

## News Blogs and Citizen Journalism: New Directions for e-Journalism

Dr Axel Bruns  
Creative Industries Faculty  
Queensland University of Technology  
Brisbane, Australia  
a.bruns@qut.edu.au  
<http://snurb.info/>

Even for a casual observer of the journalistic industry it is becoming difficult to escape the conclusion that journalism is entering a time of crisis. At the same time that revenues and readerships for traditional publications from newspapers to broadcast news are declining, journalistic content is being overtaken by a flotilla of alternative options ranging from the news satire of *The Daily Show* in the United States to the citizen journalism of South Korea's *OhmyNews* and a myriad of other news blogs and citizen journalism Websites. Worse still, such new competitors with the products of the journalism industry frequently take professional journalists themselves to task where their standards have appeared to have slipped, and are beginning to match the news industry's incumbents in terms of insight and informational value: recent studies have shown, for example, that avid *Daily Show* viewers are as if not better informed about the U.S. political process as those who continue to follow mainstream print or television news (see e.g. Fox *et al.*, 2007). The show's host Jon Stewart – who has consistently maintained his self-description as a comedian, not a journalist – even took the fight directly to the mainstream with his appearance on CNN's belligerent talk show *Crossfire*, repeatedly making the point that the show's polarised and polarising 'left vs. right' format was "hurting" politics in America (the show disappeared from CNN's line-up a few months after Stewart's appearance; Stewart, 2004). Similarly, news bloggers and citizen journalists have shown persistence and determination both in uncovering political and other scandals, and in highlighting the shortcomings of professional journalism as it investigates and reports on such scandals.

This gradual decline of industrial journalism as the dominant force in the public sphere can be linked directly with a broader shift from industrial to post-industrial paradigms. As the industrial age makes way for the information age, and as its hierarchical and centralised structures for the organisation of production, distribution, and market economies transform towards a networked, heterarchical

environment characterised by many-to-many information flows, the conventional models of media production, distribution, and consumption are no longer relevant. At the height of the industrial age, a variety of economic, social, political, and technological factors conspired to shape the media industries, too, in the form of other production industries, with a clear process chain from producers through distributors to what were very appropriately described as ‘end consumers’: in this model, power over information was concentrated very clearly in the hands of a small number of media proprietors, and delegated from here on down to a hierarchy of editors, journalists, and other staff. While audiences did retain the ability to buy or not to buy the newspaper, to switch on or off the radio and television news, in practice this choice amounted in many local markets that were served by only one or two major news outlets simply to a choice between the news as it was offered, or a self-imposed news blackout.

It should be noted here that news proprietors and their staff did not necessarily abuse the power conferred upon them by this hierarchical system, of course – many did strive for high journalistic standards, aiming to provide ‘all the news that’s fit to print’ and that was required to sustain an informed citizenry, and in broadcast environments the (initial) scarcity of frequency spectra added a further obligation to provide quality news content (an obligation often legally enshrined in broadcast licences). At the same time, however, the demands of day-to-day journalistic practice led many journalists to work from an imperfect, abstract understanding of their audiences’ informational needs, supplemented at best by the limited consumer feedback received through letters and calls to the editor. Coupled with increasing commercial pressures on news media organisations (as manifested in dwindling staff, time, and other resources), this has led to a growing gap between the needs and wants of news audiences, and the news products provided to them by the journalism industry.

This disconnect between producers and consumers is hardly limited to the journalism industry only; it has been experienced in similar fashion in a wide variety of other industries, where it has been addressed at least in part by gradual moves towards a greater ability for users to customise and personalise products after or even before purchase. Commonly, such customisation adds an information layer to the physical product which can be controlled wholly or in part by the consumer; in the case of inherently informational products, however, customisation can extend much

further and actively involve consumers – users – as active producers of content, assuming a hybrid producer/user role which can be described as that of a *producer* (Bruns, 2008a). The emergence of such produsage is further enabled by a shift towards a more equitable media environment which allows all participants to both receive *and* send information, on an (almost) equal basis.

### **Gatekeeping, Gatewatching**

The embrace of produsage tendencies by the journalism industry is complicated by its existing organisational and operational models, however. During the industrial age, when the number of available news channels in print and broadcast was limited and when (in pursuit of quality or out of more overtly commercial motivations) a hierarchical structure of organisation prevailed, journalistic production was controlled through the practice of gatekeeping: the ‘gates’ of the journalistic publication (both at the input stage where information about potentially newsworthy events entered the process, and at the output stage where fully formed news reports emerged to public view in newspapers or broadcast bulletins) were considered sacrosanct, and served as filters for news items which were considered to be unimportant, uninteresting, or otherwise irrelevant for audiences. (A further form of gatekeeping exists also at the response stage, where only a small number of audience responses are selected for publication based on their level of relevance and interest.) While ideally a useful mechanism for condensing the total sum of all current events down to what can be intelligently covered using available resources in a standard newspaper or broadcast bulletin, such gatekeeping is necessarily also subject to the unconscious and implicit biases of journalistic staff, or even to explicit interference by editors and proprietors as they impose their own political, social, or commercial agendas. Even though objectivity, balance, and disinterestedness have been enshrined as key ideals throughout much of modern journalism’s history, they have therefore inevitably remains just that: ideals which day-to-day journalism has managed to approximate more or less well.

