Revisiting the Gatekeeping Model: Gatekeeping Factors in European Wireless Media Markets

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ABSTRACT

Mediation in news industries has received significant attention by researchers for more than half a century. Gatekeepers decide which information should be delivered to different audiences. The Shoemaker/Reese Gatekeeping Model identifies five different filters of content processing: individual influences, professional routines, the organization, extra-media influences and ideology. Journalism practices, intra-organization and extra-media-related procedures and strategic alliances, including culture and ideology, add more complexity in the contemporary globalized media landscape. Gatekeeping is being processed through out all the above mentioned pillars. ICT technologies related to the media have influenced the interactivity among the pillars and wireless technologies have influenced the digital media landscape. The European Union has experienced dramatic changes in its regulation environment and spectrum resources allocation. In this article, the authors examine the impact of wireless technology on gatekeeping practices in the context of EU news markets.

Keywords: Competition, Deregulation, Digital Dividend, Market Performance, Media Gatekeeping Model, Radio-Spectrum Policy, Wireless Lisboa Treaty Goals

INTRODUCTION

For more than 50 years, gatekeeping has been an influential paradigm in the field of communication theory. The term “gatekeeping” has been coined by Kurt Lewin (1947) and ever since it has been utilized by various professional fields and academic disciplines. The literature describes gatekeepers as individuals who decide what kind and how much information should be allowed to be delivered to a particular audience. A seminal gatekeeping study is attributed to David Manning White who applied Lewin’s concept in the field of journalism. White’s (1950) study, also known as the “Mr. Gates” study, examined the personal news selection habits of a newspaper editor. White observed what news items were thrown away and which were retained. The editorial criteria, that determined what constituted newsworthiness, became subject to observation. This
Gatekeeping process analyzed by White was limited to one individual editor and his news selection practices.

Since the 1960s, the gatekeeping process has been refined and expanded to encompass not only information but also, raw materials, goods, services, technologies, and so forth. The definition of the “gatekeeper” does not pertain only to the individual but includes institutions and organizations of different kinds—even government bodies and international authorities. In the context of media communication, gatekeepers make quantitative as well as qualitative decisions that determine the flow of information and thereby influence public knowledge, perceptions and even behaviours related to different issues. Thereby, people’s understanding of world news has been dependent on global media gatekeeper decisions on what constitutes news and how much of the available news content should become public.

Gatekeeping is a complex, multidimensional process involving different players at different levels who become subject to various institutional influences. Analyzing this interplay of functions requires a systemic understanding and knowledge of the institutions. Gatekeeping is useful for understanding different communication processes at different stages, from message creation to dissemination and public consumption. Such an assessment requires a systemic conceptualization combined with available empirical evidence to enhance scholar understanding of contemporary media industries in a global digital, and even more, wireless environment.

THE GATEKEEPING LITERATURE

The “Mr. Gates” study focused on the news filtering criteria of the individual – the editor. Editors exercise a great deal of power in deciding what constitutes news. Manning described his editor’s decisions as “highly subjective.” One-third of the rejected news items were discarded because the editor decided they were not suited for publication, while the other two-thirds were rejected because of limited newspaper space (White, 1950, p. 386). In that case study, the editor rejected 90% of the wire news that reached him, demonstrating the degree of authority a newspaper editor exercises on what news should become public. Similar studies examining the role of individual news editors displayed similar results (Cohen, 2002; Dimitrova, Connolly-Ahern, Williams, & Paul, 2003; Hollifield, Kosicki, & Becker, 2001; Peterson, 1981; Plaisance, & Skewes, 2003; Singer, 1997; Snider, 1967; Wanta & Craft, 2004). Those initial gatekeeping studies emphasized the ability of the individual gatekeeper to shape news content. Later works, however, demonstrated that gatekeeping is a complex process involving different actors and practices. 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” (p. 402). Researchers realized that individual gatekeeping decisions should be examined in the context of institutional as well as cultural environments. Thus, the gatekeeping research tradition encompassed research questions and hypotheses superseding the narrow cycle of the individuals.

While outlining the origins of the media sociology tradition, Reese and Ballinger (2001) argued that the European media research tradition has favoured analyzing institutions, societies and ideologies in contrast to the American tradition which traditionally focused on individuals and practices (p. 641). Thereby, they suggested that a holistic research approach to gatekeeping should examine evidence from the micro to the macro level. The first significant deviation from analyses focused on individuals is Warren Breed’s (1955) work entitled “Social Control in the Newsroom.” The author exam-
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