

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

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One of the most enduring areas of research in media sociology is media gatekeeping—the process by which countless occurrences and ideas are reduced to the few messages we are offered in our news media. News work—the process of newsgathering, news writing, and dissemination—has come under scrutiny in no small part because people's sense of reality is influenced by what gets into the news and what gets left out. Virtually all of news work involves gatekeeping. What will we write about? What will we include or leave out? How will the topic be shaped? But gatekeeping involves more than decisions about what to write or which images to capture. It begins when events, ideas, or people¹ first come to the attention of a news worker. From the news organization's standpoint, gatekeeping ends with selecting events, shaping news items, and disseminating them. An entirely new gatekeeping process begins when audience members make their own decisions about which news items, if any, to view, listen to, or read. This chapter, however, confines itself to the gatekeeping process that ends with the transmission of the news items. Yet this is no small task. For one event to become a news item requires a series of activities—observations, decisions, serendipity, creativity, constraints and facilitators, and a good share of luck. This might seem to result in a diverse set of events covered by the news media. Yet, we know that the news from one day is similar to that of another (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006), and so we assume that gatekeeping is not a random process. Rather, it involves a complex series of operations that extend throughout the news production and dissemination process. Gatekeeping can be studied on many levels of analysis, with many different research methods.

Origin of the Concept

A basic premise of gatekeeping is selection—some things are chosen and others rejected. We cannot eat every food item on the menu or buy every tomato in the grocery store. Therefore we select some items from the population of items before us. If a newspaper has space for only 5000 column inches of news, then many selection decisions must be made. First we must select from among the many events in the world those that will become news items and then decide which news items will be published. A bucket can hold only so many walnuts—which are put in the bucket and which are left on the ground? If all walnuts are the same, selection is of little importance. But if some walnuts taste better than others or some are more attractive, then selection becomes more important. So it is with news—events and news items vary according to numerous criteria.

It was in thinking about ways to change social norms that Kurt Lewin first coined the word *gatekeeping* (Shoemaker, 1991). The first pairing of the terms *gatekeeping* and *communication* came in Lewin's unfinished manuscript (published posthumously in 1947), "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: II. Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research," in the journal

Human Relations. Lewin's "theory of channels and gate keepers" was elaborated in 1951 in *Field Theory in Social Science*, an edited collection of Lewin's work. He used the concept of "gatekeeper" to illustrate how widespread social changes could be achieved in a community; he was primarily interested in how one could change a population's food habits. Lewin concluded that not everyone is equally important in making food selection choices, and he showed how influencing the person who orders or shops for food could change the food habits of the entire family.

Food, wrote Lewin, reaches the family table through *channels*. One channel begins at the grocery store, and another might begin in the family garden. Figure 6.1 illustrates how Lewin thought food passed from these two channels to the dinner table. For example, in the grocery channel, food is discovered at the grocery store, purchased or not, and, if purchased, transported to the home. These sections are multiple decision points. In the garden channel, decisions are made about what to plant, prune, and harvest, each a section in the channel. As fruits and vegetables grow, some will be picked from the garden by hungry children, some consumed by insects or disease, and others may die for lack of rain. Therefore, of the fruits and vegetables that could have been available to the household, only a subset is ultimately harvested and brought into the kitchen.

At this point, food from the grocery and garden channels merge; they create a combined channel with its own series of sections and gates for which new decisions are required. Should the food be refrigerated or put in the pantry? The cook must consider that food may rot in the refrigerator or languish in the deep recesses of the pantry. From among the usable food, the cook decides what to select for a given day—some items will be selected because they will "go bad" if not eaten immediately. The cook also decides how to prepare and present the food on the family's table. At every stage, a food item may be selected or rejected: Even if a potato is selected to be baked, it may be thrown away at the table if rot is exposed when it is cut open. And at each stage, the food is shaped (for example, French fried potatoes rather than mashed potatoes) and the cook decides when the food will be served and whether leftovers will become part of tomorrow's dinner.

Lewin called the entrance to each channel or section of a channel a *gate*. Movement from one channel section to another is determined by applying either a set of rules or by a *gatekeeper* making "in" or "out" decisions (Lewin, 1951, p. 186). An important part of Lewin's theory was his assertion that positive and negative forces surround the gates. For example, if an expensive cut of meat is seen in the grocery store, the meat's cost exerts a negative force against buying it—it's *so expensive, how can I afford it?* If the meat is purchased, however, its expense changes from a negative to a positive force—it *was so expensive, I must take care to transport, store, and prepare it carefully*. Because the forces surrounding a gate may differ, whether the item passes through it depends on the valence (positive or negative) and intensity of these forces. Since one channel may have multiple gates, there are many forces and many opportunities for an item to be selected or rejected.

