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**On a Role: Online Newspapers, Participatory Journalism,
and the U.S. Presidential Elections**

Jane B. Singer

Right from the start, journalists recognized – many with considerable alarm – that digital media would change the nature of gatekeeping profoundly and permanently. What, they wondered, would civic society do without them?

Journalists have long seen themselves as central to the democratic process. The provision of information that citizens need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), along with the vetting of potentially harmful misinformation or disinformation, is foundational to their self-perception as the linchpin of citizen sovereignty. In what Gans (2003) calls the journalist's view of democracy, this occupational role as gatekeeper is vital to a properly informed electorate. Normative journalistic behavior involves ethically exercising this gatekeeping control over news content on the public's behalf (Lewis, 2012a).

This civic responsibility is most clearly delineated in coverage of politics and government. Yet it is obvious to everyone, including journalists, that the steadily and rapidly increasing prominence of the Internet as a key vehicle for both obtaining and providing political information undercuts their role as the gatekeepers to democracy. Indeed, no sooner had news outlets ventured online in the mid-1990s than observers began highlighting the challenges stemming from its potential to displace journalists as providers and analysts of

civic information (Tumber, 2001). The emerging media world clearly was one with no gates and thus, presumably, no need for someone to guard them (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000).

It took barely a decade for the Internet to overtake newspapers as a major source of U.S. campaign news (Pew Research, 2008). Social media, which began to be widely used in the latter part of the 2000s, became embedded in the political life of the nation even faster; by the 2012 campaign season, two-thirds of social media users were employing the platforms to post views on civic issues, follow candidates, lobby friends, and more (Rainie et al., 2012). Meanwhile, affiliated websites of traditional outlets have migrated from a largely disdained and easily ignored offshoot of the “real” newsroom to a centerpiece of today’s multi-platform news strategy. During campaign season, these news outlets now devote enormous quantities of staff time and energy to online political coverage.

This chapter presents results from a 2012 study of campaign and election coverage provided by online U.S. newspapers. The fourth in a series of similar studies begun in 2000 and summarized below, it offers a unique longitudinal view of how journalists perceive their role as gatekeepers of political information in the face of a steady diminution of their ability to exercise control over that information. It summarizes newspaper editors’ thinking over a dozen years in which user capabilities to create and share news and views have gone from limited and cumbersome to ubiquitous and ridiculously easy, with the sequential rise of blogs, comment capabilities, mobile media, and social media, among other participatory innovations.

The findings suggest that while numerous options for users to contribute to political coverage are now widely available, there has not been a corresponding increase in editors’ willingness to foreground these capabilities or fold them into their own coverage goals. After a small surge of excitement in 2004, as blogs were becoming prominent, online editors generally have retreated from an emphasis on content from outside the newsroom. Instead,

they continue to see the newsroom's output – in particular, technologically enhanced forms of traditional political information – as their most noteworthy contributions to the democratic process.

Guarding Open Gates: The Rise of Participatory Journalism

As the Internet has developed into a dominant news source for citizens of advanced democracies, and as “user-generated content” has evolved alongside more traditional formats in a networked news environment, scholars have tracked challenges to a professional gatekeeping role. This section summarizes a sampling of that work, most of which has pointed to journalists' continued valuation of the traditional role and function amid a dramatic growth in user participation options. Although users are gaining influence over some stages of news production, both before and after an item is published, many journalists resist relinquishing control over decisions about what passes through the news gate (Singer et al., 2011; Domingo et al., 2008).

The idea that newsroom practices mediate between events and consumers of information about those events is engrained in journalism students and practitioners (Boczkowski, 2004) and undoubtedly contributes to print journalists' general disregard for user contributions. Most research in newspapers' first decade on the Internet, from the mid-1990s to around 2005, suggested an industry determinedly clinging to the conviction that their gatekeeping role remained essential. At best, many acknowledged a potential shift in emphasis: away from control over the availability of information to control over its quality. And it went almost without saying that they believed what they provided would be of higher quality than the rest (Singer, 1997). Additional work consistently bore out this initial occupational reaction that journalistic control was necessary to separate the proverbial wheat (content from journalists) from the chaff (content from everyone else), particularly in

newsrooms where online news production reproduced the one-to-many message flow of print (Boczkowski, 2004).

For many journalists, such sentiments seem to have changed relatively little with the advent of social media and its greatly expanded co-production options. Robinson's 2007 study of online newspaper editors offers some of the clearest support for this editorial perspective of the newspaper as an authoritative institution. Although many of her interviewees were increasingly looking to new sources for story ideas and feedback, they were generally reluctant to give users the ability to turn those ideas into stories themselves. "We have to keep asking, who's in charge?" one editor asked rhetorically, citing a need to maintain standards of fairness, accuracy, and civility. "Someone has gotta be in control here" (Robinson, 2007: 310-311). Gatekeeping, she concludes, remained a central component of news routines even as the role enactment shifted to accommodate new audience relationships and capabilities.

