

From News Blogs to News on *Twitter*: Gatewatching and Collaborative News Curation

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Online engagement with news and current events – and especially with political developments – has a history which is almost as long as that of computer-mediated communication itself; even early online communities such as the famous bulletin board system Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL) included spaces for the discussion of news and politics by their users (Rheingold 1993). Such activities were significantly simplified and popularized with the advent of the World Wide Web, and especially with the development of what are commonly referred to as ‘Web 2.0’ technologies: online platforms which were built around the active contribution of content and commentary by users, and which enabled a substantially larger number of users to publish their thoughts on virtually any topic, including the news of the day.

A major early catalyst for the use of such platforms in reporting and discussing the news occurred with the establishment of the first Independent Media Center in the lead-up to the controversial 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle (Meikle 2002; Hyde, 2002; Bruns 2005). Activists who anticipated a largely one-sided coverage of the event by US and international media – painting anti- and alternative-globalization protesters simplistically as rioters and disruptors of the event – used Web 2.0 technology to develop their own, alternative online media channels, through which they reported on the activist meetings and conferences accompanying the official WTO summit, and covered the clashes between demonstrators and riot police from a bottom-up perspective. Operated using open source technologies and borrowed equipment, *Indymedia* (as it became known) provided a vision of the WTO summit which was in stark contrast to the mainstream media coverage, and set the scene for the largely adversarial relationship between mainstream and alternative media which would dominate the following years; the first Independent Media Center in Seattle also became the template for several hundred loosely networked IMCs which would emerge in countries around the world over subsequent years (Platon & Deuze 2003).

While the success of Indymedia highlighted the possibilities of using comparatively cheap, lightweight Web technology to offer a credible challenge to the agenda-setting authority of mainstream media organizations, it also presents a somewhat misleading picture of the everyday news engagement practices which would develop – at first,

especially in the US, but gradually also throughout other developed and well-connected nations – over the coming years. Seattle acted as a catalyst which attracted a critical mass of media-savvy activists who were able to engage in the first-hand reporting of summit events, but such preconditions are not necessarily met in everyday practice; the “citizen reporters” who came to Seattle for a week to drive Indymedia’s coverage eventually had to return to their own lives, which offered considerably less opportunity for the quasi-journalistic activities of researching and reporting new stories. In the aftermath of the Seattle event, therefore, the central focus both in Indymedia and in the wider movement which it had helped to invigorate shifted from reporting ‘new’ news to commenting on mainstream news, even at the same time as the term “citizen journalism” began to enjoy increasing popularity (Singer 2006; Deuze 2009).

“Citizen journalism” is doubly misleading, however: on the one hand, it implies that professional journalists are not also citizens, and – in final consequence – denies the possibility that they may have entered their chosen profession in pursuit of civic ideals at least as much as in pursuit of a career. On the other, it claims that the online participants described as citizen journalists are indeed engaging in the full range of journalistic practices, including original reporting, and subscribe to the central ideals of professional journalism, including objective and disinterested coverage of issues and events. Neither of these are necessarily met for citizen journalists, however: for practical reasons related to available time and resources, citizen journalists often act as a second tier in the news process, commenting on and critiquing mainstream news content but generating few genuinely new stories of their own, and they do so very often specifically because they feel that *their* perspectives, *their* causes are not accurately represented in such mainstream reporting.

This chapter, then, explores the role of this second tier of independent news blogs as it developed in the years following Seattle, and outlines the practice of gatwatching as a key element of news bloggers’ activities. We critique perceptions of the news blogosphere as an echo chamber or filter bubble whose discussions about current events are detached from journalistic coverage, and demonstrate instead the close interconnections between independent news bloggers and professional journalists in the wider media ecology. Finally, we sketch the gradual transition and broadening of gatwatching practices in the news blogosphere towards the collaborative curation of news sharing in contemporary social media spaces, and outline the further research questions which emerge from such transformations of the flows of news and discussion.

