

Stuff That Matters: Slashdot and the Emergence of Open News

Dr Axel Bruns
Media & Communication
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia

a.bruns@qut.edu.au
<http://snurb.info/>

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new genre of user-driven Websites engaged in a novel form of news reporting which has been described as open publishing or open news, in analogy to the open source movement (see e.g. Meikle, Bruns). These sites combine news, rumours and background information as well as community discussion and commentary on their chosen topic, and frequently serve as a first point of entry for readers interested in learning more about the field; their key feature is that they are *open* to users contributing news stories and commentary, and that such contributions are usually posted on the site without or with only minimal editing by the site operators. Examples include the Indymedia network of sites (<http://www.indymedia.org/>), Slashdot (<http://slashdot.org/>), Kuro5hin (<http://www.kuro5hin.org/>), or Plastic (<http://www.plastic.com/>), but beyond this group of sites which operate mainly in the activism, Internet policy and technology sectors – many of them providing ‘news for nerds’, as Slashdot describes itself – open news sites can now also be found in many other fields of interest from politics to entertainment.

By relying to significant extent, in many cases even entirely, on the participation of their audiences, these sites offer spaces for virtual communities of specialists or enthusiasts to emerge or gather, who in the process and as a product of their interaction on these sites also collate detailed resource collections and hyperlink directories for their fields of interest. In other words, these sites chiefly involve their users as content contributors and producers, turning them into what can be called ‘producers’ of the site – in analogy to Alvin Toffler’s term ‘prosumer’, but stressing the productive engagement of users in this process. According to Slashdot co-founder Jeff ‘Hemos’ Bates, in fact, that site’s users contribute “100% of our news gathering” (personal interview) – and the situation is similar in other open news sites.

Aiming to evaluate all the content relevant to their field that is becoming available online, and to coopt or at least link to this information from the news and resources collection that is a central part of the site, open news site producers engage in an adaptation of both traditional journalistic gatekeeping methodologies and librarianly resource collection approaches to the Web environment: unable to police (that is, to keep) the

gates through which publication occurs in the online environment, they have become 'gatewatchers', *observing* the publication of news and information in other sources (that is, the passing of information through other gates) and publicising its existence through their own sites.

In doing so, they implicitly and sometimes explicitly apply principles borrowed from the open source movement to the gathering and publication of news and information. Open news sites can therefore be described as a form of peer-to-peer (p2p), collaborative Web publishing, where news stories emerge through the joint efforts of a distributed network of contributors. Clearly, this also affects the power structures inherent in traditional news reporting, and leads to the emergence of a new set of internal power relations on these sites. It also introduces questions of intellectual property ownership, which are again analogous to IP issues in open source: who owns the collaboratively produced content of sites like Slashdot; who has the right to exploit it? Who is responsible in cases of unintentional misinformation or deliberate libel and slander?

A close investigation of Slashdot, one of the best-known open news sites, reveals many of the advantages as well as problems of open news sites. With its over 500,000 registered users and an immense level of content traffic on its pages, Slashdot demonstrates the potential for such sites; its intricate user moderation and meta-moderation system also provides an opportunity to investigate the feasibility and the limitations of user community self-policing methods. Sites like Kuro5hin and Plastic, on the other hand, were developed more or less directly in response to perceived shortcomings of the Slashdot model, and it is also useful to examine their modifications to the open news approach.

Slashdot.org

To the uninitiated, Slashdot's informational aims may seem somewhat nebulous at first – by its own motto, Slashdot covers "news for nerds, and stuff that matters", which according to editor Jeff 'Hemos' Bates means "posting links to stories around the web that geeks will find interesting. As well, we produce some original content – feature writing from Jon Katz, as well as guest feature writers" (all Bates statements from email interview). While the definition of 'nerd' or 'geek' may be difficult to put into words, it is evident from the site's popular success that it has managed to address and bind its target audience through the range of the content it presents – the very name of the site, in fact, also helps to increase its 'nerd credibility', as site creator Rob 'CmdrTaco' Malda writes: "Slashdot' is a sort of obnoxious parody of a URL. When I originally registered the domain, I wanted to make the URL silly, and unpronounceable. Try reading out the full URL to <http://slashdot.org> and you'll see what I mean. Of course my cocky little joke has turned around and bit me in the butt because now I am called upon constantly to tell people my URL or email address. I can't tell you

how many people respond confused ‘So do I spell out the ‘dot’ or is that just a period?’” (“FAQ: About Slashdot”).

Slashdot “was started as a way to post ideal musings about sites found around the web”; as the Slashdot on-site FAQ states, it “was originally created in September of 1997 by Rob ‘CmdrTaco’ Malda. Today it is owned by OSDN, which, in turn is owned by VA Software” (Malda, “FAQ: About Slashdot”). It is “run primarily by ... Jeff ‘Hemos’ Bates who posts stories, sells advertising, and handles the book reviews and Robin ‘Roblimo’ Miller who has recently come on board to help ... handle some of the more managerial sides of the site, as well as (surprise!) posting stories” (“About This Site”), and in 2001 the overall team consisted of nine staff within Slashdot itself and eight further technology staff at its owner. In its six years of operation, it has won multiple awards and has become loosely affiliated with a group of over 660 supporting individuals and institutions. More directly, it is connected to OSDN, the Open Source Development Network, which owns Slashdot and a variety of other sites, many of which are themselves open news sites targetting the open source community.