Despite indications that some journalists may be inching toward acceptance of loosened control as a potentially good thing (Lewis, 2012b; Robinson, 2011) much of the work in this area suggests slow going. For instance, Jönsson and Örnebring (2011) found that online newspaper users are empowered primarily to create content related to popular culture, travel, and health, rather than political information or other hard news. "There is not really a shift in power over media (news) content in the mainstream online news media, even if there is a higher degree of participation and interactivity," they wrote (p. 140). Others have similarly found that reporters do not see participatory journalism as "real" journalism (O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008); that its emergence has prompted the reiteration and reinforcement of gatekeeping norms (Hermida & Thurman, 2008) rather than seriously challenged long-established news values (Harrison, 2010); and that at least at such major news institutions as the BBC, "the democratizing potential of increased citizen participation

in news production has been blunted” by unwillingness to accept their enterprise as a civic partnership (Williams et al., 2011: 94).

Although the study reported here focuses on online editors of relatively large newspapers, even journalists working in much smaller communities have sought to preserve barriers between themselves and their audience and thus their social capital as gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Lewis and his colleagues (2010) found that Texas community newspaper editors who disliked the idea of citizen journalism implicitly drew on gatekeeping rationales, emphasizing a need to safeguard the integrity of their content and to preserve traditional journalistic routines and values. Singer (2010) found that British community newspaper editors felt much the same way; user-generated content, they said, could undermine journalistic norms and values unless carefully monitored by newsroom gatekeepers. Particularly among editors with relatively lengthy experience in traditional media, there seems little inclination to view citizen journalists’ roles as critical in relation to the editors’ own roles (Nah & Chung, 2009).

Most of these studies have considered news decisions in general. But with provision of political information at the heart of journalists’ perceived reason for existence, they seem unlikely to be enthusiastic about sharing that role with members of the public they claim to serve. Williams and Delli Carpini (2000) were among the first to suggest that the political information could easily bypass journalists to reach the public, using Matt Drudge’s Clinton-Lewinsky scoop as an exemplar. Since then, despite being significantly outnumbered by alternative gateways to political information, journalists appear less likely than their audiences to use newer genres such as citizen blogs and viral political videos (Hussain, 2012). Again, there are hints that for at least some journalists, attitudes may be changing. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), for example, look at the impact of Twitter on coverage of the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, identifying “hybrid and fluid journalisms that rely on subjective

pluralism, cocreation and collaborative curation” (p. 138). But to what extent do these shifts in mind set extend beyond major breaking news events (particularly those in distant and dangerous lands) to comparatively routine campaign coverage?

The studies reported here attempt to address this question, which has not been extensively explored in the literature. Relatively little work has sought to connect the rise of social media and participatory journalism with the persistence of traditional gatekeeping perceptions in the context of a contemporary election campaign. To what extent are editors incorporating new interactive, participatory capabilities in their coverage? What weight do they give these initiatives, and how, if at all, are novel forms of civic engagement shaping their own content choices?

Campaign Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections in the 2000s

The 2012 study is the fourth in a series that began with the 2000 U.S. presidential election. The goal has been to trace the ways in which editors of leading American newspapers have incorporated (or not) the Internet’s continually expanding capabilities into decisions about the political campaign and election coverage that they see as so vital to the democratic process.

Post-election questionnaires about their coverage were distributed each year to online editors of the largest-circulation newspaper in each state, as well as any additional papers with circulations of 250,000 or above. Closed- and open-ended questions provided information not only about what the sites included but also about why, in editors’ views, that content was there. The closed-ended questions were used primarily to obtain concrete data about the presence or absence of particular features. The open-ended ones yielded richer data related to editors’ goals for their sites and up to three content areas they were most proud of, among other topics.

The technology used to obtain the data evolved over the four election years. In 2000 and 2004, the questionnaire was distributed by email; editors were asked to enter their responses directly into the body of a message containing the questions, then send it back to the researcher. This simple technology required relatively little respondent effort or expertise, and response rates were high; however, it necessitated manual transfer of the data into Excel and Word for analysis. In 2008 and 2012, online software provided by SurveyMonkey was used to administer the questionnaire. This made things much easier for the researcher but somewhat harder for the respondent, who had to access and navigate through a multi-page online questionnaire. Response rates fell in 2008 and dropped even further in 2012, when usable responses were obtained from barely 20% of the editors surveyed.