In Figure 6.1, arrows show how forces facilitate or constrain the passage of items within a section and on both sides of a gate. Forces are designated in italics; for example, *fP,EF* represents the positive force associated with the attractiveness of food within the section "buying." A positive force should facilitate the food's passage past the next gate and into the "food on way to home" section.

Lewin believed that this theoretical framework could be generalized beyond the selection of food items. "This situation holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group, for movement of goods, and the social locomotion of individuals in many organizations" (Lewin, 1951, p. 187). Gatekeeping has proven to be a portable concept, used not only in communication but in a variety of disciplines. For

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

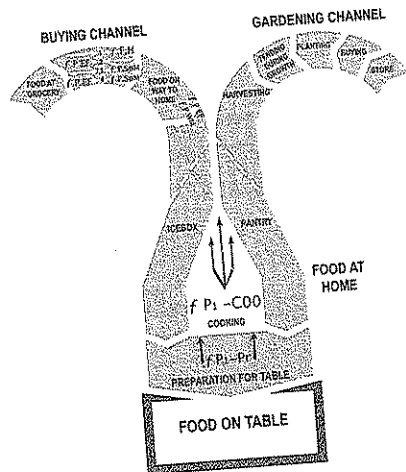


Figure 6.1 Kurt Lewin's model of how food passes through channels on its way to the table. From *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers* (p. 175), by K. Lewin, 1951, New York: Harper. Copyright 1951 by Miriam Lewin. Reprinted with permission.

example, primary care physicians are sometimes called gatekeepers for their role in controlling access to specialized physical and mental health care (Roberts & Greene, 2002).

Although Lewin's terms *channel*, *section*, *force*, and *gate* imply physical structures, they are metaphors for a process through which items may or may not pass, step by step, from discovery to use. A *channel* is a social artifact or organization that determines the hurdles an item must pass over. The news media are themselves channels, with newspapers, television and radio news programs all considering what should become news. On a smaller scale, assigning a reporter to cover education rather than crime creates a channel within which that reporter interprets the world. *Sections* correspond to ways in which the channel is organized. *Gates* are decision points, not only involving the selection of an event, but also whether it will be treated as hard or soft news, how long it will be, what sorts of visuals will be used, its prominence within the newscast or newspaper, and whether it will be followed up the next day. *Forces* are cultural norms that work for or against selection, length, and so on. *Gatekeepers* are generally people who make these decisions, but they also may be policies that people carry out.

As a social psychologist Lewin was well aware that individuals, or individual gatekeepers, acted within a social context. Lewin developed *field theory* to account for that context. He understood gatekeeping to be the outcome of a web of interconnected gates and forces within a social field, and not simply as one person making decisions. In addition, he assumed that individual decisions are grounded within the social field. In other words, they are "the product of the interaction between the person and his environment" (Schellenberg, 1978, p. 70).

Early Studies and Models

Although gatekeeping research originated in Lewin's scholarship, one of his research assistants is credited with applying gatekeeping theory to the study of news. David Manning White, from the University of Iowa, is responsible for the initial development of the research agenda for media gatekeeping. White was the first scholar to apply Lewin's channels and gatekeeper theory to a communication research project (White, 1950). White said he "thought that the complex series of 'gates' a newspaper story went through from the actual criterion event to the finished story in a newspaper would make an interesting study" (Reese & Ballinger, 2001, p. 646). His idea was

to ask a small-city daily newspaper wire editor—whom he called “Mr. Gates”—to keep all copy that came into his office from three wire services during a one-week period in 1949. Mr. Gates also agreed to provide an explanation for why rejected stories (90 percent of the total received) were not used.

White (1950, p. 386) concluded that the selection decisions were “highly subjective.” About one-third of the articles coming across the wires were rejected because of Mr. Gates’ personal evaluation of the stories, particularly whether he believed them to be true. Other stories were rejected because of a lack of space or because similar stories had already run. White’s focus on the subjective decisions of an isolated individual did little to test the broader implications of Lewin’s field theory, but his study encouraged many communication researchers to look at selection decisions in news.