While such commercial ownership of an open news site is still unusual, perhaps, the Slashdot FAQ states that given the popularity of the site it was simply unavoidable: “it’s difficult for the reader to grasp exactly how big and complex an operation running Slashdot has become. While we do sometimes experience a little nostalgia for the old days, Slashdot at its present readership level simply couldn’t exist without the infrastructure that the OSDN provides. Also, the fact that the OSDN has taken over things like network operations and advertising sales means that we can work on the things that we enjoy, like posting stories and code development” (Malda, “FAQ: About Slashdot”). Once again, this commercial interest in Slashdot also points to the fact that it has been identified as a lucrative enterprise, or indeed, in Kumon & Aizu’s terms, an ‘intelprise’. That Slashdot’s owners should come from the open source community with its stated ideals of collaboration and open access for all, rather than from amongst the ‘closed-shop’ representatives of the traditional computing or media industries, also serves to underline the extent to which the open news model is at odds with traditional operating philosophies in these industries (and conversely how closely analogous to the open news philosophy open source ideals are).

Site Popularity

While affiliated with the OSDN, and while sharing a significant portion of its readership base with the Network’s other sites, Slashdot’s own interests go beyond a narrow (or even a general) interest in open-source software development and the intellectual principles behind it. The site’s overall coverage of ‘nerd

news', therefore, has attracted a broad audience, as many of its statistics indicate: Slashdot's "Hall of Fame" (HOF) shows its most active news story to have attracted over 4000 commentary postings, while its most visited story (about a prospective lawsuit by Microsoft against Slashdot) received over 375,000 viewers alone. This figure is further surpassed by one of Slashdot's on-site readership polls, which had over two million voters participating (some inflation of numbers through multiple votes might be possible here, though). In addition, the HOF also shows the ongoing high-level involvement of its main editors: Rob 'CmdrTaco' Malda edited and posted over 7500 of the news stories featured on Slashdot, Jeff 'Hemos' Bates more than 5600 items (thus between them averaging about 42 stories per week in the site's six-year existence).

The ongoing popularity of the site is visible throughout: during the timeframe of this study, many news stories received up to 1000 comments within their first day of publication – as Bates reported in 2001, in fact, Slashdot serves around "1.2 million pages per day, with an average of 230k unique IPs per day, and nearly 400k registered users" (more recent estimates would put that number closer to 600,000s). As active contribution goes, "500 stories are submitted per day", and "users in discussion groups" number "15,000 or so" (Bates, quoting figures from 2001). Remarkably, this significant user base has developed purely by interpersonal communication, as Bates notes: "we do not, and have not promoted the site. I am proud to say that Slashdot has never paid a dime for advertising, and have always relied on word of mouth. Advertising, IMHO [in my humble opinion], is mostly a waste in this area".

Such popular success, then, has also led to some unexpected side effects, mainly for the Websites featured in Slashdot news stories:

when Slashdot links a site, often a lot of readers will hit the link to read the story or see the purty pictures. This can easily throw thousands of hits at the site in minutes. Most of the time, large professional websites have no problem with this, but often a site we link will be a smaller site, used to getting only a few thousand hits a day. When all those Slashdot readers start crashing the party, it can saturate the site completely, causing the site to buckle under the strain. When this happens, the site is said to be "Slashdotted."

Recently, the terms "Slashdot Effect" and "Slashdotted" have been used more generally to refer to any short-term traffic jam at a website. (Malda, "FAQ: About Slashdot")

The Slashdot Front Page

In Slashdot, news and commentary blend and become the central focus of the site – in Bates's own words, Slashdot's news section plays "the whole role" in the context of the site. Slashdot news stories are

also immediately interactive, however, as they contain a feature for users to add their own comments to a story – and the discussions arising around a posted news story therefore frequently serve to enhance that story by providing further detail or background information. Thus, it is no contradiction if Bates also writes that “the groups are the lifeblood of Slashdot, IMHO. It’s where people come to talk about things, and thousands read. It’s over half of the daily traffic, to read the comments”. At the centre of the Slashdot site, then, is an inextricable blend of news, commentary, and community interaction.

Therefore, the main page of the site features pointers to about a dozen of the day’s main news stories, selected by the editors. At the top of the page are also five quick link buttons to the topical sections that the first five of these stories are located in. Further strengthening this focus on news, a sidebar on the main page also lists ‘older stuff’: the headlines of Slashdot front page news from the previous two days. This box also contains a link to “Yesterday’s Edition”, the archived Slashdot front page from the end of the previous day – and this function is recursive, so that users can step back in time through Slashdot front pages day by day if they so wish.

In addition to this option to view the latest, most important news of the day, Slashdot can also be read with a focus on a variety of topical sections, links to some of which are featured on the front page. The latest additions to some of these sections are also featured in more detail in a sidebar on the front page, along with quick links to the latest external “Cool Sites” (which always include an affiliated “Support Slashdot” merchandise Website on the OSDN), the separate Freshmeat site (billing itself as “the Web’s largest index of Unix and cross-platform open source software”) and its latest featured software releases, and the current Slashdot poll. Poll topics here are often semi-humorous (for example, “how long [do you take] from wake-up to email”, with 36% of participants choosing “under 10 minutes”), and generally attract significant participation numbers well into the tens or even hundreds of thousands.