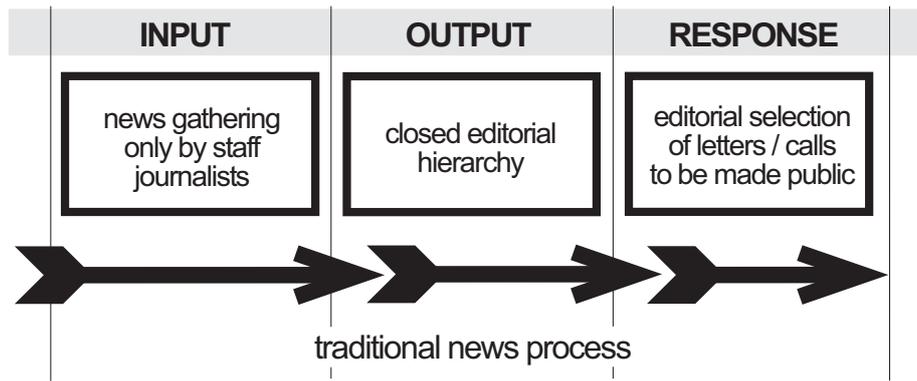


Fig. 1: Three stages of gatekeeping in the traditional news process  
(adapted from Bruns, 2005)

In the emerging information age, many of the original motivations for the industrial gatekeeping regime no longer apply. Where at a time of channel scarcity, each news outlet was compelled to make its coverage as comprehensive as possible, a growing abundance of channels means that what is prevented from passing through the input gates of one channel is likely to make it through those of another; where in print and broadcast, news reports had to compete with one another at the output gates for the limited space available in newspaper or broadcast bulletin, the online environment offers virtually unlimited column space and airtime; where for the same reason, audience responses traditionally had to be confined to small feedback sections accounting for a fraction of the total publishing space, to embrace them now means making a first step towards enabling users to become producers. Far from watching current events on behalf of audiences, and condensing this wealth of information into a unified package, the aspect of gatekeeping that now becomes most palpable for news users is its limiting of their access to the full range of newsworthy events. Journalism's role as watchdog and informant for the wider citizenry was appropriate at a time when most citizens were unable to seek out a broad range of information sources for themselves; as direct access to such sources (ranging from first-hand reports from governments, companies, and NGOs to a diverse collection of news agencies and other information analysts and commentators) has improved, however, the famous *New York Times* slogan 'all the news that's fit to print', which so very well encapsulates the gatekeeping model, acquires an increasingly patronising tone; the time for watchdogs is coming to a close.

What is required instead, as Bardoel and Deuze point out, is a redefinition of “the journalist’s role as an annotational or orientational one, a shift from the watchdog to the ‘guidedog’” (2001: 94): the very abundance of news channels and information sources which is now available for direct access to users especially in the online environment has also made it significantly more difficult to find and follow important stories (regardless of what stories may be considered to be ‘important’ by each individual user). A key role for professional journalists and others operating with some degree of adherence to journalistic ideals and ethics therefore now becomes that of identifying and highlighting newsworthy material, wherever it may emerge from. These new ‘guidedogs’ may point their users to useful reports in conventional news publications as well as to first-hand materials from official or unofficial sources or to insightful commentary and analysis; in other words, they watch the output gates of other sources, and further publicise the material published there – they are *gatewatchers*, not gatekeepers (see Bruns, 2005).

Compared to journalistic gatekeeping, gatewatching requires a very different set of skills: it relies less on first-hand investigative research and the ability to compose succinct news stories, and more on information search and retrieval skills especially in online environments. This also enables gatewatching to be conducted on a far more *ad hoc*, decentralised and crowdsourced basis than has been possible for gatekeeper journalism: a much wider range of participants, including what Jay Rosen has described as “the people formerly known as the audience” (2006), can now perform “random acts of journalism” (Lasica, 2003a: 71) simply by pointing out to other users whatever interesting information they uncovered by chance or by design during their travels on the Web and in other media forms.

