

Gatewatching

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Emerging with the first wave of social media, gatewatching describes the continuous observation of the output gates of mainstream news media in order to identify material for publication and discussion by citizen journalists. Initially associated with news bloggers and now translated to social media – and especially Twitter – as a collective effort, gatewatching enables users to collate, contextualise, and comment on topics of interest; it serves as a second tier of news coverage that has the potential to add a broader range of perspectives and hold mainstream journalism to account. Sustained and systematic gatewatching efforts enable practitioners to emerge as well-recognised news curators; some professional journalists have also embraced this practice, and the rise of liveblogging as a distinct format in mainstream journalism is inherently informed by such practices.

Gatewatching; gatekeeping; journalism; citizen journalism; social media; news curation

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Introduced as a response to the journalistic practice of gatekeeping, the concept of gatewatching describes “the continuous observation of material that passes through the output gates of news outlets and other sources, in order to identify relevant such material for publication and discussion in the gatewatcher’s own site” (Bruns, 2018: 27). Professional journalists and other newswriters traditionally engage in original research to produce new news reporting, and such work must pass through several selection processes (‘gates’) before it is published: these include the initial story selection as well as final editorial approval. Further, feedback and responses from audiences are similarly tightly policed, with only a small selection appearing in ‘letters to the editor’ columns. At a minimum, gatekeeping in journalism therefore occurs at the input, output, and response stages; historically, this selectivity was necessary because of the limited space or time available in printed newspapers or news broadcasts. This entry reviews the concept of gatewatching, traces its evolution over the past two decades, and provides a further outlook on possible future developments.

Gatewatching reacts to the considerable transformation of news publishing and news engagement that resulted from the growing role of online media. The rise of the Web, and subsequently of various forms of social media, as a major platform for the news increased the volume and diversity of the professional news content available to news audiences; it also enabled the emergence of a new category of citizen journalists who occasionally engaged in original news reporting (Atton, 2003), but due to resource limitations more frequently compiled, critiqued, and contextualised the news coverage published by mainstream media outlets, and encouraged their audiences to continue the conversation.

First Wave: Blogs and Citizen Journalists

The emergence of this first wave of citizen journalism was also enabled by the growing availability of flexible and easy-to-use online publication tools that required only limited technical knowledge or financial investment. Central to early gatewatching practices was the blog: blogging enabled citizen journalists to link to one or more news stories on the Websites of mainstream news outlets, and potentially to other relevant materials such as government reports, political statements, or scholarly research, and to offer their own assessment, interpretation, and critical commentary on these stories. In doing so, they could also juxtapose the coverage of multiple news outlets and other relevant stakeholders, and thereby highlight the similarities and differences in such reporting and alert their readers to alleged omissions and biases across media institutions. Further, these citizen journalists would also frequently monitor each other’s coverage of current events, and refer to, debate, and dispute fellow bloggers’ coverage and interpretation of the news.

The news bloggers (Singer, 2006) and commentators who engaged in such activities with some degree of regularity thus systematically watched the output gates of mainstream news outlets (and other major sources) for new material that they deemed to be relevant to their own blog’s audience; having no control over the news selection processes exercised by those news media, they are not gatekeepers, but gatewatchers, and are engaged not in publishing, but publicising the news (Bruns, 2005). Except for their (initial) positioning as citizen enthusiasts outside of the professional news industry, this gatewatching role thus closely approximates the “second tier” of news media envisaged well before the invention of the Web by Herbert Gans, as a category of news media that “would devote themselves primarily to reanalysing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media ... for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting ... as would be financially feasible” (1980: 318).

Gans, who anticipated the citizen journalism phenomenon by suggesting that this second tier might also “use lay people, at least sometimes, to report and comment on the news” (1980: 324), predicted that the addition of such a second tier of news media, acting as a corrective to the mainstream first tier, would increase the

multiperspectival nature of the news by offering a broader range of interpretations of current events. Even in its earliest forms, gatewatching certainly provided such increased multiperspectivity, though not always in a way that enlightened and informed its users.