Finally, the front page also carries a selection of standard links to specific Slashdot features, such as its full list of 125 topical sections from “AMD” to “Ximian”, and from “Games” to “United States”, as well as Slashdot’s lengthy list of frequently asked questions about the site. Also included here are links to further interactive features, most importantly the option to submit a new news story to be checked by the editors; there is also a link to the ‘Journals’, a Slashdot-based blogging facility which complements the on-site community interaction possibilities with further opportunities to state one’s own opinions. Finally, there are further links to external Websites: the Slashcode site aiding the further development of Slashdot’s operating software, and offering that software for download; the Open Source Development Network itself, and an OSDN-run site with job offers for open source developers; as well as editor Rob Malda’s own personal homepage.

Slashdot News Stories: Presentation and Selection

Slashdot stories are generally submitted by the site's users, and edited by its staff. Submission of news is also possible anonymously (unnamed authors are then listed on the site as 'Anonymous Coward'): "we think the ability to post anonymously is important. Sometimes people have important information they want to post, but are afraid to do it if they can be linked to it. Anonymous Coward posting will continue to exist for the foreseeable future" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"), even though anonymous submissions may be more difficult to verify by staff and users. "And furthermore, anonymous submission will not increase or decrease the chances that we'll select it" to be featured on the site ("FAQ: Editorial").

Beyond such basic considerations concerning user identity, content control and editing mechanisms on Slashdot are generally very advanced, and provide a model for many other open news sites (especially since the philosophy behind this editorial setup filters into the Slashcode software package, and has influenced other, similar packages as well) and for gatewatching processes wherever they may occur. Overall, all submitted stories are checked by the editors before they are posted on the site – however, the focus here is less on the truthfulness of their content than on its quality – Slashdot's standard answer to a user question about how staff verify stories, in fact, is "we don't. You do. :) If something seems outrageous, we might look for some corroboration, but as a rule, we regard this as the responsibility of the submitter and the audience. This is why it's important to read comments. You might find something that refutes, or supports, the story in the main" ("FAQ: Editorial"). This indicates that the site's editors treat its users as equals rather than as a merely passive audience for whom news must be especially prepared and packaged – users can become producers easily enough, and the site's editors are merely producers charged with an additional quality-control responsibility, and empowered with remnants of a gatekeeper role. As Bates notes, "we have had a couple problems publishing unverified information – however, we have always been extremely careful to say something has not yet been verified. Usually, since we are linking to news stories, we rely on them. However, in outrageous cases, we double-check and reach people within the company, rather than the PR firm, as that is more trustworthy" – in all, therefore, Slashdot's role as a *gatewatching* site, reporting on news stories as they are emerging elsewhere, relieves it of the task of being a traditional-style *gatekeeper*.

Only on the Slashdot front page do some stricter gatekeeping values apply, and as Malda writes in the Slashdot FAQ, "I have always been the final decision maker on what ends up on the homepage" ("FAQ: Editorial"). Even this is hardly strict gatekeeping, though – users may always bypass this 'editor's selection' of what stories are considered most newsworthy, and delve directly into their specific areas of interest. This

is intentional: “Slashdot has too many submissions to post them all, but many submissions are worth posting for folks specifically interested in them. We post many stories in the sub sections that don’t appear on the homepage. Examples are Ask Slashdot, Your Rights Online, and Apache. Each of these sections has a smaller, more devoted group of readers with a more specific interest in these subjects” (“FAQ: Editorial”). For submitted news stories featured here, then, only some general selection criteria apply: editors “go through these submissions, and try to select the most interesting, timely, and relevant ones to post to the homepage”, and reasons for rejection include

- Badly worded subjects
- Broken or missing URLs
- Confusing or hysterical sounding writeup
- It might be an old story
- It might just be a busy day and we’ve already posted enough stories
- Someone already submitted your story
- Your story just might not be interesting!

(“FAQ: Editorial”)

At best, this is a very mild form of pseudo-gatekeeping which is further undermined by the fact that any rejected story could easily be re-sent as the user commentary attached to an accepted submission on the same topic.

The Slashdot Approach to Gatewatching

Clearly, the Slashdot front page plays a special role in the site, and selection of its features throws a particularly interesting light on the gatewatching processes involved in the running of open news sites. It is worth quoting Slashdot’s creator Rob ‘CmdrTaco’ Malda at length here, as he explains his editorial philosophy in the Slashdot FAQ:

Let me try to give you an analogy for Slashdot’s homepage. It’s like an omelette: it’s a combination of sausage and ham and tomatoes and eggs and more. Over the years, we’ve figured out what ingredients are best on Slashdot. The ultimate goal is, of course, to create an omelette that I enjoy eating: by 8pm, I want to see a dozen interesting stories on Slashdot. I hope you enjoy them too. I believe that we’ve grown in size because we share a lot of common interests with our readers. But that doesn’t mean that I’m gonna mix an omelette with all sausages, or someday throw away the tomatoes because the green peppers are really fresh.

