News-Seekers vs. Gate-Keepers: How Audiences and Newsrooms Prioritize Stories in Print and Online Content

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ABSTRACT

Traditional research on gatekeeping examines how journalists, editors, and publishers construct and position information to become news. Opportunities for interactivity in online news outlets, however, are creating space for audience members to also play this role. This article analyzes the tone and scope of the stories appearing on the print front-pages in the online most-read lists in twelve news outlets. Findings reveal how news-seekers prefer serious soft news articles, stories that position readers prominently, and fact-laden updates. These trends are interpreted in light of an elitist approach to gatekeeping versus a more egalitarian mindset and the authors conclude that the articles promoted by news-seekers are far less frivolous than feared.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Content Analysis, DICTION, Gate-Keeping, Journalism, Online News

INTRODUCTION

Gate-keeping scholarship tracks how the expert judgments employed in newsrooms shape the news environment. While the term gate-keeping dates back to Lewin’s (1947) understandings of group dynamics, this scholarly approach was first discussed in the field of journalism by White (1950) in his study of the editorial decisions for why certain news wires stories were chosen versus those that were not. In subsequent years, gate-keeping research has been used to examine how journalists, editors, publishers, and organizations select, write, edit, and position information to become news (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2008, p. 73). Seminal projects have used this approach to study individual gate-keepers (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2008; Snider, 1967; Whitney & Becker, 1982), distinctions across media types (Haiqing, 2001), and forces involved in the process (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley, 2001).

For those concerned with print news, the front-page has long represented a hallowed place for gate-keeping, a site protected and respected by editors and journalists. As Keller (2009) explains, Page One epitomizes the purpose of the newspaper, creating a “gathering place” for information and where audiences can learn what they most need to know to engage in self-governance (p.

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Academics and practitioners are examining how the news environment will change as audiences move from the front-page to the home page (Bennett, 2004; Haiqing, 2011; Lee, 2012; Singer, 2001). Some hypothesize that opportunities for interactivity in online news gives news-seekers some of the control traditionally held by gate-keepers (Bruns, 2005; Lee, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Because many online newspapers feature user recommendation sections such as “most-read,” “most emailed,” and “most shared,” readers have an ability to bypass traditional editorial cues and rely on the community of readers to guide their news experience (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011). Scholarship is beginning to empirically assess how audience-generated cues like “most-read” influence readers (Boczkowski et al., 2012; Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Lee, 2012; Thorson, 2008). Interviews with editors and journalists, however, already expose how newsrooms take such user data seriously as “most-read” articles and topics are often repositioned to prominent places on online news sites (Singer et al., 2011). While some believe that editors and journalists will always maintain a level of control over mediated content (Dylko, Beam, Landreville & Geidner, 2011), others contend that the future of news may “change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about” (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 375).

News-Seekers vs. Gate-Keepers

Online news-seekers often make different choices than traditional gate-keepers. The strongest finding in this research is that online news choice tends to favor nonpublic affairs topics (Tewksbury, 2003). Specifically, the weather remains the most closely followed topic (52%) followed by crime (28%), community (26%), and sports (26%, see People and the Press, 2012). In one study, Thorson (2008) found that counter-intuitive and advice articles were significantly more likely to remain on the NYTimes.com “most emailed” list for multiple days. In another, Boczkowski and Peer (2011) discovered that consumers preferred nonpublic affairs stories while journalists preferred public affairs stories in national and regional outlets. And, in a follow-up project, Boczkowski and colleagues revealed how (1) the journalists’ news-agendas featured more public affairs content than that of readers, (2) the gap between these agendas are dynamic, (3) readers select more public affairs content as Election Day nears, and (4) even though journalists’ agendas vary over time, their choices are “thematically less variable than consumers’, thus suggesting that occupational values are more durable and homogenous than popular taste” (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2012, p. 348).

Projects also show how emotions increase people’s attraction to online content (Berger, 2011; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). This trend appears in online news, Twitter, and other forms of social media (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) as well as across languages (Guerini & Staiano, 2015). Here, online audiences are driven by emotional connections to content not typically mentioned in traditional gate-keeping scholarship.

This article adds to research on the shift from the front-page to the home page by asking broad questions about the tone and scope of the “gathering place” created by news-seekers. If the front-page represents journalism’s privileged “village well,” how does the home page compare? Is it really an inferior good as many have asserted? Or, if it is submitted to systematic assessment (Althaus, 2012), does it feature unexpected but welcome contributions to what has traditionally appeared on Page One? Specifically, this article asks: What are the textual properties of traditional print news front-page stories? And, what are the textual properties of the most-read
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