THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF NETWORK GATEKEEPING

A Thesis in
Media Studies

by
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ABSTRACT

The traditional, uni-directional model of gatekeeping, in which raw content passes through a gatekeeping mechanism manned by journalists and editors before reaching the reading public, has been uprooted by the Web, where the ability of users to create and disseminate their own content makes the roles of gatekeeper and the gated interchangeable. This study is interested in news sharing and consumption on social networks and collaborative web portals, which reward good gatekeeping while advertising themselves as communal venues free of editorial authority. However, if the mass of information on the Web necessitates some form of gatekeeping, where does it come from? According to some of the most prominent network gatekeepers on Facebook, Twitter and Digg.com, their relationships with their communities of users more closely resemble those of traditional gatekeepers and their reading audiences, with interest replacing journalistic training as a marker of credibility. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In his article, “The Death and Life of the Book Review,” from the June 21, 2010 issue of The Nation, John Palatella argues that, for all its crowdsourcing, shovelware and sock puppetry, the Web is nothing more than a postmodern throwback. Although 75 percent of online news consumers get their news through email and social networking sites, and 52 percent forward and share news themselves (Purcell et al., 2010), the question of how gatekeeping works on collaborative web portals and social networks has received little academic attention. Palatella (2010) argues that the institution of journalism has not been transformed, but “restored to a ghostly, hyperactive version of the newspaper world of the early twentieth century” (p. 30). However, what has certainly, and perhaps seemingly, been transformed by online news is the relationship between journalists and editors and their audiences, and more fundamentally, the nature of gatekeeping. Nevertheless, traditional notions of hegemonic gatekeeping have been transformed by dynamic online environments, and even if there was editorial control in the supposedly utopian Web, when any user is given the “power or social capital to make authoritative decisions, then the community is effectively substituting the old elite gatekeepers from traditional media with new elite gatekeepers” (Keegan & Gergle, 2010, p. 132). Doctor (2010) posits that “we’ve become our own and each other’s editor” and that “gatekeeping is now a collective pursuit… that has “shifted from ‘us’ to ‘them,’ where ‘them’ includes a lowercase version of ‘us’ too” (para. 3). The Web poses paradigmatic challenges not only to news consumption, but also traditional notions of gatekeeping. The traditional, uni-directional model of gatekeeping, in which raw content passes through a gatekeeping mechanism manned by journalists and editors before reaching the reading public, has been uprooted by the Web, where the ability of users to create and disseminate their own content makes the roles of gatekeeper and
the gated interchangeable. This study is interested in news sharing and consumption on social networks and collaborative web portals which advertise themselves as communal venues free of editorial authority. However, the mass of information on the Web makes gatekeeping necessary, so where does it come from and what does it look like? The seemingly egalitarian, communal and democratic nature of social networks allows for more open and diverse exchange of news, but depending on the confidence users have in each other’s gatekeeping, it could also push social news consumption toward the precipice of tabloidization. Whatever the outcome, this research hopes to provide a first step towards a holistic understand of network gatekeeping, one that allows researchers to keep up with the ever-changing online news landscape and better equips media practitioners to predict the heretofore unpredictable trajectory of their online news.

Because the popularity of user-generated news sites is, at least in large part, attributable to the “democratic ideals of equality, accountability, transparency, and empiricism,” it is important to know if users of these collective sites abide by the same democratic principles when making individual decisions about the quality, credibility and representativeness of online news and, more fundamentally, the gatekeeping ability of fellow online news consumers (Keegan & Gergle, 2010, p. 134). Answers to these questions about collective vs. individual gatekeeping on Digg.com, Facebook and Twitter will ultimately lead to a determination if these technologies merely indicate a shift in gatekeeping practices on the Web, or signify a more fundamental and consequential transformation of the way news in produced and consumed in a digital environment.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Gatekeeping

Although the concept of gatekeeping has been applied to many fields (e.g., Bass, 1969; Schultze & Boland, 2000; Sturges, 2001), the term “gatekeeper” was first used to describe the process through which, when passing through channels of communication, some news items make it to the public while others do not (White, 1950). For both communications researchers and professional journalists, the concept of gatekeeping has been the dominant conceptualization because, in traditional media such as print, radio and television, the amount of space devoted to news is finite, making it “necessary to have established mechanisms which police these gates and select events to be reported according to specific criteria of newsworthiness” (Bruns, 2003, p. 1). In this way, only that information considered to be suitable to a medium’s audience by a small number of “gatekeepers” (Lewin, 1947, 1951) would reach it. Defined by Shoemaker (1991) as “the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day” (p. 1), gatekeeping in communication and journalism has most often considered editors, journalists and newspaper editorial staffs to be gatekeepers. Additionally, gatekeepers in print and broadcast media must not only select what content passes through to the audience, but also in what way that content is presented within the confines of a given medium and based on generally agreed-upon rules such as the inverted pyramid style of writing. With this in mind, Shoemaker et al. (2001) redefined the concept as “the overall process through which social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed, and is not just a series of ‘in’ and ‘out’ decisions” (p. 233). Barzilai-Nahon (2008) identifies three waves of gatekeeping theories in communication research.
(see Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, for a thorough review). The first wave focused on individual factors that influence gatekeeping, such as personality characteristics and normative and moral values of gatekeepers (e.g., Gans, 1979). The second concentrated on organizational and procedural influences on gatekeeping (e.g., Bass 1969), and the third wave is interested in institutional, cultural and social influences on gatekeepers and the gatekeeping process. She then lists some key questions that have been asked about gatekeeping in the current literature and in that of the past decade, including how editors make decisions (Hardin, 2005), how their roles change on the Web (Singer, 2001, 2006), and whether the new media sets the news agenda differently from the traditional media (Porter & Sallot, 2003).

Seven themes of gatekeeping research emerged from Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) analysis: process, new-old, identity, influence, relations, practical and normative. Because this study will both compare gatekeeping processes of traditional and new media and attempt to identify what makes a successful gatekeeper on collaborative web portals and social networks, it fits into two of these themes, old-new and identity. However, unlike most current studies of gatekeeping which do not critically analyze the concept and its foundations (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008), this study will make neither make assumptions about gatekeeping in the new media based on the old, nor require that network gatekeepers fit a certain disciplinary mold.

Barzilai-Nahon (2008) points out three reasons why new conceptualizations of gatekeeping are needed in communications research. The first is evident in the ambiguous nature of gatekeeping on the Web compared to the straightforward, uni-directional model of the traditional media. This study embraces that ambiguity and offers a number of clarifiers. The second is that gatekeeping has become increasingly disciplinary, with definitions and conceptualizations that are inapplicable outside of a particular field of study or research agenda.
Journalistic training is not a prerequisite for gatekeeping, and will not be in this study, making it of interest to scholars in communications, information science and political science, among others. The third reason that Barzilai-Nahon (2008) argues for a new conceptualization of gatekeeping is because most past research has focused on gatekeepers, not the gated. Because this study will not consider the two mutually exclusive or even distinct conceptual roles, it answers Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) call for “additional theoretical refinement and clarification of network gatekeeping, and specifically understanding the spectrum of dynamics of gated activities and characteristics” (p. 30).

Traditional Gatekeepers and their Audiences

The concept of gatekeeping has been traditionally considered a uni-directional relationship, with gatekeepers and the gated playing sender and receiver roles (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005). While the gated, or receivers, are often considered newspaper readers, the gatekeepers, or senders, are most often conceived of as editors and editorial staffs. Because editors believed that their readers lacked the journalistic training to gatekeep their own content (Gladeny, 1996), the gatekeeper was seen as responsible for both producing and disseminating information to the gated. Additionally, even with a shift toward online news, the gated may only produce content “under the control and authorization of the gatekeeper” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005), and the ability of the gated to circumvent the traditional gatekeeping process is considered minimal.

Contrastingly, in print journalism, several analyses (e.g., Atwood, 1970; Gladney, 1996) of editors and reading audiences have shown that journalists and readers often have contradictory notions of how gatekeeping should be defined and practiced. Some editors often underestimate the number of people reading the paper and overestimate interest in soft and fluff news (McNulty, 1988; Gladney, 1996), while others view readers condescendingly, perceiving reader
interest as divergent from professional standards of quality journalism (Atwood, 1970). Given this relationship, and despite their ontological differences and often divergent perceptions and opinions in traditional print journalism, editors and readers are psychologically similar in online news (Sundar & Nass, 2001), giving empirical credence to Palatella’s (2010) claim.

Even with more politically partisan news outlets, newspaper readers or television viewers can switch papers or channels, but are still subjected to the same traditional gatekeeping processes. However, Kelly and DeMoulin (2002) concluded that traditional news sources would be abandoned in favor of the internet as people became more comfortable with its capabilities. Research from the Pew Research Center (2009) has supported this outlook by showing that as readership of daily print publications decreases, readers are getting their national and international news from online sources. Journalists and editors who combat this phenomenon by giving the public “what it wants” (Bogart, 1989), or what they think it is inclined to consume based on market research, are accused of ignoring a journalistic code based on objectivity, accuracy and balance. Also, because what readers want may not be what they need in order to be informed and participatory citizens of a democracy, reader preferences often conflict with traditional journalistic norms and values.

Much research has addressed what exactly readers expect from journalists and editors. While some researchers have targeted young readers and attempted to determine readership from content characteristics, others have probed reader preferences for layout, design, and balance of hard and soft news (Gladney, 1996). Still others have inferred reader perceptions and preferences from circulation and market size differences. For example, Carter and Clarke (1963) compared reader interest in what they called “disruptive” and “integrative” news in daily and weekly newspapers, and Grotta, Larkin, and DePlois (1975) found that, more so than readers in a large
market, readers of small circulation newspapers value local news coverage over national or international news. Griswold and Moore (1989) scrutinized how variables such as size and closeness of community affected reader perceptions of news, and Viall (1992) suggested that the diversity or homogeneity of a newspaper’s market affects reader perceptions of journalistic values. After asking journalists, editors and academics to name high and low quality newspapers, Stone, Stone, and Trotter (1981) found that a newspaper’s circulation was more often a product of the size of the market than the quality of the paper. Finally, with the advent of television, online and citizen journalism, many studies (e.g., Carroll, 1989) have looked at the influence of market size on perceptions of journalistic values in these new media.

However, less is known about editor and journalist perceptions of their reading audiences. Friedland (1996) and Jankowski and van Selm (2000) observed differences between how audiences consumed information in a traditional medium and engaged journalists in an online news environment. Among others, Martin, O'Keefe and Nayman (1972) compared the findings of a public opinion poll to editors’ perceptions of public opinion on the same issues, Bogart (1989) compared reader interest with what editors considered important, and McNulty (2008) found readers, not editors, to be more discreet and conservative about what should get into the paper. Atkin, Burgoon, and Burgoon (1983) surveyed both editors and readers and discovered that editors assumed their readers to be indifferent to a number of journalistic standards, underrated reader interest in state, national, government, political and international news, and overrated reader appetite for sports, entertainment, cultural and fashion news. Gladney (1996), despite the aforementioned evidence to the contrary, found that both editors and readers consistently ranked standards like integrity, impartiality, and editorial independence as important, while influence and reputation were consistently considered unimportant.
Nevertheless, many standards were not agreed upon, supporting past research (e.g., Atwood, 1970) which suggests that overall, editors have a condescending view of their audiences.

Whereas news aggregate sites and journalistic blogs rely on the “involvement of a loyal audience with a lot of enthusiasm and expertise,” the in-depth, investigative and thought-provoking reporting of print newspapers and magazines has not gained a following in the “rapid, superficial, appropriative, and individualistic” Web community (Palatella, 2010, p. 31). One reason has been the diminishing of journalistic standards online where, according to Palatella (2010), “quantity beats quality, being first beats being the best…speed is confused with timeliness, and the value of timeliness is debased by speed” (p. 26).

Brill (2001) discovered some evidence for this argument with a survey finding that 70 percent of print journalists valued speed in reporting compared to only 62 percent of online journalists. Likewise, 54 percent of print journalists valued thoughtful interpretation of complex problems compared to only 35 percent of online journalists (Brill, 2001). Although similar surveys have shown that virtually all print editors believe that journalistic standards should be no different across media (e.g., Gladney, Shapiro, & Castaldo, 2007; Arant & Anderson, 2001), others indicate that nearly half of journalists agree with Palatella (2010) that preoccupation with speed undermines journalistic integrity, and 30 percent report that although they may not admit it, the online and print versions of daily newspapers are not likely to operate according to the same journalistic standards (Navasky & Lerner, 2010).

