

Chapter 13

Gate-Keeping and News-Seeking in Print and Online Outlets

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, gatekeeping theory has been used to examine how journalists, editors, and publishers write, edit, and position information to become news. The opportunity for interactivity in online news outlets, however, creates space for audience members to play this role as well. Even though many in the journalism profession are worried about a shift in control from the front page to the home page, researchers have yet to analyze, systematically, the textual characteristics of the stories that online news-seekers select and deem most popular. This chapter compares the tone and scope of the stories appearing on the print front pages and those appearing in the online most read lists in twelve elite and regional news outlets. The findings show that news-seekers prefer serious soft news articles, stories that position readers prominently, and fact-laden updates. The chapter interprets these trends in light of an elitist approach to gatekeeping versus a more egalitarian mindset, and concludes that the articles promoted by news-seekers are far less frivolous than feared.

INTRODUCTION

The life of a newspaper revolves to a large, possibly ridiculous, degree around the making of a single page—the front page. For most of the paper's history, the news workday has been defined by the launching, refining, winnowing and arranging of those few articles that will represent

the editors' best reckoning of what mattered most yesterday. Certainly the obsession with Page One is diminishing a little now, as we shift attention to our nonstop digital edition...but the climatic event of the newspaper day is still the afternoon Page One meeting... (for)...it is what most stirs our ambition (Keller, 2009, p. 7).

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As *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller (2009) contends, the front page holds a venerable place in print journalism. For traditionalists, Page One epitomizes the purpose of the newspaper, creating a “gathering place,” a “village well,” and a “water cooler” where information is gathered and presented and where audiences can learn what they need to know to engage in self-governance (p. 9). For editors, the front page exacts a magical “calculus” of identifying the stories that most urgently need to be told as well as those most central to the communal purpose of the paper (p. 10). For journalists, the front page is the “showcase that every reporter aspires to” for “there are few more satisfying phrases in (the news) business than ‘You are fronted’” (p. 7). In addition, for realists—at a time when the newspaper is “migrating to the never ending global-cycle of the Internet”—the front page is “evolving” and likely “endangered” (p. 10).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Data on news consumption habits support concerns about the future of Page One. Since 2002, online and digital news consumption has increased dramatically at the same time that print newspaper circulation rates, advertising revenues, and profit margins have decreased (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). One December 2011 survey found that four-in-ten Americans reported getting “most of their national and international news” from the Internet (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011). Another poll from 2012 found that 39 percent of U.S. news consumers got their news online, up from 24 percent in 2002 (People and the Press, 2012). Still another study reported that the top 25 digital U.S. news sites had 342 million average unique monthly visitors, an increase of 17 percent from 2010 to 2011 (Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012).

Academics and practitioners are curious about how the news environment will change as audi-

ences move from the front page to the home page. 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). Researchers are only 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, 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, Domingo, Heinonen, Hermida, Paulussen, Quandt, Reich & Vujnovic, 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 and Metzger, 2001, p. 375).

This shift from the front page to the home page is troubling for those who have long championed the role of experts in shaping the news environment. Advocates of this position have been influenced by Lippmann’s understanding of the role of elites and citizens in a democracy. For him, the “central difficulty of self-government” was “of dealing with an unseen reality” (1922, p. 396). He believed that it was a false ideal to expect people to possess the information to participate fully in politics, as much of it resided outside of their seen realities (1922; 1925). Rather, for democracy to function, a set of elites (e.g., policy specialists and bureaucrats) should provide elected officials with “accurate representations of the parts of the world they are delegated to comprehend” (Schudson, 1998) and citizens should take a spectator role of the process (except for participating in elections). Many journalism scholars believe that a mindset

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