There are many components to the Slashdot Omelette. Stories about Linux. Tech stories. Science. Legos. Book Reviews. Yes, even Jon Katz. By mixing and matching these things each and every day, we bring you what I call Slashdot. On some days it definitely is better than others, but overall we think it's a tasty little treat and we hope you enjoy eating as much as we enjoy cooking it.

("FAQ: Editorial")

This analogy encapsulates the Slashdot flavour of gatewatching: Malda and the other Slashdot editors watch the gates through their users' eyes by reading user-submitted news stories, and select the most interesting of these to be featured on the homepage, while others may end up in the site's topical sections. They are not traditional gatekeepers, because they have no control over the gates, but instead simply highlight the most useful of the material which passes the gates every day and has been identified by their users in their role as gatewatchers; they are not censors, because they do not prevent their readers from access to specific stories or from making their own voices heard, but indeed openly invite such participation; they are not journalists because they do not claim independent, disinterested observership, but rather make openly subjective value judgments – 'an omelette that I enjoy eating'. As Malda himself writes in the FAQ, "deciding the interest level of a story is a very subjective thing, and we have to take into account not only the intrinsic interest of the story itself, but what else is happening that day. On a day when lots of things are happening, we reject some very good stories. But on a day when nothing interesting is happening, we may post something not really as cool" ("FAQ: Editorial") – and even the so-called 'intrinsic interest' of the story itself is just another subjective judgment. Slashdot, in essence, practices a form of *supervised gatewatching*, with Malda, Bates, and other staff as supervisors of the gatewatching work of their user-producers.

Their supervision judgments may even be reversed later on, further undermining any remnants of strict gatekeeping selection: "a lot of times, we don't use a particular story on a particular day, but at some later point, someone else submits it, and it ends up getting used. We have 4 to 6 guys working together to post things on Slashdot. What one of us finds stupid, the others might find interesting. Or it just might be the rest of the stuff that's going on that day. There are a variety of factors: the personality of the post, the quality of the submission, or even the quantity of stories already posted when your submission entered the queue" ("FAQ: Editorial"). This competitive element to the submission of Slashdot news stories might thus in fact even lead to readers submitting stories of better quality, in order to get *their* contribution accepted over others. Open news sites may therefore experience a 'critical mass' effect at some point of their evolution as individual sites: when their user base grows beyond the point where grateful editors publish almost every

story that does not arrive with severe factual or typographical errors, story submission takes on the nature of a competition where the users with the most published stories are also the most respected or influential (or certainly the most *visible*, at any rate), and this competition further attracts and binds active (prod)users to the site, while strengthening the quality of article submissions. Beyond this point of 'critical mass', in other words, and as long as site staff and infrastructure can keep up with increasing article traffic, the site virtually starts to run itself.

To have a consistently edited homepage, however, is also important, as it helps define the site's identity as it first appears to users. As Malda writes in the FAQ, "Slashdot is an eclectic mix of stories maintained by a small group of people, but contributed to by anyone who wants to. I think that the personality and character of Slashdot is part of the fun and charm of the site, and I think it would suck to lose it. That's why the decision of what ends up on the homepage will continue to be determined by me, Hemos, and the rest of the guys". Thus, "my first goal has always been to post stories that I thought were interesting. I think a lot of people share my idea of interesting, and that's part of why Slashdot became successful" ("FAQ: Suggestions"). And again, the subjective choices made for the front page do not interfere with the rest of the site's content, which is much more lightly edited, or the opportunity to comment, which is always offered – "the only time we ever delete comments is if the comment contains malformed HTML that is somehow causing Slashdot to fail to display properly. Comments are not deleted on the basis of content" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"). In essence, Slashdot also clearly is a dialogue between its editors and users, where editorial selection of major stories for the front page is frequently questioned by users, and editors' views as evidenced in their framing of the stories are criticised and commented upon. Thus, "Slashdot is a very open community; in the user comments our readers are free to say whatever they please. But we feel that the unique nature of Slashdot is largely because the contents of the homepage are determined by a handful of people" ("FAQ: Suggestions").

The editors also note that there would be other options for the site's editorial organisation, including full user control over site content. However, they are sceptical about the success of such models: "I'm sure a very cool website could be developed based on the concept of allowing public voting to determine the content of the homepage, but that website wouldn't be 'Slashdot'. If we tried to do it 'by committee' it would suffer from the same problem that most projects done by committee suffer from: it would get bland" (Malda, "FAQ: Suggestions"). As it happens in many mailing-lists or discussion groups, the site's focus could easily shift from the reporting of interesting news to the endless repetition of popular topics – as Malda writes, "I don't want to read the 'Bitch at Microsoft' website, but if ruled by popular consensus, Slashdot would very likely degenerate to this point" ("FAQ: Suggestions").

Users as Editors

The makers of Slashdot have encountered this problem themselves: “each day we grew, adding more and more users, and increasing the number of comments submitted. As this happened, many users discovered new and annoying ways to abuse the system. The authors had but one option: Delete annoying comments. But as the system grew, we knew that we would never be able to keep up. We were outnumbered” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). However, they have also found an elegant way to overcome the problems with debate quality found in many unmoderated high-participation discussion fora on- as well as offline, where meaningful interaction between participants often either veers irretrievably off-topic, or else becomes swamped amidst the overall high level of message traffic.

