therefore 'visible' to the public. At the other is a news environment in which users make all the decisions; social bookmarking sites such as Digg, which typically display lists of clickable headlines based on user recommendations, are examples of aggregated user-generated visibility. The other options described here position newspaper websites at various points in between. The result is a two-step gatekeeping process, in which initial editorial decisions to reject or include an item in the news product are followed by user decisions to upgrade or downgrade the visibility of that item for a secondary audience.

The findings related to the first research sub-question, concerning gatekeeping decisions about legally and ethically responsible user-generated content, position journalists relatively close to their traditional spot – but with input coming not just from conceptions informed by their own socialization into newsroom occupational culture, as identified by White (1950) and others, but also from their audience. Journalists have always been influenced by audience interests, of course – they create a product that needs a market to survive – but that influence has never been as direct, explicit, and immediate as it is now.

In assigning users the responsibility of identifying potentially problematic comments from other users, news organizations have opened the door to sharing with their audiences the role of gatekeeper over the ethical standards of what they publish. However, journalists (or designees at contracted moderation companies who are charged with following the rules that journalists set) retain the ultimate authority to determine whether the problem warrants denial of access to the publishing platform – that is, a relegation to invisibility. Users are involved in finding and flagging the potentially problematic material, but journalists retain the definitive say in what will and will not remain on public view.

As additional participatory options on media websites have continued to evolve and mature, however, journalists have stepped further away from the gate. Findings related to the second and third research sub-questions suggest some of the ways in which this is happening.

Various tools being implemented on newspaper websites enable users to assess something they have just read and to communicate that assessment. Some of these assessments relate to the contributions of other users, for instance by giving a 'thumbs up' to a particular comment or by clicking on a 'recommend this' icon, so that the number of positive recommendations is automatically displayed in association with the item. As described above, this study found such rating options were available on a majority of newspaper websites.

Perceived threats to their own autonomy in determining newsworthiness were among the biggest concerns about user-generated content expressed by *Guardian* journalists only a few years ago; indeed, they described as 'traffic whoring' anything that suggested that the popularity of an item should dictate coverage decisions (Singer and Ashman, 2009: 15). User rating and recommendation systems, applied to the contributions of other users rather than journalists, do not directly undermine this authority. However,

they do entail external assessment of the quality of what is published on a media website, as well as prominent public display of that assessment.

The nearly ubiquitous display of 'usage boxes' – showing the items users viewed most often, commented on or emailed most frequently, and so on – takes this shared control a step further, allocating valuable online real estate to a realm of news judgment that journalists previously have not only controlled but also fiercely protected. Through the implementation of these and other sophisticated automated tools, journalists have relinquished control over what formerly was an exclusive right to identify and communicate to audiences which stories were the day's 'best.' Those judgments rested on journalists' socially and culturally informed guesses about what would be of greatest importance or interest to audiences. Digital technologies mean they no longer have to guess; up-to-the-minute 'traffic reports' are now automatically generated and readily accessible (and often obsessively followed) in the newsroom. However, those same technologies mean users can convey their interests not only to journalists but also to one another.

They can do that within the space provided by the media website. Or they can do it in entirely separate spaces, which represent the most thoroughly popularized and broadly shared enactment of the gatekeeping role of all. In providing email capabilities for all their stories and in rapidly expanding their presence on social networking platforms, journalists are encouraging users to redistribute – to make visible to additional people – what they see as the most valuable stories provided by the news organization. With this last innovation, news organizations have given users full gatekeeping responsibilities based on perceived value of a particular news item, a perception informed by a knowledge of recipients that no news organization can match.

To summarize: journalists who long have defined themselves largely as society's gatekeepers now find the role is broadly shared with members of an increasingly active audience. Users are choosing news not only for their own consumption but also for the consumption of others, including those within their personal circle of acquaintances and those who are part of an undifferentiated online public. This shift toward 'user-generated visibility' suggests a new way of looking at one of the oldest conceptualizations of the journalist's role in our society.

The initial reaction of many journalists – who in defending their occupational turf have sought to position themselves as uniquely qualified to make those news judgments, based largely on their own standards and processes – was to see this encroachment of users into their gatekeeping territory as a threat. Yet it is at least potentially a mutually beneficial development. Users receive additional, even personalized, guidance in identifying information of interest to them. Despite valid concerns about audience fragmentation, journalists may in fact be gaining a larger, and more interested, audience for the material they have produced – without having to do any additional work themselves, a benefit that critical scholars such as Deuze (2007) have identified in other contexts.

In an online world, there may be no gates (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2000). However, it turns out, there are more gatekeepers than ever.

This article suggests a number of directions for future research. More rigorous methods offer significant benefits; in addition to those already highlighted, they would enable

exploration of correlations among the variables tentatively identified here. Ongoing work is needed to understand this rapidly moving target. New options continually are being added, and smaller newspapers are incorporating those already in place at the larger ones that, perhaps counter-intuitively given their traditional distance from their audiences, have been leaders in fostering interactive opportunities to strengthen ties to users. In addition, new questions will arise as the online newspaper business model evolves. A few sampled papers in this study already were erecting pay walls around at least some of their content; for example, how will a smaller and more restricted audience affect content-sharing approaches? Some newspapers also had begun requiring users to comment through Facebook, an intriguing step that removes many of the problems created by anonymous postings while also helping generate social network traffic. Such trends richly deserve the attention that journalism scholars have begun to afford them.

Many other questions remain. What criteria might users apply in selecting what to make more visible, either as recommended reading within a media website or for redistribution throughout an individual's social network? Will those criteria be normative ones, and if so, will the norms resemble those of practitioners? What changes might be observed over time, as journalists become more savvy Internet citizens and as Internet citizens become more savvy 'journalists'? What more can we learn about the interplay of practitioner and audience ethics, as well as the continually shifting, and increasingly shared, nature of media work in a networked environment? Such understandings would enrich ongoing efforts to identify the meaning and the value of journalism at a time when both are contested.