Subsequent gatekeeping studies questioned White’s conclusion that personal decisions were very influential. Gieber (1956) said that the 16 newspaper telegraph editors he studied made decisions not based on their personal likes and dislikes, but rather because of a “straitjacket of mechanical details,” such as deadlines, production requirements, and the number of competing news items (Gieber, 1964, p. 175). The importance of these impersonal factors led Gieber to interpret the wire editor’s job as being passive, primarily applying the organization’s policies. McNelly (1959) noted that the actions of a single gatekeeper could be exaggerated if attention was not paid to the fact that multiple actors, such as correspondents and editors, were involved in the gatekeeping process. Gieber (1960) explored how sources, bearing the values of their reference group, played a role in the construction of news. Without explicit reference to Lewin’s field theory, Lewin’s ideas nevertheless were finding support. In fact, Chibnall (1977) saw an interaction between the gatekeeper and his or her environment—since reporters were so dependent upon sources for access to key information, reporters often had to play by the rules sources dictated. While attempts would eventually be made to enrich and expand the theory of gatekeeping, for example, Donohew’s (1967) examination of the forces at the gates, these early studies largely neglected ties not only to Lewin’s field theory, but also to theories in general.

At about the same time, however, a more theoretical model of news item transmission was proposed by Westley and MacLean (1957), based on Newcomb’s (1953) ABX co-orientation model. Newcomb proposed the idea of *co-orientation* as a way to study communication acts between two people (designated A and B) simultaneously orienting toward each other and toward an object (designated X)—Figure 6.2 shows how Westley and MacLean added the mass media (designated C) between the sender and the receiver. In this model, there are multiple events (Xs), some of which are discovered by sender A (in this model, a source) and then travel through the mass

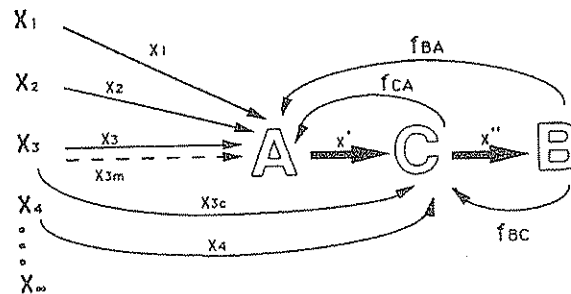


Figure 6.2 Westley and MacLean’s model of mass communication process, showing C as the gatekeeper. Reprinted by permission of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication from *Journalism Quarterly*, 34, 31–38. Westley, B. H., MacLean, M. S., Jr. (1957).

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

media (C) to the receiver (B). Other events go directly to the media, bypassing sources. The introduction of the mass media C into Newcomb's model shows that not all messages that the sender is aware of are transmitted to the receiver.

Westley and MacLean's model views the gatekeeping process differently from that described by White. White focused on the decisions of one person, emphasizing personal and subjective aspects of the decision-making process. The Westley and MacLean model, however, emphasized the gatekeeping aspect Lewin said was governed by "impartial rules" (1951, p. 186). They saw the journalist's job as carrying out policies prescribed by an organization or social system, more or less uniformly.

This shows that gatekeeping can be studied on at least two levels of analysis—the individual and the routine practices of news work. Lewin saw gatekeeping as occurring on multiple levels of analysis. His examples include at least three levels. An *individual* can make personal decisions about what to buy at the market or cook on a given day, there are family *routines or habits* to take into account, and there are also *societal and cultural forces* at play. For example, certain foods are culturally unavailable within a given social system—insects are rarely eaten in some cultures but are prized as delicacies in others. Even if insects are culturally available as food, a particular family's eating habits may exclude insects from the shopping list. Or the individual shopper may make selections based on a personal preference that insects will be eaten only once a month.

Lewin's field theory proposed that individuals interact with their environments—what he termed "psychological ecology" (1951, p. 170). Lewin's theory later was elaborated by psychologists both as ecological systems theory and human ecology theory. Individuals must be understood within the context of four systems: a microsystem (immediate context), mesosystem (nexus of immediate contexts), exosystem (external institutions), and macrosystem (culture) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The realization that gatekeeping can be studied on multiple levels of analysis makes it much more interesting. As shown by Shoemaker (1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), gatekeeping in a communication context can be studied on at least five levels—individuals, the routine practices of communication work, communication organizations, social institutions, and societies. On the individual level, selection decisions are personal—*What do I like or dislike?* If not personal, selection decisions can still be driven by individual factors such as the gender, sexual orientation, education, class, or religion of an individual gatekeeper (Cohen, 1963; Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996).

