CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A.J. Liebling once said, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." Now, millions do.[1]

It was the photocopier, not the Internet or its most popular publishing technology, the World Wide Web, which led Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan to coin one of his most enduring catchphrases: "Everyone's a publisher." The photocopier, he felt, broke the stranglehold of editors over what material would reach an audience, and what content remained destined for obscurity. And indeed, the spread of photocopiers throughout offices worldwide (to the point that the brand name Xerox became synonymous with any form of photocopying) did lead to the emergence of a whole universe of underground and alternative publications. Perhaps not *everyone* became a publisher, but a great many people did.

The arrival of the World Wide Web as a mass medium repeated this phenomenon at an even higher level. The Web had a number of advantages over the photocopier—as hypertext markup languages developed, it allowed for more and more sophisticated content to be published online, incorporating not only text, but also images, sounds, and video; it offered user interactivity; and it enabled the connection and combination of materials from virtually any source through associative hyperlinking. Most importantly, perhaps, the Web solved a problem mere photocopiers were unable to address—it offered not only access to the means of publication, but also enabled cheap and instant on-demand *distribution* of content to interested audiences.

The repercussions of the emergence of this interactive and highly participatory mass medium continue to be felt. If everyone is, or at least has the potential to be, a publisher, what are the effects on existing publishing institutions? If information available on the Web can be easily linked together in a wide variety of combinations, what is the effect on traditional publishing formats? If there is a potential for audiences on the Web to participate and engage interactively in the production and evaluation of content, what happens to established producer and consumer roles in the mass media? If audiences have instant access to a myriad of information sources, what factors determine

their choices, and how do their choices affect their views and knowledge of the world around them?

Such questions lie at the heart of this book. In addressing them, we will focus especially on the field of news publishing, which has already seen a number of key developments. Amongst them is the emergence of a new generation of news Websites in a variety of fields in recent years: from the technology news of *Slashdot* to the political reports of the *Indymedia* network, from the personal news commentary in many Weblogs to the massively multi-sourced news digests of *Google News*, the balance between traditional news publishers (newspapers, and radio and TV stations) and new players has shifted significantly. In the process, the role of journalists and the definition of what constitutes journalism must also be reevaluated.

From Gatewatching to the Creative Commons

Throughout the book, case studies of key Websites alternate with systematic analyses of how these "new" news sources operate. Chapter 2 begins by introducing the practice of *gatewatching* upon which most alternative approaches to online news coverage are built. Varying in flavor from site to site, gatewatching complements or, in some cases, entirely supplants traditional journalistic gate*keeping* practices. In news Websites which practice gatewatching, the balance shifts from a publishing of newsworthy information to a *publicizing* of whatever relevant content is available anywhere on the Web (and beyond), and a subsequent evaluation of such material. This limits or eliminates the need for journalistically trained staff and opens the door to direct participation by audience members as information gatherers (that is, as gatewatchers), reporters, and evaluators—users become *produsers*. In effect, therefore, this model can be described as participatory journalism, and—due to the wide range of views commonly expressed by participating audience members—may lead to a multifaceted, multiperspectival coverage of news events. Indeed, the idea of multiperspectival news, which was first explored by journalism scholar Herbert Gans in the late 1970s, unexpectedly gains new currency in gatewatcher Websites.[2]

In addition to considering gatewatching as an alternative to traditional gatekeeping practices, then, Chapter 2 will also examine parallels to other information-gathering techniques, for example the resource collection practices of librarians. As we will see, gatewatching builds on the commonplace assumption that the Web (and the Net) is an egalitarian, open-access medium which is particularly well suited to liberating the exchange of alternative, non-mainstream content and ideas. While today many threats to this ideal are evi-

dent, we will see that the idea of gatewatching is inspired by the view that the Net inherently routes around any obstructions to the free flow of information—such as editorial interventions and access restrictions. Consequentially, there are claims that gatewatching and associated approaches will automatically produce more balanced, uncensored news coverage than exists in more traditionally edited and controlled media forms—and much like the assumption upon which these claims are based, we will critically evaluate such views.

