

Resource Centre Sites: The New Gatekeepers of the Web?

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The work presented in the thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text, and has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Preface

This thesis introduces and analyses the emerging Website genre of Resource Centre Sites. RCSs are sites which 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. They also offer spaces for virtual communities of specialists or enthusiasts to emerge, who in the process and as a product of their interaction on these sites collate detailed resource collections and hyperlink directories for their fields of interest. Therefore, Resource Centre Sites significantly involve their users as content contributors and producers, turning them into what is here termed ‘producers’ of the site.

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 RCS, Resource Centre Site producers engage in an adaptation of both traditional journalistic gatekeeping methodologies and librarianly resource collection approaches to the Web environment: in the absence of gates to keep online, they have become ‘gatewatchers’, observing the publication of news and information in other sources and publicising its existence through their own sites.

Their operation is studied here through a number of case studies of major existing Resource Centre Sites from various fields of interest. These sites are analysed both based on their available Web content, and using background information obtained in a series of email interviews with RCS creators. In combination, this offers insights into the operating philosophies of sites and site editors, and provides an opportunity to assess to what extent these ideas have been translated into everyday practice.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of past and current theoretical views of the Web in an effort to evaluate their suitability for the current study. Older approaches positing an abstract ‘ideal’ form of hypertext are rejected in favour of a direct engagement with the World Wide Web as the now dominant mode of hypertextuality. Chapter 2 outlines the principles of gatowatching in contrast to traditional methods of evaluating news and information as they exist in journalistic media and archival institutions, and investigates the effects such gatowatching practices may have on editors and users. Chapter 3 describes the overall characteristics of Resource Centre Sites as a genre of Web publications. It notes the special role site users play in the operation of such sites (in their new role as ‘producers’), and distinguishes the RCS genre from similar Website models such as portals and cybermediaries. Chapter 4 observes the everyday operation of such Websites in practice, using case studies of major existing Resource Centre Sites including Slashdot, MediaChannel and CountingDown, and interviews with their creators. (These interviews are included in full in the Appendix.) This analysis works with both a synchronic view to the variety of topics existing Resource Centre Sites are able to address, and a diachronic view to the evolution of proto-RCSs (such as enthusiast community or online advocacy sites) into fully-featured Resource Centre Sites. Finally, based on this analysis, Chapter 5 is then able to point out some of the implications and effects that increasing use of this media form may have on its users and the network of news and information publications on- and offline, and to indicate the potential for further developments of the site genre.