News Blogging as Gatwatching

If – not least for practical reasons – the early citizen journalism of the Indymedia movement transformed to citizen commenting in subsequent years, then, the emerging Web technology and online cultural practice of blogs and blogging became its chief tool. Especially after the establishment of blog hosting platforms such as *Blogger* and *Wordpress*, blogs provided an even cheaper and more lightweight technology for online publishing than the Indymedia platform had been, and they did so, importantly, also for individual users,

rather than mainly for activist groups. At times compared to the arrival of cheap printing presses and its impact on the publishing and spread of political pamphlets during the American struggle for independence, blogging technology enabled anyone with an interest in news and politics, with a political grievance or an activist cause, to become their own publisher and share their thoughts on virtually any topic with a potentially world-wide audience (Bruns 2006).

While the majority of such news and politics blogs may have attracted only minuscule audiences, some such sites rose to much more substantial popularity, to the point where they were able to affect the political process or prompt meaningful and impactful debate about the coverage of specific issues by mainstream media organizations. Several such events are by now well-rehearsed in the literature about news and political blogging: the dogged pursuit of former US House Senate Leader Trent Lott by a loose coalition of political bloggers, over pro-segregationist remarks at a birthday dinner for Congress veteran Strom Thurmond, gradually led to increased media questioning and, eventually, to Lott's resignation; the Washington, DC, political insider blog *Drudge Report* claimed credit for being the first to break the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal; the detailed debunking of mainstream media claims about US President George W. Bush's service records by news bloggers served to prematurely end respected news anchor Dan Rather's career. News and politics blogs had arrived as players in US politics (and over time did so in other nations as well): by 2004, the major parties' presidential nomination conventions began to formally accredit leading bloggers alongside mainstream media representatives.

Again, however, we should not ignore the vast number of lesser news blogs over a focus on the handful of highly influential, widely read sites. The latter eventually rose to their positions of prominence only *because* of the activities of the wider blogosphere: they became visible because many other, more minor bloggers linked to their posts, thereby demonstrating the dynamics of attention in what Benkler has described as a new "networked information economy" (2006, p.3). The common practice – in blogging, as well as in other forms of social media – of linking to and thereby sharing the posts of others provides an important amount of amplification of these posts, enabling them to be widely visible well beyond their original point of publication; it is through such amplification processes, for example, that the Lott, Lewinsky, or Rather stories were kept alive and eventually achieved domestic and international notoriety. (More recent controversies, by contrast, have tended to see a heightened level of *Twitter* and *Facebook* use over a shorter timeframe to achieve similar impacts – so much so that the term "social media shitstorm" to describe such intense moments of user-driven political crisis has entered recent dictionaries and scholarly literature; cf. Schmidt 2013.)

This demonstrates a fundamental practice in news and political blogging, operating both within the blogosphere itself and in its intersections with the wider news mediasphere: the practice of gatewatching (Bruns 2005). Because of their considerable operational constraints, usually resulting in a focus on citizen commenting over citizen journalism, news blogs cannot possibly act as gatekeepers in the way mainstream news organizations have

long positioned themselves; in an always-on, digitally determined media ecology, in fact, even those news organizations are now generally no longer able to control the news gates and claim major “scoops” for themselves. News bloggers, therefore, engage not in gatekeeping, but *gatewatching*: they observe and monitor what information passes through the gates of other news organizations, as well as those of original news sources (government and NGO organizations, companies, research institutes, etc.) and fellow commenters, and highlight, evaluate, and discuss such material if it relates to their own fields of interest. Such gatewatching is a practice particularly well-suited to online publication: it realizes the opportunities which emerge from the possibility of including direct hyperlinks to off-site material in one’s own post, enabling news bloggers to engage in a conversation-at-a-distance with the material they link to.