Nonetheless, the questionnaires yield considerable insights about gatekeeping without actually asking editors explicitly about that role, mitigating the likelihood of obtaining defensive or “desirable” responses. Instead, editors were given the opportunity to describe, in their own words, various aspects of their campaign and election coverage. Responses were analyzed in the context of traditional journalistic roles and the extent to which editors gave weight or credence to alternative voices and roles. Of particular interest were the ways in which editors were or were not accommodating a sharply and steadily growing number of options for user contributions that might help create an interactive and engaged political community rather than merely people informed by content that the journalists chose to provide.

The rest of this section highlights key findings from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 studies.

The 2000 U.S. presidential election

Eighty newspapers met the study criteria in 2000. Responses were obtained from 57 editors (71%), all but four of whom reported offering special online sections dedicated to campaign coverage (Singer, 2003). Nearly all the editors (45 of 49 who answered the

questioncited a goal directly related to informing users. Of those, 19 referred specifically to the ability to provide timely news, particularly on Election Night. Several crowed that they could finally beat television – despite the fact that in 2000, some TV news outlets infamously got the results wrong, erroneously announcing that Al Gore had won in Florida and was therefore elected president. The Internet’s unlimited news hole also was cited, for instance in describing voting guides that gave readers “the ability to understand the choice they were about to make,” as one editor said (p. 45). In general, editors in 2000 saw the website as extending the franchise of the print newspaper rather than as a separate entity in its own right.

Only four editors diverged from an emphasis on traditional gatekeeping roles as information providers, instead describing goals related to stimulating political discourse among a community of online users. However, those who did were eloquent about its benefits. “This medium is about the empowerment of our community, to facilitate interaction with interesting or meaningful people,” one editor wrote. “This is the place the readers have a voice, have a stake in the ‘community’ that a good newspaper nurtures” (Singer, 2003: 49-50).

Among the 44 editors who described at least one online-only content area as a source of pride in 2000, information-related attributes were again dominant. Of a total of 95 areas cited either first, second, or third as a source of pride, 67, or more than two-thirds, related either to depth and detail of the information provided or to its timeliness. Although only a few editors described facilitating discussion as their primary goal, chats and discussion forums – the primary options for user participation in 2000 – were cited 14 times as a source of pride. Editors saw the key advantage as the ability to offer something impossible in print; for instance, one editor described chats with candidates as adding “a previously non-existent dimension to the voter-candidates relationship” (Singer, 2003: 47). Multimedia features also generated 10 mentions, and “candidate match” options enabling users to identify the

candidate whose issue positions best matched their own were cited as the top source of pride by another four editors.

Overall, the initial 2000 study found that as journalists were moving online, a “normalization” process was occurring: Traditional information-oriented functions, particularly related to getting political news out quickly, remained central to their self-perception as democracy’s gatekeepers. They saw the medium as a way to address ongoing criticisms about the superficiality of traditional political coverage, citing pride in their new ability to offer breadth, depth, and utility not easily available in print. But they viewed their goals and achievements primarily in the context of good newspaper journalism – which could at least potentially be done better online. With a few exceptions, most gave little attention to the ability to help foster an engaged, active citizenry as well as an informed one.

The 2004 U.S. presidential election

Editors of websites affiliated with major U.S. newspapers continued to emphasize their role as providers of credible information in the 2004 election campaign. But as blogs and other platforms began opening up websites to user contributions, they seemed to edge away from this traditional gatekeeping role and to see their coverage as more open to shaping by those users.

The 2004 questionnaire was again distributed by email to online editors of the largest-circulation newspaper in each state as well as additional papers with over 250,000 print readers, a total of 77 editors in that year. The response rate dipped to just over 61%, or 47 of the editors initially contacted. Again, a large majority – 39 editors – identified informing the public as their primary goal, citing the Internet’s ability to provide greater speed, volume, and detail than were possible in print. Only three of those 39 emphasized the role of information in fostering civic engagement; for instance, one editor cited a desire to “increase interest in the process, encourage more people to vote, and give voters the information they needed to

make an informed choice” (Singer, 2006: 270). Just two editors in 2004 offered overall goals directly related to engaging citizens in a more explicitly discursive form of democracy, for instance through “blogs and forums, giving the voters the interactive ability to discuss the issues and candidates and also to interact live with the candidates” (Singer, 2006: 270).

However, when asked about their sources of pride in 2004, editors seemed to place greater emphasis on these participatory options. There was a notable decline in the percentage of responses related to the timeliness of information, from 29 of the 95 total responses (29 of 95) in 2000 to just 12 (of 87) in 2004. But blogs, which were not available in 2000, were cited 16 times, while options for user participation in and personalization of online offerings earned 11 mentions, a three-fold increase over 2000. Indeed, almost all the newspaper websites in the 2004 study complemented newsroom-generated political content with opportunities for users to contribute information or ideas.

