

**article:**

# standing before the portals

## non-profit websites in an age of commercial gatekeepers

*Eszter Hargittai*

*Given how easily material can be produced and distributed on the World Wide Web, vast amounts of information have been made freely available online in the last few years. However, this overload of data is increasingly met by attention scarcity, as users divide their attention among more and more sources. This leaves many websites struggling for audiences. Sites with commercial interests have more means of attracting visitors, leaving non-profit organizations with even less chance of reaching users. This paper explores what the domination of commercial interests online means for the visibility of non-profit content on the Web. In addition to discussing how simply being on the Web does not automatically lead to user visits, the paper makes specific recommendations to site owners on ways of achieving greater popularity.*

**Eszter Hargittai** is a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department, Wallace Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA (Tel: +1 609 258 6915; fax: 1 609 253 2180; email: eszter@eszter.com)

The author would like to thank Paul DiMaggio for his helpful comments. Support is also acknowledged from US Interactive and from the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, Princeton University through a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. A version of this paper was presented at DIAC00 – Shaping the Network Society, in Seattle, May 2000.

Although the internet and its antecedents have been around for decades, the network has only diffused significantly in the last few years. Its growth has been especially large since the emergence of graphical browser software for the World Wide Web in 1993. A boom in the amount of information available on the Web quickly complemented the acceleration in the number of users. Today, there are over two billion Web pages available for browsing,<sup>1</sup> with several million pages being added daily.<sup>2</sup> However, search engines index no more than 15% of all Web pages, and even the largest ('metasearch') engines only account for a combined coverage of about 42% of all pages.<sup>3</sup> These figures suggest a great discrepancy between what is physically available on the Web and what is within the reach of users. This paper looks at the implications of this discrepancy for the accessibility and prominence of public interest, not-for-profit content on the World Wide Web.

## Production and distribution of information online

The vast amount of material that has been made available in the past few years on the Web is proof of how easily anyone with access to the network can use it as a communications device.<sup>4</sup> The internet has the potential to create arenas for more voices than any communication medium before it, by dramatically reducing the cost of replicating and distributing information. Writers, musicians and visual artists no longer have to rely on large production agencies and distributors to get their work out to the public. Politicians and activists can reach citizens without having to go through media giants, or the difficulty of posting and pamphleteering step by step, impeded by geographical limits.

1. B.H. Murray and A. Moore, 'Sizing the Internet', *Cyveillance*, July 10, 2000 ([www.cyveillance.com](http://www.cyveillance.com)).
2. D. Lake, 'The Web: growing by two million pages a day', *The Industry Standard*, 28 February 2000; Censorware, *ibid*.
3. S. Lawrence and C.L. Giles, 'Accessibility of information on the Web', *Nature*, Vol 408, 1999, pp 107-109.
4. It is important to remember that not all people have equal access to online technologies. Access to the internet is stratified among the population both in the United States (NTIA, *Falling Through the Net III: Defining the Digital Divide*, Washington, DC, US Department of Commerce, 1998) and internationally (E. Hargitali, 'Waiving the western web: explaining differences in internet connectivity among OECD countries', *Telecommunications Policy*, Vol 23, No 10/11, 1999, pp 701-718; ITU, *Challenges to the Network: Internet for Development*, Geneva, 1999). In order to post one's opinion, one needs to have access to a network connected device and enough knowledge about online services to know how to post a message in a forum, on a mailing list or a Web page.
5. M.H. Goldhaber, 'The Attention Economy and the Net', *First Monday*, Vol 2, No 4, 1997.

But the Web is not just about promoting one's own work or products; it is also about the interactive exchange of information, as in the form of online discussion forums. This ease of both posting and retrieving information has led many to speculate about the potential effects of the Web on all spheres of life, and its political, social, cultural and economic consequences. By allowing a vast reduction in the replication and distribution costs of a product – whether text-based, audio, video or multimedia – the Web puts product dissemination within reach of the individual and reduces the barrier between the creator of information and its materialization. Not only can you create a product easily, you can make numerous copies of it at very low cost. Moreover, because it is no longer necessary to transport these items physically, you can allow access from almost any geographic location. This has led commentators to suggest that individuals can compete on equal terms with organizations, and attract traffic to their websites without the benefit of corporate packaging.<sup>5</sup> But I would like to argue that the problem of attracting and, more particularly, retaining the attention of Web users causes individual creators of content to rely on 'gatekeepers' to channel their material toward users. And the gatekeepers of the World Wide Web are the services that categorize online information.

