Gatewatching and News Curation

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The Origins of Gatewatching

The term gatewatching describes the monitoring of the output gates of conventional news organizations – their Websites, broadcasts, print editions, and other publication channels – for news reporting, as well as the referencing, citation, evaluation, critique, and other use of such source materials in another outlet's own publication output (Bruns 2005; 2018). Such secondary use of original content from other news publishers places the gatewatcher in a "second tier" of the news environment, as envisaged by journalism scholar Herbert Gans well before the advent of modern online publishing technologies (1980, p. 318): focusing by necessity on commentary, discussion, and opinion writing, gatewatchers are rarely able to break entirely new stories, but by continuing to track existing news events and issues even after the mainstream media's attention has moved on, and by juxtaposing multiple accounts of the same issue from different outlets, they often contribute critical new perspectives to the public debate. In doing so, make the news environment more multiperspectival (Gans 1980, p. 313).

I introduced the term gatewatching in 2005 as a counterpoint to the conventional gatekeeping practices that are common in the first tier of journalism – where the editorial choices of how journalists are assigned to potential stories, from what perspectives those stories are covered, and how the resulting coverage is presented in the news outlet determine which news events and issues eventually make it through the output gates of the news organization, and which stories are 'spiked' – abandoned and discarded – at some point during the reporting process. Through these choices, the journalistic and editorial gatekeepers of the mainstream news industry wield considerable power over the flow of news, and their unanimity or divergence in making such choices determines whether certain stories reach the general public or not. To pick an obvious set of examples: news editors in the 1940s and 1960s decided that to report stories about Franklin D. Roosevelt's frail health or John F. Kennedy's suspected infidelities was not in the public interest, while their counterparts in the 1990s and 2010s believed that covering the Clinton-Lewinsky affair or Donald J. Trump's cognitive limitations was. Such differences in gatekeeping approaches materially affected the respective public standing of these US Presidents.

Gatewatching, then, is a reaction to the conventional gatekeeping regime: In fact, it is often born out a disagreement with prevailing gatekeeping choices within the first-tier mainstream of journalism. Gatewatchers seek out a variety of news stories on the same topic, and compare and contrast them to uncover additional insights; often, they also bring to bear their own domain knowledge to highlight limitations or misconceptions in the commentary of news and

opinion writers who may have journalistic expertise but are not themselves domain experts in the area covered by the news story. Gatewatching crucially requires access to a wide variety of original news and opinion sources, and it is unsurprising, therefore, that early gatewatching initiatives emerged especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the Web (and with it, access to news sources from around the world) established itself as a mass medium.

Indeed, the first wave of gatewatching initiatives reached a peak in their popularity in the first decade of the new millennium, as platforms for citizen journalism and news blogging became more and more readily available. This enabled news enthusiasts and "political junkies" (Coleman 2003) from around the world to set up their own blogs or to join collective efforts such as the global network of Indymedia Centers (Platon and Deuze 2003). It should also be noted that many such efforts failed, however: In spite of the relative ease by which would-be gatewatchers could set up a news blog or citizen journalism site for their news commentary, many also found that to track the news about their topic of interest, to produce a steady stream of new articles for their site, and to engage and respond to commenters on the site required more time and effort than they were able to find. Those gatewatchers who stuck at it over a longer period of time were those who committed to their activities in a semi-professional manner.

Some of these remaining pro-am gatewatchers did earn considerable recognition for their efforts: During the early 2000s, for instance, news bloggers (and especially the subcategory of 'war bloggers') in the United States arguably led the public criticism of the Bush administration's post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Bowman & Willis 2003, p. 34), at a time when many mainstream media outlets could be seen to refrain from explicit criticism of the war strategy in order not to appear 'unpatriotic'. This critical role was also recognized in the invitation to selected bloggers to cover the 2004 Democratic Convention as officially accredited journalists, alongside conventional media outlets. Elsewhere, news bloggers and citizen journalists similarly disrupted the journalistic status quo: In the lead-up to Australia's 2007 federal election, for instance, a number of news blogs run by professional psephologists – experts in public opinion analysis – engaged in gatewatching to highlight and correct the flaws in the mainstream media's interpretation of pre-election opinion polls. These bloggers' projections of the eventual election outcome proved correct in the end (Bruns & Highfield 2012).