The Websites built around such gatewatching as a foundational practice, then, act not as conventional journalistic outlets offering a more or less comprehensive range of in-house content; instead, they serve as digests of Web-based and other news and information as compiled through the gatewatching of external sources – at their most basic, they may offer little more than brief introductions of each item with a link to the source information. In many cases, such sites focus on a specific field of interest, and they have often managed to develop large and committed communities of users acting as gatewatchers; one long-established example for this is the well-known technology news site *Slashdot* with its community of well over 600,000 users and contributors. A more recent alternative to such centralised models is the emergence of

more decentralised, loose networks of like-minded sites (often comprised in the main of group and individual blogs) which together follow current events in their chosen fields of interest and so collaboratively act in a guidedog role for their users. Where *Slashdot* users commit their ‘random acts of journalism’ by submitting pointers to the materials they have found to the one central site, in these decentralised gatewatcher networks individual bloggers post such pointers on their own sites, and construct a dense network between their sites by linking to interesting material on fellow blogs and news sites.

In the first place, then, such gatewatching adds a further stage of information processing before the input stage of the publications based upon gatewatching: where conventional journalists may conduct their own research or scour the newswires for interesting and important stories, gatewatchers observe the gates of a wide range of information sources for useful and relevant materials that they think should be brought to the attention of the wider community. The outcomes of this gatewatching (pointers to found materials, with more or less detailed annotations) are then submitted to the input stage of a gatewatcher news site, or published on the gatewatcher’s own Website; this, however, also indicates that user-led gatewatching is by no means incompatible with conventional journalism, but may instead serve as an additional source of information – indeed, some enterprising mainstream news outlets, including especially *BBC News Online*, are now making very open appeals to their users to submit their own stories and pointers to stories for evaluation at their input gates.

### **Beyond Gatewatching: Towards Citizen Journalism**

Many of the alternative news sites which have emerged with the gatewatching model go beyond this limited embrace of users as producers, however; instead, they not only add a gatewatching stage as a precursor to the news production process proper, but also reconfigure their input, output, and response stages in a variety of ways. What emerges as a result is a wide variety of models which can only be sketched out briefly in this chapter (they are outlined in considerably more detail in Bruns, 2005), combining aspects of gatewatching and gatekeeping to differing degree at each stage.

Common to most models – largely as a result of the way in which gatewatchers gather and report information – is a significant transformation of the response stage. Where traditional news publications allowed only a small fraction of

their users to become active participants and have their voices heard as part of the publication itself, gateway publications tend to impose few or no limits on the ability of users to become contributors at the response stage. This is necessary especially as the original gateway report often contains little more than a brief summary of and link to the external information it highlights: users are encouraged to see the original report for themselves rather than trust the annotation and commentary added by the gateway. In order to put the report into context, then, it does however become necessary to further discuss, analyse, and critique it – where in conventional journalism, the journalist writing a story about a newsworthy event would have been charged with that task before publication, in gateway news the community of users is performing it after publication through an extended process of debate, discussion, and deliberation in a series of responses which are usually attached directly to the initial gateway report. In this way, the brief gateway note highlighting new information is fleshed out, put into context, and complemented with further information and new gateway pointers to other reports added during the discussion, and again this can be described as a form of crowdsourcing: rather than relying on a single journalist to consider and present all sides of a news story, here a larger and potentially more diverse community of users is able to collaborate as producers of a more comprehensive form of news coverage than would have been possible under the pressures of the industrial model. At its best, this achieves what journalism scholar Herbert Gans described as multiperspectival news reporting:

ideally, multiperspectival news encompasses fact and opinion reflecting all possible perspectives. In practice, it means making a place in the news for presently unrepresented viewpoints, unreported facts, and unrepresented, or rarely reported, parts of the population.

To put it another way, multiperspectival news is the bottoms-up corrective for the mostly top-down perspectives of the news media. (2003: 103)

Beyond individual stories on a gateway site, for the whole site this multiperspectivity of its news coverage also still depends on what takes place at its input and output stages: while individual news may be debated from multiple perspectives if the response stage is opened to all interested participants, the overall range of stories covered may continue to be substantially slanted towards specific

interests or agendas for as long as selection biases still exist at the input stage (where incoming gatewatcher reports are filtered) or the output stage (where such reports are released to users after further processing). Many gatewatcher sites also fully or partially abandon gatekeeping at these intermediate stages, therefore: *Slashdot* applies a very limited amount of content filtering which denies passage only to very poorly written gatewatcher stories, for example, while *zeitgeist* site *Kuro5hin* implements a kind of internal gatewatching by allowing its community of registered users to collaboratively filter submitted gatewatcher stories before they are ‘officially’ released on the site, and *Wikipedia* offshoot *Wikinews* enables the collaborative editing of stories before and after publication (see Bruns, 2006). Many sites in the *Indymedia* network, on the other hand, have done away with input and output gates entirely by immediately publishing every submitted story (an approach which creates its own problems as it does not allow for any form of quality control, thereby opening a door to spam and other abuse).