Today, “Slashdot gets a lot of comments. Thousands a day. Tens of thousands a month. At any given time, the database holds 50,000+ comments. A single story might have a thousand replies – and let’s be realistic: Not all of the comments are that great. In fact, some are down right terrible, but others are truly gems” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). Therefore, Slashdot now uses an elaborate system of (self-) moderation, “designed to sort the gems and the crap from the steady stream of information that flows through the pipe. And wherever possible, it tries to make the readers of the site take on the responsibility” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). Its aims are listed in the Slashdot FAQ:

- Promote quality, discourage crap.
- Make Slashdot as readable as possible for as many people as possible.
- Do not require a huge amount of time from any single moderator.
- Do not allow a single moderator a “reign of terror.”

(“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”)

As moderators, users are able to add or deduct ‘usefulness’ points from comments which have been contributed to one of the myriad of discussions occurring on the site, and by default Slashdot will only display those comments in a discussion which are ranked above a certain threshold value, with the most ‘useful’ comments featured most prominently. In other words, this system helps to highlight what are commonly (that is, by those users who have moderated in a discussion) held to be the most interesting and useful comments, and the system conversely serves to downgrade and ultimately screen out less useful or even disruptive contributions.

If their comment is subject to moderation, furthermore, this also affects the contributor of the comment, who similarly receives an increase or decrease in their personal 'karma' points score; users are thus similarly ranked (though not publicly) by the overall quality of their comments, and their ranking in turn again affects the initial 'usefulness' score of any new contributions they make in the future. In effect, 'good' users are recognised as such; "as a good poster, you earned a bonus: you are allowed to speak slightly 'louder' than other people" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation") – while 'bad' users are progressively silenced as their 'karma' score decreases. As in most groups where certain members have gained more personal status than others, though, with that status "comes a responsibility – you have to justify that bonus score. The louder you speak, the more likely you are to be moderated down, unless you're sufficiently interesting to prompt the moderators to let you keep your bonus score. This is how the system is designed to work: you can't just rack up big karma scores, and then post nonsense" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"). The 'karma' score which users have gained might also be useful for Slashdot's editors in evaluating new story submissions, of course – it may serve as an indicator of a user's trustworthiness as a contributor.

Slashdot's Approach to Moderation: Allowing the Gates to Watch Themselves

The success of any such moderation system is entirely dependent on the quality of its moderators, of course. Slashdot's moderator team has undergone a number of changes in the past: at first, site founder Malda simply "picked people to help. Just a few. 25 or so at the end. They were given the simple ability to add or subtract points to comments. The primary function of these brave souls was to weed out spam and First Post and flame bait. Plus, when they found smart stuff, to bring it out" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation") – but as traffic on the site increased this team was found to be insufficient. "So", as Malda recalls, "we picked more the only way we could. Using the actions of the original 25 moderators, we picked 400 more. We picked the 400 people who had posted good comments: comments that had been flagged as the cream of Slashdot. Immediately several dozen of these new moderators had their access revoked for being abusive, but they settled down" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"). Thus, in addition to the ever-increasing demand for moderators as the site grew, these specially selected moderators also introduced an unintended group of especially powerful users, who would occasionally abuse their powers to push personal agendas – a tendency which would become even more difficult for the site's staff to control as the number of moderators increased.

Therefore, Malda writes, he "needed to limit the power of each person to prevent a single rogue from spoiling it for everyone" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"), and so "today any regular Slashdot reader is

probably eligible to become a moderator. A variety of factors weigh into it, but if you are logged in when you browse Slashdot comments, you might occasionally be granted moderator access” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”) – by default, Slashdot users are expected to be ‘willing to moderate’ (but can decline to do so if they wish).

Only registered, regular, long-term Slashdot users with good ‘karma’ scores are offered the opportunity to moderate, and only randomly and temporarily: “moderation is like jury duty. You never know when you’re gonna have to do it, and when you get it, you only do it for a little bit” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). In practical terms, “when moderators are given access, they are given a number of points of influence to play with. Each comment they moderate deducts a point. When they run out of points, they are done serving until next time it is their turn” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). This limits both the power of any individual moderator, and the opportunity for them to ‘gang up’ to push a certain agenda, while also securing the quality of moderation – “it all works to make sure that everyone takes turns, and nobody can abuse the system, and that only ‘regular’ readers become moderators (as opposed to some random newbie ;)” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). For these moderators, then, “moderation takes place by selecting an adjective from a drop down list that appears next to comments containing descriptive words like ‘Flamebait’ or ‘Informative.’ Bad words will reduce the comment’s score by a single point, and good words increase a comment’s score by a single point. All comments are scored on an absolute scale from -1 to 5. Logged-in users start at 1 (although this can vary from 0 to 2 based on their karma) and anonymous users start at 0” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”).