On the routine practices level, gatekeeping decisions are made according to a preestablished and generalized set of practices about how the work is to be done. Gatekeeping is "mediated by practical concerns: how to report a world of activities within the constraints of publication deadlines and news space limitations, how to determine the factual character of accounts, how to formulate events into a story, and so on" (Fishman, 1980, p. 14). *Is this newsworthy enough to be included in the day's television news program?* Such decisions cross media lines to the extent that media and communication workers share basic definitions of newsworthiness (Peterson, 1979; Tuchman, 1974). The rules are not necessarily written down nor consciously acknowledged by the gatekeeper. "The rules governing newswork are not simply given and available, but actually constructed, interpreted, and elaborated upon in the actual settings of newswork" (Lester, 1980, p. 993).

Media organizations can have different goals and structures that constrain the influences of individual gatekeepers. The profit maximizing goals of news organizations may set limits on what reporters do (Bagdikian, 2004). For example, a reporter may want to investigate suspected wrongdoing in local government but be handicapped by limited resources, such as unwillingness by editors to spend money on an investigation that may fail to yield definitive results, limited

training or ability to engage in sophisticated computer-assisted reporting, or misgivings from an overly cautious legal department. Given the hierarchical organizational structure of most news organizations, individuals ultimately have to yield to decisions made elsewhere in the organization. Thus, we could also look at the gatekeeper's position within the organization as influencing the power that he or she has in making final selection decisions. Gatekeepers such as newspaper publishers and television station managers tend to have considerable power to develop policies that greatly influence selection decisions (Donohew, 1967; Hickey, 1966, 1968).

Communication organizations exist within an environment of social institutions that also affect the gatekeeping process. There are many potential influences outside of the media organization, such as sources, audiences and advertisers, markets and economic forces, government, interest groups, public relations agencies, and other media. Sources are often frontline gatekeepers, deciding to pass along some bits of information and not others (Gieber & Johnson, 1961; Soley, 1992). Perceived source accuracy is also a factor in whether a reporter will use the source. Advertisers, in their quest for the most appropriate target audiences, exert direct and indirect influence on the mass media (Soley, 2002). Some newspapers, for example, have sought information about audience likes and dislikes to produce content that is attractive to the target audience, attracting more advertising dollars (Turow, 1997). Similarly, the success of a television program has long rested on its ratings—a measure of the number and type (through demographics and psychographics) of people watching the show: Shows with poor ratings are canceled. Advertiser influence can also be indirect. Women's magazines, for example, traditionally have not run many stories about the harmful effects of smoking, presumably because the tobacco companies spend a lot of money on cigarette ads and ads for other companies that the tobacco conglomerates own (Kessler, 1989).

On the social system level of analysis, just as Lewin determined that some foods are not culturally available, events vary to the degree that they are culturally available as news items. Rape, for example, was rarely covered in newspapers a generation or two ago but today is regular fare for mainstream news media (Thomason & LaRocque, 1995). Culture—as well as other indicators of social significance, including political, military, and economic ties—also influences selection decisions, affecting the extent to which different parts of the world are covered and how they are covered (Nossek, 2004). Media in the United States tend to give more coverage to international events that relate to American national interests (Chang & Lee, 1992).

Methodology

White's (1950) study used a content analysis research design that permitted him to compare stories included in the newspaper with those rejected. This remains a preferred gatekeeping method today; studying what does not become news is perhaps more revealing of the decision-making process than is studying only the news product. If we study only what is included in a television newscast, it is difficult to know what influences the "in" and "out" decisions. For example, in her study of newspaper reporter sources, Seo (1988) found that individual source information is used in about the proportion that it is available. This puts a different light on the common finding (e.g., Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973) that "official" sources are quoted far more than are individuals. It appears that there may be a lot more official sources available than there are individual sources, but to the extent that individual sources are available, they may be used.