What emerges from this everyday, widespread practice of gatewatching and commenting is a distributed process of tracking, discussing, and – in aggregation – curating the news as it is published by other sites (Bruns 2011; Bruns & Highfield 2012). Overall, the news and political blogosphere acts as a second-order filtering mechanism, subsequent to the internal processes of mainstream news organizations, but also observing, critiquing, and – where necessary – correcting them. While this has been seen by some – and especially by a number of mainstream journalists – as a parasitic relationship, in which armchair journalists presume to improve the work of the professionals (see e.g. *The Australian* 2007), in reality the relationship has become much more symbiotic, especially as major news bloggers have become mainstream media commentators in their own right, and as professional journalists have started their own blogs. Some professionals have acknowledged that – in the words of blogger/journalist Dan Gillmor (2003, p.vi) – “my readers know more than I do”, especially about specialist topics which non-specialist journalists do not have the time or resources to explore in full detail; some news bloggers bring considerable energy and knowledge to bear on the task of critiquing mainstream reports, and of curating several such reports into a more comprehensive whole than any one news report could manage to achieve in its own right.

The Echo Chamber Debate

The quality of such gatewatching processes, and of their collaboratively curated outcomes, necessarily depends also on the diversity of the resources which are being gatewatched. One of the most persistent debates about news blogging amongst scholars and practitioners has been about this point, painting the news blogosphere at one extreme as a crucial new driver of the re-democratization of an otherwise oligarchical mass media system, telling truth to power (Benkler 2006; Shirky 2008; Castells 2009), and at the other as a hermetically sealed echo chamber in which established nostrums circulate endlessly, continually amplified by bloggers linking to like-minded others (Sunstein 2007; Morozov 2011; Pariser 2011).

Reality is likely to be found in between these two equally unrealistic caricatures of news blogging. It is true that attention in the blogosphere, as well as in the overall World Wide

Web, is unevenly distributed; a handful of leading Websites receive considerably more attention than the vast majority of sites. Such “long tail” patterns exist for most other media forms as well, and indeed constitute a fundamental constant for the distribution of public attention; online, they are supported and reinforced also by the operations of search engines such as Google. However, to claim on this basis that there is a “Googearchy” (Hindman 2009) which fatally undermines the ability of Web technologies (including blogs) to give voice to alternative perspectives, and generates an echo chamber instead, is to misunderstand public attention as singular rather than plural.

Long tail distributions of attention can be calculated for the entire Web, or for the entire blogosphere, but are comparatively meaningless from such highly aggregated perspectives. Any one blogger, or any one Internet user, has a specific range of interests, and will search for and link to material which relates to these interests; their distribution of attention represents a personalized long tail of sources which is different – subtly, or entirely – from that of any other user. Even if news bloggers were to predominantly link to like-minded other bloggers (and there are reasons to question this assumption, as they may also link to bloggers whom they seek to criticize or ridicule), then, like-minded does not mean *identically*-minded, and in making such links bloggers broaden the potential range of views and opinions their readers might be exposed to.

Further, this distribution of attention is context- and time-specific, especially for blogs which deal with news and political events. For the French and Australian political blogospheres, for example, Highfield (2011) has shown that the coverage of a news story or political issue will develop across several categories of blogs, depending on the type of issue. A story pertaining to a particular issue, such as economic policy, will be discussed in detail by specialist economics bloggers, whose topic of interest for their sites is reflected in the issue at hand. These specialists’ posts are then cited in further coverage of the issue by the “A-list” blogs – the prominent sites in terms of readership and reputation – who cover in their posts a wider range of topics than the specialists. Within political blogospheres, for instance, the “A-list” blogs comment on politics in general – crossing multiple themes, fields, and audiences – as opposed to focusing on a single subject. The “A-list” coverage then serves as both a filter and an amplifier: by drawing on analyses from the specialist bloggers, these blogs provide a more rounded and detailed, curated response to the issue, while also promoting the work of other blogs – and other media organizations – by highlighting their posts for a potentially different audience. For the coverage of general, everyday politics, this flow may be reversed, with the “A-list” leading the story and later adding thematic analysis from the specialists as a connection to their topics of interest emerges. In the response to both specialist issues and politics in general, though, the respective roles of topical experts and information curators are clear within the posts of these different types of blogs, and the follow-up coverage from “A-list”, specialist, and more minor blogs further develops these patterns as bloggers link and respond to one another’s posts. Nuernbergk (2013) shows similar patterns for the German political blogosphere’s coverage of the 2007 G8 summit and

surrounding protests in Heiligendamm (see also Moe 2010; Ackland & Shorish 2009; Nahon et al. 2011 for further approaches to these questions).