Although the highly limited powers of individual moderators and the overall anonymity and randomness of the process effectively seem to prevent any agenda-setting by moderators, there still remains some threat of ‘group-think’ or overly conservative conformism to perceived Slashdot site goals, but in reality this threat, too, seems limited. The encouragement of a mild dose of conformity might even be welcomed by the site’s editors, indeed, as it helps sharpen the site’s overall profile and maintain its topical focus. Therefore, they provide guidelines for recognising ‘good’ or ‘bad’ content: “a good comment says something interesting or insightful. It has a link to a relevant piece of information that will add something to the discussion. It might not be Shakespeare, but it’s not Beavis and Butthead. It’s not off topic or flamey. It doesn’t call someone names. It doesn’t personally attack someone because of a disagreement of opinion” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). Overall, in any way, by the evidence visible in Slashdot this form of self-moderation appears successful in its goals “to share ideas. To sift through the haystack and find needles. And to keep the children who like to spam Slashdot in check” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”) – in essence, through self-

moderation the Slashdot editors have enabled the gates to watch themselves, and to highlight the best of what material passes through them.

(Finally, to further neutralise any remaining threat of moderation abuse, Slashdot also allows users to police the moderators themselves: the site's "metamoderation is a second layer of moderation. It seeks to address the issue of unfair moderators by letting 'metamoderators' ... 'rate the rating' of ten randomly selected comment posts. The metamoderator decides if the moderator's rating was fair, unfair, or neither". Metamoderation relies on the participation of seasoned Slashdot users: "in order to be a metamoderator, your account has to be one of the oldest 92.5% of accounts on the system. This means that once you've created your account, you'll have to wait for several months, depending on the rate at which new accounts are being created." ("FAQ: Meta-Moderation").)

As noted before, by default posts with low moderation scores are rendered invisible to Slashdot readers, and so moderation of comments could be seen as a form of consensual censorship; however, such visibility levels can also always be changed according to users' personal preferences – thus, "each reader will be able to read Slashdot at a level that they find appropriate. The impatient can read nothing at all but the original stories. Some will only want to read the highest rated of comments, some will want to eliminate anonymous posts, and others will want to read every last drip of data, from the First Posts! to the spam" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"). Slashdot's creators are clearly proud of the adjustable balance between quality and openness of discussion offered by this system: "read Slashdot at a threshold of 3 and behold the quality of the comments you read. Certainly you aren't reading a wild and freewheeling discussion anymore, but you *are* reading many valid points from many intelligent people. I am actually pretty amazed" (Malda, "FAQ: Comments and Moderation").

Karma and Competition

For contributions to Slashdot, then, this system adds a further competitive edge, this time in terms of commentary rather than the submission of original news stories: not only are the ten highest-rated comments listed in the site's "Hall of Fame", increasing their authors' prestige as community members, but the individual 'karma' ratings given to each user might also spur them on to become even more useful contributors in an effort to reach the top 'karma' score of 50. As noted, and explained in more detail in the FAQ,

Your karma is a reference that primarily represents how your comments have been moderated in the past. Karma is structured on the following scale "Terrible, Bad, Neutral, Positive, Good,

and Excellent.” If a comment you post is moderated up, your karma will rise. Consequently, if you post a comment that has been moderated down, your karma will fall.

In addition to moderation, other things factor into karma as well. You can get some karma by submitting a story that we decide to post. Also, metamoderation can cause your karma to change. This encourages good moderators, and ideally removes moderator access from bad ones.

(“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”)

Users are also warned, however, not to become fixated on their ‘karma’:

karma is used to remove risky users from the moderator pool, and to assign a bonus point to users who have contributed positively to Slashdot in the past. It is not your IQ, dick length/cup size, value as a human being, or a score in a video game. It does not determine your worth as a Slashdot reader. It does not cure cancer or grant you a seat on the secret spaceship that will be traveling to Mars when the Krulls return to destroy the planet in 2012. Karma fluctuates dramatically as users post, moderate, and meta-moderate. Don’t let it bother you. It’s just a number in the database.

(“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”)

Nonetheless, even if “it’s simply not a big deal”, as the FAQ suggests (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”), it seems likely that the prestige that ‘karma’ at least *appears* to point to would further drive users to maintain and improve the quality of their contributions.

In all, Slashdot’s points system for comments and users is a form of self-moderation, but without an excessive, intrusive push for conformity, and without censorship by the editors or the users themselves: “nothing is deleted: if you want to read the raw, uncut Slashdot, simply set your threshold to -1 and go crazy! This system is simply a method for us to try to work together to categorize the thousands of comments that are posted each day in such a way that we can benefit from the wisdom contained in the discussions. It’s in there! It just takes some work to find it” (“FAQ: Comments and Moderation”). Slashdot performs that work effortlessly and elegantly, without burdening editors or users.

Slashdot as an Open News Site

“Since this system is essentially an experiment in trying to solve the problems inherent in mass communication, one would expect its success to be variable, and indeed, this is the case. Some days it works great, and some days it doesn’t”, but on the whole the system appears very successful. Malda agrees: “of course it is flawed! It’s built upon the efforts of diverse human beings volunteering their time to help!

Some humans are selfish and destructive. Others work hard and fair. It's my opinion that the sum of all their efforts is pretty damn good" ("FAQ: Comments and Moderation"). The Slashdot discussion setup constitutes a form of technology that is uniquely suited to open news sites, as it is directly linked to the site content, but openly accessible, and able to cope with mass participation, yet without a need for censorship. This could not be done in the form of mailing-lists or newsgroups: "the moderation system really doesn't have a counterpart" ("FAQ: Suggestions") in such Internet media forms, and they do not offer any significant technological advantages over the Slashdot Web interface to compensate for its loss.

