Chapter 19

The Media Gatekeeping Model Updated by R and I in ICTs: The Case of Wireless Communications in Media Coverage of the Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of digital technologies on media networks, in particular how they affect the traditional gatekeeping model. Wireless communications are the hot point of all digital technologies, and their application to the transmission of the Olympic Games is a milestone for the global creative industries every two/four years. The authors argue that the research and innovation (R&I) industries’ involvement with the media industries needs to be reconsidered within the framework of an updated media gatekeeping model. To investigate this research question, results are reported from a case study examining the gatekeeping processes in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and the subsequent Olympics up to 2016. Results show the need for a new gatekeeping model that takes into consideration the impact of digital technologies, especially wireless communications. Additionally, new decision models regarding innovation investment in the global media industry are suggested by the impact of R&I on the media gatekeeping model itself.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of the past fifty years, gatekeeping has emerged as one of the most influential communication theories. Kurt Lewin (1947) was the first to use the term, and subsequent scholars based their work on his assertions in the context of different professional and academic environments. These scholars describe gatekeepers as individuals or organizations/institutions determining the volume and the type of information that can be consumed by an audience. David Manning White (1950) is credited with a seminal work in the field of media studies. White observed
that the individual had significant authority in deciding what information should become public. Other researchers have scrutinized the role of individuals in deciding what information should pass the “gates” (Snider, 1967; Peterson, 1981; Singer, 1997; Hollifield et al., 2001; Cohen, 2002; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Dimitrova et al., 2003; Wanta & Craft, 2004).

Over the past sixty years, researchers have argued about the complexity of the gatekeeping process. Certainly, gatekeeping should be analyzed beyond the role of individuals/gatekeepers. According to Dimitrova et al. (2003),

Some practices that reduce uncertainty in making news decisions include: accepting the news definition of opinion leaders within a newsroom or on a particular beat; adopting of a group consensus through daily professional interaction; keying on output of a reference institution, such as the AP or The New York Times; accepting key sources’ definition of news; and using attitudes and values of reference groups other than those in the newsroom. (2003, p. 402).

Scholars have also turned their attention toward institutional environments and cultural settings and therefore toward macro analyses, rather than simply micro/individual analyses. For example, while explaining the development of the media sociology field, Reese and Ballinger (2001) argued that European researchers tended to favour macro analysis – institutions, societies, ideologies – in opposition to their American colleagues who routinely scrutinized individuals, and professional practices (2001, p. 641). The authors recommend a holistic research endeavour deriving different data – both qualitative and quantitative – at different levels, from individuals to societies/ideologies.

In this context, one of the milestone studies, which observed individual/gatekeepers within their work environments is Breed’s (1955) work “Social Control in the Newsroom.” Breed did not limit his observations to individual behaviours but rather investigated a process of professional socialization – how a journalist adapts to the organizational environment. Breed’s study is deemed significant conceptually as it reached profound conclusions on how a news organization acculturates its employees on what constitutes accepted and unacceptable professional behaviour. The study discovered that reporters were “sensing policy” and conformed to the cultural standards of the organization. These early gatekeeping projects were conducted in newspaper environments, but soon researchers turned their attention toward television (Berkowitz, 1990; Carroll, 1985) and then to the internet (Singer, 1998; Dimitrova et al., 2003).

At the media routines level, Shoemaker and Reese described professional practices and their influence on content. For example, reporters have developed news values that govern news selection and the framing of stories. Also, defensive routines such as “objectivity” allow journalists to protect themselves from accusations of perceived bias. Story structures and narratives are routinized. News stories have the same structure and format. Furthermore, the pack-journalism routine – journalists covering stories together and comparing notes – as well as deadline requirements, force journalists to work within certain boundaries (1996, p. 112). Breed’s (1995) work is important for understanding organizations and their influence on media content. Organizations do not always need to define explicitly what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. However, there are indirect ways to reward “appropriate” coverage and punish “inappropriate” journalistic behaviour. Every media organization is unique, as they enforce different policies, and promote different priorities, in terms of ownership patterns, pricing policies, business model development strategies, etc.

In terms of influences at the extra-media/social institution level of analysis, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) refer to interest groups, markets,
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