What emerges from this, then, is a picture not of a single echo chamber, a single long tail distribution in which a small number of “A-List” blogs dominate the rest of the blogosphere. Rather, for any one long-term field of interest, for any one short-term topic or issue within this field, for any one group of bloggers discussing this issue and interlinking with one another, there is a long tail-style distribution across a range of sites, developed *ad hoc* or accumulated over time. While clearly this does not mean that every news blogger has an equal ability to make their voice heard, at the same time it also does not deny that there is a *potential* for a news blogger, even a minor one, with an interesting point of view to be recognized, linked to, and thereby amplified by their more visible peers. If the blogosphere is democratic, it is so because it offers this potential; but there is no more guarantee that this potential will be realized than there is a guarantee in society-wide democratic processes that all voices, however obscure, will be equally well represented.

Bloggers and Commenters

Perceptions of the blogosphere as an echo chamber full of mutual self-agreement are also undermined by the often vigorous argument which may be found not only between bloggers themselves as they link to one another, but also between the users who respond to blog posts by adding their own comments to them. More so than mainstream news Websites, blogs (including news and political blogs) popularized the idea of offering a comment section in which readers could encourage, criticize, or otherwise extend the discussion offered by the blog author.

Such functionality has been added more recently also to the pages of many mainstream news sites, where it often continues to suffer from half-hearted implementations. Mainstream news organizations tend to be concerned in the first place about their corporate image and the need to minimize the potential for negative repercussions from inappropriate commentary. They therefore often employ pre-moderation approaches which – unless supported by substantial staff numbers – necessarily slow the flow of comments and discussion. Their highly visible nature also means that even in the face of restrictive moderation practices comment functionality attracts hundreds and thousands of respondents, reducing the coherence of the discussion.

By contrast, due to their significantly more limited public exposure, independent news blogs are usually able to use only light-touch post-moderation, ensuring that new comments appear immediately on the site and that a free-flowing discussion between commenters (including the original blogger) can ensue. Additionally, as most mid-size blogs will only attract some tens or hundreds of commenters, it is more likely that a genuine community of regular participants, familiar with each other’s views, can develop; although it may remain spirited and controversial, this tends to improve the quality of debate as it limits the presence of drive-by commenters who are not interested in genuine discussion and seek only to state their own opinions (see e.g. Butler 2001; Leskovec 2008, for discussions of the

inverse relationship between community size and community quality). Many blogs (and blogging platforms) also allow for the creation of persistent commenter identities, which further help to maintain community discussion across individual blog posts, or even generate persistent URLs for individual comments, enabling bloggers and commenters on the site (or on another blog) to refer specifically to a particular comment. Ultimately, this enables the development of a distributed discussion between bloggers and commenters across a range of sites, conducted through mutual interlinking.

While such commenting practices have largely been restricted to blogs and news sites themselves, the growth of social media platforms and their integration into the wider online media ecology over recent years have seen a gradual transition of news commentary and discussion beyond the blogosphere. Bloggers (as well as mainstream news organizations and their journalists) now regularly share links to their latest articles through *Facebook* and *Twitter*; as a result, follow-on commentary on such articles is as likely to take place in these social media spaces as it is on the pages of the blog or news site itself. Especially for flat, open, and public social networks such as *Twitter* (where with few exceptions any user can follow any other, without the need for a follower relationship to be approved by the other party), and less so for the more privately focused *Facebook*, this has the potential both to broaden the range of active commenters, and to lead to a more real-time, but also more ephemeral discussion of individual articles. The complex nature of interpersonal networks in social media systems (see e.g. Bruns & Moe 2014, for an outline of different layers of communication on *Twitter*) further problematizes our understanding of how news stories, and news *blog* stories, are shared and commented upon in social media spaces, and how this impacts on wider public debate.