The 2004 study identified three primary ways in which journalists stepped aside from their gatekeeping role over campaign and election coverage (Singer, 2006). One involved sections in which journalists provided baseline information that users could manipulate to suit individual needs or interests, for instance through interactive maps or postal code-tailored ballot builders. A second was the adoption of blogs, including those from local opinion leaders and from users themselves. “They were interesting, smart and lively,” said one editor whose website offered three blogs, one featuring reader viewpoints. “Our live debate blog between two readers/contributors ... was some of the best commentary and analysis anywhere” (p. 273). Chats, discussion forums, or message boards constituted the third broad area of user participation in 2004, with 33 of the 47 editors saying their sites offered such features. While some said the quality of the discourse was uneven, others praised their engagement function as a place for people “to vent, to discuss, to congregate, to have their say” (ibid.).

In general, then, the 2004 study suggested an evolution in online editors' thinking about their gatekeeping role during an election campaign. Although they continued to see the delivery of credible information as central to their function, that information was less likely to be static and more likely to be open to user input in various ways. The findings suggested a move toward integration of the journalist's traditional role in a democracy – providing trustworthy, accurate content to inform the electorate – with the more open and participatory nature of the Internet. Although online editors continued to act as political information gatekeepers, they also took steps toward a “new normal,” enabling and even encouraging users to reconstruct that information, creating and potentially sharing personally relevant meaning (Singer, 2006).

The 2008 U.S. presidential election

If the 2004 election signaled a step forward in online editors' thinking about collaborative approaches to campaign and election coverage, the 2008 study suggested two steps back. Despite a sharp increase in the number of options for user input in an election year during which social media gained importance and the Internet overtook newspapers as a primary source of presidential campaign news (Pew Research, 2008), online editors who responded to the 2008 questionnaire generally reasserted their traditional gatekeeping roles (Singer, 2009).

A link to the 2008 SurveyMonkey questionnaire was sent to 76 online editors; 46 answered at least one question but only 32 got to the end, a 42% response rate for completions. The 2008 version was similar to the 2000 and 2004 questionnaires but included questions exploring how social media and other online innovations were affecting coverage.

All 36 of the editors who answered the question about coverage goals in 2008 cited an aspect of their role as information providers, as in 2000 typically stressing the greater speed, volume, and capacity for detail provided by the Internet. Although about half a dozen

highlighted the contribution of this role to a broader goal of civic engagement, virtually none cited goals related to discursive democracy – that is, use of the website as a platform for civic or political discourse. Despite a greatly enhanced capability to handle user input, and despite the fact that nearly all the sites did include campaign-related contributions from users, only one editor alluded to this capability in describing website goals – and his reference was to providing a platform for candidates, not users in general, to “describe themselves and discuss issues” (Singer, 2009: 833). Six editors cited goals connected to revenue.

Twenty of the 31 editors, or about two-thirds of those answering the question about sources of pride in their 2008 campaign and election coverage, cited one or more features that provided deep or detailed information; the ability to provide timely information on Election Night was mentioned a dozen times. Multimedia content, primarily video, and journalist blogs also were highlighted 15 and 18 times, respectively. Editors described the blogs as “the leading edge of our coverage,” a place to provide “the inside story on our state’s politicians” and a way to get a jump on competitors (Singer, 2009: 835).

All but one of the 32 respondents in 2008 said the website either enabled users to contribute content, to personalize content provided by the newspaper, or both. Their goals for this capability included building engagement with journalistic content and giving users an outlet for expressing personal views. Only three cited the ability for user-generated content to strengthen interactions among citizens. Their focus was more directly on strengthening the information product that they themselves provided, either by adding diverse perspectives or by creating a bigger pool of potential sources for journalists. In response to the free-form question about sources of pride, only two responses cited user contributions, down significantly from both 2004 (7 responses) and 2000 (14 responses), years when far fewer options for such contributions were available.

Findings from 2008, then, suggested editors valued user contributions well below their own offerings. Although users and journalists were increasingly likely to share space on newspaper websites, published items remained separate and unequal in the eyes of a large majority of editors. Despite (or perhaps because of) expanded opportunities for the co-production of political content online, editors reacted by retreating from their tentative excitement over user participation in 2004, returning to their initial instinct to emphasize their own gatekeeping role. Their responses in 2008 suggested a reassertion of a deeply held self-perception (or at least hope) that journalists are indispensable to the proper functioning of democracy (Singer, 2009).