Additionally, the diminishing, or blurring, of gatekeeping on the Web is not simply a feeling among editors (e.g., Navasky & Lerner) but also members of the reading audience (Gladney, 1996), with readers distrusting the homogeneity of print editors on the Web and print editors underestimating the ability of Web users to perform their own gatekeeping. Whereas the
tangible nature of newspapers and magazines implies “engaged, informed study,” the “hot link and search engine seem to symbolize a particular postmodern,” heuristic way of judging the quality of news, and consequently, the quality of gatekeeping (Palatella, 2010, p. 30). Singer (1997) reported that while journalists acknowledge their gatekeeping roles are changing online—they no longer decide what the public should know but instead help audiences make order out of the mass information they are presented with—they see their credibility in performing such a role as heightened in, not deflated by the new medium: “the value of the gatekeeper is not diminished by the fact that readers now can get all the junk that used to wind up on the metal spike; on the contrary, it is bolstered by the reader’s realization of just how much junk is out there” (p. 80).

Because many journalists now post stories directly to their paper’s website without editorial oversight, Brun (2003) argues that, by pointing to sources rather than compiling an apparently complete report from them, online journalists publicize, not publish information. However, no research has considered the relationship between readers and audiences in a socially networked context. Do the best gatekeepers on Digg.com (e.g., those with the most submissions promoted to the front page) have a condescending attitude toward users with no promotions? The answer has implications not only for social networks and news portals, but also for how the credibility and quality of the news articles displayed on those sites, and their respective sources, are perceived. One theory that attempts to account for the rapidly changing dynamics of gatekeeping on social networks and collaborative web portals is Barzilai-Nahon’s (2005) network gatekeeping theory.
Network Gatekeeping

While the enormity of the Web allows for even the most specialized user to find an audience, finding that information can be daunting, especially for first-time or inexperienced users. Even more daunting can be sorting through a mass of information about the same topic and, more daunting still, deciding which of that information is worth reading. In traditional media, these tasks have fallen on the gatekeeper. On the Web, although the gatekeeping role is unclear, the term is used quite commonly, but without a corresponding theoretical framework to explain its dynamics. Until Hargittai (2000) and Introna and Nissenbaum (2000) used the term “online gatekeeper” and Barzilai-Nahon (2007) introduced the theory of network gatekeeping, research on traditional gatekeeping focused on the role of editors, journalists and news organizations, not that of newspaper readers. On the Web, however, the roles are interchangeable. While Bardoel (1996) and Newhagen (1998) suggested that there is less need for traditional gatekeeping and editorial authority as users of news portals, social networking sites and wikis are more able to create and disseminate their own content in the “fluid ecosystem” of the internet (Storm, 2007, p. 9), Barzilai-Nahon (2008) argued that although “network gatekeeping” can occur at formal, structural or community levels, the process is similar to that in traditional media, in that access to information is regulated by those who control it.

Because anyone can produce, reproduce and disseminate a product on the Web at a low cost and from virtually anywhere, the concept of a gate through which only some material passes becomes less relevant (Hargittai, 2000). However, most Web users still rely on some sort of gatekeeping process to sift through the overwhelming mass of information available. Hargittai (2000) argued that because what is produced is less relevant than what users are exposed to, gatekeeping still takes place on the Web, but at the level of product exposure. Similarly, Bruns
Figure 1-1: Model of Network Gatekeeping

(2000) posited that although “space considerations provide no immediate reason to stringently police the gates of online news publishing,” the “hyperlinked nature of the Web” makes it necessary for a gatekeeping influence to keep track of it all (p. 3). Nevertheless, in a content analysis of four leading communications journals from 1995 to 2007, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) found that the concept of gatekeeping was mentioned in only 98 of the 2,796 articles published during the period and, when it was referenced, it was used only as an illustrative metaphor or symbol rather than treated as its own theoretical framework. In response, she developed network gatekeeping theory, shown in Figure 1-1.

The theory posits that while online networks increase opportunities for the gated to produce and disseminate their own information without the approval of a traditional gatekeeper, Web users “are still largely dependent on the gatekeeper’s design and policy to reach users due
to the fact that attention of Internet users is concentrated on a very small number of information providers” (p. 248). When an online Web user with no traditional journalistic training has little political power, there is less opportunity to create meaningful information and circumvent traditional gatekeepers. As online power and influence increase, so do the opportunities to produce content (Barzilai-Nahon, 2007). Barzilai-Nahon (2005) defines a network gatekeeper as an “entity (people, organizations, or governments) that has the discretion to exercise gatekeeping through a gatekeeping mechanism in networks and can choose the extent to which to exercise it” (p. 248). These network gatekeepers can prevent information from coming into or leaving a network and control the extant information within that network.

The concept of network gatekeeping differs from the traditional relationship between gatekeepers and audiences in several ways. The differences are categorized by Barzilai-Nahon (2005) according to gatekeeping process, focus on gatekeepers, focus on gatekeeping mechanism, relationship, information, alternatives, power, number of gatekeepers and types of gatekeepers. While the process of traditional gatekeeping is mostly selection by those in the media (Gladney, 1996), network gatekeeping theory posits that in addition to selection, online gatekeeping includes channeling, shaping, integration, localization, manipulation, shaping and deletion as well. Also, although most research on traditional gatekeeping focuses on an individual journalist or the editorial staff of a newspaper as the gatekeeper, a number of other considerations, such as network service providers, governments and organizations, can also perform many of the same gatekeeping tasks traditionally left to members of the media. Additionally, as mentioned, while the relationship between gatekeepers and audiences can be condescending and hegemonic in traditional media (Gladney, 1996), the frequent interactions between gatekeepers and the gated, and the ability for both to produce content, make this
relationship inapplicable to new media. Finally, while traditional gatekeeping theories are locked into conceptualizing gatekeepers (e.g., editors, journalists, newspapers) as senders and the gated (e.g., newspaper readers) as receivers, the two roles are interchangeable in online networks where “the roles of sender and receiver are repeatedly exchanged” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005, p. 248).

Network gatekeeping accounts for the condescending relationship between traditional gatekeepers and audiences (e.g., Atwood, 1970) by theorizing that, because the relationship is seen, at least generally, as uni-directional, newspaper readers have no voice or power. Contrastingly, within online networks, the ability of users to create their own information has increased their “bargaining power” and caused gatekeepers to “avoid conditions which encourage the gated to overcome gates that have been posted in networks” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005, p. 249). However, network gatekeeping theory applies only to online networks where traditional gatekeepers and online news consumers interact. Hu and Sundar (2010) offered a typology of online sources which, by categorizing gatekeeping as collective, individual, or unknown, attempts to account for gatekeeping on sites to which network gatekeeping does not apply. For instance, because wikis are collections of content from many different and anonymous users, and are edited within reason by anyone with internet access, they would fall in the collective gatekeeping category. Similarly, a social networking site like Facebook or Twitter, if users are considered sources of content themselves, could fall into the individual gatekeeping category but, if users are conceptualized as “other users” interacting with other profile owners, it would fall into the collective gatekeeping category. This paper, through several one-on-one, in-depth interviews with Digg.com, Facebook and Twitter users, will attempt to determine if gatekeeping is truly a collective endeavor on these sites, a determination represented by the path
labeled M in Figure 1-1. Also, on collaborative news portals (e.g., Digg.com), which celebrate being free of traditional editorial authority but reward good gatekeeping by their users, has the power of traditional gatekeeping theory merely changed hands? What do successful Digg.com users circumvent to gain that editorial authority, a traditional gatekeeper or each other? Answers to these questions will be explored with a series of in-depth interviews, but first, the answer to a more fundamental question must be understood.

**RQ 1:** How do network gatekeepers perceive their gatekeeping role and how do their perceptions compare to traditional notions of gatekeeping?

**News Consumption on Social Networks**

A report by the Pew Research Center (2010) revealed that 75 percent of people who find news online get it through email or social networking sites. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter and social bookmarking venues like Digg and Delicious make it easier for the 67 percent of Americans who say they only follow news of interest to them or their friends. Also, heavy users of social networks and collaborative news portals are much more likely to customize their homepage with only that news they want to see, and 30 percent of all internet users choose their news sources based on their customizability. Lavrusik (2010) argued that, although those who consume news on social networks do not trust each other in the same way they trust traditional news outlets, they can essentially use each other as editors. Also, the problem of potentially misjudging the credibility of another, anonymous user “could be improved by enabling users to develop more targeted news feeds on personalized topics of interest, but also by identifying specific sources and curators of information as more or less credible than others” (Lavrusik, 2010).
Although only 25 percent of internet users have ever started a blog, shared a photo or posted a link (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007), there is reason to believe that number will grow in the near future (Goode, 2009). While traditional gatekeepers argue that their training and intuition allow them to best serve the public by selecting the stories it should see, “the democratic deficit lies in the non-transparency and over-determination of the story selection process and the incapacity for audiences to question or challenge those selections” (Goode, 2009, p. 1291). On collaborative web portals and social networks, although a large portion of the news is still produced and framed by traditional gatekeepers, users can participate in the agenda-setting process by offering feedback and comments on a particular selection, even if they do not post content themselves. Also, traditional news outlets may be only the first or, as is often the case among Digg.com users, the last link in a chain of sources and hyperlinks.

Goode (2009) posits that collaborative news production is an extension of this inverted chain which has been thoroughly covered in the communications literature (e.g., Moores, 1993). However, especially in the cases of Facebook, Twitter and Digg, if news stories are not sensational enough to catch the attention of users, they risk being overlooked or “amplified, sustained and potentially morphed as they are re-circulated, reworked and reframed by online networks” (Goode, 2009, p. 1293). Goode (2009) also points out that because network gatekeepers are able to produce and construct news themselves, they can be more critical of the production and construction done by traditional gatekeepers. This research will use in-depth interviews with some prominent network gatekeepers to, among other things, determine if they also employ a similar decision-making process as traditional gatekeepers.

Flew and Wilson (2008) identified four practices that network gatekeepers typically perform in socialized news environments: content work, networking, community work and
technical work. Content work, although it differs in its goals, resembles traditional journalism in that network gatekeepers edit, create and disseminate content that conforms to traditional journalistic standards and norms. Networking consists of establishing relationships with other users and established news outlets in order to build a close-knit group of friends to interact with and rely on. Drawing attention to obscure news sites by bookmarking their articles on sites like Digg and forwarding or retweeting links to news articles on Facebook or Twitter can also be considered networking (Flew & Wilson, 2008). Community work includes skills, such as how to register on a site, create a profile and post content and, similarly, technical work consists of tasks related to the technological affordances of a particular medium.

Bruns (2003) suggested that because network gatekeepers essentially do little more than publicize information, “gatewatching” is a more applicable term than gatekeeper. Following Goode (2009), this study will use the term gatekeeper because, even if the motivations and processes governing gatekeeping online are different from traditional media, there is no guarantee that a news story produced by the New York Times will make it to the front page of Digg or be forwarded on Facebook or retweeted on Twitter. The consequences of a story’s remaining buried deep within a website are comparable to those of traditional gatekeeping (Goode, 2009). Although it may occur “under more complex and challenging circumstances” (Goode, 2009, p. 1295), simply because news can be produced by individual users does not free it from the influences of traditional media sources. For these reasons, the term gatekeeper will be retained as a response to Goode’s (2009) call to “explore what new modes of gatekeeping power may be emerging” (p. 1295). Three examples of online venues that reflect these trends, are accounted for in Hu and Sundar (2010) typology, and where gatekeeping can be effectively
studied are Digg.com, a collaborative news portal, and two social networks, Facebook and Twitter.

**Gatekeeping on Digg.com**

Although Digg.com allows for users to do their own gatekeeping by “looking through the lens of the community,” the site advertises itself as being free of editorial influence (Digg, 2010). However, users are rewarded for good gatekeeping when their submissions are promoted to the front page. While the site claims to be free of editorial authority, its most successful users are essentially its best editors. Those with the most dug submissions gain the same editorial authority the site boasts being without. On the site, which advertises itself as an editor-free “place where people can collectively determine the value of content” (Digg, 2010), users can perform their own gatekeeping by digging, burying, sharing or commenting on articles in any of eight categories: technology, world and business, science, gaming, lifestyle, entertainment, sports and offbeat. In order to digg, bury, comment on and submit links to articles on Digg.com, users must first establish a free membership on the site. All content on the site is then submitted to a community of material where it is seen by registered users of the site. Users then “digg” articles that interest them. If a given submission receives enough Digits, it is promoted to the site’s homepage. The site features a number of customizable options, including a choice between seeing the most recent content or the top content from the last 1, 7, 30 or 365 days. In the most recent option, articles are ranked according to the recency with which they were made popular, or received enough diggs to appear on the homepage. In the top content option, articles are ranked according to their number of diggs. In either option, articles are accompanied by a number of comments, choices to share or bury, the news outlet that produced the article, and the username of the Digg member who submitted it. While clicking on the share icon allows users to
share a link to the article by email, Facebook or Twitter, users can also initiate and respond to comments on the article, either digg or bury each comment, and sort comments by oldest, newest, most controversial and most dugg. Clicking on the username of the user who submitted the article leads to that user’s profile, which features statistics such as number of digs, submissions and comments.