The term 'gatekeeper' refers to points that function as gates, blocking the flow of some material while allowing other information to pass through.<sup>6</sup> Studies on the marketing of culture offer an insight into where the important decisions are made in the process of finding an audience for a product. Research on books,<sup>7</sup> news publications<sup>8</sup> and popular music records<sup>9</sup> has explored the role of gatekeepers in influencing the types of cultural products that are produced and distributed on the market. With previous media, the costs of production were so high that a vitally important gatekeeping step was the decision about what products should be produced. Studies have documented the strategies that firms adopted to deal with the uncertainty of large investments in cultural products.<sup>10</sup> The common theme in all these analyses is that individual creators of cultural products have to go through both producers and distributors of their products to get attention on the market. The final link in the distribution chain – supermarket merchandisers, disc jockeys, movie critics, book review editors – can be a key element in attracting people's attention to material.

Because the barriers to entry are so low on the Web, a huge amount of information floods the market. For many users, the task of navigating through the vast number of options is overwhelming. Although there may be numerous high quality and important public interest sites on the Web, there is no guarantee that anyone will find their way to them. This accounts for the rise of the navigational sites and content classification services on which most Web users have come to rely. It is these gatekeepers of the online world that increasingly determine the difference between material that is accessible and the material that is merely available.

## The rise of portal sites

Although the Web only became a popular communication medium in the mid-1990s, the publicly accessible segment of it already contains over two billion pages.<sup>11</sup> With the rapid growth of available content, finding information became increasingly complex. To address this problem, Web content classification services such as Yahoo! developed, soon becoming popular and (eventually) profitable. Initially, these sites worked in two ways: they either featured a search engine to find sites (eg Excite, Lycos) or offered a list of category directories where staff from the search site's company manually compiled a list of featured selections (eg Yahoo!).

These sites grew steadily and started offering new services to attract and keep site visitors. As one company described itself: 'The Company seeks to draw a large number of viewers to its websites by providing a one-stop destination for identifying, selecting and accessing resources, services, content and information on the Web'.<sup>12</sup> By augmenting their services and continuing to be the most visited sites, these pages increasingly became known as the point-of-entry sites or 'portals' on the Web. According to one report,<sup>13</sup> by 1999 Yahoo! accounted for over 50% of all search engine page referrals. Given that 20–50% of all Web users visit one

6. David White, 'The gate keeper: a case study in the selection of news', *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol 27, 1950, pp 383-90.
7. Walter W. Powell, *Getting Into Print*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985.
8. Gayo Tuchman, *Making News*, Free Press, New York, 1978; Walter Giehr, 'News is what newspapermen make it', in L. Dexter and D. White (eds), *People, Society and Mass Communications*, Free Press, Glencoe, IL, 1964, pp 172-82.
9. R.A. Peterson and D.G. Berger, 'Cycles in symbol production: the case of popular music', *American Sociological Review*, Vol 40, April 1975, pp 158-73; P.D. Lewis, 'Innovation and diversity in the popular music industry, 1969 to 1990', *American Sociological Review*, Vol 57, February 1992, pp 56-71.
10. Paul M. Hirsch, 'Processing fads and fashions: an organization-set analysis of cultural industry systems', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 77, 1972, pp 630-59.
11. Murray and Moore, *op cit* Ref 1.
12. Lycos, Inc., Annual report, 1998.
13. WebSideStory, 'Yahoo! surges in popularity', press release, 21 December 1999.

of the most popular websites,<sup>14</sup> these sites play a potentially immense role in allocating user attention.

The most popular websites grew out of earlier search sites, and the home pages of browser software such as Netscape and Internet Explorer (IE). Initially, these home pages did not offer much beyond software upgrades, but they later learned the tricks of search sites. Today, Netscape's Netcenter and Microsoft's MSN.com are each much more than a resource for browser software upgrades. They both offer categorization of Web content in addition to many other online services such as free email accounts, free Web space for personal home pages, chat groups, discussion forums and news about current events, entertainment and sports. Microsoft consolidated all of the company's sites (ie software site, IE browser information site) into one megaportal in an attempt to increase traffic across all of its sites and make the resulting portal one of the most popular entry pages on the Web.<sup>15</sup> Various reports document the ongoing and even increasing role of portals in contributing to users' browsing habits online. For example, research from 1998 showed that 50–60% of users do not change the default homepage of their browser.<sup>16</sup> Later research<sup>17</sup> showed that users had become no more active in changing their default homepages, with 62% staying with the initial page in a 1999 study. This points to both Netscape's Netcenter and Microsoft's MSN.com becoming prominent point-of-entry sites.