Coverage of the 2012 U.S. Presidential Campaign and Election

The 2012 study sought to understand which was the longer-lasting trend: the one suggested in 2004, toward a loosening of control over political content, or the one evidenced in 2008, a renewed assertion of a more traditional gatekeeping role.

As before, a link to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire was emailed after the November election to the top online editor at the circulation-leading newspaper in each state, as well as any additional U.S. papers with print circulation over 250,000. A total of 73 newspapers met the criteria in 2012. Seventeen editors (24% of the initial sample) began the survey, but only 15 provided valid responses beyond the introductory page, for a useable response rate of 21%; some questions were answered by only 14 editors. Though too few to allow extensive analysis or more than tentative insights into 2012 online coverage, their responses do indicate how the gatekeeping of election news has continued to evolve.

Notably, all the 2012 respondents were well-seasoned professionals, averaging 25½ years in journalism; only one editor had fewer than 10 years of professional experience. They had held their current positions for an average of 6½ years, with the longest-serving veteran

indicating 30 years in post – presumably including supervision of pre-Internet news production.

Newsroom-controlled content, 2012

Eleven of the 14 respondents answering the question provided online features or applications in 2012 that were not available in 2008. Newsroom-controlled content initiatives included greater use of social and mobile media, as well as more live blogging and other rapid updates. Respondents universally used both Facebook and Twitter to promote their campaign and election content. There also were indications of willingness to open up avenues for external contributions, as discussed further below. For example, one editor cited an app enabling users to see locally generated Twitter buzz about President Barack Obama and his opponent in the election, Republican candidate Mitt Romney; another said local candidates could record their own short videos to accompany newsroom-generated profiles. At least one enterprising editor saw a way to make money from election coverage: photos from the campaign trail, available for purchase. “Election coverage yielded good revenue in these resales, similar to coverage of local sports,” he wrote.

As in previous years, editors were asked to identify the primary goal of their online campaign and election coverage. Every editor who answered the question indicated that informing the public – the traditional gatekeeping role in an inherently hierarchical conception of news delivery – was his or her top goal, as reflected in this representative response: “To inform our readers with the best election coverage available in our region. We did a lot of things to help readers make educated choices, but the primary goal is still to cover the news comprehensively.” Moreover, in an echo of “Web 1.0”-era responses from four elections past, editors commonly emphasized the speed of online information delivery, such as the respondent whose goal was to get a “swift and efficient report on who/what won” to readers as quickly as possible. All 14 agreed their goals had been met. “The depth and

immediacy of our coverage was unmatched,” said one editor; “we had results faster than any news site in the state or the Secretary of State’s office,” another volunteered. Increased traffic and revenue also were cited as indicators of success. In the assessment of another editor, “We’ve got the drill down.”

All the respondents said they published online ahead of print, and all but one said they always (10 editors) or usually (3 editors) engaged in such “digital-first” publishing. In fact, all but one said they published content online that was never available in print at all, and nine said they did so “a lot.” Conversely, a majority (8 editors) said the print newspaper contained no 2012 campaign or election content that was unavailable online; the rest said the print paper published only a little that was never available on the affiliated website. In other words, while much of the website content was unique to that platform, little or none of the print content was unique to the legacy news product in 2012, reflecting a pronounced shift in emphasis over the years.

Mobile delivery of campaign information also has become commonplace. All but one editor said users could access campaign or election content through a mobile app. The nature of the available content dictated the delivery platform, at least for some editors. As one explained, “Results grids worked best on the web; a post containing continuous one-line updates worked best on mobile; and longer pieces worked best in print.” This sense that print was best suited to analytical pieces and long-form journalism was evident in several responses. Another editor summed up the “formula we always use” this way: “The Web is for a speedy and basic report, with the ability to search through all the past content. Mobile is for delivering fast information. Print is for a more polished and refined report, with more analysis, more intensive and customized design.”

User-controlled content, 2012

Of particular interest in 2012 was the extent to which editors were sharing their gatekeeping role by facilitating user contributions to campaign and election content, given the explosion in the variety and popularity of social media since the 2008 election cycle. News outlets have steadily increased their own social media use during this time, albeit primarily for promotional and sourcing purposes rather than for truly collaborative journalistic efforts.