Because a front page story on Digg.com can result in an increase of at least 12 to 15 thousand visitors to the site of the news outlet that produced the story (Cohn, 2007), Digg.com buttons have become ubiquitous in online news and social networking environments. Since developing a custom widget that ranks the top five most dug stories on its website, Time Magazine’s online version has seen its presence on the Digg.com homepage increase more than twofold and its Digg-driven clicks increase from 500,000 to 1.3 million (Shields, 2009). The site has caused similar traffic increases for Newsweek.com and Wired.com (Shields, 2009), making it an invaluable resource for advertisers targeting Digg.com’s tech-savvy audience. With this influence in mind, understanding gatekeeping processes on Digg and how users of the sites view themselves and the gatekeeping ability of other users is important for several reasons, both theoretically and practically. Although individual users can gain editorial expertise with good gatekeeping, Digg.com would fall under the collective gatekeeping category according to the Hu and Sundar (2010) typology. Given that many online news consumers trust the rankings of news portals over their own evaluative judgments (Pan ,et al. 2007), and the proposition that they themselves may be the most relevant online gatekeepers (Hargittai, 2000), news portals have received little academic attention and virtually none from a qualitative perspective (e.g., Schroeder and Kralemann, 2005), either on their own or as vehicles for studying network gatekeeping.
Although Digg.com advertises itself as being free of editorial influence, Halavais (2009) asked whether the content of Digg.com was dictated by the “explicit acknowledgment of other users of a sociable site,” and if the very communality of Digg.com served to encourage contributions that fit the expectation of its community of users (p. 444). When Digg.com users submit articles to the site, they can be either rewarded, if the submission is highly dugg and consequently promoted to the front page, or punished, if the submission receives little attention. Halavais (2009) argues that this feedback is a way of “scoring” content, either or positively or negatively, that encourages further participation (p. 445). By sampling 30,000 of Digg.com’s 2.8 million users and downloading all of the comments they made on the site and the total number of diggs and buries each comment received, Halavais (2009) attempted to determine how Digg.com users become “star Diggers” and if there is a pattern whereby users learn what content will most likely be dugg or buried (p. 448). He suggests that the rewards that encourage participation on the site also enforce a “process that trains users to behave in ways that conform to community standards and expectations” (Halavais, 2009, p. 457). Comments by experienced users were generally positively correlated with both diggs and buries, indicating that on Digg.com, those with experience are more likely to receive a reaction, either positive or negative. However, while most users strove for positive feedback and reinforcement through a large number of diggs and small amount of buries, some, through racial and religious slurs, insults and profanity, sought to become as little liked by other users as possible (Halavais, 2009).

This suggests that, despite its claim to egalitarian editorship, users of Digg.com have various levels of confidence in their fellow gatekeepers, a concept this study hopes to further explore. While comments containing the word ‘liar’ were likely to be buried, especially when used in reference to another Digg.com user, comments by users who supported their arguments
with credible sources were likely to be dugg, despite the site’s pride in being without editorial authority. Similarly, the word “Digg” was one of the words most strongly correlated with burying, along with criticisms of spelling or grammar, two common editorial tasks (Halavais, 2009). Although the level at which these processes occur is unclear, at either the individual or communal level they represent an abstraction of the relationship between editors and audiences in print, with Digg.com users relying on the wisdom of others to become good editors, then using that same wisdom to perpetuate their own editorial influence. Whereas in print media, editors can be condescending toward their readers and not confident in their ability to gatekeep (Gladney, 1996), collaborative online news sites such as Digg.com essentially reverse this relationship by allowing the audience to determine how good of a gatekeeper each user is. The gatekeeping ability of each user is explicit on the site, along with the collective acceptance or rejection of each user’s submissions and comments.

In August 2010, the site underwent an unpopular redesign, which made it aesthetically similar to Facebook and functionally comparable to Twitter. Although the front page of the site has arguably been made more credible by the infusion of news items from traditional sources such as the New York Times, Washington Post, BBC and CNN, what the site’s most ardent users were unhappy with is the perceived infiltration of editorial authority from a select number of publishers (Halladay, 2010). Also, the bury button, which allowed users to give submissions a low rating, has been removed. Nevertheless, gatekeeping on the site remains fundamentally the same, and talking to prominent Digg users about why they are unhappy with the redesign will shed light on the complex and multi-layered motivations of Digg.com users.

Whether they exhibit a similar condescension toward other users as editors show toward readers in print media, and whether these perceptions have changed with the design of the site,
will be a crucial first step in determining if sites like Digg.com are polarizing or uniting network news consumers. Digg’s popularity, at least in part, has been attributed to the democratic ideals of equality and egalitarianism but, because “there seems to be prima facie evidence of a powerful core of ‘elite’ at work” on the site, the relationships among users on the site has been called an aristocracy, a popularity contest and the Digg mafia (Goode, 2009). Contrastingly, users of the site have argued that the most popular users earn their status through skill and hard work (Goode, 2009) or, as this study attempts to explore, through their effectiveness as gatekeepers.

RQ2: Do Digg.com’s network gatekeepers view themselves as editors in the traditional sense or merely a member of a collaborative editorial effort?

RQ3: How do Digg.com’s network gatekeepers perceive the gatekeeping ability of other users?

Gatekeeping on Facebook

One of the least understood motivational mechanisms on Digg.com is the influence of social networking (Halavais, 2009). Although the recently redesigned Digg allows users to sign into the site using their Facebook account and automatically forward any stories they digg onto their Facebook feed, only one study (Lerman, 2000) has examined the influence of social networking within Digg. Many studies have addressed motivations for using social networking sites and personal web pages (e.g., Banczyk, Kramer & Senokozlieva, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002), but none have specifically analyzed Facebook in the context of network gatekeeping. Although a controlled experiment is needed to determine if the four sources posited by Sundar and Nass (2001) are indeed psychologically distinct on Facebook, the News Feed application displays many of the same characteristics as a news portal, and is an ideal venue for exploring the relationships among profile owners.
A social networking site like Facebook, if users are considered sources of content themselves, could fall into the individual gatekeeping category but, if users are conceptualized as part of a community of users interacting with other profile owners, it would fall into the collective gatekeeping category. Equally ambiguously, according to Hu and Sundar’s (2010) online source typology, when “individual users control information on their social networking site (SNS) profiles,” Facebook may fall under the individual gatekeeping category but, because SNS “offer wall posts and other interactions between profile owners and their social networks,” they may also fall under collective gatekeeping. No research to this point has addressed how, if Facebook users are considered editors of their own content, their relationship with friends in their network relates to the condescending and hierarchical relationship between editors and audiences in traditional journalism or, as more young people use collaborative venues to get their news, whether their gatekeeping and editing of their own content on their Facebook profiles begin to resemble their consumption of news. A similarity would not only complicate the Sundar and Nass (2001) and Hu and Sundar (2010) typologies, but only have implications for how heavy Facebook users interact in real life, given Facebook’s purported ability to alleviate the tedium of face-to-face communication.

Presumably, within a given network of Facebook friends, there exist a small number of users who consistently share links to news stories, and when online news consumers go to Facebook for their news, this small number of users is performing a gatekeeping function. Although the other members of that network can easily go elsewhere for their news, if they consistently follow a prominent news sharer’s links and psychologically consider that user a news source (see Sundar and Nass, 2001), the user is a network gatekeeper.
**RQ 4:** Do Facebook’s network gatekeepers see themselves as editors in a traditional sense or members of a community of users, and how do they rate the gatekeeping ability of other users?

**Gatekeeping on Twitter**

Twitter is a microblogging service that, like Facebook, has become a source of immediate, instantaneous news. Although those looking to Twitter for news may miss newsworthy items among the “other chatter going on,” the biggest advantage of the site is its instantaneousness (Weinberg, 2008). Unlike Facebook, however, there is no need for reciprocity between friends, as any user can follow or be followed by any other without any necessary interaction or mutual approval. This environment provides an ideal venue for examining the gatekeeping decisions of both followers and the followed, or gatekeepers and the gated. Followers receive all tweets from those they follow, which appear on the user’s profile chronologically. There is a well-defined language on the site which, combined with the 140 character word limit, promotes brevity and conciseness. Retweeting, or forwarding the tweets of other users without their knowledge and beyond their scope, has become a popular means of disseminating news items (Cha, 2010) and reinforcing a message (Watts & Dodd, 2007). Much like the sharing function on Facebook, links to stories or tweets themselves can be retweeted independently of their originator but, unlike on Facebook, the originator can be a mere Twitter user, not a news outlet.

In one of the first studies to explore the entire “Twittersphere,” Kwak et al. (2010) examined 41.7 million profiles, 1.47 billion social interactions and 106 million tweets to study, among many other things, the distributions of and relations and reciprocity between followers and the followed. They found that unlike other social networks such as Facebook, most tweets
are not reciprocated but, in the cases of those that are, there is some evidence of homophily among users. Although gatekeeping in the journalistic sense has not been examined in the context of Twitter, Cha (2010) identified three types of a related concept, influence, that Twitter users may attain. In-degree influence refers to the number of followers a user has, which is a straightforward and overt marker of that user’s known audience (Cha, 2010). Retweet influence is the number of retweets that bear a particular user’s name. It is a more subtle way of measuring a user’s influence outside of their network of followers and indicates a user’s ability to produce content likely to be enjoyed by a large number of users (Cha, 2010). Mention influence, measured by the number of times a user’s name is included in a tweet or retweet, indicates the “ability of that user to engage others in a conversation” (Cha, 2010, p. 3).

Leavitt et al. (2009), by measuring the influence of 12 of the most popular Twitter users over a 10 day period, found that while celebrities were mentioned more often, news outlets were more influential in getting their information retweeted. Although Weng et al. (2010) found high levels of reciprocity in a nonrandom sample of nearly 7,000 Twitter users, Cha (2010) found only 10 percent reciprocity in a random sample of users. These mixed results concerning levels of reciprocity have implications for gatekeeping because, as network gatekeeping theory posits, one of the advantages of social networks like Twitter is the ability of users to interact with gatekeepers. Low reciprocity on Twitter would indicate a hierarchical model of gatekeeping, not the horizontal model proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2005).

Cha (2010) also examined which particular Twitter activities result in the most influence in what topic and time. She found that while news sites, politicians, athletes and celebrities were highest in in-degree influence, news sites, content aggregators and businessmen were highest in retweet influence and, for the most part, celebrities were highest in mention influence. Also,
because fewer than 30 percent of “mentions” contained links to original sources, mentions are identity-driven and retweets, which almost always contained a link to the original source, are more content-driven. Interestingly for gatekeeping on Twitter, Cha (2010) also found that the most influential users of Twitter were public figures, websites and content aggregators, and that there was little overlap between the three types of influence. However, ordinary users can also become influential gatekeepers.

In the same study, 20 of the most followed users who discussed a single news topic were examined. Although unheard of prior to the news topic they discussed, users who tweeted consistently about only one topic increased their influence scores the most over the course of a particular event. This implies that users can become more influential gatekeepers by focusing on a single topic and tweeting detailed, insightful things about that topic rather than merely conversing with other users. Huberman, Romero and Wu (2008) predicted that, after examining over 300,000 Twitter users, those who posted the most would receive the most attention in return and those with a large number of followers and friends would be more active than those with little. They found that although the number of followers did increase with number of posts, those users with a large number of posts do not necessarily have a large number of followers, making number of friends a more indicative marker of influence than number of followers. For the purposes of gatekeeping, these results show that although two users may be linked on Twitter, that does not mean they are interacting. Research that has looked only at traffic on the site without measuring influence has found that the top 10 percent of Twitter users post over 90 percent of total tweets on the site, prompting Goode (2009) to posit that “social networks are not flat; they are hierarchical; and they are not as conversational as we often assume” (p. 1293).
However, how followers interact with the followed has not been considered in the context of news sharing and network gatekeeping.

**RQ 5:** How do Twitter’s network gatekeepers view other editors on the site and what makes them value the contribution of a particular editor over another?
Chapter 3

Method

Because “one-on-one depth interviews are most beneficial as a research tool when the topic being explored involves change, novelty, or uniqueness and the people interviewed play influential or unique roles” (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p.269), this study attempted to answer the posed research questions using a collective case study design (Merriam, 1998; Stakes, 2005; Yin, 2003) with a total of 15 in-depth interviews. As in this case, the in-depth interview may be conducted in the context of a “particular concrete situation” which has been analyzed before the interview (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 541), and allows the researcher to probe as deeply as possible into the existence and dynamics of a particular phenomenon (Warren, 2002). The interview protocols are typically semi-structured and contain a list of open-ended questions, but they are used mainly to prevent digression from the intended topic of conversation. The researcher may probe participants about a particular point or unexpected response (Morse & Richards, 2002), but should allow them to speak freely about what they are most passionate about or interested in. The interviewer presents the interviewee, ideally someone who has experienced a given phenomenon in a different way than the researcher, with some broad topics or questions and observes how he or she “frames and structures the responses” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). Although some interviewees may be hesitant to answer personal questions or give spurious or defensive answers if the researcher’s motivations are gleaned, the in-depth interview is an accepted way to spur specific thoughts about subjective experiences (Merton & Kendall, 1946).
Participants

Digg.com, Facebook and Twitter users who regularly and consistently share news on their profiles were the potential population for the study. For the Digg.com portion of this study, those users with at least 50 followers, 1,000 diggs and 100 comments were sought out for interviews. Based on the current membership statistics, greater than these numbers in any one of the categories would indicate heavy use, and significantly more in all three would indicate that the user is one of the most prominent and successful users of the site. If a user qualified for the study based on their statistics, they were contacted via email and asked to participate in a 45 minute to 1 hour interview about their Digg usage. In total, nearly 50 prominent Digg users were contacted and five expressed a willingness to participate. Those who agreed to be interviewed were then called via Skype. The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes and the longest 65 minutes.

