Gatekeeping Theory Then and Now

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We live in a complex, dynamic world. Experts are refining and expanding technology. Sly politicians are engaging in scandalous behavior. Scientists are discovering new planets and new species. Humans are evolving. The world is changing.

There is no way to consume and understand everything, so we must rely on the mass media to provide us with information we cannot experience ourselves. However, members of the mass media do not have the time or the resources to give us every bit of information, so they must selectively choose what to disseminate. This is called gatekeeping. Those who select information to disseminate are called gatekeepers.

Gatekeeping theories have been used to investigate the control of information flow in many different disciplines, including political science, sociology, informational science, management, and law (Barzilia, 2008, pg. 1493).

For the purpose of this paper, I will view gatekeeping theory through a mass communication lens. I will unveil the origins of gatekeeping theory, and show how contemporary scholars have been applying the theory. I will also assess how gatekeeping theory contributes to our understanding of the processes and effects of mass communication. I will apply gatekeeping theory to the subject of my professional project—issues management. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of gatekeeping theory, and provide a tentative description of the gatekeeping process for the Web 2.0 environment in which we live.

Gatekeeping theory has yielded countless scholarly definitions. O’Sullivan et al. (1994) defined gatekeepers as “those personnel, such as editors, who occupy strategic decision-making positions within news media organizations” (p. 126). Shoemaker (1991) defined gatekeeping as a systematic process “by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down
and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day (p.1). Shoemaker (1991) defined a gate as an “in” or “out” decision point (p.2)

Gatekeeping as a mass media process was identified in 1922, but it had not yet been described as a theoretical phenomenon. In The Immigrant Press, Park (1922) explained that out of all of the events that occur each day, an editor chooses certain items for publication, which he or she regards as more important or more interesting than others. The rest he or she “condemns to oblivion” (p. 328). Park had the correct idea, but he did not bring that idea to theoretical fruition.

Kurt Lewin (1943) formally theorized gatekeeping. He used the theory to describe the process in which housewives decide what foods end up on the family’s dinner table.

During World War II, sugar, butter, meat, and other food products were rationed—individuals were allowed to purchase only small amounts of products that were of limited supply. During this time, Lewin and other experts encouraged individuals to incorporate protein-rich organ meats into their diets.

Lewin’s (1943) study, Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change, investigated why people ate what they ate, and analyzed methods that could change people’s food consumption. He argued that food comes to the table through various channels (p. 35), such as buying food at the grocery store or growing it in a garden; or after the food has been bought or grown, it can be cooked immediately, canned, or frozen. He said, “Food does not move by its own impetus. Entering or not entering a channel and moving from one section of a channel to another is affected by a gatekeeper” (p. 37). He argued that not all family members have the same influence in making decisions about what the family will eat, and that the wife, who usually shops for the family’s food and cooks the family’s food, controls the gates (p. 38).
Although Lewin’s primary concern was to encourage families to substitute sweetbread for sirloin, he did realize that gatekeeping was applicable in disciplines other than the food industry. He said that gatekeeping theory “holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group” (Lewin, 1951, p. 187). Lewin died of a heart attack shortly after writing these words, but his idea ignited decades of gatekeeping research that continues to this day.

In 1950, David Manning White introduced gatekeeping theory to the formal news organization. His case study examined “Mr. Gates,” a wire editor of a newspaper that reached approximately 30,000 individuals in a highly industrialized mid-west city. The purpose of the study was to determine why Mr. Gates selected or rejected news stories that came from other sources (White, 1950, p.384).

White’s results showed that Mr. Gates rejected 90 percent of news stories for two main reasons: One, the stories were not newsworthy; and, two, the stories were the same or similar as other reported stories. White concluded that Mr. Gates’ reasons for rejecting news stories were highly subjective, and based on his own set of experiences, attitudes, and expectations (p. 386).

Breed (1955) investigated how reporters and staffers followed the policies of organizational leaders, or “top” gatekeepers, despite three empirical conditions: one, organizational policy sometimes contravenes journalistic norms; two, reporters and staffers often times disagree with those norms; and, three, top gatekeepers cannot legitimately command that reporters and staffers follow organizational policies (p. 355). Regardless of these conditions, Breed found that top gatekeepers influenced the journalistic decisions of reporters and staffers. These findings are significant because lower-level workers in news organizations had the ability to disagree and ultimately report news that did not align with the views of top gatekeepers.
However, staffers and reporters considered themselves as members of a professional fraternity, and conformed to top gatekeepers’ policies because of social forces.

