A New Digital Community?
An Analysis of *Gawker*'s Commenters-to-Contributors Approach

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Abstract

This article examines Gawker Media's embrace of reader comments through a new system that takes the control of content out of the hands of traditional gatekeepers, and creates a hybrid that can be viewed as either a model or a threat to legacy media. The focus is specifically on Kinja, Gawker Media's new comment system, and its place within the context of new media forms. The essay posits that *Gawker*'s approach differs from standard practices in several provocative ways.

Keywords: blogs, gatekeeping, online tabloids, reader comments, user-generated content

Introduction: *Gawker*—Pioneer in User-Generated Content

In the last decade, new technologies have entered the mainstream, and have fundamentally altered both the form and content of news and entertainment. In this new environment, audience participation, often via blogs or user-generated content, is now an important consideration for media producers. One example is Gawker Media, a pioneer in blogging and user-generated content, which is the focus of this essay.

Gawker, one of the most successful blog-oriented sites, is now over a decade old. On a list of 25 top blogging sites in private hands, Gawker Media is said to be the most valuable.[1] In December 2009, founder Nick Denton was nominated for "Media Entrepreneur of the Decade" by *Adweek;* the journal named *Gawker* "Blog of the Decade," and called it a "template of what a blog should be."[2] In 2010, *New York Magazine* wrote:

> [I]n a world full of old-media businesses blindly thrashing around the web, Denton is a man who has unequivocally figured things out—and made a fortune doing so. Not that he invented a new medium so much as reinvent an old one. Like all new-media types, Denton has said that in the future magazines will look more like websites. But he has also said that websites will look more like magazines.[3]

In addition to *Gawker*, Gawker Media serves as an umbrella company to seven other popular blogs, including *Jezebel*, dedicated to celebrity coverage and fashion for women;

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Deadspin, for sports; *Lifehacker,* covering technology, gadgets, and related advice; *Gizmodo,* geared toward technology; *io9*, devoted to science fiction; *Kotaku,* a gaming site; and *Jalopnik,* for content related to automotive culture. In the spring of 2014, these sites together claimed a total of 70,400,000 monthly viewers.[4]

  Gawker has pioneered what has been called "a whole new brand of journalism, effectively digital yellow journalism: Original opinion mixed with original stories."[5] Although this could suggest that *Gawker*'s journalism roots are old, the "snarky" tone of the earlier *Gawker* could easily put traditional journalists off. This tone has been called an "important stylistic influence on the emerging field of blogging and has turned into the de facto voice of blogs today,"[6] creating a sort of "insult culture."[7] *Gawker*'s process has thus been described as "antithetical to journalistic ethics—it's self-referential, judgmental, ad hominem, and resolutely against effecting change in the world."[8] Further, as with other aggregation sites, copying content is a serious issue, one that traditional journalists have to confront. However, along with the resentment of *Gawker*'s repurposing of stories goes the acknowledgement that posting on *Gawker* can increase traffic to a news organization's home site.[9]

  Gawker Media is in the process of redefining the audience and offering new avenues for interaction. This article examines Gawker Media's embrace of reader comments through a new system that takes the control of content out of the hands of traditional gatekeepers, and creates a hybrid that can be viewed as either a model or a threat to legacy media. This article specifically describes Kinja, Gawker Media's new comment system, and attempts to place that new system within the context of new media forms. The essay posits that *Gawker*'s approach differs from standard practices in several provocative ways, which will be outlined below.

  Given the increasing significance of user-generated content to legacy media, it is important to address the attendant challenges of this ever-changing landscape, in which traditional gatekeeping is altered not only by new technology, but also by the audience.[10] Because current technology allows anyone to participate in online news formation, news outlets are forced to accommodate audience members who are no longer passive receivers of content but are becoming active "users" and "participants in the journalistic work process."[11] In the world of online news, as Jane Singer points out, the physical and social distances between professionals and their readers and sources have "collapsed."[12] In this environment, news producers now must figure out ways to accommodate and integrate contributions from users.[13]

  This process raises new challenges. For example, in a recent issue of *Nieman Reports*, Steve Safran criticizes news organizations that publish user content but do not vet it, because, in his view, that is the role of an editor.[14] And from the reporter side, the negation of traditional gatekeeping requires a rethinking of journalistic work routines and self-perceptions.[15] Although there are many examples in which legacy media have encouraged audience views, editors often struggle with deciding how much or how little oversight is needed. For instance, NPR's Code Switch project, an attempt to incorporate a response-

driven format, still allows editors to control what gets aired.[16] Considering that editor control is the most common way of dealing with audience comments, *Gawker* showcases a unique approach to integrating comments into a new form of interactive journalism.

