LIS 550: Assignment 4
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June 2, 2012

I chose to explore aspects of the gated/gatekeeper relationship discussed in the Nahon reading for this module. In the article, Nahon writes, "The possible transformation of the gated into gatekeepers is not achieved through mere possession of certain attributes. The transformation is achieved by having the capability (and choice) of the gated to perform an act of information control, the power to carry out this act, and the context surrounding this act that makes one a gatekeeper." Nahon's discussion of the permeability of the gated and gatekeeper roles rang true with my experience and observations over more than 25 years as part of the Internet community. I believe that these roles, how they are defined and assigned, and the gated/gatekeeper relationship continue to rapidly evolve, which experienced users find distressing as the process challenges established online social norms.

Nahon writes, "In networks, the nodes, links, content flow of information, and structures provide us with a high degree of observable traces of power through decisions and agendas." To examine part of this topic, I focused on news sharing in social networks, particularly users' relationship with their role as gatekeeper to their contact network, how they choose news to pass to other users, and how their individual decisions and agendas control the flow of news among users. I also wanted to consider how the power in that role is being negotiated between users and higher-level gatekeepers, such as news-reporting organizations.

I constructed my survey with 13 questions designed to gather information on this topic as well as some demographic information, and then sent an invitation to participate to my own social network on Facebook. 47 people took the survey. They ranged in age from 24 to 68, with 68% between the ages of 30 and 49. 68% were female. They have used online services between 5 and 29 years, with 62% having been online 11 to 20 years. 83% have at least an undergraduate degree, and approximately 2/3 of those respondents have some post-graduate work. 83% consider themselves heavy users of online services, logging in several times per day and spending more than an hour online daily. 73% read news online daily, 43% from one or two sources and 30% from multiple sources.

My survey indicates that these users frequently share news with their networks, both shared from other users and directly from news sources. None of the respondents said that they never share news stories; 68% said they share stories occasionally, 19% said they share stories frequently. 43% said they share stories directly from news sources, and 34% said they re-share stories that appear on their own feeds. The survey also indicates that these users take their gatekeeper role seriously, carefully considering how to select news to pass to their networks. They view themselves as the steward of a small narrowcasting channel connecting to those who follow their feed, thinking both about the needs of their "audience" as well as their reputation in this role. When asked to explain why they choose to forward a story, the most common answer was that they judged it to be interesting to their audience; other common reasons given were that it would amuse their audience, inform them in some way, or to make a personal connection because the item had usefulness or significance for particular people in their networks. Other reasons cited included to provoke a discussion, prove a political point, promote a story they felt deserved wider exposure, and establish a personal tone or viewpoint for their online presence. Several noted that they were more likely to promote a story if it is unusual or from an uncommon source—they enjoyed finding a "scoop." When deciding not to forward a story, some

respondents said they avoided posting overly political or offensive stories; other reasons included bad writing, untrustworthy sources, lack of perceived value, and wanting to minimize presence on the social network.

Recently, some news organizations have required that users send a notification to their social network to access a news story on their site from a Facebook link. The notification appears on the user's Facebook timeline, states that the user read a specific story, and includes the headline; often, the user may set certain sharing parameters, but may not opt out of the notification entirely without losing access to the story via that link. I consider this "viral sharing" to be an interesting new mechanism by which news organizations are negotiating control of the gatekeeper role with users (as well as with Facebook) so I asked for opinions about that specific type of story. 20% had never seen such a story, but most had. When asked to report their reaction, only 8% allowed the service to post the automatic notification. 11% allowed the notification, but took care to set sharing options appropriately; I was surprised that this was not more used, since it's possible to set the notification to "self" and read the article while only notifying oneself, which provides a simple solution by sidestepping most of the objections. 30% declined to read the article at all, and 30% made the effort to note the article's information, leave Facebook, and look it up by other means. This indicates a strong negative reaction about the prospect of allowing a news source to use their carefully maintained Facebook network for promotion of an unevaluated news story. Considered another way, they appear to be willing to allow Facebook as a gatekeeper by using the service and its mechanisms for news sharing, and the news service by reading the story (sometimes circumventing and abandoning Facebook's gatekeeping to do so), but within the bounds of Facebook, they want very much to be gatekeepers for their own news feed audience.

When asked whether they found this request to be offensive, only two respondents explicitly said they did not; indeed, five people said they had not seen it, but would find it offensive if they did. Most respondents expressed strong opinions against this practice. The most commonly cited objection was about maintaining autonomy of choice over information flowing into their news channel, particularly concerning their own choices that may affect how others view them. Users said they want to be able to read potentially embarrassing stories privately, and do not want to relinquish control of what is posted to their channels. Many said that being "forced" offended them, even if they might otherwise choose to share the story; they said that evaluating the story before sharing is important, and that they did not want to be seen as endorsing a story before reading it. Several others said they did not want to flood friends' feeds with "annoying" information and objected when their friends allowed these notifications. Other objections included concerns about data mining and that automated notifications crowd out real social interaction.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they found the request to notify automatically different from a choice to share an article, and why they thought so (or not). Nearly all said that they did, and articulated their reasons for finding it offensive further. In this context, they expressed concern more strongly and clearly about implied interest and endorsement of an unread article. The themes of maintaining choice, risking privacy violation, and avoiding embarrassment remained, but many more respondents wrote explicitly about how important their reputation as gatekeepers is to them, in terms of "curating" what appears on their newsfeeds and how it will affect their audience's opinions of them. These users want to be able to browse news freely,

and they do not want their reading of an article to equate with endorsement of it. They want very much to maintain an editorial voice and choose what news to pass through, according to their personal criteria of valuable information. They also view implied endorsement as the news service exploiting their credibility—one respondent said, "If a news service wants to advertise on social media, it should purchase ad space from the provider, not post on social media in my name."

The process of negotiating the flow of information online between users and services, and other agents, such as organizations, companies, and governments—in essence, the question of who owns the channel—has existed since the beginning of the networks that would become the Internet. The idea that the users should control content while services simply provide the substructure runs deep, dating back to when all users were also programmers and other "sweat equity" stakeholders of the system. Corporate online services picked up where academic and government agencies began in trying to impose control, yet the mores remain in the users' expectations about online identity and conduct. To users, control means freedom to gain and share knowledge as well as social currency and standing; to companies, control represents financial success. Given that both sides have much to gain, the negotiation and redefinition of the relationship between gated and gatekeepers will doubtlessly continue and evolve for a long time to come.