Faced with such public criticism, and unaccustomed to a public that was increasingly utilizing the Web and fledgling social media platforms as means of public communication outside of the control of mainstream media organizations, many journalists and news outlets reacted with indignation at first: During what became known as the Australian 'blog wars' of 2007, for example, an anonymous editorial in the national newspaper *The Australian* thunderously described the psephologist bloggers as "sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper" (2007, n.p.); elsewhere in the world, too, the fact that for all their criticism of mainstream journalism's efforts gatewatchers fundamentally rely on these sources for their own work did not escape critics' attention: as US blogger-journalist Paul Andrews commented, "without the daily work of print journalists, one wonders if even the

news-conscious blogs would contain any real news" (2003, p. 63). (The same is also true, though, for many minor news outlets, which similarly often follow and report on the overall news agenda set by the leading news organisations. Gatewatching exists within the news industry itself, too.)

Gradually, however, such animosity eroded, and some of the most successful exponents of this first wave of gatewatching found themselves coopted and incorporated into conventional journalism outlets as 'official' news bloggers, while at the same time many existing opinion columns on mainstream news sites were simply rebranded as blogs; even *The Australian* hired one of the psephologists it had attacked by name in an earlier editorial. This reluctant embrace of novel formats and practices is far from unusual, of course, in journalism as well as in many other fields: As Lewis points out, "professions naturally seek to patrol and preserve their familiar jurisdiction, while also colonizing activities occurring at the periphery, such as blogging and UGC [user-generated content]" (Lewis 2012, p. 850). With its growing if cautious embrace of news blogs, citizen journalism, and the gatewatching practices that underlie such activities, at any rate, mainstream journalism arguably sought to normalize and thereby defuse the threat posed by this new phenomenon. By the late 2000s, news blogs and citizen journalism therefore no longer represented the challenge to journalistic authority they had been in earlier years – but a new disruption was just around the corner.

A Second Wave: Collective Gatewatching and News Curation

The decline in the popularity of blogging (of all types, not just of news blogs) during the late 2000s is related predominantly to the arrival of the latest generation of social media platforms: *Facebook* launched in 2004, and *Twitter* followed in 2006. Where earlier social media technologies from blogs to *MySpace* had emphasized customizability – offering greater payoffs to users looking to set up their own, personalized spaces, but in the process also deterring users without the skills and time required to do so – these new platforms proved attractive to much larger populations by providing only standardized, simplified user interfaces and focusing far more strongly on the circulation of content rather than the design of the spaces in which such content is posted. Almost from the launch of these platforms, that content included not only personal updates and interpersonal chat, but also links to and discussion of news stories, events, and issues: Any user of these new platforms now had the opportunity to engage in gatewatching, and many did.

Such tendencies to participate at least in casual, *ad hoc* gatewatching were further enhanced by the addition of new platform affordances that made it easier for like-minded users and communities of interest to find each other and stay in touch: Search functions enabled the discovery of relevant content and accounts; *Facebook* pages and groups enabled users to forge more permanent connections and discuss matters of shared interest; and hashtags (on *Twitter*, and later also on *Facebook*) provided a mechanism for users to create simple keyword flags that they could follow in order to track unfolding events and issues. Indeed, the idea of hashtags on *Twitter* was suggested by an early user of the platform, Chris Messina (Halavais 2014), and

the first recorded use of a hashtag, #sandiegofire, was explicitly to share and track news updates about an unfolding natural disaster.

The transition of gatewatching from the comparatively solitary activities of news bloggers on their individual, stand-alone blogs to modern social media platforms that are explicitly built as social networks also introduced an important further extension of such practices: By becoming a shared activity, gatewatching enabled collective news curation activities to a much greater extent than ever before. Participants tracking unfolding news events on social media platforms may introduce new content by posting additional article links or summaries, for instance, but they may also evaluate and comment on the material posted by others, compare and contrast the coverage in different articles to arrive at a more rounded, multiperspectival account of events, or argue about the appropriate interpretation of the facts they present. In addition, by responding to, liking, and on-sharing existing posts they similarly engage in the more or less explicit evaluation of the posts that have come before, and such reactions are used by the platforms and their algorithms to identify the most important, trending posts or topics that are preferentially displayed to other users coming to or searching for the same topic. In doing so, user communities "collectively crowdsource … prevalent actors and their tweets to prominence", as Meraz and Papacharissi describe it for the case of *Twitter* (2013, p. 155).