Kinja, a New Way of Organizing Comments

According to data from Gawker Media, by the summer of 2012, the Gawker sites generated 7 to 15 million page views a day, and its network of eight sites garnered "1 million comments on 7,500 posts from 130,000 active commenters," along with almost 50 million comments in their database.[17] In April 2012, Gawker Media launched Kinja, a new way of organizing the sites' comments.[18] According to *Folio*, the idea was to tweak Kinja to highlight more constructive content and to "'banish' pointless or excessively negative commenters."[19] Lauren Bertolini, the company's community development manager, told *Folio* that Kinja was "developed to solve the tragedy of comments that can be a toxic and poisonous section of a news site or blog."[20] *Gawker*'s process of improving the quality of comments had already gone through several iterations. As Andrew Phelps noted in an April 2012 *Nieman Journalism Lab* article: "Most news organizations would kill for *Gawker*'s commenters, but Nick Denton is messing with them again."[21]

In a seemingly counterintuitive move reflecting Denton's view that commentators needed more ownership, *Gawker* stopped starring commentators, allowing a computer algorithm to make the choice of which posts would "rise to the top" based on length and quality. This new platform was inspired by social media, but is grounded in the generation of news content. Through Kinja, users gain the same tools that the editors have: *Gawker* becomes a type of home site, as registered users can create their own homepages and blog postings, interact with the editors, and integrate their Facebook and Twitter accounts into Kinja.[22]

According to *Nieman Journalism Lab,* Denton expects Kinja to facilitate what he calls a "truly interactive news platform."[23] These innovations change the relationship between the staff and the readers, as well as mirror what readers were already doing with content on other platforms: "a reader gets to repurpose and share an article in whatever context she chooses.… *Gawker* editors can also snap up original reader contributions to Kinja, reframe them, and share those reader-generated posts.… Staffers can aggregate commenters; commenters can aggregate staffers; at some point, the distinctions start to dissolve."[24] In this process, contrary to a traditional journalistic approach in which comments are placed at the bottom of an article as almost an afterthought, in the Kinja model, comments become prioritized. Critical to the success of Kinja's approach is the loyalty readers have traditionally shown magazines. This process relies on an established relationship with a committed audience, as people have to care enough to not only comment, but also to add content—that is, to "*choose* Kinja as a place where they share and contextualize."[25]

In justifying the new system, Denton told *AdAge:* "The original idea of blog publishing was that writer and reader would be on the same level.… Kinja is designed to break down the walls of the ghettos. So that everybody—editor, writer, source, subject,

expert, fan—can be a contributor."[26] Notes to readers from the editors of *Gawker*-affiliated sites enforced this view. Matt Hardigree, editor of *Jalopnik*, the first *Gawker* site to launch the new format, wrote: "Yesterday, you were a reader and a commenter. Today you can be a writer, an arbiter, an editor, and a publisher. You'll still read, but now you can also contribute."[27] And in April 2013, the new *Gawker* editor John Cook, introducing the new format to readers, wrote: "Working in an environment of constant heckling…tends to cultivate a self-defensive, pre-emptive transparency. The revamped commenting system debuting today will refine and sharpen that heckling, and make it more likely, we hope, that informed sources and subjects will bring their voices to bear on our stories, unmediated and of their own volition."[28]

Not all staffers were as optimistic as Denton. Former *Gawker* editor A.J. Daulerio, described comments as "a tar pit of hell."[29] And, of course, the new system put the professionals at the same level as the commentators, as their job descriptions were rewritten out from under them. Some feared for their jobs; one might wonder whether, in its new iteration, *Gawker* even needed writers.[30] Another critical effect on the staff was that they were "now expected to pay attention to this reader ecosystem" as it grew and to post to other sites.[31] Thus, the professional staff was now "mandated" to engage with commenters, a task the *New York Observer* called "equal parts forum moderator, lifeguard, and whipping boy."[32] As Andrew Phelps wrote in *Nieman Journalism Lab:* "Any journalist writing for a highly trafficked website knows what a miserable time suck [reading comments] can be. But that's their job now. *Gawker* staffers are essentially professional commenters now—or maybe commenters are amateur bloggers."[33]