Importantly, the transition of news discussion from blogs to spaces such as *Twitter* also affects the power relations between participants. Where the sites of news organizations as well as news bloggers are clearly controlled by their respective authors and operators, who have the ability to determine both what articles are published and what user comments are made visible, the same is clearly not the case for social media. *Twitter* and similar platforms provide a third-party space in which news organizations, journalists, bloggers, and commenters encounter and engage one another simply as comparatively equal *users*; only *Twitter* has the ability to shut down the public discussion of a poorly-researched article, for example, and it is unlikely to do so. Coupled with the enhanced publicness of social media debate, this appears to have resulted in a greater level of engagement especially between professional journalists and their readers; where in the past, they may have chosen to ignore a critical blog article about their work rather than to leave a comment on the blog, for example, it has now become common to observe interactions between journalists, bloggers, readers, and other stakeholders on *Twitter* (Bruns 2012).

More generally, social media platforms have also contributed to the further mainstreaming of gatewatching practices: they have enabled a substantially larger number of users – well beyond the population of the blogosphere – to engage in random acts of news sharing, for example by tweeting links (often with some commentary attached) to

interesting articles. In the process, gatewatching has become a distributed, communal, crowdsourced practice, and an evaluation of the news-related links tweeted at any one point provides a detailed insight into the issues and topics which currently exercise the general public. Fig. 1, for example, shows the week-by-week volume of tweeted links to major Australian news Websites from mid-2012 to late 2014, pointing to substantial peaks and troughs in activity which can be related to current events in Australian politics and public life.