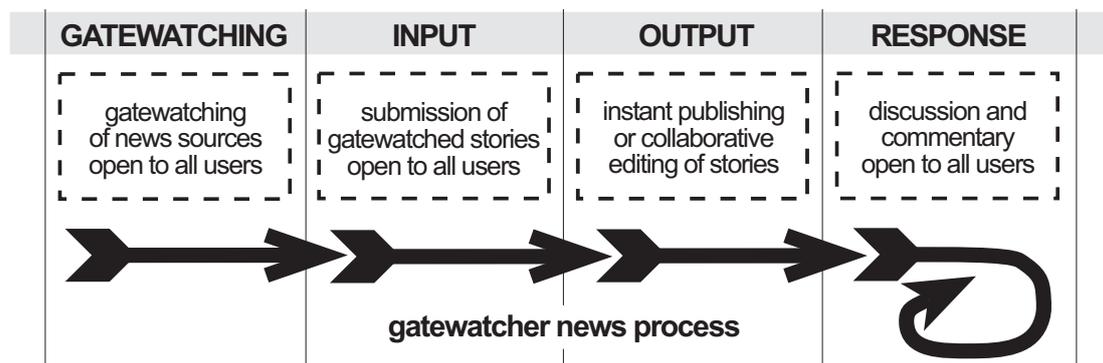


Fig. 2: Four stages of gatewatching (variations apply across different sites)  
(adapted from Bruns, 2005)

What happens in many such gatewatcher sites and news blogs can already be described as a form of citizen journalism: these sites build on their participant communities’ range of understandings and interpretations of current events which is necessarily wider and more diverse than that of a small number of industrial journalisms, and these diverse, multiple perspectives of users acting not simply as informed, but as what Henry Jenkins calls “monitorial” citizens (2006: 208) – that is, as gatewatchers – discussing, debating, and deliberating on the news serve to complement and sometimes supplement the output of the mainstream journalism industry. Such citizen journalism acts in the first place as a corrective to the

mainstream, then, and in this role becomes the second tier in the two-tier news media system which Herbert Gans postulated in his seminal 1970s research into the shortcomings of mainstream journalism, well before the advent of the Internet as a possible technological basis for this second tier:

[the existing] central (or first-tier) media would be complemented by a second tier of pre-existing and new national media, each reporting on news to specific, fairly homogeneous audiences. ... Their news organisations would have to be small [for reasons of cost]. They would devote themselves primarily to reanalysing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media – and the wire services – for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting, particularly to support bottom-up, representative, and service news, as would be financially feasible. (1980: 318)

This basis form of citizen journalism has sometimes been criticised for existing in a parasitic relationship with the mainstream: at a first glance, of course, gatewatching does indeed feed off mainstream news publications and other sources for its news coverage. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has described this as “a parasitical role of online communication”, and has stated categorically that “within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines” (2006: 423, fn. 3). At the same time, however, under the same logic news publications, too, could be considered to act as (paid-up) parasites of newswire services – and more importantly, any such descriptions ignore, sometimes deliberately, whether the apparent ‘parasite’ in addition to its feeding off existing content also produces new material which is returned to the mediasphere. Citizen journalism in its gatewatcher form as we have described it so far does indeed perform an important service in the wider media- and public sphere: building on diverse participant bases, it adds broad, multiperspectival analysis and commentary on news events to the inevitably narrow range of perspectives expressed in mainstream news reporting; building on committed interest communities, its sites are able to engage in a more ongoing, longitudinal fashion with key themes in the news, from hyperlocal news to high-end consumer

technology to addressing climate change; and by employing the gatewatching model which highlights and contrasts the information passing through the output gates of a wide variety of news sources and publications, its participants act both as guidedogs for one another, helping their peers make sense of the abundance of information now available to them on virtually any topic, *and* as watchdogs for the mainstream media, identifying and correcting misunderstandings, misreporting, and misinformation.

Ultimately, therefore, citizen journalism performs an important public service; if in its heyday mainstream journalism was considered to be a Fourth Estate keeping a watchful eye on the performance of public actors throughout state and society, then citizen journalism today provides an answer to the ancient question of *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, ‘who watches the watchers’, whose independence and objectivity is threatened and undermined by political and commercial interference. Citizen journalism, in other words, has become an “Estate 4.5”, as Jane B. Singer describes it (2006: 28). This has been highly evident over the past decade – from *Indymedia*’s role in providing an independent, alternative perspective on the 1999 World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle to blogger Salam Pax’s dispatches from Baghdad during the early phase of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and to the contributions of many other news bloggers and citizen journalists to a critical coverage of the ‘War on Terror’ at a time when especially in the United States mainstream media criticism has been severely muted for fear of being seen as ‘unpatriotic’.