Dimmick (1974) asserted that gatekeepers use various criteria to select or reject news. One criterion he described was journalistic news values, which include timeliness, proximity, conflict, prominence and currency (p. 24).

A second criterion he described was the way journalists view their individual roles. Some journalists may see themselves as purveyors of neutral information. Others may see themselves as talking heads. Journalists who hold different views of their roles are likely to gate keep differently (p.20).

A third criterion that influences news dissemination is a gatekeeper’s composition model. Dimmick (1974) defined composition models as methods of combining the dimensions of the decision space to determine which stories will be selected or rejected (p.27). Essentially, these models guide what news gatekeepers disseminate. More importantly, nearly every news story reflects the decisions made by more than one gatekeeper. Thus multiple composition models influence what news organizations disseminate. Because the news selection process encompasses numerous gatekeepers who all have different composition models, Dimmick argued that the “Mr. Gates” model is not an effective way to portray the process of gatekeeping (p. 40).

Gans (1980) wrote *Deciding What’s News* after the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War rendered floods of media coverage. He found that politicians occupy gatekeepers’ attention because politicians provide gatekeepers with ample, sellable material (Reese, 2009, p. 285). Gans also found that countless gatekeepers used the *New York Times* as a guide for what to disseminate (Reese, 2009, p. 288). Gans argued that because public officials occupy gatekeepers’
time, and because gatekeepers use the *New York Times* as a guiding light for dissemination, gatekeepers lack interaction with their direct audiences. Thus, feedback—a gatekeeper’s verification of accurate communication—comes from elites, instead of gatekeepers’ audiences (Silcock & Schwalbe, 2012, p. 1). This limits the breadth and depth of news that the public receives.

Berkowitz (1990) used a content analysis to examine the gatekeeping process in local television newsrooms. His data, like Dimmick’s (1974), suggested that gatekeeping had moved past the era of Mr. Gates rejecting or selecting news stories based on his personal preferences (Berkowitz, 1990, p. 66).

Berkowitz (1990) noted three main differences from White’s (1950) initial study. One, gatekeeping was a group process, and content was shaped by group dynamics—not by one person or one group of people. This notion aligned with Breed’s (1955) findings. Two, an organization’s resources or newscast formats dictated the way the organization selected or rejected news. Three, the metaphor of a gatekeeper opening and closing the gate did not fit in the modern television newsroom—stories passed through multiple gates. Further, resource constraints, logistical problems, and other factors influenced what gates stories passed or did not pass through (Berkowitz, 1990, p. 68).

In 1991 Shoemaker did everyone a favor by classifying theories and models of gatekeeping into five main categories. First is the *individual level*, which looks at the extent to which individuals are responsible for gatekeeping decisions. Second is the *routine level*, which refers to the patterned, routinized, and repeated practices that media workers use to do their jobs. Third is the *organizational level*, which includes the various decision-making processes within news organizations that affect gatekeeping processes. Fourth is the *institutional level*, which
focuses on the external characteristics of organizations that influence gatekeeping processes, such as marketing forces or political affiliations. Fifth is the social system level, which examines the influence of ideology and culture on gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 48).

As the 20th century came to a close, scholars found that personal biases, social forces, varying compositions models, political elites, and organizational intricacies were not the only factors that influenced what gatekeepers disseminated. Other influences included individual instincts, expert judgment, and motivation (Berkowitz, 1997), political ideology (Chang and Lee, 1992), attitudes and values (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989), and class position and career pressures (Gans, 1990).

I have shown how members of the mass media select and reject information based on various factors, but how does this affect us? DeFleur and DeFleur (2010) asserted that the gatekeeping process limits, controls, and shapes our knowledge of the actual events occurring in reality. In other words, the mass media provides us with information we cannot obtain ourselves, but its ability to do so is limited by a lack of resources and time. The media’s insufficient portrayal of the world shapes our reality, which makes our perceptions fallible and incomplete.

So far, I have demonstrated how gatekeeping evolved from a way to investigate how food reached the dinner table during World War II, to a way to describe how editors and reporters selected news, to a way to recognize the organizational and cultural contexts in which gatekeepers operate. I have also shown how gatekeepers’ incomplete accounts of the world shape our perceptions of reality.