Such collective news curation should not be misunderstood as a grand experiment in democratizing the news, however: Much as with the previous wave of news blogs and citizen journalism, this collective gatewatching and news curation is still driven especially by those who are able to make their voices heard most clearly above the murmurations of the crowd, and this often means committing considerable time and effort. But because of the crowdsourced process that Meraz and Papacharissi describe, visibility now depends much more substantially on the response of that crowd, who choose to amplify particular voices via liking, commenting, and sharing, and ignore others. In this process, social media mirror the fundamental dynamics of how publics come to be, as Warner describes them:

> public discourse says not only: "Let a public exist," but: "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way." It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world-understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole, and see who salutes. Put on a show, and see who shows up. (Warner 2002, p. 82)

The same is true for gatewatching and news curation in social media spaces: Individual users make their contributions, for example by sharing new links with an existing *Twitter* hashtag community, and other community members choose to amplify those links by retweeting them, or not. This, then, does not describe a democratization of the news, but a *demoticization*: A process where what news stories, what news frames, what news interpretations come to the fore depends fundamentally on how much support they find in the social media community that crowdsources them to prominence. The quality of the news stream that results from such collective gatewatching and news curation activities depends inherently on the background

knowledge, news and media literacies, and political diversity of the crowd of users that participates in these activities: If they are insufficiently diverse, for instance, groupthink may result and critical voices may be marginalized.

Gatewatching and news curation have become demotic in this way also because the very practice of sharing the news via social media is now a *habitual* pastime for social media users: By 2016, the annual *Digital News Report* published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed that, during an ordinary week, more than half of the news users in its representative study across 26 countries were either proactive participants, who "made an original or public contribution to news coverage", or participated at least reactively, "by disseminating existing news coverage or leaving feedback" (Newman *et al*. 2016, p. 100). Such engagement may be only random and occasional, as time and interest permits, rather than a sign of a more comprehensive everyday commitment to engaging with the news via social media, but the networked logic of these platforms means that any such random act of sharing contributes further to the collective, crowdsourced circulation, evaluation, and amplification of news stories across the network. Further, this social distribution of the news also reaches news consumers who have disconnected from mainstream news outlets themselves – in particular, women, younger users, and retirees (Hermida *et al*. 2012, p. 818).

The effects of such gatewatching and news curation through social media are especially obvious during breaking news events, from celebrity scandals to terrorist attacks: Whenever such acute events occur, it is common for *Twitter* hashtags to form within minutes of the first reports – and many of those initial reports themselves usually first appear on *Twitter* and other social media platforms, before being republished on the Websites of mainstream news outlets. Indeed, one of the first prominent breaking news events covered by *Twitter* was the emergency landing of a plane on the Hudson river in New York City in January 2009:

> despite the fact that the headquarters of international wire services, major metropolitan newspapers, and big-time television networks are *literally opposite* the crash site, Twitter user Janis Krums scooped them all when he "tweeted" his report of "a plane in the Hudson" and posted an iPhone photo on TwitPic. (O'Connor 2009, n.p.)

Such events turn professional journalists themselves into gatewatchers, who at least at first can only report to their outlets' audiences what they have found on *Twitter* – and such demonstrations of the power of social media as tools for the coverage of breaking news events therefore eventually also convinced many journalists and their news organizations to explore *Twitter* and other social media platforms as additional tools of their trade.

Journalists as Gatewatchers and News Curators

Nonetheless, the journalistic adoption of social media during the 2010s mirrors the reluctance to engage with blogging that we saw in the preceding decade. True to form, for example, the editor of *The Australian* dismissed *Twitter* out of hand as "a place where activists cheer each other on, often in the foulest language or with the most naive affirmations of clearly partisan

positions", and warned that journalists who do engage on the platform "risk their own product's credibility" (Mitchell 2016, n.p.).

Other, more progressive and innovative news outlets experimented more actively with the incorporation of social media into their professional practices, however. US National Public Radio's Andy Carvin, for example, has been celebrated for his extensive efforts in curating the contradictory and often unverified information emerging from Egypt and other nations during the 2010-12 Arab Spring uprisings. Working not from the region, but instead connecting with social media contacts from his office in the United States, "Carvin engaged in gatewatching by pointing his followers to source material provided by a diverse set of actors online, contributing to a 'real-time verification system'" (Hermida *et al*. 2014, p. 494); his focus was not on reporting original news, but on constructing a composite picture of the dynamics of these events by piecing together the various individual updates into a greater whole.

Such work builds on the fundamental professional skills required of journalists: Sourcing, verifying, and evaluating information, and developing and communicating a news narrative from these individual reports. In moving such efforts from the closed environment of the newsroom to the open spaces of social media, however, they now also expose themselves to additional scrutiny, and create an expectation of greater engagement with news users on these platforms. Carvin and other journalists working as news curators in the context of breaking news events now effectively compete, but may also collaborate, with other participants ranging from ordinary users to domain experts, and their evaluation of a particular event is no longer privileged by the imprint of a news organization, since that imprint in itself does not automatically afford the journalist's social media contributions any greater visibility compared to those of other users.