We can see, then, that Slashdot provides a key model for open news sites. It enables the participation of users as gatewatchers and collaborative producers of news reports, and their engagement in the ongoing corroboration or fact-checking of published news stories; this process bears close similarities to the open source model where initial code fragments are expanded and debugged through ongoing community participation until useful and stable programmes emerge. Slashdot editors assume the role of supervising gatewatchers, policing to some extent what items make it into the news as presented by the site, but not excluding further material from being introduced into the discussions; and Slashdot users are themselves not only offered a role as producers, contributing and editing site content, but even as associate supervisors, highlighting interesting and demoting undesirable material through moderation. Not simply site readership, but *user participation* has reached a significant extent for Slashdot, therefore. Analogously, in open source software development efforts we often find that specific facilitators steer and oversee the collaborative development process, but that contributors may take on specific roles as co-supervisors of the development effort.

The immense success enjoyed by Slashdot, as evidenced by its membership and the level of their ongoing engagement as content contributors for the site, further makes the site an interesting model for other open news publishers; and indeed, many current open news sites use the Slashcode upon which Slashdot is built, or rely on similar packages like Scoop, PHP-Nuke, Postnuke, Xoops, or others which readily state their conceptual connection to the Slashdot model. More generally, it is also evident that open news and open source share a certain common ideology which values transparently organised and openly accessible collaboration in an effort to reach certain goals that are common to a specific community of participants, regardless of whether such goals are the development of a software programme or the coverage of a news event. Both these collaborative efforts can also be described as peer-to-peer (p2p) collaboration, since both generally take a flat organisational structure in which participants interact directly with one another without intervention by controlling authorities.

This does not mean that such collaborative models are devoid of internal structures of power distribution, however. As we have already seen, Slashdot employs a form of supervised gatewatching where a small group of operators do retain some editorial powers; similarly, open source projects often involve a steering committee of some form which determines the course of development at least in general terms. It should be pointed out that both models enable users to evade such circumventions (open source software projects can be 'forked', splitting the course of development in two different directions, while supervised open news usually still includes an option to post alternative views at least in comments), but in the main such evasion tactics are unable to affect the power structures significantly, and will at best set up a separate environment with new power relations (as in the case of forked open source projects).

Slashdot, in fact, has been the subject of lengthy and sometimes heated debates about the 'openness' of its open news model, and several rival sites have developed in direct response to what were perceived as shortcomings of the Slashdot model. These include sites such as Kuro5hin and Plastic, which often carry through the open news approach to a point where their site operators refrain from supervising the gatewatching process altogether. For example, Kuro5hin owner Rusty Foster states that the site "relies on its readers – it exists for you and through you. This site has an open submission queue. Any user can submit and vote on stories. If you want to see something posted, you can make it happen by participating in the moderation of the stories in the submission queue" ("Kuro5hin.org Mission Statement"). In this model, user-submitted news postings are placed in a moderation queue where registered users can vote on an article's fate (with options to publish it on the site's front page, on a specific section page, or to dump the article altogether). Once a certain threshold of votes is reached, the action preferred by the majority of users is automatically implemented by the site (Kuro5hin, "Article Moderation and Reading"). Clearly, this removes a great deal of the remaining powers of site owners, and takes the process of collaborative content production on the site beyond open news to open editing. This is generally regarded as a significant improvement over the Slashdot model by Kuro5hin users, who have taken to referring to Slashdot as "that other place". It is less obvious whether this view is representative for all present and former users of Slashdot, however, and thus indicates a systemic flaw in the Slashdot model: as debates such as "Trouble Over at Slashdot" indicate, many Kuro5hin users who express such sentiments are in fact disgruntled former Slashdot participants, and may constitute only a small minority of Slashdot's user base. It is certainly evident that while popular, Kuro5hin does not rival Slashdot in size and participation rates at this point (the site was launched in December 1999) – there appear to be no mass movements of users away from the more supervised Slashdot to its less policed competitors. Plastic.com, which employs a similar open submission queue system, also attracted 'only' some 40,000 users since its launch in January 2001.

Limitations and Futures for Open News

Whatever the makeup of the editing process in sites like Slashdot, Kuro5hin, or Plastic, there remain some other significant limitations to the open nature of the model. While perhaps openly, collaboratively edited, the content even of sites like Kuro5hin is still published on a specific Website run by one individual or a group of site owners, who thus retain some degree of special status amongst the overall user base. Kuro5hin's Rusty Foster or Plastic's Carl Steadman and their teams may refrain from direct interference with the editorial processes on their sites, but their ability to shape and structure their publications as they see fit means that they retain final control over and ownership of published contents. This is a significant difference to the open source model, where any user is able to obtain the entire source code to a project, and to develop this in whichever direction they prefer; in open news, however, while it may be theoretically possible to access the entire archive of articles and comments on a site, this material would still remain limited in its use value unless combined with the underlying Website system for handling it. As the Kuro5hin debate noted above makes plain, disgruntled users of an open source package could develop a different (forked) version of the package which meets their demands by building on the existing materials, while similarly disgruntled users of Slashdot were not able to take control (or make a copy) of the existing Slashdot site and to develop an alternative version which would include existing content but apply their preferred open content editing principles; instead, they had to develop sites like Kuro5hin and Plastic which started from a complete lack of content. And even these sites in turn do again remain owned by their founders; to date, there appears to be no workable model to make Websites themselves communally owned, in addition to the collaborative production of content.