Facebook and Twitter users were contacted in much the same way. For Facebook, users who shared at least 15 stories in the past week were considered prominent gatekeepers in their networks and sent a message on the site inviting them to participate. Again, close to 50 users were contacted and 5 agreed to be interviewed. The interviews all lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. Because not all Facebook users allow people outside of their network to view their front page, only those users who allow public access to their walls were contacted. This limitation should not be problematic because, presumably, those network gatekeepers want the largest possible audience for the news they share. For Twitter, users who tweeted links to at least 15 news stories in the past week were contacted. Seventeen Twitter users were contacted and five agreed to be interviewed via Skype. The five interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes.

Because geographical markers are voluntary and rarely included on the profiles of the Facebook, Twitter and Digg users who were contacted, it is difficult to determine if those who agreed to be
interviewed are systematically different from those who declined or did not respond. However, given the universal applicability of the concepts they were asked about, systematic differences that would affect the usefulness of the responses are unlikely. Also, despite the low response rate, the sample is faithful to Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) call for network gatekeeping to be free of assumptions about the gatekeepers. Before any potential participant was contacted, the study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Pennsylvania State University. Participants gave their consent for their responses to be transcribed and included in this research article.

Instrument

Three semi-structured interview protocols were designed for organizational purposes and were used only to keep the conversation on track. They were used to stimulate further discussion, not generalize to the entire population of Facebook, Digg.com and Twitter users. The Twitter interview protocol included four broad and overlapping categories: (1) Approaches to and use of Twitter, (2) News sharing on Twitter (3) Gatekeeping on Twitter and (4) Perceptions of the gatekeeping ability of other Twitter users. The Digg.com interview protocol also included questions in four categories: (1) Approaches to and use of Digg.com, (2) Digg.com tasks, (3) Gatekeeping on Digg.com, and (4) Perceptions of the gatekeeping ability of other Digg.com users. Lastly, the Facebook interview protocol included three categories: (1) Approaches to and uses of Facebook, (2) News on Facebook, and (3) Perceptions of the gatekeeping ability of other Facebook users. At the end of each interview, the participants were presented with the list of adjectives provided by Barzilai-Nahon (2005) to describe network gatekeeping, and were asked to pick which word or words best describes their gatekeeping on Digg, Facebook or Twitter. They were then asked to describe the last news article of at least 200 words that they submitted,
shared or tweeted and to identify their motivations in posting that particular article.
Chapter 4

Results

Digg.com

Case 1

Sam (pseudonym) is a software engineer in Islamabad, Pakistan. He created his Digg account three years ago, but has been very active on the site for the past two to three years. He is on Digg throughout the day, and likes the site because it allows him to follow what his friends in the United States, Australia, Singapore and India are liking. Because his friends are digging interesting and hot news about many different topics, he can see websites that he might otherwise not have seen or known about, and since it is not impossible for Sam alone to always remain up-to-date on the latest trends in the rapidly evolving technology field, Digg provides a means of staying current. Also, by networking with other users, Sam is able to channel traffic from Digg to his own blog and website. He uploads technology-related stories to Digg every day, and believes that the latest and most current stories from famous blogs such as CNN and Mashable will be most dugg by Digg’s community of users. He trusts Digg for breaking and political news as well, not because most of the news sources are credible and reputable, but because his friends usually upload stories from these sites. However, he only looks at what his friends have dugg if he himself does not have time to look through the news feeds from CNN and Mashable. He can tell if a topic is trending by the number of diggs it has in a given time period, but if he himself is not familiar with a trending topic, he will investigate the topic himself before digging it. Although he cautions that journalistic standards may differ from culture to culture, Sam believes that his gatekeeping on Digg is similar to that of a traditional journalist because he sifts through many blogs to determine what news is hot and trending. Then, after rewriting it in his own words, he
passes that news on through Digg. Also, if he has personal experience with or an emotional connection to a story or topic, he will “give it a link back.” His occupational and personal uses of Digg differ in that, at work, he displays and adds his own news to the community but, at home, he uses it strictly for entertainment. He uploaded a story during the interview related to the closing of Xmarks, a social bookmarking and search tool with over 2 billion users. He dugg it because very few people had seen the news but, because other blogs like his had already posted the story, he believes it will receive many diggs from the community.

Case 2

Bart (pseudonym) is a college-educated social media professional in Boston trying to start a successful blog. Although he started using Digg only less than a year ago, he uses the site up to 3 hours a day, 5-7 days a week, enough to make him one of the most prominent individual Digg users with over 500 followers and nearly 12,000 diggs. He attributes his success to his immersion in social media and networking with like-minded users. His best learning tool was learning from the mistakes of other users, who he said were always kind in telling him what strategies did and did not work. Although no one has learned exactly what works on the recently redesigned Digg, building a loyal following of users and networking with them will work on any social media platform. No one alone can be successful on Digg. Once you have a loyal following, members of this network can digg each other’s stories, submit stories, comments, etc. He finds the new Digg obsolete because he can find the same information other places. Although the same information is likely to show up on the site, the redesigned, less collaborative Digg makes it harder to find the same information. On the old Digg, he would follow a group of roughly 200 friends, who would submit a story or two each day. If he logged in within 24 hours of their posting the stories, he could then look through all 200 of them each day. With the new
version of Digg, those same 200 friends post stories to the site, but Bart cannot keep up with them and, because they cycle through his home page like a Twitter stream, he can only see the stories that were uploaded around the time he logged in. Bart uses Digg “strictly for social media purposes,” getting page views for obscure news sources. He attributes his digging decisions to how much he enjoyed the content of a given article, but would skip over content he did not enjoy rather than bury it. He has commented over 300 times on the site, but does so only if he feels like he can contribute to the topic. Ultimately, he is loyal to his group of friends, commenting on or digging their articles when they ask. During the course of the interview, Bart reported at least 10 requests for diggs and comments. When asked if he considers the user who submitted an article to the community over the content of the article when deciding whether to digg it, he answered yes, and that most users of the site do this when cycling through their group of friends. Bart considers Digg a credible, “awesome” news source because most of the articles come from sources such as the *New York Times*, BBC and Time. Although most of the front page is from credible sources, he said, there is a lot of “garbage,” and it is the job of the user to do the “weeding.” Because users have to make a judgment about the importance of each article in the context of all the others, he believes this weeding is similar to that done by traditional journalistic gatekeepers. Some of the stories have sensationalized headlines that actually came from an irrelevant or unimportant quote at the bottom of a story. Users should be able to spot these things simply by looking at the article’s source. He said that for regular users who search Digg for news, the gatekeeping they perform is most characterized by selection, where users must select what they believe to be quality news. For those, like Bart, who are uploading stories to Digg, gatekeeping is more characterized by shaping and manipulation. By always adding a picture to a story and writing a headline that could not be found at the *New York Times* or CNN,
he manipulates the everyday users into believing his story is a “must read.” Because the summary and headline are very influential in how well a story is received, the everyday users are easily manipulated. The last story Bart uploaded to Digg was titled “Exposing 5 of the Most Bigoted American Leaders Today.” It received 36 diggs, which he considers good on the redesigned Digg. He uploaded this particular story because it is a list, and “those types of stories will do well on almost any social media site, almost anywhere on the web.” He added a woman’s picture next to the title because “it adds a layer of curiosity…most people don’t think of women when they think of bigots. When a user sees this, they think ‘oh this is cool, I want to see who the five most bigoted people are, and when they see the woman, they think ‘Who is this lady that's on the list?’”

**Case 3**

Angie (pseudonym) is a sales manager in Gong Dong, China. She became aware of Digg four years ago and began using the site in 2008. Since then, she has used Digg nearly every day for social marketing purposes. After the redesign of the site, she has started using the site less for social marketing and more for pleasure, searching for “fancy” stories or outlandish headlines. Angie likes that she can find information in many, often unrelated subject areas and show others what her favorites are. She is most attracted to entertainment news because she can become closer to celebrities, but also looks for stories about television, movies and popular culture when she is studying. She often goes to Digg for political and breaking news, but mostly for the comments. When asked if she considers the other Digg users credible, she replied that users have to make judgments for themselves and, although there is a lot of “spam,” if that spam is useful to her, she will believe it.
Case 4

Nathan (pseudonym) is a search engine optimization and social bookmarking specialist in Kansas City, Missouri who has been using Digg “all day, every day” for the past four and a half years. While he said the Digg front page used to be more communal and a good way to get publicity for front page stories, lately it has been “inexperienced spammers just posting random shenanigans trying to do offsite search engine optimization for their junk.” However, because they have revived many of the previously discontinued features, Nathan generally likes the new version of Digg. After sifting through informational, technological, humorous and resource blogs, he posts stories related to the 4,000 U.S. colleges he works with as well as humorous and technological stories to promote his own blog. Top five lists, stories about innovative technologies and, lately, those making fun of Digg typically receive the most feedback. Because the Digg front page often features those users with the most followers or contacts rather than the “best news,” he consider Diggs a credible news source only “in a sense.” When referring to the best news, he means stories about global catastrophes with far-reaching implications, such as the recent B.P. oil spill which he said was on the front page of Digg for months. He does not use Digg much for personal use, but when he does, it is mostly for entertainment. Because he constantly promotes Digg at web conferences and submits four articles a day to build the site’s network and community, Drew described his gatekeeping activities on Digg as adding. The last article he uploaded was titled, “3 Questions You Might Have About Google Instant and SEO.” He uploaded it because it was informative and was written by a co-worker.

Case 5

Andy (pseudonym) is a social media entrepreneur in Auckland, New Zealand. He operates a website about weight loss and muscle building and uses Digg to drive traffic to his
website. He has only recently become an active Digg user, but praises the site’s power to drive traffic and create status and trust among users. He mainly uses Digg to promote his own website and to accumulate an “army of people” who will “get your content to the top.” He said that users build trust with other users by following the links they provide and digging them if they deserve a good rating. He typically gives good ratings to anything “interesting, weird, breaking news, funny or educationally-benefiting.” When asked if he considers Digg a credible news source, he said that the site is most effective at spreading news quickly, and that the credibility of the site lies in the original sources of the articles. Unlike some of the other Digg users who were interviewed, Andy critically reads the articles his friends submit, only digging them after validating their original sources. He mostly submits his own blog posts and other informative, interesting information that will most likely receive good feedback. He said that although he has not submitted a large enough sample to accurately test, what seems to get the most feedback and attention on Digg are rumors, controversies and “stories relating to moronic gadgets.” He attributes the success of these types of stories to their immediacy. He believes that although some people enjoy reading and promoting stories, most have selfish motives, uploading stories even if they are “crap.” Because manipulation has a connotation that makes him sound like an “evil capitalist” and he channels traffic from Digg to his website, the best word to describe Johnny’s gatekeeping activities on Digg is channeling. He uploaded a story from his own website during the interview titled “Why Being Overweight is Ruining the World.” It received 16 diggs and 1 comment in the first 24 hours.

Facebook

Case 1

Ron (pseudonym) is a graduate student studying architecture in Rome, Italy. Although he
is no longer an active journalist, he has worked in broadcasting and received a degree in journalism from Notre Dame. He logs into his Facebook twice a day and posts news stories that interest him to his profile approximately every other day. Although he avoids posting overtly biased stories, he generally posts editorials or commentary with cultural dimensions, which may also be politically relevant, rather than hard news stories. His favorite sources include David Brooks, The Front Porch Republic and anything politically-charged that relates to city planning. He usually does not consider whether or not his friends will enjoy or agree with the stories he posts, but avoids posting stories with a controversial point of view in favor of those that leave him saying, “That’s exactly how I feel.” Because his architecture program is very close-knit and includes many people with similar points of view, stories related to urbanism and architecture get the most commentary within his group of like-minded friends. However, he also uses Facebook to test out his stand-up comedy material. When asked if he thinks his friends consider him a credible news source, he responded that he cannot say because he considers a credible news source as one that reports just the facts without a point a view, and he “definitely has a point of view when he posts anything related to urbanism or architecture.” He frequently clicks on links to stories that his friends have shared, but only those that are relevant to architecture and that he is interested in. Also, it depends on which friend posted it. He almost always clicks on the stories that his former colleague shares because they come from many of the same sources and he and his colleague share similar points of view. He also frequently clicks on the more “frivolous” things like music and movies as well, but does not consider who posted these things when deciding whether to click on them. However, although he mostly posts stories related to architecture, he does not want them to be seen only by those with similar interests. Most of the feedback from a story he recently posted about creating more walkable streets was received by
non-architects, a response he considers a success in his “effort to win the hearts and minds of people outside my profession.” The word he said best describes his gatekeeping efforts on Facebook is shaping because his posts are meant to win hearts and minds and shape opinions. He wants to “put things out that people read and say, ‘this makes perfect sense - why aren't we doing this?’” The last story he had posted was an article titled “The Catholic Schools We Need” from America Magazine, a choice he made because the article was “not just about the kinds of physical places we create, but people's respect for the public and private - and the rules that need to be followed in the public sphere,” including Facebook.