America Online (AOL) is another major player in channelling users' attention on the Web. However, AOL constitutes a special case, given that it consolidates access and content services. A separate paper could be written on the gatekeeping functions of AOL, as they are arguably even more restrictive than those of website portals. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to signal that AOL plays a significant role in the online world by directly affecting users' online actions. When users log on to AOL, they are presented with AOL proprietary content. It

takes extra effort to launch the browser and explore the general content of the Web. According to one report, AOL users spend less than 20% of their online hours outside of AOL,<sup>18</sup> which demonstrates the ability of AOL to target and focus users' online attention to its own content.

The goal of any online commercial venture – in this case portal companies – is to make a profit. The question of how this may be done has been the topic of debate and speculation ever since commercial interests appeared on the network in the early 1990s. Government support for media content is rare in the United States.<sup>19</sup> This leaves the burden of financing to other potential sources such as individuals (eg users paying subscription fees for services), private foundations or corporate sponsorship. So far, the trend has been towards the latter. Most online services are funded through advertisements by venture capitalists or through corporate cross-subsidization, where the profitable division of a company covers the costs of the online undertaking. But to justify funding, websites must attract and keep visitors – and encourage them to stay and revisit frequently.

Companies use various strategies to maximize their popularity. They collect information on the number of visitors to their sites. If they can induce you to register, they can also collect demographic information about you. Registering with a portal and personalizing your browser

14. Media Matrix, 'Media Matrix releases the top 50 digital at home and at work digital media and web audience ratings for August 1999', press release, [http://www.mediamatrix.com/pressroom/press\\_releases/09\\_20\\_99.html](http://www.mediamatrix.com/pressroom/press_releases/09_20_99.html)

15. M. Bransma, 'Analysts: MSN will give portals a fight', *ZDNet News*, 24 July 1998  
16. C. Guglielmo, 'Microsoft cries foul over Netscape Communicator 4.5', *Inter@ctive Week*, <http://www.zdnet.com/intweek/daily/980916c.html>, 16 September 1998

17. Jupiter/NFO, Jupiter/NFO consumer survey, V2, Jupiter Communications, 1999.  
18. Jupiter, 'Trends and outlook: consumer content strategies', V12, Jupiter Strategic Planning Services, 1998

19. Although the Web is an international medium, given that the most popular portal sites are based in the USA and it is the country with the highest number of online users, this discussion concentrates on the American aspects of the network. Note that the same portals (especially Yahoo! and Excite) operate country-specific sites for users in other nations. These portals are similarly popular to their American counterparts.

may make surfing the Web easier, but it also allows portal companies to trace your movements and offer you more targeted advertising. Moreover, the effectiveness of ads can be measured more accurately than by many other media. In addition to posting paid advertisements, portals showcase links to pages of partner sites, from which they may derive an income.<sup>20</sup> It is important to remember that much of what is prominently featured on popular navigation sites is there for commercial reasons.

## Locating content online

How the public uses a communications medium depends very much on how it is organized and regulated. For example, in its early years (1899–1910s), radio was a one-to-one medium that people used to communicate with each other personally.<sup>21</sup> By the 1920s, however, it had come under government regulation, and broadcasting was more common.

The organization of the industry influenced how the population later used radio. For example, educational and religious institutions were given access to lower quality spectrum than commercial entities, making them less appealing stations for listeners.

Organization of online content may similarly influence how people use the Web. We have already looked at how this has evolved in recent years; the next important step is to identify the ways in which users may locate content online. The process can be categorized according to whether or not you have previous knowledge of a page. In the case of a previously known page, these are a few of the ways you can find your way back:

- Use the browser's default page.
- Type in the address or URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of a previously visited page.
- Use an entry from your bookmark list.