In March 2013, Emma Carmichael, associate editor to former editor A.J. Daulerio, noted that *Gawker* was moving from a magazine format to a social media form. This transformation became evident on an experimental basis for the first time the previous fall, when Hurricane Sandy knocked out *Gawker*'s servers in lower Manhattan, forcing the sites to go to Tumblr. In an ironic way, the Kinja format models that approach, allowing readers to have a direct connection via Gawker to social media. Not only were staff members worried about their professional status and jobs, but they also perceived, according to Carmichael, that their editorial process was "exposed," an outcome that professionals might find burdensome.[34]

The economic impact of the new system was a topic of conversation as well. The author of an *AdAge* article in March 2013 wondered whether the new system was an acknowledgement that *Gawker* could not grow without outside contributors. *AdAge* also posited that the new system was a way to accelerate advertising growth. Denton denied that, stating that good content draws viewers, but the expectations about advertising growth are not completely groundless because the site's rules allow *Gawker* to insert ads into content and also to use reader content in ads.[35] *The New York Observer* noted that if Ray Wert, then executive director of content at *Gawker,* managed to establish Kinja's discussion threads as the advertising format of the future, it would join the top ranks of social media tech companies.[36]

Significance to the Evolution of News Routines

Import for the Creation and Process of News

Journalism has become an increasingly collaborative and collective process, revising the old gatekeeping model, in which journalists depended on sources for information and then controlled what appeared in print or on the air. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism suggests that the news process has been redefined—as people around the world both create news and share it, news has become a practice that is socially engaging and socially driven.[37] As Singer and colleagues put it in their recent work *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers,* journalists are no longer "determining what gets recorded. A great many other people also contribute content, representing their own interests, ideas, observations, and opinions. That content comes in a steadily expanding volume and variety of forms and formats … turning the online newspaper into an open, ongoing social experiment."[38]

This is not to say that journalists are happy with this development. Singer suggests that editors still have "their elbows out" when it comes to audience participation.[39] There is now gatewatching rather than gatekeeping. Yes, anyone can post content, but staff members at news organizations wonder whether this constitutes journalism. The self-perceived exclusivity of trained, professional journalists is also suggested by studies showing that many journalists still ignore the audience input they receive via digital feedback.[40]

Indeed, journalism is now being described as a "process"—no longer a discrete and tangible product but as a "shared, distributed action with multiple authors, shifting institution-audience relationships, and altered labor dynamics."[41] This process, undertaken in part by those described by Jay Rosen as "the people formally known as the audience,"[42] may fit under various definitions and categories, including user-generated content, citizen journalism,[43] participatory journalism,[44] and we media.[45] This new journalism-as-a-process is evident in blogs; discussion forums; comments sections; reviews by readers; reader-submitted articles, photos, or videos; citizen news sites; and mail lists.[46] Once again, it is important to acknowledge that journalists may not view all forms of mediated content as "journalism." For the purposes of this article, however, these reader-submitted materials are understood as elements that are now: (a) incorporated into traditional journalism forms, such as magazine websites; (b) are interactive, allowing for a continued process of constructing content by various parties; and (c) serve as commentary or additional content.

Audience Participation

There is no consensus as to whether a blog is a medium or a genre.[47] This article uses the term in both senses. For example, Kinja can be defined as a social-networking platform that includes text, photos, videos, and comments, while *Gawker* is a form of online tabloid magazine. Gawker Media pioneered blogging as a way of doing journalism, and thus can serve as an exemplar of the strengths and pitfalls of the form.

     Gawker's founder, Denton, is an interesting media figure to study; he is known to write copious memos and has no hesitation about sharing his views.[48] Denton has been an adamant supporter of audience members as co-creators of content. For example, he discourages the use of the term "comments" to describe Kinja's content. "These are posts," he told *The New York Observer,* appropriating a term once confined to professionals: "And we intend to hold the posts contributed by readers to the same standards as those of writers—and erase the rather old-fashioned distinction between the two castes."[49]

     Traditional journalism has adopted more reader participation and is being changed in the process. These forms are viewed very differently depending on the context in which they appear. Further, the process is deeply tied to the differing concepts of audience. At *Gawker,* blogging is journalism, and comments are an essential feature of blogs.[50] Within legacy media, blogs are separate and supplement news stories. Singer, for example, views journalists and bloggers as distinct.[51] However, for Mary Garden, this "distinction is untenable considering that blogging has emerged as a new genre of journalism both within and outside mainstream news organizations."[52] Paul Bradshaw, in *Nieman Reports,* noted numerous ways in which this change has occurred for journalists—what the author called a "transformation" of what journalists do in blogs. They self-reported a changing relationship to readers; a diminishment of official sources; more generating of story ideas via the public; working more quickly, putting breaking stories on the blog, writing more informally; focusing on updating and continuing stories; and having more interacting and conversing with their readers.[53]