**Case 2**

Jimmy (pseudonym) uses Facebook for a range of things, from staying connected with his friends and commenting on photographs to organizing formal events and posting links to newsworthy articles. He shares what he calls “important” things, such as global news related to China or Africa, because they deserve a larger readership and spur discussion among his friends. He does not expect his friends to also post newsworthy news articles, but frequently follows links to articles that his friends share. Although he does not share articles specifically to invite conversation or ignite controversy, controversial and “explosive” articles typically get the most feedback from his network. He does not only post articles from reputable news sources, but will share anything he finds interesting, regardless of the source or medium. For Jimmy, an article is good if he considers it worthy of a larger readership and it contains something of scholastic interest to him or the people to whom he targets the story. Although he may not specifically target any group of his friends, if he posts an article related to Chinese education he expects mostly his friends from China to respond. While he believes that journalists gatekeep by rationality, he gatekeeps by mood. He frequently follows links to news articles that his friends
have shared, but will only comment if they are anti-China. When asked if he considers his friend who posted an article or the article’s source when judging the quality of that article, he responded that because his comments are directed to the person who posted the article and not the journalist who wrote it, he will consider his friend. Also, since he is not manipulating or shaping the stories he shares in any way, he describes his gatekeeping on Facebook as displaying. He said that a Facebook profile is a personal profile, and the news Jimmy chooses to share reflects the type of person he is, even down to his interests. He said that gatekeeping on Facebook, unlike that of a traditional journalist, is an unconscious and indescribable moment when “I really want to post on Facebook so I can let people know what I’m doing or let people know I read this article or let people know I want to read this article.” Jimmy most recently posted an article titled “Measuring What Makes Life Worthwhile” because he believes the people in his network should know about it.

**Case 3**

On his personal website, Edward (pseudonym) has compiled news feeds from many sources, including CNN, MSNBC, Acientific American, Engadget, ESPN, and the *New York Times*. On the page, there are, among many others, tabs labeled Top News, Science and Technology News, Movie News and Sports News. The Top News section of the website features constantly updating news feeds from CNN, MSNBC, the *Washington Post, New York Post, Seattle Times*, and Entertainment Weekly. Edward promotes this news feed by saying that no longer do Web users have to sift through every one of these sites, they can simply come to him. He chose to include these particular sites because these are the sources he typically goes to for news. He reads all of these nearly every day to avoid the media biases of any one, and although he does not know who exactly the visitors to his website are, he created the feeds to save people
time, so they “wouldn’t have to go to a dozen websites and could essentially go on one website to see it all.” He is more concerned with saving time than avoiding media biases, but says that the juxtaposition of politically-polarized sources makes it easier to bypass the biases that most political news sites have. When asked if the gatekeeping he does if similar to that of a traditional journalist, he replied that, in a sense, it was because “they take the information, generally filter it through themselves and present the material while sometimes also presenting personal biases and prejudices, while all I have done and worked on presenting the material from different news companies in hopes that they are mostly unbiased or their various biases can be lessened by having the same story presented by a few different people.” Because he is not personally connected to the news he posts, he does not claim to be a credible news source, but by amalgamating credible news from many sites, he hopes to be indirectly credible. The word that comes closest to describing his gatekeeping activities is integrating because he integrates news from many sources to cancel out media biases.

**Case 4**

Angad (pseudonym) is a medical student in Buena Vista, California. Although he uses Facebook only as a study break, he has posted at least 2 news stories to his profile for the past several years. Often, he simply shares the story from its sources website instead of logging into Facebook. He posts anything that “catches my eye,” whether funny or controversial, as long as he finds it interesting. He posts because he likes to “stay on top” of current events and “get to the news to my friends so they don’t have to search through all the sites I visit.” He also commonly comments on the stories he posts in order to invite his friends to share their views. He considers himself a “social psychologist” who looks at the world as a paradigm and reports things that do not fit. His objective is to get people to think about whether we are doing the right things and
why we do the things we do. He does not like mediocrity, and often posts inspirational stories on his Facebook page to “get people motivated to do something with their lives.” Although his friends will ultimately respond to whatever they most closely relate to, he said there are distinct cohorts among his friends who respond to stories differently. If he posts something related to medicine or health care, his medical school friends will respond. If he posts something related to politics, another group will respond, and sports another, usually the men. He does not post things with a specific cohort in mind, but has comprehensive, spontaneous interests that are neither regular nor consistent. He does not believe his friends read or care about the news, and believes it is his responsibility to make the news fun for them again. He believes that because the “good to bad news ratio” is 95 to 5 percent, we are desensitized to and turned off by the news. He believes the “screening” he does while looking for news stories is similar to the gatekeeping a traditional journalist does because his views can be biased. However, it is different because while journalists usually have an agenda to promote a certain viewpoint or product, he does not trying to push anything on his readers, other than getting them to read. He does click on links to stories that others have shared, but not very often. He usually looks at material his friends have shared on the actual website instead, looking at the ticker of articles that have been shared on Time.com or CNN.com. Nevertheless, he likes to believe that his friends consider him a credible news source. Because he draws from so many sources and channels what he finds interesting to his Facebook page, channeling is the best word to describe the gatekeeping he performs. He wants to ignite curiosity in others through the articles he posts because good, thoughtful articles often lead to conversations, which lead to action and encourage people to be more active and engaged in politics. The last article he posted was titled “U.S. Faces Shortage of Doctors” from the Wall Street Journal. He posted it to let his peers know that “there is a bright future ahead” and
encourage them to “not forget about the bigger goal and vision.”

**Case 5**

Amy (pseudonym) is a journalist in Columbus, Ohio, who shares at least one story per day on her Facebook profile. While most of the stories she shares are from the *New Yorker, New York Times* and *Washington Post*, some are stories she herself has written. She mainly posts these stories on social networks to increase her brand as a reporter, but also shares stories she enjoys reading and those she believes are important to know. Because many of her followers are writers themselves, she believes Twitter is a good way to share stories. When asked if she believes Facebook is a credible news source, she replied that because people can post anything to social networks while “a reporter at a credible news organization would risk the company's reputation if he made something up”, it absolutely is not a credible news source. When Facebook is used as a news source, it becomes “a means for people with no checks and balances to be perceived on the same level as credible organizations…and a blend of credible stories and everyday posts on that don't require fact checking.” Displaying best describes her gatekeeping on Facebook because, although she hopes her friends do not rely on her as a source of news, sharing news on Facebook is similar to cutting a story out of a newspaper and mailing it to a friend, except that now, “you're mailing clips to your friends' friends.” The last story she shared was a *New Yorker* story about a Texas man who set a fire that killed his three children. She shared it because she believes they tell an important story that her followers should know.

**Twitter**

**Case 1**

Paul (pseudonym) is a web strategy consultant in San Francisco, California. He has worked for major television networks as well as the nation’s largest alternative weekly
newspaper chain. As part of his job, he uses Twitter every day to boost the viewership of obscure content. Stories about marijuana, violent crimes and “dumb criminals” typically get the most feedback, but technology news, entertainment news, info-graphics and interactive maps and graphs are also very popular. Although there are many times when Twitter users disregard the sources of news on the site, source reputability generally does matter when it comes to retweeting. Paul has also worked as a print journalist, and said that the gatekeeping he does on Twitter differs in several ways from the gatekeeping he did as a print journalist. First, while print journalistic gatekeeping decisions are made to increase readership, those on Twitter are more concerned with getting the content retweeted and generating buzz about the tweeter’s profile. Also, local, niche-oriented, and personal news that may not make it into a national paper can become very popular on Twitter, and “there will be questions and discussion points that are brought up on a Twitter account that never make it to the paper.” Twitter itself is not a credible news source, but the accounts of news organizations are generally more credible than those of regular citizens. However, regular citizens can also become authoritative “by demonstrating expertise on a certain subject over a long period of time, through expression of informed opinion.” Paul described his gatekeeping on Twitter as illuminating, informing, entertaining, and piquing interest. Because it always gets retweeted and humanizes the tweeter, John tweets a story daily which he titles “Awful Story of the Day.” His last was titled “94-Year-Old Allegedly Beaten to Death by 81-Year-Old Roommate in Nursing Home.”

Case 2

Diane (pseudonym) is a public relations practitioner in Johnstown, Pennsylvania who uses Twitter for 3-5 hours every day. She follows mostly news outlets and individuals who tweet news, as well as people in the public relations and labor and employment industries. Because it
saves her time, she prefers to get her news from Twitter where she can get constant updates, eliminating the need to sift through multiple news outlets. Although it depends on the account, she does not consider Twitter a credible news outlet. She trusts other Twitter users to post credible stories, but only because she can follow the link and verify it. If someone she trusts posts an article which, after an investigation, she considers to be invalid, her trust in the friend will not diminish because sometimes “people get their facts mixed up and I always trust my own judgment more than other people.” Also, since there are rarely tweeted retractions on Twitter, traditional journalists tend to get their facts mixed up more often than those who retweet their stories. She has people of many backgrounds and with many interests among her followers, but mostly those interested in public relations, labor and employment and women’s issues. She uses Facebook more for personal use and, by tweeting 75 percent news, keeps her Twitter account more professional. However, she does tweet things that are more personable and relatable “because it makes me seem like a real person and not like I’m churning out regurgitated news.” She tweets articles that she believes her followers will be interested in, as well as articles that she herself is interested in but that she knows will be irrelevant to most of her followers. She tweets heavily from reputable news outlets, but although they are often biased, she will tweet from blogs if she either agrees with the opinion being expressed or thinks it is wrong. She will not tweet what she considers to be wrong, not because her friends will get the wrong impression of her, but because she does not want them to get wrong information. She said that local stories about crime tend to get the most feedback on her Twitter. She most recently followed a link that one of her friends shared with a misleading headline. She decided not to retweet it. Because she has not posted “anything that was blatantly false or overly opinionated,” she does not know why her followers would not consider her a credible news source. By tweeting articles that are
current, interesting and relevant to the industries she is interested in, her gatekeeping on Twitter is similar to that of traditional journalists. Because “it’s a combination of taking news that I find, but not completely repeating what was said and passing it along to other people” with “no guarantee that other people are going to see my posts,” Diane said that channeling best describes her gatekeeping on Twitter. The last article she tweeted was titled “Is Micro-News the Future?” She shared it because she found it interesting and thought her followers should know about the trend.

Case 3

Trish (pseudonym) is a marketing professional in Eagerton, Oregon. She has three professional and one personal Twitter account, which she uses several times an hour to build relationships, stay connected and share newsworthy articles. She shares social-media, marketing or branding-related articles as well as humorous or breaking news articles at least three times per day. She does not only share articles from credible news outlets, but also from wherever she finds something that interests her. She said that because she looks to Twitter for news more than any other venue, the site is itself a credible news source. Trish’s Twitter account, which features over 15,000 followers, is broken down into several categories such as baking and women’s issues. Based on the feedback she gets and the number of followers she has, she believes that her friends consider her a credible news source. Blog announcements, social media related news stories, recipes she is interested in and particularly resonate quotes are often the most popular stories on her profile. Because she shares interesting and previously unshared stories, she believes her gatekeeping on Twitter is similar to that of traditional journalists. She will click on a link that other users have shared if she deems the title to be interesting, catchy, well-constructed and on a topic she is interested in. Because she aims to create a consistent message and personal
brand on Twitter, Tisha said that shaping best describes her gatekeeping activities on the site. The last article she tweeted was about Twitter’s attempts to monetize their platform by selling followers to users. She shared it because it was interesting.