So where is gatekeeping theory now? Is it still relevant? Where is Mr. Gates? I will now investigate the status of gatekeeping theory in the 21st century—a time in which the Internet has transformed the gatekeeping landscape.
In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, Singer (2003/2006) studied how the Internet affected the practices of standard newspapers. She argued, “The power of gatekeepers seems to diminish in a modern information society” (2006, p. 265). She explained that the Internet undermines the idea of a “gate” and challenges the notion that individuals can or should limit what information passes through that gate” (2006, p. 265).

The emergence of Web 2.0 has influenced gatekeeping scholarship. Web 2.0 is the current condition of the World Wide Web, which allows users to interact and collaborate with each other through social media as creators of user-generated content (O’Reilly, 2005). In the 2.0 environment, Internet users produce, distribute, and redistribute online information through social media. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) described this process as “audience gatekeeping,” in which Internet users pass along already available news items and comment on them depending on personal judgments of newsworthiness (p. 113).

Webster and Ksiazeck (2012) challenged the common belief that social reporting through social media leads to web fragmentation. They applied network analysis to Nielsen data on television and Internet use, and found high levels of audience duplication. This revealed that audience gatekeeping on social media sights can lead to media concentration, rather than isolation and fragmentation (p. 51).

Kwon et al. (2013) advanced the theory of audience gatekeeping by examining how different information channels influenced Twitter users’ information selection. They found that the most viewed channels came from a select few mainstream websites such as foxnews.com and cnn.com. This means that gatekeepers from powerful media organizations provide the most information and receive the most views on Twitter.
In his book, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Hindman (2008) argues that the majority of Internet users visit a small amount of powerful websites and blogs, which are powered by powerful news organizations and elite professionals. These elites select what information to disseminate, and control the most-viewed dialogue of the Internet.

The emergence of the Internet has drastically changed the notion that gatekeepers act like the original Mr. Gates. In the Web 2.0 environment, gatekeepers not only wear three-piece suits and sit at desks; they wear pajamas and sit on couches. We now have the ability to disseminate information ourselves, for free! However, Kwon et al. (2013) and Hindman (2008) would argue that while the Internet may seem democratic, we still view and repost sights from the most powerful news organizations, who disseminate news based on their own personal biases, political and economic interests, and organizational structures.

Given the current status of the internet, I believe we are in a Mr. Gates 2.0 era, in which powerful news organizations and elite political leaders choose what to disseminate, then, in turn, we disseminate that information ourselves by “retweeting,” “liking,” and “sharing” the information. This makes gatekeepers’ jobs easier, and their influence more profound. Further, it limits, controls, and shapes our knowledge of the totality of actual events occurring in reality (DeFleur and DeFleur, 2010).

Gatekeepers use mass communication to disseminate the messages they select. Mass communication is “a process in which professional communicators design and use media to disseminate messages widely, rapidly, and continually in order to arouse intended meanings in large, diverse, and selectively attending audiences in attempts to influence them in a variety of ways” (DeFleur et al., 1981, p. 28).
Gatekeeping theory makes contributions to our understanding of the processes and effects of mass communication. As we have seen, gatekeepers are often professional communicators, such as editors, journalists, and reporters who use mass media to disseminate selected messages to wide audiences, such as newspaper readers, website visitors, and TV viewers. These selected messages influence the way gatekeepers’ audiences view reality. Further, gatekeeping theory describes how social forces, personal biases, politics, economics, and other factors influence what gatekeepers disseminate, often times to arouse intended meanings in the largest, most diverse audiences.

Although the literature I have reviewed extensively describes how media members gatekeep, it does not do an adequate job of describing why gatekeepers aim to influence their audiences. In other words, why do editors, journalists, and reporters want to persuade individuals through the content they disseminate? Do they want to advance their political agendas? Do they want money and power? Gatekeeping theory does not provide clear answers to these questions.

Overall, gatekeeping theory makes contributions to our understanding of mass communication because it describes how gatekeepers use mass media to influence their audiences. However, the theory could do a better job of describing why gatekeepers gatekeep. Because of this, I give gatekeeping theory a contribution rate of 7 out of 10.