Not all citizen journalism is engaged in such high-stakes, global-impact politics, of course; frequently, it also serves to provide a more in-depth and more insightful coverage of areas traditionally neglected by mainstream media. This is evident for example in the position of *Slashdot* as a leading site in the field of information and communication technology news, but also in the emergence of a variety of hyperlocal citizen journalism projects, covering neighbourhood news which may be of interest only to strictly limited local communities. (Germany’s *MyHeimat.de*, which provides a federated basis for what may ultimately become a country-wide coverage of hyperlocal news – and which also produces free local print magazines compiling the best content from the area – serves as a useful example here.) Citizen journalism has been able to assume leadership in such fields as they have been all but vacated by mainstream journalism, often for economic reasons: for the news industry, it is simply not viable to dedicate journalistic staff to areas which

may only very occasionally produce stories that are of interest to more than a committed niche audience, while the more *ad hoc*, crowdsourced models of gatewatching and citizen journalism can effectively address such fields by sharing journalistic tasks across a wider community of contributors. This communal distribution of effort is analogous to practices in open source software production (a field which using a community-driven model similarly has been able to create quality software for applications which have been deemed to be financially unviable by the mainstream industry), and is indeed common to all forms of produsage (Bruns, 2008a).

Especially in such cases, then, citizen journalism clearly moves beyond a purely ‘parasitic’ role, and in fact it is mainstream journalism which can be found at times to draw from the work of citizen journalists in its own coverage of news stories from such fields if they do rise to wider public recognition beyond the niche communities. This was evident for example in the late-2007 Australian federal election campaign, during which a number of psephologists (scientist specialising in the analysis of political opinion polls and related demographic data) extensively blogged their work, challenging the often unscientific and sometimes deliberately misleading interpretations of opinion polls by political journalists (see Bruns, 2008b). While some news outlets pursued an attack course against the representatives of ‘Estate 4.5’ – the embattled Murdoch-owned national broadsheet *The Australian* went so far as to make the dubious claim that unlike the citizen journalists, “we understand Newspoll because we own it” (*The Australian*, 2007) –, other journalists were less aggressive, and reported on the work of such psephologists or even featured their work in invited guest columns.

Whether succumbing to the temptation to pick a fight with citizen journalism, or harnessing the best material published on its sites for incorporation into mainstream news stories, however (in a process of what may be described as reverse gatewatching), such direct engagement between citizen journalists and their counterparts in the news industry, as peers and equals, points to the fact that any description of citizen journalists as mere parasites in the news process misses the mark. Instead, it is now becoming more appropriate to describe this relationship as a symbiotic one: citizen as well as mainstream journalism are today two equally indispensable elements of a wider news media ecosystem, as blogger-journalist J.D. Lasica points out:

we need to move beyond the debate of whether blogging is or isn't journalism and celebrate its place in the media ecosystem. Instead of looking at blogging and traditional journalism as rivals for readers' eyeballs, we should recognize that we're entering an era in which they complement each other, intersect with each other, play off one another. The transparency of blogging has contributed to news organizations becoming a bit more accessible and interactive, although newsrooms still have a long, long way to go. (2003b)

### **Symbiosis in a Post-Gaussian Mediasphere**

Terms such as 'symbiosis' and 'ecosystem' are especially appropriate also as they point to the fact that individual elements in this system retain their specific roles and functions – they are not freely interchangeable. To the extent that it is driven by gatewatching – the evaluation and analysis of material available from existing sources – citizen journalism remains dependent on the prior availability of such material, while a central (if gradually declining) aspect of professional journalism is its ability to conduct first-hand investigative research. Such investigative journalism is enabled by a number of external factors (some of which have come under threat in recent years, for a variety of reasons): commercial or public funding which supports journalists during extensive investigations; legal frameworks which protect journalists and their sources from prosecution, especially when uncovering matters of intense public interest; and the institutional clout of recognised news organisations which helps journalists gain first-hand access to key public actors.

None of these factors are easily attainable for citizen journalists operating on a voluntary, *ad hoc* basis outside of industry and profession, even though the value of their contributions to the mediasphere is becoming increasingly evident. On the other hand, we have already seen that this position outside the operational, commercial, and political pressures of the industry also enables citizen journalists to make unique contributions of their own: their work can engage with news and current events far more deeply and continuously than is possible for staff journalists bound by a 24-hour news cycle; their communities are able to discuss, debate, and deliberate on issues from a far wider range of first-hand perspectives than can be achieved by professional journalists sourcing commentary and opinion from a handful of public figures; and

their independence from external pressures allows for the expression of the sometimes controversial, sometimes even extreme views which nonetheless must be part of a truly multiperspectival coverage of the news.

In other words, we might say that at its heart mainstream journalism offers news-as-product: a collection of easily digestible reports based on research, ready for consumption; while citizen journalism provides news-as-process: a continuing and necessarily unfinished coverage of topics and events inviting user participation, aiming to achieve what can be described as ‘deliberative journalism’: “deliberative journalism would underscore the variety of ways to frame an issue. It would assume that opinions – not to mention majorities and minorities – do not precede public deliberation, that thoughts and opinions do not precede their articulation in public, but that they start to emerge when the frames are publicly shared” (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 2002). Both, then, are necessary and desirable in a postmodern, post-industrial media environment, and both are inherently dependent on the other – it appears highly likely, therefore, that the current process of arrangement and symbiosis between the two will continue for the foreseeable future.