**Case 4**

Dana (pseudonym) uses Twitter during her entire work day as a public relations practitioner in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a total of approximately three hours per day, in ten minute increments, for personal use. She looks for things that interest her on Twitter, from sports to celebrity gossip, but typically does not look to the site for political or breaking news. She considers Twitter a credible news source, but only depending on which account is being followed. She considers both local and national news outlets to be the most credible and while she would rather get her news from the news outlet itself, she will also click on links to stories from Twitter users who she trusts to “tweet relevant and correct news.” The Twitter users most likely to tweet relevant and correct news are those following the same news outlet accounts as her. She has an eclectic following because she tweets about many different and unrelated topics. She tweets links to things she is interested in, both professionally and personally, about business, food, public relations, social media from both traditional news outlets and blogs, which she said tend to be more opinionated. However, she will only tweet a blog post if she agrees with the opinion being expressed. She knows that some of her tweets will not appeal to all of her followers and consequently, does not try to target each one, but posts things that she herself finds interesting, humorous or important. Because she “feels like if something is new or can be improved and I think would be important to know what it is that they’re changing or shaping or adding to,” she believes the word shaping comes closest to describing her gatekeeping activities on Twitter. The last news article she tweeted was titled “The Worst Ads of 2010.” She tweeted it
because she agreed with the rankings.

**Case 5**

Liam (pseudonym) is a journalist in northern New Jersey who shares sports-related news stories two to three times per day. He does not consider Twitter itself a credible news source, but after confirming the credibility of Twitter content from its original source, it can become credible. For this reason, the stories Anthony shares are from credible sources. Although he does not post stories specifically to garner feedback, stories that he himself writes get the most feedback from his followers because most do not live in the area in which he works as a journalist. However, he said, his followers who do live in the area prefer local news. He hopes that when he posts stories, his followers will read them and continue on to his newspaper’s website. When asked if he uses his traditional journalistic skills when posting stories to Twitter, he said yes, “I make sure the story has been edited by our editors and if it has been placed on our newspaper pages, then I go and post it.” Because he is interested in showing his followers that his newspaper is a credible source for news and sports, displaying is the best word to describe his gatekeeping activities on Twitter. The last story he tweeted was about a local high school football game. He tweeted it because “I wanted people to see my story and I also wanted to draw people to my newspaper's website.”

**Common Themes**

Nearly every user of Facebook, Digg and Twitter indicated that there are multiple groups of users within each network which may differ by, among others, interest level and knowledge of the medium. Although the existence of such groups seems intuitively commonsensical, the current model of network gatekeeping does not account for the possibility that the dynamics which it models occur simultaneously, or differently, within each group and on each network.
One of the most prevalent themes is the juxtaposition of the frivolous and newsworthy. Several users, including Ron who uses his Facebook as a forum for both news sharing and his comedy routine, purposely post and share humorous and entertaining items along with their important and newsworthy ones. Nearly every user who reported this juxtaposition said that they do it because it humanizes their news sharing. This humanization is an additional common theme, and one that has not gone unnoticed. When Google News was launched in 2002, every page boasted that “This page was generated entirely by computer algorithms without human editors. No humans were harmed or even used in the creation of this page” (Nieman, 2010). Eight years later, the algorithmic gatekeeper issued the following statement: “At Google, we run anywhere from 50 to 200 experiments at any given time on our websites all over the world. Right now, we are running a very small experiment in Google News called Editors’ Picks. For this limited test, we’re allowing a small set of publishers to promote their original news articles through the Editors’ Picks section.” Although only a limited and small test, Google has recognized the trend toward humanization in online news sharing, which may supersede not only the detachment and neutrality of traditional journalism, but also the infallibly objective gatekeeping of a computer algorithm.

An additional recurring theme was the feeling among network gatekeepers that the content that results from traditional gatekeeping itself needs gatekept, a process visually represented in Figure 2-1. Theoretically, raw content gathered, structured and disseminated by traditional gatekeepers would arrive in a network in its completed form. That content would then be sifted through and potentially manipulated by network gatekeepers before reaching the gated, or all other users. However, when the content reaches the network gatekeepers, it is already
structured and packaged. Consequently, the gatekeeping done by network gatekeepers is essentially synonymous to that done by traditional gatekeepers, except one is done with raw content and the other with pre-packaged and pre-gatekept content. Essentially, network gatekeepers, with their mastery of a given medium and its accompanying gatekeeping mechanisms, see traditional gatekeepers as unqualified in much the same way traditional gatekeepers have been shown to view those with no journalistic training.

However, all of the users interviewed demonstrated a mastery of their respective medium in order to become prominent, so how is competence judged among these groups of masterful users? According to them, it is simply interest. Regardless of whether they are an expert on a given topic or subject, because they are skilled in the mechanisms of the medium, simply being interested in that topic or subject makes them an expert. Just as an untrained, and even
unknowledgeable, Twitter user can gain influence by tweeting consistently and insightfully about a single subject (Cha, 2010), merely being interested in a particular topic can make a network gatekeeper more credible and influential in the “contextual vacuum” of the Internet (Sundar & Nass, 2001, p. 57).

**Research Questions**

Research question 1 asked about the way in which network gatekeepers perceive their gatekeeping role and how those perceptions compare to traditional notions of gatekeeping. When asked, of the words posited by Barzilai-Nahon (2005), which best described his gatekeeping on Digg.com, Bart cited “selection” as most representative of not his, but the gatekeeping of regular users. His gatekeeping and that of those who upload stories was most characterized by shaping and manipulation, an alarming proposition given that many Digg users cite its democratic ideals of equality and transparency as reasons for seeking news there (Halavais, 2009). However, the two-group model may be overly simplistic, given that Bart was referring to his group of friends. There are likely many more similarly structured groups of friends on Digg, all with varying levels of influence. To say that one group of influential diggers controls all content is likely premature before more thorough analyses of the redesigned site are conducted. However, each of these sub-networks, and the language many of the interviewees used to describe them, closely resemble the relationships between traditional gatekeepers and their audiences described by, among others, Gladney (1996), Atwood (1970), and Arant and Anderson (2001).

Similarly, Ron chose shaping as the best word to describe his gatekeeping decisions. Although he is essentially selecting which stories to post from the sources he most frequently peruses, he chooses them strategically, to shape opinions and “win hearts and minds.” Because he draws from so many sources and channels what he finds interesting to his Facebook page,
channeling is the best word to describe the gatekeeping he performs. Given that traditional news sources are increasingly incorporating raw and user-generated content into their output, the channeling metaphor is also applicable to traditional gatekeeping but, because the affordances of collaborative news portals and social networking sites require no journalistic training to master, journalistic experience or expertise is no longer a prerequisite for credible gatekeeping.

Ron reported that he almost always follows the links to stories posted by his former architecture colleagues because they all share similar points of view. However, his colleagues were also getting most of their stories from the same sources as Ron. Although he tries to enlighten his friends who are not educated in architecture, he chooses not to enlighten himself by selecting only those stories shared by friends who are of like mind. For Sunstein (2001), one of the benefits of social media for modern democracy is the increased opportunity for unanticipated encounters with people and opinions with whom individuals may disagree. By choosing to read and follow only those stories with which he is inclined to agree, Ron is limiting the chance of unanticipated encounters with unfavorable material. While social networks like Facebook are ample venues for unanticipated and unwanted encounters, their customization can limit these same opportunities. Of course, news consumers may insulate themselves with favorable material in traditional media as well but, with network gatekeepers, that focused and non-wavering interest is a marker of credibility.

Angad believes that unlike network gatekeepers, traditional journalists are most often biased, trying to promote a particular product or point of view. As a result, he takes it upon himself to gatekeep the content that traditional gatekeepers have produced. This would represent an extension, not distortion, of the traditional gatekeeping model, where network gatekeepers serve as the gatekeepers of the traditional gatekeepers. However, according to Angad, the only
prerequisites for serving as a gatekeeper to the gatekeepers are broad interests that do not alienate any one group. As a result, Angad posts things that interest him and hopes that because the stories interest him, they will inspire his friends. Similarly, Amy reported that she shares stories written by herself and other credible news organizations in order to promote her brand as a reporter. Whereas in traditional journalism, being a member of a reputable and respected editorial staff will increase the brand of a journalist, merely sharing stories coming from that news outlet can increase the brand of a network gatekeeper.

Research question 2 asked if Digg.com users view themselves as editors in the traditional sense or members of a collaborative editorial effort. Although he did not explicitly state it, Bart insinuated that there are two groups of users on Digg, the “regular users” and those who upload stories. Those who upload stories are able to easily manipulate the regular users simply by placing pictures next to headlines that are made to look as little like traditional news sources as possible. Theoretically, if the relationship between these two groups of users was like that of editors and readers in print media, the more influential gatekeepers who upload stories should cite selection as the word most representative of the gatekeeping they do. Interestingly, however, Bart cited selection as most representative of not his, but the gatekeeping of regular users. His gatekeeping and that of those who upload stories was most characterized by shaping and manipulation, an alarming proposition given that many Digg users cite its democratic ideals as justifications for consuming news there (Halavais, 2009). However, as mentioned, the two-group model may be overly simplistic, given that Bart was referring only to his own network.

Angie is what Bart would call a regular user. As a sales manager, she is well-aware that not everything on Digg is newsworthy, but that is why she enjoys it. However, she also looks to the site for comments on political news, even though the commenters are often those submitting
the “spam.” This suggests that while many casual users of the site are not aware of the various
gatekeeping functions that heavy users perform, heavy users take manipulative advantage of that
ignorance in a very non-collaborative and vertical fashion. Regular users (e.g., Angie) and heavy
users (e.g., Bart), may be separated not only by their level of use, but also their awareness of
gatekeeping possibilities. Interestingly, this is essentially the difference between traditional
gatekeepers and the gated. Because the gated had no journalistic training or knowledge of
gatekeeping processes, they left the gatekeeping to those who did. On Digg, every user knows
the technical and community work, but the best users perfect the networking aspect as well,
developing a loyal following of users who digg each other’s content, no matter how newsworthy
or frivolous. Angie enjoys the entertainment and popular culture news on Digg, and likes to
show others what her favorite stories are on the site. Again, although she looks to Digg for
comments on political news, she enjoys the outlandish and fluff stories as well, even though both
newsworthy and frivolous content may be submitted by the same user.

Angad mentioned that “famous” blogs get the most feedback, and two of the most
famous blogs he mentioned were Mashable and CNN. One is a blog connected to a reputable
traditional news source, the other strictly a blog, but he did not specify which type of famous
blog typically does better on Digg. Nathan uploaded his last article because it was both
informative and written by a co-worker. Although he reported uploading it because it would be a
valuable addition to a community who may want to know about Google Instant and SEO, there is
still an element of self-interest involved. He is simply one case, but which of these motivations
was greater will be a first step in determining if Digg’s most prominent users even consider
themselves members of the communities they are trying to build.

Andy is also unlike the other Digg interviewees because he always validates the sources
of articles submitted by his friends before he digs them. Although he asserts the importance of building an “army” of other users who digg his content, that content must be good before he digs it. However, “good” simply means that he is interested in it. Because most of his submissions are blog posts that he has written, he either considers himself a credible, “validateable” source, or relies on what he considers the lower standards of other users. In both options, he considers himself the superior gatekeeper, another marker of the lack of confidence the most masterful users have in the rest of the Digg community. Also, Andy believes that while he uses Digg only to drive traffic to his own website, other users are attracted to controversial and moronic stories about technological gadgets “they don’t need.” He also believes that his use of Digg as a channel to his own website is also more admirable than other users with a “what’s in it for me” mentality. This attitude is typical of the most influential gatekeepers on Digg, indicating that heavy, masterful users see themselves more as hierarchical gatekeepers than members of a communal and collaborative editorial effort.

Research question 3 asked how Digg.com users perceive the gatekeeping ability of other users. Several things are interesting about Bart’s responses. First, he considers Digg a credible news source because most of its articles are from the New York Times, BBC, Time, etc., yet he uploads stories that are sensationalistic, not informative, because they will “do the best” on Digg. It is those editors who manipulate their stories most effectively who receive the most comments, diggs and page views, not those who upload stories with headlines the users could find on the New York Times. Why else, Bart asked, would users go to Digg for news if they could read the same news from its original source? According to Bart, users go to Digg for news because they cannot find it elsewhere, but if this is the case, it cannot be considered a credible news source simply because most of the front page comes from the New York Times and BBC. Also, if the
site’s most prominent and successful users go to great lengths to make their submissions look as little like articles on the *New York Times* and CNN as possible, the site cannot be considered credible because it features articles from these same sites, regardless of the level of manipulation.

Second, the redesigned Digg greatly reduces the ability of users like Bart to get their submissions promoted to the front page. Instead, it is a list of traditional news sources such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Time* and CNN. In theory, if these sources are what make Digg a credible news source, the redesigned version would be more credible than the old. Nevertheless, Bart expressed frustration over the redesign, not because Digg would not benefit from more credible sources, but because he would not be able to manipulate other users as easily. His submissions would be less relevant and, eventually, “obsolete.”