In 2012, editors were asked a series of questions about their use of features designed to enable users to contribute their own content, to personalize content that the news outlet provided, or to share the news outlet's content. Fifteen editors answered these questions, and all 15 said they provided opportunities for at least two of the options as part of their campaign and election coverage; seven answered "yes" to all three. Options for user contributions included:

- * Comments on stories, columns and blogs (enabled by all 15 editors answering the question).
 - * User Twitter feeds (9 editors).
 - * Polls or other online surveys; Q&As with political journalists (8 editors for one or both options).
 - * Forums or discussion boards (7 editors).
 - * Announcements of campaign events; Q&A with political candidates; user photos or videos related to the campaign (5 editors for one or more of these options).
 - * Crowd-sourced political coverage; hyperlocal political coverage; Q&A with political experts from outside the newsroom; reports from users related to campaign events; reports from users on Election Night (4 editors).
 - * Commissioned political content from users; user blogs (2 editors).
- "Have Your Say" sections and video chats were each offered by one editor.

Again, the response rate is low, making the findings tentative. But at least among these respondents, a wide range of options for user contributions were available, including options that gave users control over some online political content. To summarize: More than a quarter of the editors used crowd-sourced political coverage or other user reports on campaign events; a third ran user-generated visual content; and two-thirds incorporated users' Twitter feeds. Commenting capabilities were universal. However, only a couple of the websites hosted user blogs, and podcasts were not used at all.

In a separate section of the questionnaire devoted to Election Night coverage, these editors overwhelmingly reported that they obtained their information from traditional sources, such as the Associated Press or other wire services (14 of 15 editors); local, state, or national election officials (12 editors); and their own news staffs (12 editors). Six obtained at least some results from TV or radio, and three consulted other websites. Only one editor reported obtaining results through social media, and none relied on users for election results. However, six editors did use "blogs and/or social media from users" for supplemental Election Night information, and three made user text and photos available on their website. That said, journalists were the dominant sources for this information, as well: all 15 editors answering the question used text and photos from newsroom staffers, 11 used blogs and/or social media from their journalists, and 10 used audio and/or video provided by journalists. A third also used newsroom-produced interactive graphics.

Thirteen of the 15 respondents user contributions met their expectations for both quantity and quality, but only two said they got more contributions than expected – and none felt the quality exceeded expectations. Moreover, most of the editors admitted that user contributions played no role in their own campaign coverage; only two said it had any influence. "We chased several stories based on audience recommendations," one of these two

editors wrote; the other said participation solicited through photo galleries, polls, and blogs produced information that affected decisions about where to assign newsroom resources.

Editors also were asked whether any of the political material contributed by users was “reverse published” in their legacy newspaper – in other words, how closely they continued to guard the gate around the printed product. Eight of the 15 said no user content related to the campaign or election appeared in print. Five said “a little” did, and just two said their newspaper used “a lot” of user contributions in print. However, open-ended responses describing this content suggested that “users” did not necessarily mean your average Joe Citizen. Of the five editors who provided explanatory context, three specified that their responses related to content provided by candidates or political experts. Only two respondents indicated that material from regular users made it into print. One took “mostly wrap-up stories from the end of the (Election Night) evening.” The other mentioned that a “great many tips” received online were followed up – by journalists – but also said that political events submitted online went into a central database and became part of a printed political calendar. He said they “may have also used some photos and letters submitted online.”

In short, journalists’ incorporation of user-provided material about the 2012 campaign and election into their own news decisions appears to have been minimal at best. Most paid little to no attention to user contributions, and even those who said they did used it only in perfunctory ways. Editors continued to maintain control over the news product online and, to an even greater extent, in print.

Taking advantage of opportunities to turn users into content promoters, on the other hand, was a far more appealing prospect. All the respondents said they offered at least some options for users to personalize and/or share campaign and election content created by the

newspaper, and all characterized these options as either wholly (4) or partially (11)

successful. Options here included:

- * Social media applications, for instance through Facebook or Twitter (offered by 9 editors).
- * Ballot builders; RSS feeds or other topical delivery options (7 editors).
- * A local election information locator (6 editors).
- * Interactive groups, such as electoral maps, for user manipulation; recommendation widgets, such as dig.com (5 editors).
- * Personal political profiles (3 editors).
- * Quizzes (2 editors).
- * Candidate “match” features (1 editor).

Asked to describe their primary goal in offering these user-personalization and content-sharing options, editors cited synergistic desires to “build engagement and increase page views,” as one editor wrote, or “shared knowledge, SEO value” in the words of another, referring to the ability to boost website traffic by making content easier for sites such as Google to find, called “search engine optimization.” Similarly, success tended to be measured in traffic data. “That’s what the metrics tell me,” an editor wrote in explaining why he felt these efforts to be wholly successful. “All-time record traffic despite advent of a strict paywall.”

Editors’ sources of pride, 2012

As in previous years, editors were asked to indicate up to three things about their 2012 campaign and election coverage that made them especially proud. As there were so few responses, it is possible to show these in detail in Table 1, using the same umbrella categories

as in previous years plus two new ones – multi-platform options and social media – reflecting recent changes in the media landscape.