For some journalists, this realization has resulted in painful learning experiences as social media users have critiqued, fact-checked, and corrected their interpretation of events; several such journalists have retreated back to the comparative safety of the newsroom, occasionally (like *The Australian*'s Chris Mitchell) publishing new missives about how "Twitter … is not conducive to logical thought, deep research, reflection or independence of thought" (2016, n.p.). Many others, however, have managed to adapt to this new, more open environment, and social media in general – and *Twitter* in particular – are now also prominent spaces where journalists engage with each other, connect with domain experts, monitor broader public discussion, track news events, and promote their own stories. They have accepted – if sometimes grudgingly – early blogger-journalist Dan Gillmor's adage that "my readers know more than I do" (2003, p. vi).

Indeed, some such journalists have managed to transition from being known as a journalist working for a prominent news imprint to establishing *themselves* as a respected news brand on social media: They have attracted a personal following on social media that they will take with them as and when they move from one employer to another (Hanusch & Bruns 2017). For new cadets entering the profession, especially at a time of continuing economic stress, such entrepreneurial thinking is now a requirement, in fact: "You won't become a journalist unless

you engage with social media" (Costeloe qtd. in Stray 2010, n.p.). But that requirement may also contribute to perpetuating a lack of diversity in the news industry: Journalists who are women or represent minority backgrounds are more often the targets of incivility and hate speech by other social media users than their white male counterparts, and this may result in a disproportionately large number of such cadets leaving the profession rather than advancing their careers (cf. Hedman 2016).

Yet for the industry as a whole, the pull of social media is now virtually inescapable. Recent editions of the *Digital News Report* show that social media are now a or in fact *the* major source of news especially for younger demographics (e.g. Newman *et al*. 2016, p. 10); though the leading platforms may change, this trend is unlikely to reverse substantially in the foreseeable future. This reliance of audiences on news distributed via social media – posted by the news outlets' and their journalists' official accounts, but especially also shared through the collective, habitual, and serendipitous gatewatching activities of the broader social media userbase – also further undermines the importance of the journalistic imprint: What is shared and accessed via social media is the individual article, rather than the front page of a news Website, and news audiences on social media may no longer pay particularly close attention to the source of the articles they encounter in their networks.

This decline in brand recognition has been actively exploited by new, born-digital outlets that focus on publishing highly shareable content, of course: Outlets such as *BuzzFeed* became successful by specializing in the production of viral clickbait that can be consumed in brief snacks (cf. Salmon 2014), while legacy news outlets struggled to adjust to a mindset that saw each article as a content item in its own right rather than part of a larger package that users would engage with over the course of a dedicated session (in the way that previous generations might have sat down with a newspaper or watched a news broadcast). Yet some of these new entrants into the industry, including *BuzzFeed*, also used the advertising revenue generated from their low-quality viral content to subsidize teams of serious political journalists, sometimes recruited from legacy newsrooms that were forced to shed staff due to a reduction in subscription and advertising incomes. Rather than fighting the impact of gatewatching through the erection of paywalls and other barriers to random access, as some legacy news outlets have attempted, such new players actively embraced the social media sharing of their content as a source of exposure and revenue.

It remains to be seen, however, whether such new business models can be successful in the longer term. The circulation of links to news articles through social media platforms – and the inclusion of headlines and article summaries in addition to the links themselves – has also meant that social media users have become less likely to actually click through to the full article as it exists on the news outlet's own Website. As a result, any revenue from ad impressions is generated mainly on the social media platforms themselves, and flows predominantly to the platform providers rather than the content creators (Bell, 2015); operators like *BuzzFeed* whose business model ultimately depends on click-throughs to their own sites have therefore had to downgrade their revenue expectations, and in particular have let go of many of their 'serious' news staff. At the same time, in many jurisdictions there are now growing calls for regulatory

intervention to force the platform providers to share advertising revenue more equitably between the platform operators and the content creators; how such regulation might be introduced and enforced, however, and how it would ensure a fair distribution across different content creators (with appropriate encouragement for local and high-quality content production) remains a focus of intense political debate at this point (e.g. Lecher 2019; Taylor 2020).