Such questions of ownership become especially important when the commercial and legal implications of open news are considered. Successful sites like Slashdot now offer some limited commercial opportunities for their operators, which raises certain ethical and moral problems, as site owners are profiting from the unpaid voluntary labour of their users. At the same time, they may also be legally responsible for the content of the sites they operate, even though they may go to great lengths to refrain from editing material posted there. The legal implications of the relatively vague claims to content ownership in open news still remain to be tested in detail, and it is possible that such tests may eventually lead to the development of a form of 'open news licence' in analogy to the 'open source licence' used in software development. Work done by the Creative Commons team to develop content licences might be able to be adopted for this context.

Answers to these and other issues in the open news model may come from further developments, beyond open news Websites as such. Recent key developments in this area include the growing popularity of blogging and the emergence of content syndication systems. Blogging shares many of the characteristics of gatewatching, but operates on a more decentralised, distributed level where individual bloggers post their articles on their own blogs and may engage one another in discussion through comments functions or direct reference to one another's articles. In this process, and especially also with the emergence of blog networks and various models for interconnecting individual blogs based on characteristics such as common topics or shared geographical location, we may see the emergence of a new form of open news which does not rely on a specific Website like Slashdot or Kuro5hin as its technological base. It is possible to envisage a model where such sites would offer only one of many points of entry into a decentralised open news *network* which could nonetheless appear as structured to the individual user as Slashdot or others are now.

Closely related to such ideas also are the many approaches to content syndication which are now being employed by many online news sources. RDF, RSS, and XML files offered by such sites enable users to directly retrieve information about the latest news items posted on an individual site, and to automatically incorporate pointers to these items into their own site or to aggregate them into a joint newsfeed which can be accessed through specific software or display devices. Participants in this form of voluntary content exchange and syndication range from blogs and open news sites themselves to some major news organisations like BBC News, with numbers swelling rapidly. As the detail of information available in such syndicated feeds increases, and as this development connects with similar efforts such as the Semantic Web project (see Berners-Lee *et al.*), which in essence would make any Web content more easily syndicable, it would again be possible to envisage future open news models taking on a far more networked, distributed structure which loosens its ties to any one open news Website.

For now, however, it is already evident that open news has managed to develop a significant level of interest and participation amongst its users. Whatever the limitations of Slashdot, the size of its user base and their level of contribution to the site indicate that to them, open news is indeed 'Stuff That Matters', much as the Slashdot slogan states, and as we have seen, further improvements to the model are being made on a number of fronts from open editing to content syndication and exchange. There is a clear demand by users for their participation as producers in the news reporting process, and for a peer-to-peer exchange of news items encountered through gatewatching. What remains to be seen is the extent to which such models are applicable in mainstream news beyond the sphere of self-declared 'nerds' or activists, and whether they may affect more traditional news organisations to open up their own procedures.

References

Bates, Jeff 'Hemos'. Email interview. 21 May 2001.

Berners-Lee, Tim, Jim Hendler, and Ora Lassila. "The Semantic Web: A New Form of Web Content That Is Meaningful to Computers Will Unleash a Revolution of New Possibilities." *Scientific American*, May 2001.

Bruns, Axel. "From Blogs to Open News: Notes towards a Taxonomy of P2P Publications." Paper presented at ANZCA 2003 conference in Brisbane, 9-11 July 2003. 24 Sep. 2003
<http://www.bgsb.qut.edu.au/conferences/ANZCA03/Proceedings/papers/bruns_full.pdf>.

Creative Commons. 2003. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://www.creativecommons.org/>>.

Foster, Rusty. "Article Moderation and Reading." 2003. 24 Sep. 2003
<<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/2/5/94655/29111>>.

---. "Kuro5hin.org Mission Statement." 19 Aug. 2003. 24 Sep. 2003
<<http://www.kuro5hin.org/special/mission>>.

Kumon, Shumpei, and Izumi Aizu. "Co-Emulation: The Case for a Global Hypernetwork Society." *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*. Ed. Linda M. Harasim. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1994. 311-26.

Malda, Rob 'CmdrTaco'. "'About This Site.'" 2001. 30 Dec. 2001 <<http://slashdot.org/about.shtml>>.

---. "FAQ: About Slashdot." 7 Feb. 2002. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://slashdot.org/faq/slashmeta.shtml>>.

---. "FAQ: Comments and Moderation." 21 Oct. 2000. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://slashdot.org/faq/com-mod.shtml>>.

---. "FAQ: Editorial." 19 June 2000. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://slashdot.org/faq/editorial.shtml>>.

---. "FAQ: Meta-Moderation" 10 June 2003. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://slashdot.org/faq/metamod.shtml>>.

---. "FAQ: Suggestions." 14 June 2000. 24 Sep. 2003 <<http://slashdot.org/faq/suggestions.shtml>>.

Meikle, Graham. *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. Annandale, NSW: Pluto, 2002.

"Trouble Over at Slashdot." Kuro5hin.org. 18 Jan. 2002. 24 Sep. 2003
<<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2002/1/17/21155/1564>>.