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Clearly, online editors in 2012 took greatest pride in political content that fulfilled their traditional role as providers of thorough and timely information. Voter guides to candidates and issues – long a staple of election coverage online and in print, though several editors mentioned personalization features incorporated in the online versions – gained eight specific mentions from a total of 13 editors answering the question. (Some cited more than one thing in a single response.) Four were proudest of their ability to provide Election Night results quickly. Although several cited use of social media, particularly Twitter, other options enabling user input merited little recognition. Even though all the respondents offered extensive opportunities to share content control with users in various ways, they remained proudest of digital manifestations of their own long-standing self-perception as creators of an informed electorate.

Asked to briefly explain their responses, editors tended to emphasize the utility of the information they provided. “Seriously, there can’t be enough said about immediate coverage and instant results,” wrote an editor whose top source of pride was live updates. “We often think that readers want these complex stories when in reality, they want to know what’s happening at their polling place and who won, especially the night of.” Another editor was proud that “we killed it. Other media had to cite us and our calls/results that night. Traffic was huge because we’ve built that expectation that we’d have the goods.”

An editor who listed a voting guide first said that it “cuts to the chase in terms of letting users see their voting choices, the candidates’ responses, and their personal, marked-up ballot.” Several editors mentioned that the guides included candidate responses to issue-related questions, creating “a thorough profile” and “a useful public service (that) sometimes

produces news, as candidates respond to questions about their backgrounds and their positions.”

The provision of useful information that, not incidentally, helped drive traffic to the site was central to the discussion of other online features, as well. An editor who highlighted online-only daily stories said they “gave readers reasons to come back to the web during the day and helped fill a healthy appetite for what was happening at the polls.” Another described the elections home page as “a heavily traveled place for readers to get all their election news in one place,” adding that it “became a mainstay in our ‘Top 10’ pageview lists in the days surrounding the election. I’m proud of it because readers used it.”

Discussion of user engagement was connected primarily to newer capabilities – and to options that involved either visual or very brief content formats. For example, one editor explained that “interactive graphics give readers something they love – the ability to control and decipher information.” Not surprisingly, social media were explicitly identified as well-suited to user participation. The only editor to list social media implementation as his chief source of pride described a partnership with the state university’s journalism program in using Twitter to obtain feedback about a locally staged debate, in order “to gauge whether we could build engagement through heavy promotion of a hashtag.” Another editor proud of his social media use cited its ability to serve dual roles: “Our Twitter feeds were not only effective in informing the public but (became) a popular form of engagement with our readers.” A third, proud of using Twitter to publicize local reactions, said “it wasn’t scientific, but it was engaging and a lot of fun.”

Overall, though, editors were proudest of their own abilities as gatekeepers in what they viewed as the public interest, providing “thorough information on all our races and candidates, what people can expect when they hit the polls and where they can vote,” as one wrote. Indeed, these findings suggest that the trend in election coverage over time has been a

steadfast emphasis on traditional journalistic roles involving the provision of depth, detail, and timeliness. Together, these accounted for nearly 60% of the sources of pride over the four election cycles. Newer options – blogs, multimedia or animation, personalization features – merited a blip in attention as they became integrated into election coverage, then a decline as they became more commonplace. Table 2, which adds the 2012 data to responses in previous years, indicates these trends. Although response rates were especially low in the latter two election cycles, percentages are included here for consistency and comparison.

[TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE]

Conclusion

This longitudinal study suggests that editors' self-perception as gatekeepers of traditional political information has remained exceptionally resilient in the face of ongoing change. Over the four data collection periods, covering a dozen years of Internet evolution, the volume and variety of campaign-related material provided by users has increased steadily and dramatically. Yet, asked about what mattered most to them – their goals for the website, their key sources of pride – the overwhelming majority of editors in each year consistently cited material they themselves provided.

Moreover, in doing so, they emphasized such traditional news attributes as timeliness, as well as an ability to contextualize political information largely thanks to the unlimited space afforded by the online medium. Periodically, new opportunities for engagement are incorporated and duly noted; they may even generate some editorial enthusiasm. But as those novelties become routinized and normalized, they tend either to be put to use in connection with traditional practices or fade from noteworthiness in editors' eyes.