Chapter 3 contains a case study to illuminate practices of gatewatching. Here, we will analyze one of the best-known gatewatcher sites, *Slashdot*[3], which provided the inspiration as well as, in a number of cases, the technology base for many of the alternative news sites which have emerged in subsequent times. Focusing on technology news, *Slashdot* centrally involves its community of several hundred thousand registered users as gatewatchers and content contributors, enabling its site operators to remove themselves entirely from the newsgathering process. The remaining involvement of *Slashdot* operators as editors, or in effect as supervisors of the gatewatching process on the site, also points toward the first of a number of important distinctions between different flavors of gatewatching approaches: in contrast to other sites studied in later chapters, *Slashdot* does not constitute a fully *open* publishing system; significant aspects of the editing and publishing process remain without user participation. At the same time, however, we will see that in other aspects *Slashdot* provides highly elaborate systems for user participation and content control—particularly we will examine the participatory content rating and moderation systems employed by the site.

Chapter 4 builds on the *Slashdot* case study by investigating sites which do move beyond an "open submission, but closed editing" model and instead directly involve their users as editors and producers of the site (in effect further limiting the remaining powers of site operators). Again, we will refer to such user-producers as *produsers* of these sites. In turn, gatewatching becomes the input stage to a process of open publishing and open editing which eventually results in the publishing of what we will call *open news*, in analogy to similarly produced open source software. This analogy also points to the effects of open news on traditional news publishers, which to a certain extent are similar to the impact of open source software on established software publishers. Further, much as open source software is claimed to be better quality-controlled and more detached from commercial agendas than proprietary software, so have there been suggestions that open news is more informative and balanced

and less influenced by political and commercial agendas than the news provided by commercial operators.

Open news, in fact, may be only one of a number of new developments in analogy to open source software. "Open source intelligence" or OSI, as it has been termed by Felix Stalder and Jesse Hirsh, the operators of open source advocacy Website *OpenFlows*, is now being applied to a number of projects[4], and gatewatching and open editing practices can similarly be found beyond the realm of *news* as such. Indeed, any "news" Website also always carries the potential of becoming an historical archive of past events since the increasing availability of digital storage space means that there is no immediate need to remove past news items from the archives. Chapter 4 and the following case studies will therefore also investigate the potential for a crossover of gatewatching and open editing practices from immediate news coverage to the provision of information on past events; in particular, it will chart the connections between open news sites and the wiki open-editing encyclopedia phenomenon. Much like open news sites, for example, wikis enable a multiperspectival coverage of their subjects, and provide opportunities for audiences to participate in the development, compilation, editing, and evaluation of their contents.

Chapter 5 examines what is at present the key case study for open news Websites; it analyzes the *Indymedia* network of alternative news sites around the world. Building in large part on the vision of Sydney-based Web developer Matthew Arnison, *Indymedia* provides the technology base for truly open publishing (and increasingly, open editing) approaches to independent news coverage; since its first rise to prominence during the protests against the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999, it has established itself as the premier source for alternative news on current political issues. As a network of several hundred Independent Media Centers across the globe, however, *Indymedia* also showcases a number of local variations on the overall theme of open publishing, and already points to possible approaches to the exchange of news and information between individual Websites, which we will examine in more depth in later chapters.

A further case study in Chapter 5 will examine the *Wikipedia*, one of the best-known wiki sites. The *Wikipedia* is a collaboratively produced, multiperspectival online encyclopedia which employs open-editing and gatewatching approaches well beyond the field of news (while, notably, also including a "news" section); it clearly points to the relevance of such approaches and of the overall open source ideology to many other fields of information processing and knowledge management. Conversely, its mechanisms for dealing with

conflicting views and opinions and its approaches to open editing are also of interest to many more narrowly defined open news sites.

Chapter 6 draws further connections between open news and other key phenomena on the Internet. In addition to the analogies with open source, open news can also be usefully described as peer-to-peer (p2p) journalism, in parallel with other p2p technologies. To do so, the chapter provides a definition of "peer to peer" which is based on the forms of *social* interaction rather than on the purely *technological* connections that are made possible by any given p2p system. With this definition, we may describe many open news Websites as p2p journalism: they enable users (as produsers) to directly cooperate with one another and engage with news sources, without any significant intrusion of censoring, editing, or otherwise determining or limiting authorities.