Indeed, the growing popularity of citizen journalists and news bloggers, and their frequent and sometimes harsh criticism of professional journalists and news outlets, inevitably resulted in a considerable amount of animosity between both sides. One need not go as far as leading newspaper *The Australian* (2007), whose anonymously authored editorial lambasted its news blogger opponents as “woolly-headed critics” indulging in “smug, self assured, delusional swagger” and caricatured them as “sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper” during a particularly heated debate over the correct interpretation of pre-election opinion polls (the bloggers, several of whom were professional psephologists, were proven right by the eventual election results). Many other journalists and editors – and especially perhaps those whose work had come under attack from citizen journalists – similarly viewed these new challengers as little more than ‘parasites’ feeding off the work of mainstream journalists as input to their own news blogging efforts.

Only a minority saw the potential for a more “symbiotic and complementary” relationship, as Jane B. Singer envisaged it (2006: 26); instead, a growing number of journalists incorporated blogging into their own practices, and thus sought to normalise it by becoming “j-bloggers” even while maintaining their conventional gatekeeping practices (Singer, 2005): they embraced the technology of news blogging, but not the ethos of gatewatching that was associated with the technology; their ‘blogs’ were little more than the online equivalent of conventional opinion columns. Similarly, in another industry attempt to normalise and defuse the challenge from news blogging, some of the most prominent leaders amongst the first generation of news bloggers were hired as news commentators and opinion columnists. By the late 2000s, this resulted in an uneasy but relatively stable new equilibrium between gatekeepers and gatewatchers, professional and citizen journalists.

Second Wave: Gatewatching on Social Media

That equilibrium should be disrupted again, however, with the advent of a second generation of what were now widely described as social media. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter proved to have considerably greater mass appeal than blogs, attracting larger user communities not just as audiences but also as active content contributors – and this included content that shared, engaged with, commented on, and critiqued the news as reported by mainstream media outlets. Indeed, while newssharing has become a habitual practice for the users of many social media platforms, it was Twitter that proved to have the most significant impact: its short-message format (integrating well with mobile devices), its flat and non-reciprocal network structure (where any user could follow any other account as long as it is public), and its mechanisms for rapidly assembling potentially very large communities around themes of shared interest (through hashtags as textual markers, and trending topics lists to advertise those hashtags) positioned it as a leading platform for tracking and discussing current events – from natural disasters (Palen & Hughes, 2018) through political crises (Hermida et al., 2014) to entertainment and sports (Pegoraro, 2014).

But where news blogs were distinct publishing outlets, loosely and unsystematically connected by their authors’ hyperlinking practices, the reliance of this new wave of news engagement on Twitter (and others) as a unified platform meant that such activity was now inherently networked, with the random or habitual newssharing and news commentary actions by individual users aggregated (with the help of hashtags and platform algorithms) into a collective and communal whole. As Meraz & Papacharissi have evocatively described it, now “a chorus of users ... collectively crowdsourced prevalent actors and their tweets to prominence” (2013: 155) by liking, responding to, and retweeting posts and thereby increasing and maintaining their visibility for other users. Such

platforms thus support a form of collective and networked gatewatching – which, further, with the gradual adoption of Twitter and other social media platforms by news organisations and individual journalists, also began to directly involve those professional stakeholders who had traditionally acted as gatekeepers rather than gatewatchers.

Adapting their working practices more or less enthusiastically to the social media environment, some journalists also began to embrace gatewatching itself: in addition to promoting their own stories through their social media profiles, for instance, they also shared links to new work by their in-house colleagues, or even by journalists from ostensibly rival news outlets. Acting in this way as professional gatewatchers, these journalists might be driving audience traffic to the Websites of their competitors, yet at the same time they are also establishing their own social media presences as information hubs on certain issues or topics, thereby building their personal brands (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013) and amassing a social media follower base that (presumably) will also engage with the journalist's original content. Put another way, by acting the part of a constructive *gatewatcher* these journalists hope they will also be seen by their social media followers as a trustworthy *gatekeeper*.