For scholars, this tenacity presents a challenge as we seek to understand the evolution in journalists' thinking about their gatekeeping role in an online political realm. It is unfair to say that their views are not changing. On the contrary, journalists clearly are finding

innovative ways to take advantage of capabilities to engage audiences in political content and in the democratic choices they face as citizens. Yet at the same time, they continue to give pride of place to their own contributions to the discourse. The results of these four rounds of questions suggest that at least among veteran editors – and in each year, respondents were typically digital immigrants rather than natives – journalistic values, as well as views about what their occupation is all about, are very deeply held. Technologically enabled adaptations are appreciated largely because they drive traffic to the newspaper website – where, editors hope, users will linger to absorb the content journalists have labored to provide. Over a dozen years, respondents in these studies have offered, more than anything, a reassertion of what they see as the civic virtue inherent in traditional journalism roles, products, and practices.

How, therefore, are we to understand the way these two trends in political journalism – one evolutionary and potentially even revolutionary, the other deeply conservative – co-exist in the philosophies and practices of journalists? One suggestion is a shift in emphasis from static choices to dynamic processes (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), clearly vital in an environment of rapid and constant change. A related approach is the conceptualization of gatekeeping as less about decisions related to quantity – this item in, this other one out, a formulation tailored to a spatially limited news environment that no longer exists – and much more about conceptions of quality. This is, in fact, precisely how journalists seem to be resolving the cognitive dissonance unavoidably created by the clash of an open network with the closed news-production process on which their self-conceptions rest. The distinctions they are drawing – and indeed have drawn right from the start, as the studies summarized in the early literature suggest – are not about the availability of information but rather about its worthiness. The information that citizens *really* need to be free and self-governing, they are saying, is information that is accurate, trustworthy, and significant. It comes, they maintain, from us, the journalists.

This is not to say that journalists are necessarily right that what they produce is more worthy than what users produce. Some is; some is not. The point is that this is a more contemporary way of thinking about how journalists interpret the gatekeeping metaphor today, how they apply it in their own work – and how, in doing so, they are positioning themselves for an even more extensively participatory future. Gatekeeping theory's continuing value lies less in its ability to shed light on the news selection process than in its utility in helping us conceptualize and understand the nature of information and the normative values of those providing it.

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Table1: Sources of editors’ pride in the 2012 campaign and election information on leading U.S. newspaper websites.

Sources of pride	Listed first	Listed second	Listed third
Depth/detail of information	- Convention special - Home page - Voting guide (three separate mentions) - Web-only daily stories - Website sections	- Comprehensive voter guide - Home page - Livestreamed interviews with all major candidates - Voting guide (four separate mentions)	- “Meet the Candidates” - Sample ballot voting guide - Debate coverage
Updated information	- Live election results - Live updates - Our presentation and completeness of results - Election results / coverage page	- Election results and data map	-
Journalist blogs	- Election Day blog	-	-
Multimedia / animation	-	-	- Local expertise on video - Photo galleries
User personalization options	-	- Find your polling place - Interactive graphics	
User contributions	-	- Voting blog	- Local expertise on blog - Voting story collection areas
Multiplatform content	- Convention iPad app	-	-
Social media *	- Using Twitter to get local feedback on debates	- Local Twitter reactions map - Social media curation - Social media	- Social media, Tweetups, Google hangouts - Social media distribution

* Note: Responses may indicate social media use by journalists, users, or both.

Table 2: Editors' sources of pride over time

Numbers indicate how many times each type of feature was mentioned first, second, or third as a source of pride. Percentages relate to the total number of features mentioned in each year and overall (last column). There were 13 responses to this question in 2012, 31 in 2008, 37 in 2004, and 44 in 2000.

	2012	2008	2004	2000	TIMES CITED 2000 - 2012
Depth / detail	17 (45.9%)	28 (32.9%)	34 (39.1%)	38 (40%)	117 (38.5%)
Updated information	5 (13.5)	12 (14.1%)	12 (13.8%)	29 (30.5%)	58 (19.1%)
Journalist blogs:	1 (2.7%)	18 (21.2%)	16 (18.4%)	(not offered)	35 (11.5%)
Multimedia / animation:	2 (5.4%)	15 (17.6%)	7 (8%)	10 (10.5%)	34 (11.2%)
User personalization:	2 (5.4%)	10 (11.8%)	11 (12.6%)	4 (4.2%) ^a	27 (8.9%)
User contributions	3 (8.1%)	2 (2.4%)	7 (8%) ^b	14 (14.7%) ^b	26 (8.6%)
Social media (2012 only):	6 (16.2%)				6 (2%)
Multiplatform (iPad app, 2012 only):	1 (2.7%)				1 (< 1%)
TOTAL NUMBER OF FEATURES listed as sources of pride, per year	37	85	87	95	304

^a In 2000, the only personalization option offered was a “candidate match” feature.

^b In 2004 and 2000, user contributions consisted of forums, chats, and Q&As.