Once again, therefore, we return to a concern with the role of editors or site owners in open news and p2p journalism. The nature of their role determines the "p2p-ness" of a news publication: peer-to-peer journalism is impossible where strong editors remain in place, and instead relies on the realization of open editing ideals; at the same time, however, few if any open news sites are not at least still owned by a specific person or group, which means that by virtue of such operators' ability to control the site some limitations to p2p journalism may still remain even in the most 'open' of news sites.

The case studies in Chapter 7 examine such questions in more detail. In direct response to *Slashdot*, which as we saw in Chapter 3 still retains dedicated editors in spite of its gatewatching approach to newsgathering, several sites have attempted to develop truly peer-to-peer models for gatewatcher news coverage. The most prominent of these are *Kuro5hin* and *Plastic*, which often refer to *Slashdot* as "that other place" and debate the benefits of open editing and p2p journalism. Chapter 7 examines the alterations to the *Slashdot* model which these sites have made.

Not all p2p journalism is necessarily open to all participants, however: to demonstrate this important limitation, Chapter 7 also studies *MediaChannel*, a media watchdog site which combines reports from its network of over 1,000 affiliated news organizations. In the *MediaChannel* context, these organizations are the peers between which open interaction may take place, yet the results of their collaboration are then presented in a relatively "closed," traditional news format to general users of the *MediaChannel* site. This may indicate the intrusion of p2p approaches into more traditional journalistic practice, and also

indicates that behind the closed doors of established journalistic institutions a limited form of gatewatching has always taken place.

Open news, and peer-to-peer approaches to the interaction with news and information, will also inevitably lead to a blurring of the boundaries of what is considered news and journalism. Where the emphasis on news recedes and p2p interaction becomes foregrounded, we move away from self-professed "news" Websites and into the realm of Weblogging and other frequently updated, but only vaguely news-related information and commentary. Many bloggers still employ gatewatching practices, but rather than contributing to the collaborative news coverage on open news sites they prefer to provide their own idiosyncratic coverage of events which they feel are of interest; if what they do can be called journalism at all, it is a form of casual many-to-many journalism—what one researcher calls "random acts of journalism."

Chapter 8 studies these links between news-related blogging and more structured collaborative open news models; it also investigates the potential for topical blog aggregator Websites, or meta-blogs, to serve as a middle ground between individual blogs and centralized open news sites. Having now examined a continuum of gatewatching and open news approaches from the centralized *Slashdot* to decentralized Weblogs, from the open-editing *Indymedia* to the closed-editing *MediaChannel*, and from the p2p approaches of *Kuro5hin* and others to the many-to-many exchange in the blogosphere, Chapter 8 concludes by offering a taxonomy of online news sites which enables us to distinguish a number of related but distinctive categories of online news publishing.

Chapter 9 provides a number of case studies of meta-blog sites which aggregate individual blogs on specific topics. While many sites in this sector are still under rapid development, an analysis of their approaches already points to the next set of questions—of editing models and content ownership—which need to be addressed. In particular, we will examine *Technorati*, *Blogdex*, *Daypop*, and the *Internet Topic Exchange*, and also study group and individual blog models. From here, we return to the question at hand—Are news-related blogs journalism?—but also find that alternatively we might ask just as well what today constitutes journalism, and news, in the first place.

Many of the initiatives described in the previous chapters depend on better and more immediately integrated tools for the classification, tracking, syndication, and exchange of information on the World Wide Web. Chapter 10, therefore, provides an overview of current trends in content syndication mechanisms and other relevant technologies, and examines how they may be

used for the purposes of open news and gatewatching sites, as well as by more traditional news organizations. New developments in metadata standards on the Web as well as the Semantic Web initiative led by WWW inventor Tim Berners-Lee have now begun to enable a more effective exchange of information between Websites without a need for formal cooperation, and it is possible that they may lead to the development of automated forms of gatewatching or to editing and publishing practices which span a number of individual Websites. Combining open news and p2p approaches, then, such tools may do for news what filesharing platforms have done for music and other content: they enable a kind of "newssharing" across large networks of users regardless of the original place of publication for any one news item. However, it remains to be seen to what extent Semantic Web approaches and other syndication technologies are indeed adopted by key sites.