While gatekeeping theory does an adequate job of contributing to the understanding of mass communication, it is not without limitations. One, gatekeeping is fundamentally a descriptive theory that offers little if any predictive power. As Roberts (2005) argued, the theory’s chief value comes in summarizing the various forces that come into play as members of the media make decisions. It provides a framework for media scholars, but does little else (p. 2).
Another limitation is that gatekeeping theory does not account for the complexity of public discourse. Sung (2012) argues that gatekeeping theory portrays public discourse as a monolithic black box, or an undifferentiated process, when public discourse actually consists of multiple overlapping and competing discourses that take place at the same time (p. 100). Gatekeeping theory does not account for these complexities, which Sung (2012) asserts is an impoverished way to analyze a democratic society (p. 130).

Finally, the various mediums gatekeepers use—such as television, newspaper, and the Internet—all alter the processes of gatekeeping in different ways. For example, a political blogger will disseminate news much differently than a sports writer of a local newspaper. Thus, gatekeeping theory is inconsistent across various mediums.

Gatekeeping theory adequately describes behavior, but does not predict it. Gatekeeping theory does not account for the complexities of public discourse in democracies, and it is not always consistent.

When I graduate from the Manship School I plan to work in the issues management field. In order to attain this goal, I must construct a successful professional project that will showcase my strategic communication skills.

For my project, I plan to conduct an extensive crisis plan for a professional organization—preferably an oil and gas company. The crisis plan will essentially instruct communication employees of the oil and gas company to be successful gatekeepers—it will be a guide for selecting information to disseminate.

Among other things, the crisis plan will instruct the oil and gas company’s communication team to effectively manage the aftermath of a jobsite explosion. Like members of the media, these communication employees will select information about the crisis to
disseminate through the media. The crisis plan will instruct the employees to disseminate information that shows that all necessary steps had been taken to prevent the crisis. The plan will also urge them to elaborate about the proactive processes the company took before the crisis to ensure the safety of the company’s employees and the community. Further, the plan will instruct the communication employees to ensure the public that all measures will be taken to heal the wounds from the crisis, and make sure a similar crisis never happens again.

On the other hand, my crisis plan will urge the oil and gas company’s communication team to not disseminate information that could possibly tarnish the company’s image. For example, the team should not disseminate information about the crisis that has not been corroborated. Also, if the company genuinely made a mistake that engendered a crisis, a spokesperson should acknowledge the company’s mistakes and then focus on moving forward. Continually repeating the company’s mistakes could severely damage its image.

My crisis plan will help an oil and gas company’s communication employees be effective gatekeepers. It will advise them how to disseminate information that will sustain or improve their image, and will urge them to not disseminate information that could tarnish the company’s image. My crisis plan will show that gatekeeping is a versatile theory that professionals can use in fields other than the mass media.

As my analyses comes to a close, I want to provide gatekeeping scholars with a tentative description of the gatekeeping process that will be helpful in the Mr. Gates 2.0 environment. I will use DeFleur and DeFleur’s (2010) definition as a guiding light—

In exercising “surveillance functions,” news organizations have large amounts of information brought to their attention by different media sources. These organizations disseminate selected news through traditional media and the Internet based on economic factors,
organizational policies, definitions of newsworthiness, conceptions of audience, and beliefs about journalistic duties and values. Popular news organizations attract the majority of audiences via traditional mediums and the Internet, so they become the most influential gatekeepers. Internet users become secondary gatekeepers by “retweeting,” “liking,” and “sharing” information that popular news organizations have disseminated. Internet users’ online acquaintances see this information, and sometimes even continue the redissemination process. Therefore, powerful news organizations’ selected news is disseminated much more widely and frequently, which further limits, controls, and shapes the public’s knowledge of the totality of actual events occurring in reality (Understanding mass communication, Defleur & DeFleur, 2010).

In a complex world, we must rely on gatekeepers to provide us with information we cannot experience ourselves. However, we must be aware that gatekeepers limit, control, and shape our realities depending on what news they disseminate (Defleur & DeFleur, 2010). It will be difficult to tame this phenomenon, given that countless Internet users continually reassert information that powerful news organizations have already disseminated. Nevertheless, we must not be discouraged, because with the Internet we have the ability to assess countless news sources, which can give us a clearer picture of the world in which we live. Therefore, as long as we are willing to put in the extra work, we can hold gatekeepers accountable.
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