Angad cited as one of his reasons for liking Digg that because his friends uploaded stories from credible news outlets, he does not have to go through every site looking for newsworthy content. He presumably trusts their gatekeeping, but only when he does not have time to do it himself. Also, as a backup, he keeps a news feed to these same sites on his own website, in case he wants to confirm the gatekeeping of his friends. Although he typically considers a topic with many diggs to be newsworthy and likes Digg because he does not have to do all the gatekeeping himself, if he himself has not heard about a topic with a lot of diggs, he conducts his own investigation by “Googling” the topic. The criteria he uses to judge the newsworthiness of a given news item in this situation is a topic for future inquiry but, interestingly, he also insinuated that if a topic he deems to be newsworthy does not have many diggs, other user did not necessarily fail at gatekeeping, but simply may not be aware of it.

Andy said that Digg creates status and trust among users. On Digg, these concepts seem to cyclically, and perhaps tautologically, coincide, with trust leading to status and status leading
to more trust. However, which comes first is unclear. Judging from the interviews, trust is strongest between users who reliably digg each other’s submissions, but the degree to which the quality of those submissions plays a role remains ambiguous. A user can submit the most newsworthy and thought-provoking content, but without a loyal following of trusting users, that content will remain buried on the site. Nevertheless, the Digg profiles with the largest number of followers are traditional news sites. While some Facebook users perceive comments as more democratic on social networks than news websites, Johnny sees traditional news sources on Digg as reserved for news. Regular users gain trust by digging each other’s “crap.”

Research question 4 asked how Facebook users rate the gatekeeping ability of other users. A recurring theme among Facebook gatekeepers is the juxtaposition of the absurd and newsworthy. While trying to change hearts and minds and enlighten his non-architecturally-inclined friends about the practical implications of urbanism, Ron also tries out his comedy routines on these same friends. Also, while he heavily considers who the friend was who posted an architecture-related article when deciding whether or not to read it, he follows links to movies and music, what he considers more “frivolous” things, without considering who posted them. He has little confidence in his friends regarding architecture, but values their gatekeeping prowess only for more frivolous content. Whether the comedy material on Ron’s Facebook profile devalues his news sharing, or vice versa, is outside the scope of this research but a fruitful area for future inquiry.

Angad does not have confidence in the gatekeeping ability of his friends not because they cannot, but because they do not care to do it. He sees it as his responsibility to ignite their curiosity and spur them to action through posting and sharing news articles. However, Angad posts stories that he finds interesting, not that he thinks they might be interested in. His lack of
confidence in his friends becomes a justification for providing them with the news they need, even if it is simply the news he thinks they need. Nevertheless, he invites their comments and views on the articles he posts not because they may influence his own views, but simply to start a conversation. Although there is inspirational and important news, it takes someone like him with “broad interests” to sift through the 95 percent that is not newsworthy. He does not trust others to do any gatekeeping for him, but wants his friends to read the stories that result from his own gatekeeping. In this way, he reads only the stories that interest him, minimizing his opportunities for unanticipated encounters, much like Ron.

Also, like the groups on Digg, there are different cohorts of people in Angad’s network, categorized according to the interests of their members. Angad does not try to keep each group happy, however, as he posts things that interest only him. He believes he is qualified to gatekeep for all of these groups solely because he has far-reaching interests that may apply to any one of them. Unlike print journalists, who most often focus on a single beat intensively, network gatekeepers believe that their comprehensive interests make them correspondingly qualified to be gatekeepers, regardless of their level of journalistic training.

Jimmy reported that he shares articles because he believes they deserve a greater readership. However, he also predicted that when he shares an article, it will most likely be read and discussed by those friends who have prior knowledge of or a relation to the article’s topic. Again, this indicates that, when it comes to news consumption, a given Facebook network is made up of sub-networks which are loosely organized around a set of interests. When these interests also correlate with a race, ethnicity or nationality, as in the case of Jimmy, it seems to undermine the global reach and communality of the social network within which the sub-networks exist.
Of additional interest is the level of sourcing from which many of Ron’s posts are derived. His two favorite sources are David Brooks and The Front Porch Republic. The first is a source at the individual gatekeeping level, the second at the collective gatekeeping level. While seemingly inconsequential, psychological perceptions of stories at these different levels of gatekeeping may affect what level Facebook users consider themselves when posting, forwarded and commenting on stories. This perception may consequently affect their feeling of being part of a collaborative editorial effort. Ron said that he does not consider whether his friends will enjoy or agree with any story he posts, but posts only if the story makes him say “That’s how I feel.” However, he posts stories that will be read by people outside of architecture as well, even though the posts within architecture receive the most feedback. Although he said he is trying to win hearts and minds by posting news stories, he could just as easily do this by typing his views into the status bar. There is something about the structure of news that, however editorial or opinionated, is seen as more credible than a paragraph in the status bar. Although the news itself may lose some credibility in the context of Facebook, it remains more credible in the minds of Facebook users than their own words, no matter how articulate they may be.

Research question 5 asked how Twitter users view the gatekeeping ability of other users and what makes them value the contribution of a particular editor over another. While Jimmy said that his goal in sharing a story on Facebook is to increase readership, Paul reported that that is the goal of traditional journalism, not social networking and bookmarking. The distinction is made at the level of the gatekeeper, with traditional news outlets wishing to generate readership for the outlet and social network profile owners wishing to generate readership for themselves and the article itself. While its dynamics are assumed to be much more communal than the traditional gatekeeping model, the goals of gatekeeping on Twitter are more singularly
motivated. This was echoed by Paul, who reported that while Twitter itself is not a credible news source, individual profiles can be credible. The profiles of news outlets are the most credible, but regular people can also become credible by demonstrating a prolonged expertise on a single subject, consistent with previous research (Cha, 2009).

Trish said that Twitter is a credible news source because she uses it more than any other outlet to get her news. Also, she posts stories because she is interested in them, without regard for her 15,000 followers. Her Twitter account is broken down into several groups that, together, make up her total number of followers. Although her large number of followers presumably makes it impossible to serve as an authority for all of their individual interests, the large number also increases her authority within each specialized group where she has considerably fewer followers. This is consistent with prior research, which indicates that regular users can extend their authority to other topics by first becoming an authority on one topic. However, whether being an authority on a separate topic increases the valence of that authority across topics has not yet been explored. Dana was surprised to be asked if her friends consider her a credible news source, and insinuated that she is credible simply because she tweets about something she is interested in. She will tweet interesting things from both traditional and new media outlets, but will only post content from a blog if she agrees with the opinion being expressed. She also considers most credible those Twitter users who follow the same sites that she does, implying condescension toward or disapproval of those who do not. Diane reported that she will tweet both because she knows that her followers will be interested in a given article, and that although she knows they will not be, she herself is interested in it. But if Twitter's value as a news outlet is its personalization and communality, it would make little sense to post if no one will be interested.
Chapter 4

Discussion

Prior research on Twitter (e.g., Cha, 2010) has indicated that users can gain influence by continuously and insightfully tweeting about a single subject or issue. They can also extend that influence to other subjects, as in the case of Digg founder Kevin Rose (Cha, 2010). For those Facebook users who were interviewed, this process seems to be inverted. Many of the Facebook users posited that they are considered by their friends to be credible news sources because their interests, not expertise, are far-reaching and comprehensive. However, their knowledge of a single subject, as in the case of Ron, may also be assumed to extend to other subjects, making them authorities on not only the subjects on which they know the most, but also unrelated subjects which they are merely interested in. Also, while research (e.g., Watts & Dodd, 2007) has shown that Twitter users can gain more influence by posting or retweeting themselves rather than inviting or engaging in conversation, Facebook users often post stories that they know will ignite discussion and feedback from their friends. Perhaps the ability of a gatekeeper to engage in and moderate discussions is more important on Facebook than Twitter, where following the bandwagon requires no reciprocity.

This raises questions about the intra-media robustness of the bandwagon theory, which posits that news or products that are read or recommended by a large number of people are considered more credible or newsworthy. The very nature of social networking sites such as Facebook guarantee that content is favored by at least one other person, and probably more by those demographically similar. What needs to be further considered is the idea of collective gatekeeping, where users reciprocally gatekeep each other’s content and, together, gatekeep content produced by traditional gatekeepers, as a replacement for the concept of the
“bandwagon.”

The most practical implications for this reconceptualization would be online news interface design. This study operates under the assumption that at least part of the changes in online gatekeeping can be attributable to the ambiguity of online news sourcing. Sundar & Nass (2001) proposed three conceptions of online news sources to explain the lack of confidence in traditional news editors in networked contexts. Visible sources are the “sources seen by the receiver to be delivering the message or content” and technological sources are the “media or channels of content presentation that are presumed by readers to be the originators of content” (Sundar & Nass, 2001, p. 58). Individuals themselves become sources when they selectively choose their own content and perform their own gatekeeping, and when a mass audience as a whole is responsible for a website’s content, “other users” become sources as well (Sundar & Nass, 2001, p. 59). Consequently, in collaborative online news environments like Wikinews and Digg.com, users can be conceptualized as editors because they are essentially doing their own gatekeeping or other users because the sites claim to be free of editorial oversight. Has the editorial oversight merely switched hands?

Integrating news and social networking on the online versions of daily newspapers may not only allow the traditional news outlets to become much more social, but also much less credible if those liking the news are not considered good gatekeepers. For example, The Washington Post, one of the most credible and recognizable American newspapers, has its masthead in the upper left-hand side of its online interface. On the right side is a Facebook Network News application which allows users to view either the most popular stories of the day accompanied by the number of people who have shared them or a summary of their Facebook friends’ news-viewing activity. By logging into Washingtonpost.com using Facebook Connect,
users can share, like and comment on content, as well as see all the content their friends have shared, liked or commented on. Also, users can read content recommended by their network, see what *Washington Post* content is most popular across Facebook, and create a profile page showing the content with which their Facebook friends have interacted. *The Centre Daily Times*, a daily newspaper of circulation 23,000 in State College, Pa., does a similar thing, except instead of allowing users to become their own gatekeepers, the site invites users to become fans of the newspaper on Facebook. Whereas the *Washington Post*, a more reputable national newspaper, allows users to do their own gatekeeping by liking and sharing stories themselves, *The Centre Daily Times* essentially requests that users become fans of the editorial staff of the paper. More thorough experimental work is needed in the area, but this research would predict more favorable responses from *The Centre Daily Times* because it minimizes the gatekeeping tasks that readers can perform and neutralizes the influence of bad gatekeepers.

Also, questions of whether good gatekeepers will use their influence wisely will be of paramount importance to the credibility of social news. Those with many loyal followers may either choose to forward and retweet stories they know their friends will like, or pass on stories they think they need. These interviews revealed some of both, but dangerously juxtaposed. Many of those interviewed thought of social media and news sharing as a game, in which whoever accumulates the most followers wins. If network gatekeepers believe that content produced and disseminated by traditional gatekeepers is itself in need of gatekeeping, maybe it is. However, if that is the case, the gatekeeping of both groups should be of comparable quality. If network gatekeepers essentially treat their gatekeeping as a game, they must be considering that done by traditional gatekeepers a game as well. Additionally, if, as on Digg, the most successful users on the site seek each other out for cooperation, the apparent communality of such sites could be
little more than a discussion among and manipulation by gatekeepers, the opposite situation that
many users cite as their motivation for using social media.

Although many, if not all, of the original sites also allow for readers to give their own
comments, regular users look to Digg for others’ comments on political news as well. This
indicates that there is something about social networks that make their comments seem more
listened-to than those on the online versions of traditional news sources. Thus, although Bart
openly admits to manipulating regular users, Angie looks away, unaware of the strategic
gatekeeping that manipulates her. According to Barzilai-Nahon (2005), these perceptions are due
to the belief among traditional gatekeepers that the “gated audience is not considered capable of
producing and creating information freely” (p. 5). As a result, “The gated only rarely receive the
right to create information, in most cases under the control and authorization of the gatekeeper,”
as on the designated comment sections of online news sites. (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005, p. 5). On
Digg, although the article itself may be the same, because it was uploaded to the site by another
user, the comments are seen as more democratic and, consequently, more insightful. On the other
hand, it is conceivable that the most influential network gatekeepers could be employed in
gatekeeping raw content gathered by either traditional or citizen journalists. They are the most
knowledgeable about what content will be the most engaging and thought-provoking among their
followers, and could use that knowledge to reinvigorate the interest in news of those in their
networks.

The original model of networking gatekeeping proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2005),
shown in Figure 3-1, was constructed in light of the uni-directional relationship between
gatekeepers and the gated in past literature on traditional gatekeeping. It begins with a poster,
“one who posts new information to a network” (Barziali-Nahon, 2005, p. 3). In the cases of Facebook and Twitter, posters are users who forward, share, tweet or retweet content and, on Digg, those who upload stories to the site. For the purposes of this research, the usefulness of the model is contingent upon the distinction between the arrows marked P1, P2 and P3. The model assumes that the poster is independent of the gatekeeping process referred to in P2 and P3, and thus cannot account for posters such as Bart, Ron, and Angad who manipulate that process. They are not only posters, but also the gatekeeping mechanism. Although other users must digg, forward or retweet their submissions to the network, they have accumulated a group of loyal users who are as knowledgeable about the workings of the gatekeeping mechanism as themselves. In this way, their submissions follow the trajectory of the arrow marked P3, but there is no gatekeeping mechanism to circumvent. They are the gatekeeping mechanism.