Alternatively, you may prefer to go to a Web page you have never visited before. Here are some of the ways this might happen. You might:

- Try to guess the address of a Web page (eg by using the word of the sought information in the URL).
- Do an open search with the help of a search engine, by typing certain terms into a search form (or in the new version of Internet Explorer, which comes with a built-in search engine, typing the term in the location bar itself).
- Click on a directory category and find links through directories and subdirectories.
- Click on an advertisement.
- Recall an address from exposure through another medium (eg radio, television, newspaper or billboard ad).
- Use browser add-ons for link recommendations (eg NeoPlanet or Alexa).
- Click on a link in an email from a friend/colleague/mailling list that contains a site recommendation.
- Click on a link from the contents of another page.

20. E. Hargittai, 'Open portals or closed gates? Channelling content on the World Wide Web', *Poetics*, Vol 27, No 4, 2000.  
21. E. Hargittai, 'Radio's lessons for the internet', *Communications of the ACM*, Vol 43, No 1, 2000.

You might think the use of a search engine would be relatively straightforward and yield objectively relevant and good results, but this would be a misconception. In fact, the results of such queries are far from random or exclusively

based on the quality and relevance of the resulting pages' content. Search engines systematically exclude (in some cases by accident, in others by design) certain sites in favour of others.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, people rarely take the trouble to come up with refined search algorithms. A 1998 study analysing almost one billion queries on the Altavista search engine showed that in 85% of cases, users only viewed the first screen of results, with 77% of sessions containing only one query.<sup>23</sup> Information prominently displayed on portal sites – whether because of its high content value or for commercial reasons – therefore has a good chance of being the destination of visitors.

Nor do Web users always realize when they are following a commercial lead. Adverts do not always make their commercial motives explicit, while links resulting from the partnership deals described earlier are even harder to identify as having pecuniary motives. Therefore, many users may not be aware that they are being pointed to sites not necessarily because they offer the most relevant or highest quality information, but because they bought their way to the top of users' screens.

Unfortunately, information on the specific activities of users at the big portals is proprietary and kept highly confidential by navigation service companies. Consequently, it is hard to know what proportion of visitors to such sites use category directories versus search engines to locate information. We also lack detailed information about people's browsing strategies in general. However, some statistics do reinforce the importance of portals in people's Web sessions.<sup>24</sup> It is also clear that several of the search routine options identified above may occur via portals. The next step is to examine the implications of commercialized portals for the accessibility of not-for-profit, public interest sites.

## Implications for non-profit sites

Given the bewildering amount of information now available on the Web, it is understandable that content classification services have emerged and gained popularity among users. But if commercial interests drive all the best known and most widely used portals, where does it leave 'not-for-profit' websites? What is the use of their content being *available* if it is not *accessible*?

22. L. Introna and H. Nissenbaum, 'Defining the web: The politics of search engines', *Computer*, Vol 33, No 1, 2000, pp 54–62.

23. C. Silverstein, M. Henzinger, H. Marais and M. Moricz, Analysis of a very large AltaVista query log, SRC Technical Note 1998-014, 28 October 1998.

24. Nua, 'Portals draw lion's share of audiences', Nua Internet Surveys, [http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?i=VS&art\\_id=90535592&ref=true](http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?i=VS&art_id=90535592&ref=true), 14 February 2000.

25. Such attempts at organizing Web content do exist. The Open Directory Project ([www.dmoz.org](http://www.dmoz.org)) is one example where volunteers compile the list of sites featured in the directories of the navigation service. However, it is owned by America Online and is not nearly as popular as any of the top commercial sites. Part of the reason for this, presumably, is because people do not know about it.

To address this problem, a publicly or philanthropically funded international portal may have to be established, to ensure quality 'programming', with sufficient educational materials and limited commercial input. This might follow the model of American public broadcasting, which became an important complement to commercial broadcasting on radio and television. In a similar spirit, a public portal might uphold the egalitarian and democratic principles on which the World Wide Web was first established.<sup>25</sup> An important caveat here is that in so far as commercial portal sites are the primary avenue through which most users enter and explore the Web, it is likely that non-commercial sites will be harder to find than commercial ones. The mere creation of a non-profit portal is therefore not enough; it would have to be complemented by an aggressive advertising campaign to let users know of its existence.

This is not to say that creators of not-for-profit websites cannot emulate the strategies of commercial sites. They may not have the same resources to spend on advertising and financial partnerships, but there are other ways to generate publicity and site exposure. This section briefly explores some of the strategies that are easily accessible to not-for-profit websites.