Chapter 11 further investigates this question by considering the Semantic Web idea in some more detail. Making the Web a semantic space depends crucially on the provision of more and better metadata describing its content, and we will see that the very practice of gatewatching itself can be regarded as a model for metadata generation. Gatewatching metadata can now be harnessed through some of the resource description and syndication systems already in use in collaborative news and Weblog sites, and meta-blogs and related sites already point toward some possible semantic futures.

We will therefore also analyze early implementations of Semantic Web ideals, and study whether such more systematic technologies may solve the problems inherent in existing solutions. In doing so, Chapter 11 will address questions of whether widespread and effective Semantic Web adoption is likely in the short or medium term, and how it may affect traditional systems of trust, control, and ownership.

Questions of ownership and control are also addressed in Chapter 12. The role of users (frequently as *produsers*) of gatewatcher sites has been stressed throughout previous chapters. Most centrally, it is obvious that gatewatching and open news publishing are collaborative practices which include a site's community of users as journalists, editors, and commentators (as well as readers), so that in fact most successful gatewatcher sites are also key online community centers. This could lead to problems with sites developing a form of "groupthink" where, far from producing balanced and multiperspectival news, reports and opinions which contradict established majority views are rejected or suppressed by consensus of the community. Further, a reliance on community contributions as the main content source for a site is problematic when

the site itself remains clearly owned by its primary operators, or conversely when the site simply aggregates content from elsewhere on the Web without seeking permission to do so.

Such issues have legal as well as moral dimensions. Solutions can be drawn from a further consideration of analogies with open source software development, where mechanisms for as well as limitations of the commercial exploitation of communally produced intellectual property have been developed and inscribed in a variety of license schemes. Similar "open news licenses" might be developed for the products of gatewatching. Differences between the source materials of open source and open news, and their usage, must also be identified, however: while any user may access the entirety of an open source software package and continue its development in a direction of their choosing, regardless of and without impinging on other directions of development—a practice known as "forking"—this would be impossible in the case of a centralized open news site without attempting to copy the entire existing site to another server and thus severing its connection to the existing community.

Finally, then, Chapter 13 draws together the various aspects of gatewatching and open news publishing which have been addressed in this book. Open news is a multifaceted and rapidly developing field which as yet has received all too little systematic critical attention—therefore, building on our journey through various forms of and approaches to gatewatching and collaborative and open news publishing, this last chapter will also identify several directions for further research in this field.

McLuhan may have been right—today, everyone (provided they have access to the technology required) can be a publisher, and as the exponential growth of blogging shows, many do have that desire. But perhaps the emphasis on mere *publishing* isn't entirely appropriate any more. What is much more important in the networked environment of the early 21st century is that today, anyone with access to the Web can be an editor, a contributor, a collaborator, a participant in the online news process—in short, a produser—and this, I believe, will prove to have a lasting impact on our understanding of, our engagement with, our ownership of the news that affects us.

Many commentators have claimed that today's audiences have become disillusioned with the news, have lost interest in the news. The astonishing level of engagement with sites from *Slashdot* to *Indymedia* and the explosion in Weblogs show a different side to the story—the disinterest may well lie not with the news as such, but with the way news is presented in the mainstream media. At

least a significant percentage of modern-day audiences appear to have a strong interest not only in receiving news reports, but also in evaluating and debating them, sometimes in contexts which are entirely different from traditional frames of coverage. As Herbert Gans provocatively put it, "the news may be too important to leave to the journalists alone"[5]: through collaborative open news production, news audiences have begun to reclaim their place in the news cycle.

NOTES

1. Shane Bowman and Chris Willis, *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information* (Reston, Va.: The Media Center at the American Press Institute, 2003), http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf (accessed 21 May 2004), p. 47.

2. Many thanks to my friend and colleague Alex Burns for pointing me toward Gans's work on multiperspectival news.

3. My thanks to the late Colin Hood for first introducing me to *Slashdot*, setting in train much of the research contained in this book.

4. Felix Stalder and Jesse Hirsh, "Open Source Intelligence," *OpenFlows*, 2002, http://openflows.org/article.pl?sid=02/04/23/1518208 (accessed 18 March 2003).

5. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of* CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, *and* Time (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 322.