     Among the advantages of online comments are that they offer ways to hold journalists accountable, allow readers an immediate platform to offer their feedback, and provide a venue for readers to interact with other readers. However, these advantages raise both ethical and workplace issues. Addressing the ethics of online discourse, Mark Cenite and Yu Zhang propose a set of guidelines for media outlets to follow in moderating online comments.[54] Arthur D. Santana has described reader comments as a new "opinion pipeline."[55] His 2011 study found that journalists working at the largest U. S. daily newspapers view comments negatively and are concerned about the content and the offering of an open forum for anonymous discussions. However, journalists also realize that the online forums constitute a new way to interact with readers and function as a new way to take the temperature of readers in regard to their coverage of events.[56] Carolyn Nielsen, who asked working journalists how comments affected their work and self-perception, found that although journalists do not want to eliminate comments, they would prefer to see them moderated. Nielsen proposed studying the effect of comment management systems,[57] which is the route that many sites have taken, including *Gawker* via Kinja.

     Of course, the idea behind comments serves the mission of a free press, which is to foster the free exchange of ideas. Yet, it is clear that computer-mediated communication does not conform to traditional norms of respect and self-management applicable to in-person interactions. Dominique Brossard, of the University of Wisconsin, co-authored a 2013 study in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* showing that rude and aggressively

framed comments incorporated into an unbiased news story can affect the way readers interpret a story.[58] Researchers manipulated a science story on nanotechnology by incorporating either civil or uncivil comments, including name-calling and insults, and then asking readers to assess their perception of risk.[59] Readers "interpreted the story very differently, and often incorrectly, based solely on the tone of the comments," Brossard told *Editor & Publisher*.[60] Still, Brossard does not recommend eliminating such forums: "The genie is out of the bottle. Reader interaction is part of what makes the Web such a lively arena for discussion. The trolls will still be out there, but they will only win if we let them win." Her solution? Algorithms that control the direction of the debate.[61] One such platform is Facebook, another Disqus, another Conversations at *Huffington Post,* and another, of course, is Kinja.

One difficult element with which most comments sections continue to wrestle is the concept of anonymity, which Denton valorizes and promulgates in Kinja: "The most interesting comments, they don't come from people with Klout scores, they don't come from people who actually have a long history of commenting on our sites or any sites. Often it's a first-timer. Often it's anonymous."[62] Although most work on this topic has been done in the computer-mediated communication discipline, work has been done on user attitudes in the journalism field. Research suggests that there is no easy solution to the problems created by anonymity. In a 2011 study of contributors to forums at daily newspapers, Jack Rosenberry found that although online forum participants felt that discussions had "a negative character" and that "negativity inhibits effective conversation," 80% favored keeping anonymity.[63] Ethical issues surrounding comments have also been raised. Laura Hlavach and William H. Freivogel question whether it is ethical to allow online comments that are sensitive, rude, or speculative, and would not be tolerated in a print format. Using a decision-making model for approaching ethical dilemmas, they propose standards for comments, one of which limits the use of anonymity.[64] Media sites share these concerns. In an effort to control trolls, in September 2013, the *Huffington Post* banned anonymous postings.[65] However, a recent study by Disqus concurs with Denton's view about encouraging anonymity; it found that anonymous commenters comment more frequently and their posts are more often "liked" or replied to, which is presumably one measure of quality.[66]

Gawker—*A New Community?*

This paper argues that *Gawker* is an example of a paradigm shift in the delivery of information. Paradigms are defined by philosopher and physicist Thomas Kuhn as "systems that shape how one thinks and acts, creating discursive boundaries for what is and is not possible within a given field, profession, or collective."[67] A paradigm "fails" when the assumptions that form its foundation are called into question and found to be lacking. I apply the concept of a shifting paradigm in three ways to *Gawker*. The first is in institutional form, in the move from a hierarchical structure to one of networking. In her study of *Jezebel,* a Gawker Media site, Elizabeth Hendrickson highlighted the use of instant messaging as the main form of communication within *Jezebel*'s virtual newsroom. To understand this new communication model, Hendrickson argues for a new cross-disciplinary approach: "As old

models for understanding media cease to support the complex structures of new organizations, we must look to other frameworks for additional guidance."[68] In a similar way, *Gawker's* approach to blogging provides a venue in which to explore if and how such websites are also shifting standards for legacy media.