One of the most celebrated early examples of this approach is Andy Carvin, a social media strategist for US National Public Radio who became a key conduit for up-to-date information on the unfolding events of the Arab Spring through his gatewatching practices on Twitter. An in-depth case study of Carvin's activities by Hermida et al. shows that "Carvin engaged in gatewatching by pointing his followers to source material provided by a diverse set of actors online" (2014: 494), but also evaluated and contextualised this material and engaged in a meta-discussion with his followers about his sourcing practices. "Carvin was not simply broadcasting, but was immersed in the culture of a media environment that privileges relationship over information delivery, interacting and conversing with others to co-construct the news" (Hermida 2014: 368); extending beyond individual acts of gatewatching itself, this committed and sustained effort to track the dynamics of the Arab Spring over an extended period might more properly be understood as news curation.

Gatewatching in Mainstream and Fringe Journalism

Carvin was not alone as a news curator on the Arab Spring, of course: rather, his work contributed to a broader stream of "curated flows", "created through the overlapping curating activities of journalists, strategic communicators, individuals, social networks, and online display algorithms in the contemporary media environment" (Thorson & Wells 2015: 25). The quality and systematicity of such gatewatching and news curation activities will necessarily vary widely: while Carvin was widely acknowledged as presenting a diverse and balanced range of perspectives in his feed, with particular attention to non-elite, citizen sources, other curators may – through inattention or bias – promote a considerably more one-sided version of reality. This is not in itself problematic (rather, it merely realises the more multiperspectival evaluation of the news that Herbert Gans called for), yet turns more pernicious when such diverging perspectives no longer accept the same fundamental factual basis but instead cherry-pick factoids or substitute their own 'alternative facts' to support their views. As they do so, gatewatchers who are led primarily by their pre-existing ideological agendas rather than a genuine engagement with and evaluation of the available facts are at risk of unwittingly amplifying misinformation, or may even deliberately spread disinformation.

Quality gatewatching and news curation, in other words, continues to adhere to journalistic foundations like factuality and rationality, even if in many other aspects it departs considerably from conventional journalistic processes. By contrast, recent years have also seen the weaponisation of gatewatching practices in support of specific (sometimes extremist) ideologies, as unscrupulous operators decontextualise and distort factoids from mainstream news reporting in order to further ideological arguments and promote conspiracy theories. For

example, Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) show how far-right news outlet *Breitbart* gatewatches the mainstream media for cherry-picked content; the creation of *Breitbart* itself was heavily influenced by founder Andrew Breitbart's early involvement in fellow news blogs-turned-news sites *Drudge Report* and *Huffington Post*. Even further to the fringes, extremist movements like QAnon explicitly encourage their followers to "do your own research" – which can be interpreted, using the terminology presented in this entry, as an exhortation to engage in targeted gatewatching and news curation for materials that can be operationalised to support the movement's ideological worldview.

However, gatewatching and news curation also remain powerful tools towards more prosocial ends. Enhanced by more recent Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) methods, they have been used to independently track developments following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and to verify the claims made by the various stakeholders in this war; this mirrors and extends uses during the Arab Spring and subsequent conflicts. Similarly, such practices were instrumental in crowdsourcing debates like Black Lives Matter and #metoo to prominence and in making interested followers of these topics aware of new developments at a time when several other major news topics competed for their attention. Indeed, the growing adoption of liveblogging by mainstream news organisations (Tereszkiewicz, 2014) can be understood as an attempt to formally incorporate such gatewatching practices into everyday journalistic publications: in their combination of in-house content, external links, social media posts, and journalistic and audience commentary into a hybrid form of news coverage on selected major issues and topics (Bruns, 2018: 271) these liveblogs represent a contemporary iteration of established gatewatching and news curation processes.

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