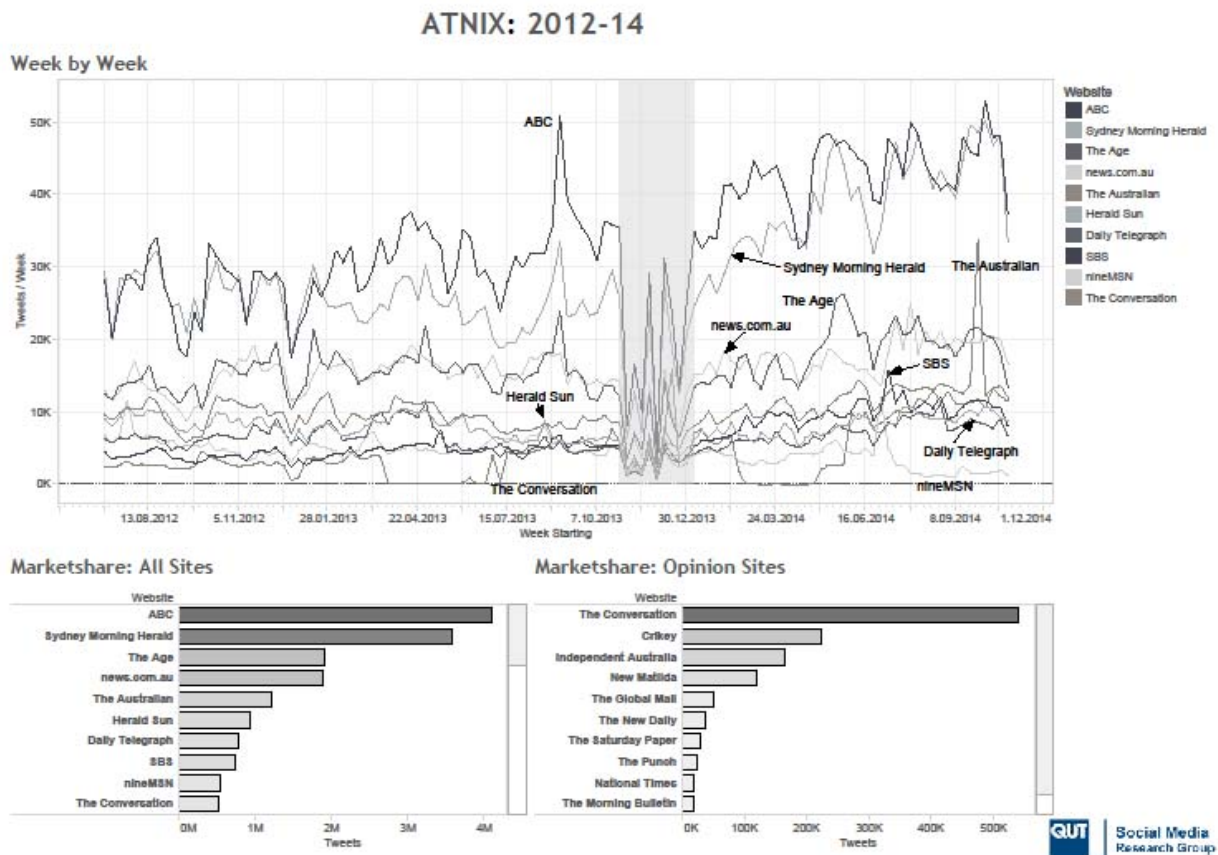


Fig. 1: Australian Twitter News Index (ATNIX), showing tweets per week linking to key Australian news sites. June 2012 to December 2013 (shaded area indicates outage through server maintenance; drop-offs for *The Conversation* caused by domain name change). See <http://mappingonlinepublics.net/tag/atnix/> for continuing ATNIX updates.

While such overall patterns provide an indication of general news interests amongst the social media userbase, pointing to the everyday routines of gatewatching activities, more focused and heightened patterns of activity can be observed around specific acute events – including political crises, natural disasters, and other breaking news. Here, *ad hoc* publics of users (cf. Bruns & Burgess 2011) form to collaborate on compiling and curating the information which is relevant to a story, drawing on a diverse range of sources as appropriate to the situation. On *Twitter*, this is facilitated for example through the

mechanism of the hashtag, which enables users to mark their messages as relevant to a specific topic (for example #sandy for the severe hurricane Sandy which affected the US east coast in late 2012). Others can then access, follow, and track all the messages hashtagged with the same term in one convenient location.

The *ad hoc* communities which form around hashtagged breaking news events – including journalists, politicians, directly affected participants, and other stakeholders, as well as ordinary users – continue to employ standard gatowatching approaches in their activities; in aggregate, their individual actions combine into a collaborative effort to “work the story” (cf. Bruns & Highfield 2012), much as the staff in a media newsroom might have done in response to a breaking news story, but on a substantially larger basis. News organizations themselves are increasingly reaching out to such self-organizing parajournalistic communities during moments of crisis, in fact, essentially inviting them to assist in working a story which – in the confusion which tends to surround such early moments in the development of a story – remains too complex to be made sense of by newsroom staff alone. During riots in the UK in 2011, for instance, journalists used Twitter to both disseminate information and promote their publication’s coverage of the unrest, but also to request reliable and accurate accounts and fact-checking from other users (Vis 2013). The UK *Guardian* newspaper is a notable leader of this collaborative approach to covering breaking news and live events; its extensive use of live blogs to report events as they happen involves the audience in both tone and format, inviting contributions via email, social media, and comments on the blog itself (Thurman & Walters 2013). Although the extent of published reader contributions to the blog varies depending on the type of event, the comments sections for these blogs provide a further space for users to add to the developing story, and interact with other readers and journalists.

Further Outlook

Several key threads for further scholarly research in this area emerge from the preceding discussion. First, the emerging practices of sharing the news through social media provide a fascinating, real-time and large-scale insight into the current preoccupations of the media audience and their active responses to the news. As fig. 1 has shown in brief, such patterns may be observed over shorter or longer timeframes (similar to *Twitter’s* “trending topics”, but distilled down specifically to an engagement with news content), and can be correlated with the political and other public events of the day. This points both to overall patterns in the distribution of attention across different online news sources, and across different news beats from politics to sports, and to the specific distribution of and response to individual stories, measuring the velocity and tracing the transmission paths by which information travels through the network.

Research in this area may also develop perspectives on the relative importance of specific nodes – users and sites – in the network, revitalizing and updating theories about opinion leadership and information flows (e.g. Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; Eisenstein 1994; Bennett & Manheim 2006) for the contemporary media environment. Crucial to such

research will be the development of conceptual models which account for the traditionally recognized stakeholders in public debate – journalists, politicians, and other public figures – as well as for the public communication practices of everyday audiences. Our Australian *Twitter News Index* (ATNIX), tracking news sharing in the Australian Twittersphere on a continuing basis since mid-2012, constitutes an early step towards this work (see Bruns, Highfield, & Harrington 2013), but much more must be done to develop such initiatives.