Scott and Gobetz (1990) did a content analysis of the amount of "soft news" coverage on the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks. They found that the amount of soft news increased between 1972 and 1987, but why?—were there more soft news events to cover? Or did journalists select an increasing percentage of soft news items? If journalists did select a greater proportion of soft news items, why should this be so? Was it because the journalists wanted more soft news? Or

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

did journalists perceive that audiences wanted more soft news? Or were there other influences at work, such as a change over time in organizational routines? Such questions are vital in the study of gatekeeping. It is not sufficient to show changes over time, or that one type of news item is covered more at one time point. To more fully understand the gatekeeping process, the study should consider the theoretical context of the total news environment.

This is best accomplished by combining content analysis with other research methods, such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, observation, and experiments. For example, journalists are part of the total news environment, and surveying them yields information about their backgrounds, personal values, personal characteristics, and other variables that could influence the news stories they produce. Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2001) surveyed both reporters and their editors in a study that compared the characteristics of news items (from a content analysis) with data from two surveys. The first went to reporters who wrote stories about U.S. congressional bills and measured their various opinions and characteristics. The second went to their editors, and asked them to assess the newsworthiness of the bills. Data from these two surveys were combined with that from the content analysis to assess the relative influence of reporters' characteristics and the newsworthiness of events on how prominently the events were covered.

Surveys can inform us about psychological determinants of gatekeeping (Chang & Lee, 1992), such as preferences for one type of content over another or role conceptions. They can measure respondents' perceptions of forces working on the selection decision (e.g., space, time, directions from superiors). These perceptions, however, may vary in reliability and validity. Survey respondents report what they know (or think they know) about their attitudes and preferences, speculate about what they would do under specified scenarios, and tell what they know about their colleagues and about how their organizations work. Such information may or may not provide valid measures of these forces and how they affect the gatekeeping process. The expression of an attitude does not always lead to attitude-consistent behavior. Still, although content analysis data can tell us what becomes news, surveys can help us understand why news items exist. Survey data do provide insight into journalists' thought processes—processes that are invisible to the content analyst.

In-depth interviews with gatekeepers yield even more information about the influences of the news environment on content. For example, Berkowitz (1990) combined four weeks of observation of television news gatekeepers with interviews of 30 to more than 60 minutes in length about why specific decisions had been made. An unstructured interview format has the advantage of allowing respondents to take the discussion wherever they wish. This can be particularly helpful when interviewing gatekeepers about why they made specific selection decisions; the interview can be personally tailored to each gatekeeper. Personalization is also a disadvantage, however, because personalized interviews are generally not comparable; by definition there are no standardized questionnaires, thus lowering the study's external validity. Internal validity may be higher than in standardized surveys, however, because the causal chain between the selection decision and its antecedents can be traced in specific and detailed ways.

Gatekeeping studies using observational methods may suffer from the usual problem of reactivity, but this is generally lessened if the observational period is longer than a few days. In Berkowitz's study of television news gatekeepers, he devoted two weeks at the beginning of the study to "familiarization with the newsroom and the station's news process" (1990, p. 57). Following this initial period, four weeks were spent observing gatekeepers at work, followed by one week devoted to personal interviews. This seven-week-long field period helped reduce the threat to internal validity due to reactivity, but it points to one of the disadvantages of observational research—it takes time to do it right: The longer the field period, the greater the external validity. The advantage of observation in studying gatekeeping is that the researcher sees decisions

being made in a real newsroom under realistic conditions and can observe some of the influences affecting the decisions, thus increasing external validity. Not all influences are observable, however, such as unwritten policies or socialization to newsroom routines. Combining observational data with interviews, however, can help the researcher more fully understand the gatekeeping process.

Experimental research in gatekeeping is unusual, but a field study by Hudson (1992) looked at how television news gatekeepers rated six staged versions of a murder story in which the violence levels were manipulated. The versions ranged from a story read by an anchor with no video to a version entailing a complete video of the murder occurring, subsequent shots of the body, pools of blood, and a close-up of the victim's face. All participants viewed six versions of the story and gave each a perceived acceptability level (PAL) of the violent material. Hudson then evaluated whether PAL scores varied for "participant" and "neutral" journalists, as measured by Johnstone et al. (1976). Are there any other experiments that can be cited?

The decision as to whether to use content analysis, surveys, personal interviews, observation, or experimental methods to study gatekeeping depends on the hypotheses being tested. It is clear, however, that the fullest understanding of gatekeeping will come from a multiple-method strategy that gathers data about the total news environment.