Institutionalised Gatewatching: Liveblogging as a New Journalistic Form

At the same time, some journalistic outlets have also embraced a different form of content delivery that combines many of the benefits of social media engagement with the advantages of the journalistic imprint: Liveblogging. Liveblogs in themselves are far from new, but they have been infused with new importance especially by the sense of permacrisis the world has experienced during the late 2010s and early 2020s: Outlets such as *The Guardian* have now operated their continuous liveblogs to track the response to the COVID-19 crisis globally and at the national level in the UK, US, and Australia since early 2020, for instance, and even one year later show no sign of stopping.

Such liveblogs serve as a kind of half-way solution between conventional journalistic practice and full engagement in social media (Thurman & Walters, 2013). From the user's perspective, they follow the logic of social media in their reverse-chronological organization; their division into brief, timestamped updates to the underlying topic; their frequent inclusion of links to further articles and information (from the home outlet itself, but often also from rival news organizations or primary sources); and their embedding of posts sourced from social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* (Tereszkiewicz 2014). In other words, liveblogs are themselves exercises in journalistic gatewatching, and the primary service performed by the liveblog editor is one of secondary news curation rather than original news coverage: If audiences access the liveblog, it is not necessarily primarily because of the quality of the coverage produced by the news outlet itself, but because of the quality of the curated feed that the editor has constructed from a combination of sources (Thurman & Schapals 2016).

As such, then, much of this activity could just as well take place through the news organization's or journalist's *Twitter* or *Facebook* account. But from the outlet's perspective, to run the liveblog as a section on its own Website has the considerable advantage that all ad impression revenue generated by the liveblog flows directly to the news organization, rather than to the social media platform: The liveblog is, in essence, a social media exclave outside of the social media space itself. (This may, of course, also be attractive to news audiences who are still reluctant to engage with social media, or put off by the volume, style, or tone of content found there.) Finally, and importantly, liveblogs exhibit some of the same 'stickiness' that is common for social media platforms: The continuous stream of updates on an active liveblog means that users tend to spend a substantially greater amount of time on liveblog pages than on the pages of ordinary articles; this further increases the site's ability to generate advertising revenue.

Clearly, liveblogs are predominantly suited to live, unfolding events, however; they do not represent a panacea for the struggling journalism industry. However, even before the current barrage of crises, some enterprising journalism outlets had drawn on their social media experiences by establishing generic newsbeat liveblogs that acted as a news curation space for their more specific coverage – for instance, a daily national politics liveblog that flagged any new articles from the news site that fell into its purview, and enhanced them by adding social media responses, official statements, and other relevant materials as they came to hand. Although somewhat artificial in comparison to liveblogs focusing on acute events or topics, such liveblogs nonetheless served as a kind of *Ersatz* social media space under the control of the news outlet, engaging in gatewatching and news curation activities yet remaining firmly within the institutional imprint.

Conclusion: Normalising Social Media Logics

As we have seen, the first wave of gatewatching initiatives – news blogs and citizen journalism – ebbed away as mainstream journalism managed to normalize and thereby tame such activities by incorporating them into its own practices. Yet to date the news industry has been unable to similarly defend itself against the second wave, which rose with the popularization of a new generation of social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Indeed, the logics of social media (van Dijck & Poell 2013) have proven so pervasive and irresistible that journalism itself now risks being subsumed into social media – as social media platforms become prime channels for the distribution, curation, consumption, and discussion of news; as such gatewatching and news curation activities are undertaken by ordinary users, citizen journalists, domain experts, and professional journalists alongside each other; as click-throughs to the actual Websites decline and news engagement takes place predominantly within social media themselves; and as the platform providers therefore retain the lion's share of the advertising revenue that might otherwise fund the continued operation of newsrooms.

This struggle is not limited to the news industry alone, of course: The more social media become the primary means of communication for a majority of the population, the more they take on some of the functions that had previously existed separately, and had sustained content creation and dissemination costs. This increases their political, commercial, and social power, and the need for regulatory intervention may be increasingly urgent in order to ensure that such power is contained and managed – yet the precise mechanisms of such regulation remain as yet unclear, and at a time of global disruptions the shared political will to implement effective regulation beyond the national level will be difficult to find.

In the meantime, some journalistic outlets are attempting to best social media at their own game, by implementing liveblogs and similar content formats that translate the responsiveness and flexibility of social media (the rapid updating, the embedding of diverse source formats) into a gatewatched and curated form that nonetheless exists under the institutional imprint of the news outlet and is operated by news professionals. Such initiatives have proven highly successful in the context of the current coronavirus crisis and during other, prior acute events, and may also translate to more generic news curation efforts that focus on broader newsbeats

and coverage themes – yet here, too, it remains uncertain whether such attempts to do social media *outside of* social media will be enough to keep journalistic practice from being subsumed altogether into the logic of social media.

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