Such symbiosis ultimately transcends the two-tier model sketched out by Herbert Gans and outlined above, and sees a greater interweaving and collaboration between the two sides. It is evident already in the growing embrace of citizen journalism by the mainstream media as well as by public actors outside the journalism industry (*pace* the journalistic dinosaurs of *The Australian* and a handful of other news organisations, who – perhaps rightly – see their traditional way of life threatened by this new species of competitor and have no other response than to fight): in the U.S. and a number of European nations, for example, key citizen journalists and news bloggers are now regularly featured in guest spots in print and broadcast, and are invited to cover the conferences and conventions of parties and other political movements, while a substantial number of mainstream journalists have also begun to seek out more directly the knowledge and opinions of specific interest groups and of the wider audience. Such moves enable both sides to play to their own strengths while harnessing those of their counterparts: mainstream journalism is able to draw on the wider range of perspectives on any one issue which is readily available from the communities of citizen journalism, while citizen journalists gain more direct access to the corridors of power, thereby enabling them to reduce their dependence on what existing material can be identified through gatewatching processes.

Beyond the broader societal and political acceptance of citizen journalists which is indicated by such developments, however, there is also a more formal institutional embrace of citizen journalism models which can be seen in the gradual transformation of a number of existing mainstream media organisations, and in the emergence of new hybrid industry/citizen journalism projects which may be best described as pursuing a kind of pro-am journalism (in line with the Pro-Am model described by Leadbeater and Miller, 2004). Mainstream media institutions such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, especially through its *BBC News Online* publication, or *The Guardian* newspaper, are now actively and openly inviting the contribution of material by their users, especially on key stories or in the context of news topics which would be difficult to cover effectively even for the best-intentioned professional journalist. So, for example, *The Guardian* successfully organised a hyperlocal coverage of the leaders' campaigns in the 2005 British General Election through its *Blair Watch Project*, which invited readers to submit their own photos and commentary from the campaign trail and thereby gathered significantly more (and more diverse) impressions from the campaign than even the media pack travelling with the leaders had been able to do.

Similarly, *BBC News Online* now regularly features invitations to users to submit their own stories, or additional material to flesh out the site's existing reports. This was notable especially in the site's coverage of the 7 July 2005 bombings on the London public transport system, where most of the early reports from the scenes of the bombings (from brief text messages and mobile phone photos to DIY audio and video reports) were submitted by citizens who had simply had the misfortune to be in the immediate vicinity at the time of the attack – however, such user participation is also frequently invited for far less extraordinary events. *BBC News Online* and a variety of other mainstream news sites are also increasingly opening up their stories for user responses (even if, for a variety of reasons, such user discussions often remain closely monitored and moderated) – this can be regarded as a cautious transition to an open and continuing, citizen journalism-style response stage in the journalistic process, much as the invitation of user contributions constitutes an opening of the input stage. In such experiments, then, it is only the output stage where conventional journalistic gatekeeping still applies in its traditional form.