Changes in Gatekeeping Research

If Lewin was the father of gatekeeping research, his grandchildren are now exploring the implications of field theory for gatekeeping. Scholars recognize that individual gatekeepers have the power to pass some items through gates and reject others, but studies have also shown that gatekeepers' actions must be understood within the context of their environment. The expansion of gatekeeping studies to multiple levels of analysis opens the door for the study of the most interesting of Lewin's concepts—the forces surrounding each gate. Most gatekeeping research routinely investigates the power that one or more forces have on whether a news item is permitted to pass through a gate. We are beginning to identify the forces that have the most impact on the selection of news items and whether the forces are positive or negative.

Studies on the individual level of analysis show that characteristics of individual journalists may have some influence on news. Chang and Lee's (1992) study looked at American newspaper editors' attitudes toward selecting foreign news items and on the individual forces that affect gatekeeping. They found that these editor-gatekeepers preferred international stories that had some significant impact on American security and national interests. A key individual-level force affecting the decision was that editors with an "international perspective"—"liberal with foreign news interest and foreign language training" (p. 561)—were more likely to prefer stories about world events. The more professional journalism experience editors had, the less likely they were to select international stories. In this study the important forces around the gates were the characteristics of the gatekeepers themselves. We would expect that newspaper editors have a disproportionate say about what news makes it into the newspaper and hence these individual level factors likely explain some variation in news content. But this reinforces the importance of the gatekeeper's place within an organization in explaining news content and reinforces the need for an ecological understanding of gatekeepers.

Some individual level influences may be more appropriately understood as routine factors. For example, Berkowitz's television gatekeepers claimed to make selection decisions based on their "instincts" about what makes a good news program (1990, p. 66). Berkowitz also found that "news judgment" or "news values" influence gatekeeping (1991, p. 246). It is debatable whether this outcome is best understood as influences from individual characteristics or as the result of routine definitions of newsworthiness. Clearly, there are standard criteria for newsworthiness

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

that are common across news organizations; however, the application of newsworthiness criteria may vary within individual gatekeepers.

Combining of survey research and content analysis to study newspaper coverage of major Congressional legislation, Shoemaker et al. (2001) set gatekeepers' decisions within their ecological setting or field. The study looked at the impact of forces on two levels of analysis, the individual reporter and the assessment of newsworthiness at the routine level of the newsgathering process. The study found that individual level factors such as gender and political ideology failed to predict coverage. However, the routine of determining newsworthiness did shape the news. The authors concluded "that routine forces are more successful in winning the competition to determine what becomes news than are individual forces" (p. 242).

Other routine-level forces include how much effort a news item requires to be transformed into a story, whether selection decisions are routinely made by individuals or groups of people (Berkowitz, 1990), and the desire for a "balanced" mix of stories (Riffe, Ellis, Rogers, Van Omme-ren, & Woodman, 1986; Stempel, 1985). McCombs and Becker (1979) suggest that whether a gatekeeper is assigned the work role of news manager (e.g., producer, assignment editor, news director) or information gatherer (e.g., reporter and anchor) is important in studying the gate-keeping process because people in the two types of jobs face different pressures (or forces). In using this role differentiation in a study of television gatekeepers, however, Berkowitz (1993) found that these work roles were not closely associated with selection of news items.

Research at the organizational level has shown that what might first appear to be individual differences can better be explained by the organizational level. For example, Kim's (2002) Q analysis of journalists found differences among broadcast journalists in their assessment of the value of international news. Kim argues, "The American television journalist is an organizational creature who subscribes to business objectives; his or her mindset operates in tandem with organizational structures and goals" (p. 449). Organizational-level research has included whether a radio station has a group affiliation (Riffe & Shaw, 1990); the number of gates a news item must pass through within the organization (Berkowitz, 1990); and resource constraints, such as number of staff, level of funding, and equipment availability (McManus, 1990). This includes the availability and capabilities of new technologies and the availability and quality of information subsidies, such as video releases (Berkowitz, 1991).

Looking at the social institution level of analysis, McManus concludes that powerful interests within government, large corporations, and the wealthy have a disproportionate capacity to provide information subsidies. "By reducing the cost of discovery of events and views flattering to themselves, these special interests can take advantage of cost-conscious media to influence what the public learns" (McManus, 1990, p. 682). Meanwhile, Riffe and Shaw (1990) found that the size of the market positively influenced the amount of news that radio stations can carry. Kim (2002) also found market size a factor in gatekeepers choosing whether to print international news.