The second paradigm shift entails *Gawker* as a pioneer of a new way of doing journalism. For example, reporting on the Future of Journalism conference at Cardiff University in 2009, Alfred Hermida wrote: "The research paints a global picture of how journalists are seeking to maintain their position of authority and power, rather than create a more open, transparent, and accountable journalistic process that seeks to work with readers."[69] Yet, *Gawker* has already pioneered precisely this new journalistic process. In Kinja, Gawker Media writers are practicing a journalistic experiment in public view, a process that has been called "collaborative, do-it-live journalism."[70] In a process he calls "iterative reporting,"[71] Denton's advice to his writers is to not fret about the state of a story, but to post what the reporter knows at a given time: "The work can be the product of a discussion, a back-and-forth between writers, editors, sources, subjects and readers."[72] In Denton's view, the end product would be a new form of interactive news; professional journalists might differ.

The third paradigm shift entails *Gawker's* recontextualizing of what it means to do journalism. Lauren Bertolini, *Gawker's* community development manager, told Folio: "We produce news and that's what our foundation is."[73] Still, Gawker Media created a platform that facilitated others participating in producing that news: "We are giving people control of the conversation," said Bertolini.[74] This control might take place before, during, or after a story is published. In Gawker Media sites, we see a rejection of traditional standards, one of which is notion of objectivity as an end goal rather than as a process of verification. Elizabeth Blanks Hindman and Ryan J. Thomas call ours "an age of media platforms that have fragmented traditional power structures."[75] Hindman and Thomas make the case that the rise of the "commentariat" and the growth of new technologies demand rethinking of such norms of journalism as objectivity.[76]

Conclusion: The Future and Future Research

Despite the discourse on the changing norms of journalism and the ways in which sites like *Gawker* are altering the media landscape, an overview of 100 papers presented at Cardiff University on the future of journalism in 2009 suggests that as far as journalists and editors were concerned, "the people formerly known as the audience is still known as the audience."[77] In reporting on the conference, Alfred Hermida wrote:

> The space for the audience to participate in journalism is, by and large,
> clearly delineated. The public can send in their news tips, photos and videos,
> but the journalist retains a traditional gatekeeper role, deciding what is
> newsworthy and what isn't. There is little room for the public to be involved
> in the actual making of the news—in deciding whom to interview, how to
> frame the story and how to produce it.[78]

Along the same lines, Wilson Lowrey argued in 2012: "Leaders of traditional news outlets over the past 30 years have wrung their hands and called for change in the face of financial, technological, and cultural disruptions. And then, so often, they have stayed the course. Despite recent variations in news forms...the field holds innovation at arm's length."[79]

Given the pressures legacy media face to survive and the challenges of changes in ownership, with the sale of *The Washington Post* to Amazon's founder being a recent example, legacy media will have to decide how to confront the changing role of their audiences. Former *Gawker* editor A.J. Daulerio told the *Nieman Journalism Lab* that Denton is "trying to change the culture of comments not just on Gawker but to have it kind of impact the way other editorial organizations handle their online comments."[80] Denton himself asserts that "[p]ublishing should be a collaboration between authors and their smartest readers"; for Denton, the "original promise of the web [was] the harnessing of the collective intelligence. That original promise was buried by questions about business models, the fake engagement of social media, and the soul-destroying quest for viral hits."[81]

NYU journalism professor Clay Shirky offers an eloquent argument about why we should pay attention to what *Gawker* is doing:

> Many news sites seemed to have entered an endgame with their comment sections a year or so ago: give up on any real participation, give up on anonymity, fall back to 'Login With Facebook.' This reaction has come about in part because comments on news sites have been stagnant for a long time. *Gawker* is demonstrating that a good part of that stagnation came about because the way readers have been asked to participate has been stagnant for a long time too.[82]

An examination of *Gawker* can shed light on the rapidly changing media landscape. Admittedly, mainstream news outlets have never claimed to be blog sites, nor do they view their content / comments as a conversation, as Denton does. Further, the Gawker Media sites are niche publications, so presumably their readers are invested in them in the same way readers have historically been invested in magazines. However, *Gawker*'s approach raises compelling questions about the role of crowdsourced content, and shows that one site's experiment with its relationship to readers can elicit industry-wide conversations. Future studies could investigate the effects that models such as *Gawker* have on professional journalism and journalists as whole. Indeed, some aspects native to *Gawker* are making their appearance in mainstream news, including the "increasing levels of opinion and a collapse of boundaries between private and public."[83] In its own turnabout, *Gawker* now hires professional reporters and is modulating its tone.[84] The likely evolution of the roles of the professional staff and the readers and the changing relationships between them will show in the next year or so who will ultimately gain control over *Gawker*'s content.

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