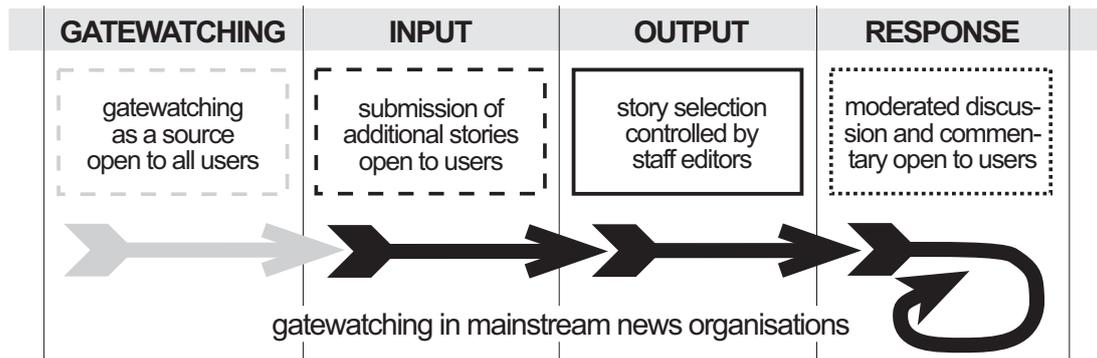


Fig. 3: Gatewatching as incorporated into the mainstream news process

Established news organisations reinventing themselves following the emergence of citizen journalism as a credible alternative are not the only, or necessarily the best, place where innovative approaches to a symbiosis between mainstream and citizen journalism can be found. Instead, a number of new organisations have emerged, built from the start on a pro-am ethos which regards professional and citizen-journalistic skills and modes of operation as complementary and equally valuable. Such organisations have emerged especially also in topical fields or political environments where there was an acutely felt need for an alternative approach to the coverage of the news; perhaps the best example for such trends is the South Korean pro-am journalism site *OhmyNews*. Founded by professional journalist Oh Yeon-ho in 2000 in response to what he perceived as the strongly conservative bias of mainstream Korean news media, *OhmyNews* has today managed to attract tens of thousands of citizen-journalist contributors from all walks of life, who work together with a staff of dedicated, professional journalists and editors who prepare their stories for publication. It is no exaggeration to say that *OhmyNews* (which also benefits from South Korea's extremely high rate of broadband Internet penetration) has substantially transformed the political and media environment, to the extent that previous president Roh Moo Hyun gave his first interview after his election not to any of the established mainstream media institutions, but to *OhmyNews* (Kahney, 2003). The site has since also spawned versions in Japanese and English, operating on a similar model of pro-am collaboration.

Again, such approaches can be seen to combine the key strengths of professional and citizen journalism – here especially professional oversight at the output stage to ensure accuracy, balance, and quality of writing with the broad-based, multiperspectival, community sourcing of material at input and response stages.

Additionally, the inherently collaborative engagement between professional and citizen contributors also provides an opportunity for mobility between both roles: so, for example, it is possible to identify consistently strong citizen contributors with a view to offering them professional employment in the news organisation and/or placing them more explicitly on formal story assignments. Rather than belonging to either tier of the Gansian model, in other words, *OhmyNews* is able to act as a conduit and pathway between them – and the more prominent hybrid organisations such as *OhmyNews* become in the overall mediasphere, the more they contribute to a gradual eradication of the two-tier model in favour of a more directly interwoven, symbiotic system.

### **Beyond Citizen Journalism**

Such forms of pro-am journalism may no longer be able to be classed as ‘citizen journalism’ proper, much as they do not constitute simply another variant of ‘professional journalism’. This may be seen as a cause for concern by both tiers of the current system, if for vastly different reasons: journalists in the industry may regard it as a further watering-down of their ‘profession’, while citizen journalists could conversely regard any collaboration with paid staff, and especially the reintroduction of checks and balances at the output stage which is a common feature of such pro-am models, as citizen journalism ‘selling out’ in pursuit of broader public acceptance. However, both views may ultimately be unsupported and unsustainable.

For mainstream journalists, in current industry practice claims to professionalism are already highly problematic: levels of journalistic training and induction to professional ethos and ethics vary widely across and within individual news organisations, and often depend more on the process of a journalist’s socialisation into the work environment than on their formal professional education. Indeed, the very term ‘journalist’ has been broadened to include not only core news professionals, but also commentators, hosts, and a variety of other media personalities; as news blogger and journalism scholar Glenn Reynolds has put it, ‘correspondent’ now often simply has a meaning of “well-paid microphone-holder with good hair” (2003: 82). As we noted earlier, at this point in the early information age, the mainstream journalistic industry overall may be experiencing a gradual decline which is at least in part of its own making and due to a slippage in

professional standards – far from further contributing to such a decline, then, a move towards pro-am models may assist in arresting it by offering industrial journalism an opportunity to reinvent itself as appropriate for the new post-industrial environment.

For citizen journalists, two options are available: one is to try to remain staunchly outside the mainstream mediasphere, reserving the right to snipe from the sidelines whenever the journalism industry conducts its business at a less than acceptable level of quality, yet rejecting the responsibility to formalise their own practices and to develop and be held to account for their own code of journalistic ethics. Understood along these lines, citizen journalism remains little more than a branch of punditry similar to the talking heads of the mass media commentariat (whom citizen journalists rightly and persistently criticise for their cynical and manipulative spin, and lack of ethical accountability), yet existing outside of the mass media. This position avoids any danger of ‘selling out’ by finding too cosy an arrangement with the mass media industry, but only at the price of a self-imposed exclusion from the core conduits of public discourse.

The only feasible alternative to such a voluntarily marginal role is a deliberate and considered pursuit of acceptable pro-am opportunities wherever they may present themselves. Notably, this does not mean the development of collaborations with professional journalism at any price and under any conditions (some of which may indeed constitute a selling out of core citizen journalism principles), but instead requires the exploration of mutually acceptable and mutually beneficial models of pro-am cooperation under the auspices of existing or new news media organisations (such as *OhmyNews*). Where mainstream news organisations are open to such exploration, it is indeed incumbent on citizen journalists to seize the opportunity and thereby guide the mainstream journalism they so often criticise towards models more compatible with a post-industrial mediasphere, while in the absence of such opportunities it may be up to citizen journalists to create environments in which mainstream journalists are openly invited to participate.

The challenges faced by citizen journalists in this context are identical to those encountered by any other successful grassroots alliance as it considers its transformation into a viable long-term movement: success occasions change. So, for example, the grassroots environmental and citizens’ rights campaigners of Western Europe in the 1970s were forced to choose between continuing as a fundamentalist extra-parliamentary oppositional group, or forming a political movement in its own

right which could ultimately even share the responsibilities of local, state, and national government. In some nations, this choice resulted in a bitter split between what became the Greens parties, and eco-fundamentalist groupings rejecting any participation in the bourgeois political system; in others, movements attempted with varying degrees of success to retain both fundamentalist and parliamentary groups under a unified organisational roof.