At the social system level of analysis, studies have explored the role of cultural values or social structure on gatekeeping. For example, Ravi (2005) shows how coverage of war and conflict varies from one country to another based upon the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of those countries. "Newspaper coverage seems to reflect notions, values, and ideas that resonate within particular societies" (Ravi, 2005, p. 59). A study by Donahue, Olien, and Tichenor (1989) shows a relationship between a community's degree of pluralism and news and advertising content. Similarly, Humphreys draws a distinction between media content in "consensual" and 'majoritarian' democracies" (1996, p. 11). The difference in state structure leads to a difference in media structure and ultimately to a difference in news content—consensual democracies afford greater pluralism of media voices (see also Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Chang, Wang, and Chen (1998) show how different social structures in China and the United States shape notions of newsworthiness in different ways, ultimately producing different television news content.

A Brief Study Proposal

To illustrate how this can be applied in a real study, we take up the topic of public relations' influence on television news. We use the concept *force* to study why events that are covered by public relations practitioners as video news releases may (or may not) become news stories.

Introduction

In gatekeeping studies, the emphasis is on whether an event makes it through a news gate. But what influences whether the event goes through the gate? Chang and Lee (1992) showed that editor-gatekeepers' personal interest in national security and national interests positively affected the extent to which they selected foreign news items. Conversely, the more professional experience editors had, the less likely they were to select international stories. Berkowitz (1990) showed that the extent to which an event fits the generally conceived concept of newsworthiness is positively related to its selection. McCombs and Becker (1979) also found that job roles could be influential in gatekeeping—news managers select different stories than do information gatherers. Whether a radio station has a group affiliation or is independent has been found to impact selection (Riffe & Shaw, 1990). Berkowitz (1991) found that the resources of the organization (e.g., number of staff) influenced news item selection.

Although these studies look at influences on news selection, they do not tie them to an important consideration in gatekeeping theory. We can use Lewin's (1951) concept *force* to predict whether an event becomes news. The idea of forces is pivotal in gatekeeping theory. This study considers the success of the video news release (VNR) as a public relations tool. VNRs carry both positive and negative forces. Their positive forces include quality and cost, whereas the public relations' goal of persuading is a negative force.

Theory

A *force* is a characteristic of an event that influences how it will move through a channel. The identification of forces that influence whether an event is the topic of a VNR, and an assessment of their relative strengths and directions, is important for the theory's growth. Positive forces tend to push items through gates, whereas negative forces push them away. What would happen if both positive and negative forces are attached to a news item? Positive forces push information about events through the channel quickly, whereas negative forces may move slowly or stop altogether.

Gates occur at various locations in the channel, and positive forces will help an event move through the gate. An event with a negative force is less likely to move through the gate. In addition to *polarity* (positive to negative), an event's forces have *strength*, varying from weak to strong. Therefore a strong positive force will move the event more quickly through the channel than will a weak positive force.

Characteristics of Forces

Public relations practitioners produce video news releases, and these VNRs have many characteristics that the gatekeeper must consider, such as the timeliness of the information and its accessibility through other means. VNRs with these characteristics might be more likely to make it on television news: VNRs are generally well done, follow the journalistic conventions of news stories, and are free of cost to the television news organization. On the other hand, the gatekeeper must also consider the fact that some hold public relations in disdain and believe that

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

they can produce higher quality news stories (Machill, Beiler, & Schmutz, 2006). As the gatekeeper considers the VNR's many characteristics, which will be most important?

All of the forces in this example exist in time in front of the news gate; that is, the forces are known by the gatekeeper before she or he decides whether to allow the video news release to pass through the gate. However, Lewin also recognized that forces can lie behind the gate, after the decision is made to bring the VNR into the pool of stories that may be transmitted. For example, once past the gate, the previous negative force associated with public relations could dissipate—the VNR being judged more on regular journalistic news values than on this stereotype.

Media Relations

Public relations activities come from outside of the media organization and are often held in disdain by reporters (Turow, 1989) who may perceive them as prejudiced sources for news items. Such attitudes create negative forces in front of news gates. Journalists are suspicious of public relations' products and prefer to create their own stories. Still, there is evidence that the news media do sometimes have use for public relations' news releases; this ranges from giving the journalist an idea for a story to using the news release in its entirety (Cameron & Blount, 1996).