The model must also be considered in light of the common themes that have emerged from these interviews. First, most of those interviewed gave some indication of various groups of
users, organized according to level of gatekeeping. On Digg, groups are formed by like-minded users who, through networking (Cha, 2010) become loyal followers of each other. In this case, the gatekeeping mechanism is the level of reciprocity of a poster’s group. No matter what the content is, if the poster has a large enough following of loyal diggers, that content will make it to the gated. However, the content has not circumvented the gatekeeping mechanism as shown by P3 in the model because the poster’s friends have served in that capacity. This is one explanation for the tolerance of the juxtaposition of fluff and breaking, impactful news among regular users.

Also, some interviewees described their gatekeeping as shaping and channeling, while others thought manipulation was the best description. These verbs represent very distinct tasks when it comes to gatekeeping. Those who responded with shaping did not change the substance of the story, but merely chose that story to shape opinions. Contrastingly, the Digg users who chose manipulation are attempting to manipulate regular users by altering headlines, pictures and captions. While both describe gatekeeping, the gatekeeping mechanisms afforded by the different networks make shaping and manipulating very different tasks.

Finally, the most consistently recurring theme throughout the interviews was the sense that the gatekeeping done by traditional editors and journalists needs to be gatekept itself. Instead of a new model, perhaps we need an extension of the old, an extended model that adequately accounts for the ambiguous gatekeeping of the overlappers. Network gatekeeping becomes a second-order response to traditional gatekeeping. When traditional gatekeepers become posters as well, then network gatekeeping becomes not only second-order gatekeeping, but also second-order network gatekeeping. A model may begin with raw content, which may be gathered by either a traditional or citizen journalist. That content goes through a traditional gatekeeping process and appears in either a traditional or online form, but fully structured and pre-packaged.
As when news outlets post content directly to online networks (e.g., the Digg account of the New York Times), that information then enters a network. This network contains several smaller networks, which may be, among other, social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) or social bookmarking sites (e.g., Digg). These networks contain still smaller networks which represent the gatekeeping dynamics within each second-order network. For instance, although more inquiry is needed, interviews with Digg users revealed that on the site there are two groups of users, those who primarily upload stories and those who mostly consume news. Within the smaller network, the poster (e.g., Bart) may be a user who uploads a story. That item passes through the gatekeeping mechanism, which could be that user’s friends or the entire community, and reaches the gated, who are either voluntarily or unknowingly unfamiliar with the gatekeeping mechanism through which the item passed. However, that process can easily be inverted, a development represented by the interconnected of Barzilai-Nahon’s (2005, 2008) models. Also, with the recent Facebook-inspired redesign of Digg and infusion of “buttons” on the websites of traditional news sources, readers can post content directly to several networks. In this way, that raw content went through a traditional gatekeeping process, then was posted to various networks by a poster, one of the gated from the traditional gatekeeping mechanism but a part of that mechanism within their network. That content then trickles down the line, through groups of smaller and more specialized users within each network. Any model must account for the ability of network gatekeepers to serve as both gatekeepers and the gated themselves, and for traditional gatekeepers to enter into a network as well.

Also, it must account for the possibility that the medium itself may serve as a gatekeeping mechanism. According to the users interviewed, it is simply interest that distinguishes network gatekeepers of comparable mastery of a given medium. Regardless of whether they are an expert
on a given topic or subject, because they are skilled in the mechanisms of the medium, simply being interested in that topic or subject can make them an expert, at least according to their followers. In this case, the medium, not the poster him or herself, serves as the gatekeeping mechanism. However, because they have a mastery of the medium in much the same way traditional journalists have mastery of their craft, they are no longer the gated. Although only exploratory, this study accounts for many types of online networks and the group dynamics within each of these networks. It also allows for traditional gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms to coexist with network counterparts and, by including various levels of gatekeeping, accounts for the channeling, shaping, integration and manipulation of content by network gatekeepers that has already been selected by traditional gatekeepers. Much more research is needed to confirm the validity of this analysis and the types of gatekeeping mechanisms that it represents. This extension of Barzilai-Nahon’s (2005) network gatekeeping model is merely meant to stimulate discussion about the changing dynamics of gatekeeping that, despite 50 years of research, are still not fully understood.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research serves as a preliminary assessment of the conceptualizations guiding what little research exists on collaborative gatekeeping, and attempts to develop an agenda for future research using various methodologies and conceptualizations. Also, it (1) it adds to the most recent Hu and Sundar (2010) online source typology, which categorizes gatekeeping as collective, individual, or unknown. With this categorization, Hu and Sundar (2010) are able to account for sites such as wikis and social networking sites which were not directly considered in their study of online health portals. This study, by qualitatively examining users themselves rather than quantitatively measuring psychological reactions to the media
platforms which they use, (2) attempted to determine if gatekeeping on news portals, social networking sites and wikis truly is collective, or if it more closely resembles the hierarchical relationship between editors and audiences in print media. Finally, it provided a first step toward (3) determining whether online, collaborative news venues signify a “dangerous polarization” of or “provide support for more collaborative discursive processes” among online news consumers (Halavais, 2009, p. 455).

**Practical Implications**

More practically, (1) some scholars (e.g., Sunstein, 2002; Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005) have argued that the popularity of wikis, news portals and social networking sites, where essentially anyone can contribute original content, could potentially resemble the tabloidization of the media or proliferation of reality television, an alarming proposition given that the 37 percent of internet users have used social media to create, comment on or disseminate news (Pew Research Center, 2010). The social bookmarking made popular by Digg has been called “gaming” but, depending on how its most accomplished users view their own gatekeeping, understanding the dynamics of collaborative web portals may also “lead to a new generation of personalization and recommendation algorithms” (Halavais, 2009, p. 456). Most research considers these venues ends in and of themselves from which the make-up of a particular online community is necessarily deduced. However, “while a tool may provide the means for deliberation, the make-up of the community and its choices matters at least as much” (Halavais, 2009, p. 455).

Given the socialization of every-day journalistic practice, the implications of this research also extend to (2) democratic decision-making and media literacy by both traditional and network gatekeepers. For traditional journalists, an understanding of the motivations
reported by these network gatekeepers will allow them to adapt to the new media environment and appear more trustworthy to a generation that often thinks them too homogenous and old-fashioned. Many of the network gatekeepers who were interviewed struggled to articulate the gatekeeping process they engage in but, although they were equally vague, were much more passionate about the incompetence of the traditional media. Mutual understanding can lead to the incorporation of network and traditional gatekeeping into a journalistic process that has historically operated under the assumption they are, at best, mutually exclusive and, at worst, wholly unrelated.

Additionally, (3) social media marketers will benefit from a better understanding of network gatekeeping. Given the influence of network gatekeepers revealed in this research, marketers may most effectively and cheaply market a product by targeting the most influential and active gatekeepers within a social network.

Additionally, because the popularity of user-generated news sites is, at least in large part, attributable to the “democratic ideals of equality, accountability, transparency, and empiricism,” (4) it is important to know if users of these collective sites abide by the same democratic principles when making individual decisions about the quality, credibility and representativeness of online news and, more fundamentally, the gatekeeping ability of fellow online news consumers (Keegan & Gergle, 2010, p. 134). Answers to these questions about collective vs. individual gatekeeping on Digg.com, Facebook and Twitter will ultimately lead to a determination if these technologies merely indicate a shift in gatekeeping practices on the Web, or signify a more fundamental and consequential transformation of the way news in produced and consumed in a digital environment. Finally, (5) unfederated cantons or not, the opinions of other users are influential, and questions of how to optimize retweeting, forwarding and liking
strategies while incorporating news onto social platforms and socializing on news platforms will not only allow researchers to more adequately account for the changing dynamics of online journalism, but also increase the capacity for critical media consumption by enabling users, and traditional journalists, to responsibly choose content from the “contextual vacuum” of the internet (Sundar & Nass, 2001, p. 57).

Limitations and Future Research

Although the Digg, Facebook and Twitter users interviewed for this study are some of the most influential gatekeepers on their sites, more and more thorough interviews are needed to generalize to the entire population of these sites’ users. Also, because most of those interviewed gave some indication of the various groups that exist within their networks, similar examinations of each of these groups should be conducted. The gatekeeping mechanisms on these three sites are very different, and to propose one comprehensive model may be overambitious.

Also, many of the interviewees were from countries where notions of journalistic gatekeeping may be very different. While few overtly referenced such differences, they may have influenced the responses if the participants tried to apply an unfamiliar and inapplicable American notion of gatekeeping to their own activities. Given that models of gatekeeping purport global applicability, cross-cultural comparisons are a particularly fruitful area for future gatekeeping research.

There are a number of other avenues for future research as well. First, most research on gatekeeping, this study included, discuss and operationalize it as an amalgamation of tasks that, when considered together, holistically make up the concept. However, while the results of forwarding, sharing, liking and retweeting may be similar, the psychological processes that
resulted in each one of these tasks may psychologically differ, and to lump all of the tasks together under one umbrella may be ignoring a rich area of exploration.

The compatibility of network gatekeeping with other communications theories such as agenda setting and framing may also be enlightening. For instance, some of the Digg users indicated that Digg is essentially a marker of what the community considers important and salient. Considered in this way, the site could potentially be a testing ground where the traditional media attains from Digg the preferences of a representative sample of Digg users, then sets the agenda for non-Digg users in an extension of the traditional models. Also, Digg users frequently, in the words of one respondent, manipulate stories so they appear as little like they came from traditional sources as possible. Future research could look into how these alterations affect the frames of the original, unaltered stories.

Also, prior research on Digg users (e.g., Halavais, 2009) found little correlation between the decisions and activities of gatekeepers of differing levels of activity, suggesting that each group uses distinct news cues and heuristics in their decision-making. Future research could experimentally explore what these heuristics are and, more interestingly, why they are different across groups.

Sociologically, this research has indicated that the gatekeeping that occurs on social networks like Facebook and Twitter and collaborative web portals like Digg and De.licio.us is essentially an exercise in impression management. Facebook and MySpace are often conceptualized as mirrors of virtual identity, but mirrors that move farther and farther away from actual identity. If most of an individual’s interaction with friends and family is through Facebook, that technology makes those conversations, even with the people most familiar with the individual’s actual identity, a social performance. And if these are performances, interactions
with those we don’t know are pure vaudeville. Additionally, as news moves online and becomes more collaborative, news consumption will follow the same vaudevillian trajectory, an alarming proposition for the future of mass communications research. With this in mind, the fourth and potentially most fruitful area of exploration lies in the potential conceptualization of social news consumption as an impression management strategy. Just as Facebook profile owners choose what to include in and post to their profiles, they also choose what news to share on their profiles, sometimes inviting comments and discussion from their friends. Are these decisions representative of gatekeeping or impression management? Most of those interviewed said they shared things they themselves were interested in, but either because they wanted to inspire their friends or invite conversation. They also believed that their friends consider them credible sources, but without reciprocity. That credibility is indicated by little more than the news they consume and, more specifically, what news they have shared, liked or commented on. It is, as one of those interviewed described it, as if the social network is the body and news consumption the clothes.

Finally, while this research has focused on network gatekeeping and news dissemination by network gatekeepers, a clearer explication of network news consumption is also an area for future research. Links to news articles from traditional outlets may be the most common and overt form of news dissemination on social networks, but they are certainly not the only ones. For example, users may see a reference to an event or issue in the Facebook status of a friend or notice that a particular name appears more often than normal in their Facebook NewsFeed, leading them to believe that something newsworthy regarding that name has occurred. The compatibility of these various means of consumption with traditional communications theories will be a particularly fertile ground for future research.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Web poses paradigmatic challenges not only to news production and consumption, but also traditional notions of gatekeeping. The seemingly egalitarian, communal and democratic nature of social networks allows for more open and diverse exchange of news, but depending on the confidence users have in each other’s gatekeeping, it could also push social news toward the precipice of tabloidization. For Palatella (2010), “the herd instinct is nearly extinct: newspapers inadvertently killed it when they scaled back on books coverage en masse; and the web, for all its crowds and their supposed wisdom, is a zone of unfederated cantons” (p. 31). Doctor (2010) argues that “even though readers are no longer captive to what an editor decides,” editors should flex their traditional editorial muscle on the Web because “people still want some help when it comes to deciding how and where to look for the news they value” (para. 17). But what makes these unfederated cantons value news in the first place? Could they now have, or believe they have, the old-fashioned editorial muscle that contradicts the utopian and democratic ethos of online news? Whatever the outcome, this research has demonstrated that much more work, from both communicative and sociological perspectives, is needed to answer these questions and fully understand the dynamics of network gatekeeping. A holistic model will account for differing levels of medium mastery and editorial authority and, more importantly, determine if the two are synonymous.
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