Second, the transition towards a greater role for social media in sharing and discussing the news raises questions about the future positioning of news blogs, as well as of other news sources. Concerns about “the death of blogging” are likely to be misplaced: while the blogosphere is no longer growing rapidly, or at all, and while blogs are no longer a particularly “special” form of online publishing, this must be seen simply as the normalization of a once-novel publishing model rather than as a point of crisis. The fundamental processes of blogging (and of news blogging) have not disappeared *per se*, but have rather become ordinary to the point of invisibility. Mainstream news sites now regularly refer to their columnists’ sections as “blogs”, without using that term to imply any particularly special position; independent commentators express their opinions on Websites which *are* political blogs, but no longer necessarily advertise this fact.

However, what may be lost in this normalization of news and political blogs simply as platforms for commentary is precisely the sense that such blogs constitute their own genre of writing, and their own network of interconnected, interlinked sites – a blogosphere worthy of the term. If social media grow to be a central space for tracking the news and exchanging of political opinion, then it is no more likely that there will continue to be a blogosphere than there is a “newspaper sphere”; rather blogs, newspaper sites, and news sites may serve simply as sources of information from which individual items are fed – through gatewatching – into the social network to be circulated, discussed, and fed back into other forms of media. While the transition to such a model of news flows – with social media as its backbone – has yet to be completed, breaking news events in particular already provide us with early glimpses of where such developments could lead; during times of crisis, as recent natural and human-made disasters have shown, social media already lead the process of news curation.

Finally, considerable further research is necessary on the impact of these changes on the nature of news, and on the news industry. At least since the *Indymedia* moment, the role of journalism in society has been questioned and critiqued with renewed vigor; the emergence of Independent Media Centers, news and politics blogs, and other alternative online media outlets has challenged mainstream news organizations to a considerable extent, and elicited responses ranging from defensive belligerence to open collaboration. The increase in alternative voices and alternative interpretations of current events, and the speed by which such coverage may be disseminated online, has also led to challenges over what is truth and what is merely “truthiness”, to quote Stephen Colbert (also cf. Zelizer 2009); such questions are far from being resolved, and may indeed be irresolvable.

What can be examined, however, is how news organizations, as well as individual journalists and other news workers, are positioning themselves in this changing environment. Early, simple divisions between mainstream and alternative media, between news sites and blogs, have long since eroded and given way to the recognition of a complex media ecology in which news organizations and their staff must be present across a range of platforms well beyond their own Websites; how such presence is created and operated varies widely and has met a diverse range of responses, however. In addition to the conventional stakeholders in online news (news organizations, journalists, bloggers, commentators, audiences), a new range of third-party participants have also emerged to further complicate the picture: these include the operators of social media spaces themselves (*Twitter*, *Facebook*), as well as aggregator and tracker services which utilize the Application Programming Interfaces of these platforms to mine news-related activity data. Such data, in turn, trace patterns of news engagement which themselves become new input for the emerging practices of data journalism.

Within this complex media ecology, the collaborative curation of news – and its subsequent analysis – is carried out across multiple platforms by a wide range of user types, from journalists and bloggers to *Twitter* users casually and infrequently tweeting opinions and links to articles. The roles of, and relationships between, these different contributors have changed over time, in response to the gradual acceptance and normalization of blogging and social media by mainstream news organizations. These changes have also impacted upon how news is presented, particularly breaking news; the importance of social media and blogging – including live blogging on news Websites – to covering events as they happen places continued value on gatewatching and collaboration between the various participants present in this expanded media ecology. Sourcing witness accounts and documentary evidence, verifying information, sharing links, and disseminating updates from official sources are roles which, rather than just being the work of the individual journalist, are undertaken by non-professionals in order to further develop the coverage of news in mainstream, alternative, and social media. The development of this collaborative rather than confrontational relationship has been a gradual process, and is far from complete; how this relationship evolves, as well as how online news curation continues to change as new practices and new platforms emerge, will remain important subjects for further scholarly research.

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