The video news release imitates a news story from a television news operation, and the public relations practitioner sends it to the television station in the hope that it will help push its topic or event through the news gate and appear in the news show. In other words, the public relations practitioner's hope is that the video news release will have a strong, positive force in front of the news gate. Positive forces include the professionalism and high quality of the video news release and the fact that it is free to the television station.

This study looks at situations in which the positive or negative forces attached to the video news release triumph, resulting in the event being pushed through or away from the gate. We test the following hypothesis:

Journalists use the text and video in video news releases about a topic to the extent that they have knowledge about the topic.

The independent variable is the amount of knowledge a journalist holds about the topic. The dependent variable is the extent to which the video news release appears in or was the impetus for a news item. Journalists who know nothing about the topic are likely to use the video news release in full, whereas those with moderate knowledge may use parts of it. Journalists who are expert in the subject/issue covered in the VNRs are least likely to use any part of the video news releases.

Although some reporters may be physicians or have expert medical knowledge, most know less, especially when they are confronted with medical advances. Medical VNRs are more likely to be used completely when the television news reporters are not scientific experts, because reporters and their producers are afraid to get the story wrong. Journalists rarely have scientific training.

Methods

To control for topics having different characteristics, in this study we looked only at events in which medical breakthroughs were announced, such as press conferences. The unit of analysis in this study is the journalist. Events eligible for inclusion in the study are medical events covered in 50 local television news programs, randomly sampled from a list of all television news markets. The study includes data from both a content analysis and a survey.

Identifying the Event

All news items about medical breakthroughs were studied during the period of 2007. *Medical breakthroughs* are events that announce a new medicine, apparatus, or procedure. They were identified by having medical students code stories in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on a 10-point scale, according to whether the story is about an ordinary event (1) or one that is new (10). The event with the highest mean rating was identified as the study's medical breakthrough event; however, when the corporate owner of the breakthrough was contacted, it failed to provide a copy of all VNRs produced about the event. Therefore, the second-highest scoring event was used. It was about measuring brain chemistry to evaluate a person's level of depression.

Content Analysis

Next, coders contacted the 50 television stations and requested a copy of the primary news program on the day on which the medical breakthrough event was announced. All 50 news stations provided stories about the medical event. Coders then identified the names of the reporters and producers who worked on the story. If this information was not available from the video, then phone calls were made to the station. Information was available from all 50 stations, yielding 60 reporters and 50 producers.

Coders then compared the VNRs to the television news stories about this topic. The following dependent variables were coded, and intercoder reliability was assessed for each:

- number of stories about the new medical procedure
- number of stories about the disease generally
- number of (in seconds) visuals from VNR appeared in news program
- number of (in seconds) words from VNR appeared in news program
- number of (in seconds) material (visual and words) from VNR appeared in news program
- was the VNR used in its entirety?
- number of (in seconds) material (visual and words) in news program that did not come from VNR

Survey Procedures

Telephone calls were made to all 110 individuals. The questionnaire included these independent variables:

- age
- gender
- number of years experience in television news as (1) producer, (2) reporter
- number of college courses taken in (1) chemistry, (2) biology, (3) healthcare, and (4) medical topic
- number of continuing education presentations attended in these areas, also including medicine
- number of medical publications read regularly
- familiarity with medical topics in general, Likert scale
- familiarity with depression in particular, Likert scale
- personal experience with depression for (1) self, (2) close family member, (3) close friend, (4) co-worker—number of people known to have depression, in each category

MEDIA GATEKEEPING

Results

The data would be then be entered into a statistical computer program such as SPSS and analyzed. Familiarity would be the dependent variable and the other variables would be independent variables in the test of the hypothesis. Analysis would be by Analysis of Variance or multiple regression.

Summary

Now that gatekeeping scholarship is more than 50 years old, we need to think about elaborating the theory to address the world of the 21st century. Certainly, more research on the forces around gates needs to be done, and looking at gatekeeping as a concept on multiple levels of analysis is fruitful. But we should also operationalize aspects of gatekeeping other than mere selection. The way in which stories are shaped, timed, and presented is also part of the gatekeeping process, and such variables deserve to be included with selection in our arsenal of dependent variables. In addition, we should consider the ways in which these dependent variables may themselves interact to produce the final media content product.

Note

1. Although the piece of the world that first comes to the attention of journalists can be a person, an idea, or an event, in fact the vast majority of news is about events. Therefore, we will use the term *event* here to represent them all.

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