Ultimately, however, for political activists then as for citizen journalists now it is a choice which must necessarily be confronted as grassroots movements advance beyond the gains of their initial success from tactical actions, and establish themselves as serious political and media operators for the longer term (see Bruns, 2008c). At the heart of these developments lies a question of “Other than to criticise the establishment, what do we want?”, and it is this question which the gatewatchers, news bloggers, and citizen journalists of the post-industrial mediasphere must now confront for themselves. The troubled state of the mainstream journalism industry means that many news organisations as well as audiences are wide open for newcomers with fresh ideas and innovative approaches to reporting, analysing, and debating the news – citizen journalists are therefore faced with an opportunity to move beyond a merely oppositional stance, even beyond citizen journalism as such, and towards the development of effective and successful pro-am models which combine the best elements of both professional and citizen journalism in a variety of innovative news publications that are more appropriate to the user-led, collaborative media environments of the early information age. They, and we, cannot afford to waste this opportunity.

## References

- The Australian*. (2007, 12 July). "History a Better Guide than Bias." <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,22058640-7583,00.html> (accessed 10 Aug. 2007).
- Bardoel, Jo, and Mark Deuze. (2001). "'Network Journalism': Converging Competencies of Old and New Media Professionals." *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Dec.): pp. 91-103.
- Bruns, Axel. (2005). *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*, New York: Peter Lang.
- . (2006). "Wikinews: The Next Generation of Online News?" *Scan Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1. [http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=69](http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=69) (accessed 20 Dec. 2007).
- . (2008a). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producers*, New York: Peter Lang.
- . (2008b) The Active Audience: Transforming Journalism from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching. In David Domingo and Chris Paterson (eds.), *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production*. New York: Peter Lang.
- . (2008c). "Gatewatching, Gatecrashing: Futures for Tactical News Media." In Megan Boler (ed.), *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P.
- Fox, Julia, Glory Koloen, and Volkan Sahin. (2007, Summer). "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Campaign." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 51, no. 2.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1980) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, New York: Vintage.
- . (2003). *Democracy and the News*, New York: Oxford UP.
- Habermas, Jürgen. (2006). "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research." *Communication Theory*, vol. 16, no. 4: pp. 411-26.
- Heikkilä, Heikki, and Kunelius, Risto. (2002, 17 July). "Access, Dialogue, Deliberation: Experimenting with Three Concepts of Journalism Criticism." *The International Media and Democracy Project*. [http://www.imdp.org/artman/publish/article\\_27.shtml](http://www.imdp.org/artman/publish/article_27.shtml) (accessed 20 Feb. 2004).
- Jenkins, Henry. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: NYU Press.
- Kahney, Leander. (2003, 17 May). "Citizen Reporters Make the News." *Wired News*. <http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,58856,00.html> (accessed 3 June 2004).
- Lasica, J.D. (2003a, Fall). "Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other." *Nieman Reports*, pp. 70-4. <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf> (accessed 4 June 2004).
- . (2003, 12 March). "Random Acts of Journalism: Beyond 'Is It or Isn't It Journalism?': How Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other." *JD's Blog: New Media Musings*. [http://www.jdlasica.com/blog/archives/2003\\_03\\_12.html](http://www.jdlasica.com/blog/archives/2003_03_12.html) (accessed 27 Sep. 2004).

- Leadbeater, Charles, and Paul Miller, (2004). "The Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society." *Demos*.  
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy/> (accessed 25 Jan. 2007).
- Reynolds, Glenn Harlan. (2003, Fall). "Weblogs and Journalism: Back to the Future?" *Nieman Reports*, pp. 81-2.
- Rosen, Jay. (2006, 27 June). "The People Formerly Known as the Audience." *PressThink: Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine*.  
[http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html) (accessed 10 Aug. 2007).
- Singer, Jane B. (2006). Journalists and News Bloggers: Complements, Contradictions, and Challenges. In Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (eds.), *Uses of Blogs*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Stewart, Jon. (2004). *Crossfire*, CNN, 15 Oct.; see e.g. <http://youtube.com/watch?v=11TaDDUVcGQ> (accessed 20 Dec. 2007).

## **Bio**

Dr Axel Bruns is a Senior Lecturer in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. He is the author of *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) and the editor of *Uses of Blogs* with Joanne Jacobs (New York: Peter Lang, 2006). Bruns has coined the term *produsage* to better describe the currently paradigm shift towards user-led forms of content production which are proving to have an increasing impact on media, economy, law, social practices, and democracy itself. His new book *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* was published by Peter Lang 2008. More information about the book and other work can be found on Bruns's Website at <http://snurb.info/>.