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Appendix

Sampled newspaper websites, by largest print circulation as of September 2010.

	250,000 and up	100,000–249,999	50,000–99,999	Below 50,000
National	*USA Today*			
National	*The New York Times*			
Alabama	–	*Birmingham News*	*Huntsville Times*	*Gadsden Times*
Alaska	–	–	*Anchorage Daily News*	*Fairbanks News-Miner*
Arizona	*Arizona Republic*	*Tucson Daily Star*	–	*Sun City Daily News-Sun*
Arkansas	*Little Rock Democrat Gazette*	–	–	*Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*
California	*San Jose Mercury News*	*Fresno Bee*	*Los Angeles Daily News*	*Sonora Union Democrat*
Colorado	*Denver Post*	–	*Colorado Springs Gazette*	*Fort Collins Coloradoan*
Connecticut	–	*Hartford Courant*	*Waterbury Republican-American*	*Stamford Advocate*
Delaware	–	*Wilmington News Journal*	–	–
D.C.	*Washington Post*	–	–	–
Florida	*Orlando Sentinel*	*Jacksonville Times-Union*	*(Melbourne) Florida Today*	*Winter Haven News Chief*
Georgia	*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*	–	*Savannah News*	*Thomasville Times-Enterprise*
Hawaii	–	–	–	*Maui News*
Idaho	–	–	*Idaho Statesman*	*Twin Falls Times-News*
Illinois	*Chicago Sun-Times*	*Arlington Heights Herald*	*Belleville News Democrat*	*Quincy Herald-Whig*

(Continued)

Appendix. (Continued)

	250,000 and up	100,000–249,999	50,000–99,999	Below 50,000
Indiana	*Indianapolis Star*	*Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*	*Munster Times of Northwest Indiana*	*Anderson Herald Bulletin*
Iowa	–	*Des Moines Register*	*Cedar Rapids Gazette*	*Dubuque Telegraph Herald*
Kansas	–	*Wichita Eagle*	–	*Topeka Capital-Journal*
Kentucky	–	*Lexington Herald-Leader*	–	*Maysville Ledger Independent*
Louisiana	–	*New Orleans Times-Picayune*	*Shreveport Times*	*Thibodaux Comet*
Maine	–	–	*Bangor News*	*Biddeford Journal Tribune*
Maryland	*Baltimore Sun*	–	–	*Carroll County Times*
Massachusetts	*Boston Globe*	*Boston Herald*	*Worcester Telegram*	*Pittsfield Eagle*
Michigan	*Detroit Free Press*	*Grand Rapids Press*	*Kalamazoo Gazette*	*Battle Creek Enquirer*
Minnesota	*Minneapolis Star Tribune*	*St. Paul Pioneer-Press*	–	*Fairmont Sentinel*
Mississippi	–	–	*Jackson Clarion-Ledger*	*Biloxi-Gulfport Sun Herald*
Missouri	*Kansas City Star*	–	*Springfield News-Leader*	*St. Joseph News-Press*
Montana	–	–	–	*Billings Gazette*
Nebraska	–	*Omaha World-Herald*	*Lincoln Journal-Star*	*Kearney Hub*
Nevada	–	*Las Vegas Review-Journal*	*Reno Gazette-Journal*	–
New Hampshire-	–	–	*Manchester Union Leader*	*Keene Sentinel*
New Jersey	*Newark Star-Ledger*	*Asbury Park Press*	*Atlantic City Press*	*Burlington County Times*
New Mexico	–	*Albuquerque Journal*	–	*Carlsbad Current-Argus*
New York	*Long Island Newsday*	*Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*	*Binghamton Press and Sun-Bulletin*	*Poughkeepsie Journal*
North Carolina	–	*Raleigh News and Observer*	*Greensboro News and Record*	*Lexington Dispatch*
North Dakota	–	–	*Fargo Forum*	*Bismarck Tribune*
Ohio	*Cincinnati Enquirer*	*Dayton News*	*Canton Repository*	*Port Clinton News Herald*

Appendix. (Continued)

	250,000 and up	100,000–249,999	50,000–99,999	Below 50,000
Oklahoma	–	*Oklahoma City Oklahoman*	–	*Muskogee Phoenix*
Oregon	*Portland Oregonian*	–	*Eugene Register-Guard*	*Grants Pass Courier*
Pennsylvania	*Philadelphia Inquirer*	*Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*	*Erie Times News*	*Pottsville Republican Herald*
Rhode Island	–	*Providence Journal*	–	*Woonsocket Call*
South Carolina	–	–	*Columbia State*	*Rock Hill Herald*
South Dakota	–	–	*Sioux Falls Argus Leader*	*Watertown Public Opinion*
Tennessee	–	*Nashville Tennessean*	*Chattanooga Times Free Press*	*Kingsport Times-News*
Texas	*Dallas Morning News*	*San Antonio Express-News*	*Corpus Christi Caller-Times*	*McAllen Monitor*
Utah	–	*Salt Lake City Tribune*	*Salt Lake City Deseret News*	*Provo Herald*
Vermont	–	–	–	*Bennington Banner*
Virginia	–	*Richmond Times-Dispatch*	*Roanoke Times*	*Winchester Star*
Washington	*Seattle Times*	–	*Spokane Spokesman-Review*	*Longview News*
West Virginia	–	–	*Charleston Gazette-Mail*	*Weirton Times*
Wisconsin	*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*	*Madison State Journal*	*Appleton Post Crescent*	*La Crosse Tribune*
Wyoming	–	–	–	*Cheyenne Tribune-Eagle*