- One important way to gain exposure is to have cross-links with other sites. These don't just attract visitors to your site; they also get you noticed by search engines. Some, such as Google, rank search results according to how many other Web pages link to yours. One way to convince other sites to link to your own is to offer mutual linking. Even if they are rivals, it's better than no linking at all.
- You need more than high quality content to attract visitors and link partners; your site also has to look good. Functionality and usability too are significant to the popularity of a site. Although non-profit sites cannot often afford to hire top quality Web designers, you can glean a lot from free online site design guides. A 'cool' look may not impress older or more academic visitors, but it won't alienate them either if it is well organized and easy to navigate. Such qualities will increase links directed to the site and possible interpersonal recommendations.
- The value of word-of-mouth information dissemination cannot be emphasized enough. Email is the most common use of internet services. People correspond with friends and colleagues and can easily attach a recommendation about a website. Thus, it is important to offer an appealing and easy-to-use site that can cater to many different visitors with different online experiences.
- There are also technical ways to increase your site's accessibility. Online guides (such as <http://www.searchenginewatch.com>) explain how placing key words or hidden code in the document can help search engines index the page or relevant searches more effectively. However, search sites can also penalize pages that try to trick the system, so it is important to incorporate coding tips legitimately. It can also be helpful to submit the page to search engines. Results may not come quickly, as some sites take months to index a site.<sup>26</sup>
- Many commercial sites keep mailing lists of interested visitors, to disseminate information as basic as notices about when a site is updated. By offering such an option, site developers can keep in contact with people who have shown an initial interest in their sites. An even better strategy is to offer users periodic mailings of information. This achieves two goals: (i) It helps disseminate the organization's message; and (ii) It reminds people of the site and can draw them back for new visits.
- If the site is the online component of an organization that has offline communications devices (eg pamphlets, publications), it is important to prominently feature the Web address on these resources. Any press releases and communications should also include this information. Overall, keeping budget constraints in mind, an aggressive advertisement campaign has to be kept at the forefront of creating a website. Without visitors, the time, money and effort spent on creating the site will have little payoff.

26. D. Gray, 'Maintaining search engine positions', *InternetDay*, 16 March 2000.

### Conclusions

This paper sets out to show that as information is proliferating on the Web, so the relative attention of users to any one source is in decline. I have identified portal sites as the most significant gatekeepers between creators of online content and users. An oft-quoted phrase by online media experts is that if [on the internet] 'content is king, then distribution is King Kong'.<sup>27</sup> This shows that distributors of online content are aware of their role in allocating user attention to Web content. Although production may be more within the reach of many users, distributing information to a large public and thereby calling people's attention to it is key in gaining an audience.

Features of the new medium – the low costs of storing, replicating and distributing materials – have changed the locus of the gatekeeping activity in the production and dissemination of information. This ability to allocate user attention to products requires us to re-evaluate how we approach the internet in relation to other media. Although the widespread publication of not-for-profit public interest information is much easier than in other media, it is important to remember that just being on the Web does not automatically result in wide popularity. If such material is to enjoy the audience it deserves, its publishers must be resourceful and imaginative. Beyond making information *available*, they have to pursue strategies to make it easily *accessible*.

27. H. Green, 'The skinny on niche portals', *Business Week*, <http://www.businessweek.com/1998/43/53601141.html>, 15 October 1998.

### article:

# the 'napsterization' of the european content industry

## a scenario for 2005

Lucien Rapp

*A new generation of digital communications is making cultural resources available to all, using an open network (the internet) and the peer-to-peer technique. In their use of digital compression these websites correspond exactly to the Napster.com model, whose activities forced music catalogue owners to rethink their strategies and regulatory authorities over copyright material. From a paper prepared for the Council of Europe, this article considers the development of the content industry in Europe by 2005, in anticipation of new applications such as tele-education, tele-medicine, tele-detection and tele-surveillance, using a combination of IP (Internet Protocol), DVB (Digital Video Broadcasting) and MPEG standards. We also examine the interplay of the various political and industrial interests involved, using in particular the technique of 'scenario mapping'.*

Lucien Rapp is Professor of Public Law at the University of Toulouse I (France), where he heads the Law Faculty's Institute of International Studies and Development (IEID), Université des Sciences Sociales de Toulouse, 22 allées de Brienne, 31000 Toulouse, France (Tel: +33 5 611 28 732; Fax: +33 5 611 29 728; email [lucien.rapp@univ-tlse1.fr](mailto:lucien.rapp@univ-tlse1.fr))