

**DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION,  
BENUE STATE UNIVERSITY MAKURDI**

**COURSE TITLE: BROADCAST SEMINAR**

**COURSE CODE: COM 702**

**TOPIC: GATEKEEPING THEORY IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL  
MEDIA.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*There are vast literatures on the ways in which media content differs from reality, but we thus far have a rather weak sense for how exactly the representation of various topics in media differs from the distribution of information in the real world. Drawing on the gatekeeping literature, and utilizing a new automated content-analytic procedure, this article portrays both media content and “reality” as distributions of information. Measuring these allows us to identify the mechanism by which the distribution of information in the real world is transformed into the distribution of information in media; we can identify the gatekeeping function. And also show how gatekeeping has changed in the face of social media.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gatekeeping theory examines the flow of information from the media to the public; that is, the process by which media groups and individual “mediators” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) digest information and report news to the public in manageable sound bites. Since gatekeepers act as mediators establishing what important information is and worthy of transforming into a public message, gatekeepers contribute to individuals construction of social reality and their personal world view (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) propose that the Internet differs from other forms of mass media and mass communication as it provides increased opportunity for interactivity and two-way conversation. Web and social media platforms enable audience members to participate in the dialogue, interacting directly with businesses, institutions, and newsmakers. Finnemann (2011) outlines that “hypertextual, interactive, and multimodal features are unique to digital media” as a result, the interactive potential of digital media increases the ways in which individuals can transform the flow of news.

While some theorists (Rosentiel & Kovach 1999; Solomon & Schrum 2007) argue that gatekeeping theory does not apply to digital media, increased audience interactivity has, in fact, introduced a new stage in the gatekeeping process, whereby audience members participate as secondary gatekeepers on the Internet (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009,). Audience members have not only redefined gatekeeping theory by becoming active participants in the gatekeeping process, they have also redefined the very nature of the audience, making it more difficult to measure and predict target audiences because of the global influence of the Internet (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009,). Gatekeeping is, thus, further complicated by globalization since gatekeepers rely on audience demographic information to control the flow of information through the gates.

The shifting dynamic of the audience in digital media, both in relation to gatekeepers and as gatekeepers, complicates the movement through gates, proposing a new constitution of gatekeeping in which movement through a gate is no longer unidirectional (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 135). Additionally, if the audience does not regard themselves as gatekeepers, what is the audience’s perception of gatekeepers and how does this influence the flow of information?

Redefining gatekeeping in terms of a digital audience begs the question: who is an influencer and to what degree do other people see online influencers as gatekeepers?

## **ADVENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media is not as new a concept as one may think. As early as 1979, researchers from Duke University created ‘Usenet’, which was a worldwide discussion platform that allowed users to post public messages. An exponential increase in internet users (notably the emergence of young ‘digital natives’) since the 1990s, as well as the development of faster technologies (e.g. broadband) has changed the nature of the internet, leading to the advent of the concept of *Web 2.0* in 2004. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) define Web 2.0 as “a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion”. Combined with this, User Generated Content (UGC) emerged to describe the different types of media content that are widely available yet created by the end-users. As such, social media is defined as: “*a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content*” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Thus, social media is a broad term encompassing web logs (blogs), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), content communities (e.g. YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) and virtual gaming worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft). Some researchers also consider technologies that facilitate private communication (such as Skype) to be social media, although such technologies do not allow for the creation of user generated content.

Social media has been radically changing the landscape of corporate communication over the past few years and there are three things that make social media a powerful force: immediacy, ubiquity, and availability.

**Immediacy:** social media facilitates instantaneous information sharing (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011).

**Ubiquity:** There are literally hundreds of millions of individuals who use various social media platforms; Facebook alone has over 500 million users with more joining every day (Zuckerberg,

2010). Because social media is practically everywhere, social media makes it very easy to spread information to a wide audience (Lenhart & Fox, 2009; Madden, 2010).

**Availability:** Closely related to the previous two points, social media is available to anyone with an Internet connection, from homeless people, to company CEOs and everyone in between (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Lenhart, 2009).

## **Social Media**

How did social media become so powerful? What exactly *is* social media?

Social media is a broad term that encompasses several types of new media and communication practices. It is difficult to create an exhaustive list of the many forms social media takes. Social media is itself continually evolving and developing an exhaustive list of all types of social media is like hitting a moving target. Some of the more common forms of social media include: Weblogs (typically shortened to “blogs”), microblogs, social networks, wikis, and media-sharing sites (Pascu, Osimo, Ulbrich, Turlea, & Burgelman, 2007).

**Blogs;** A blog is a site that consists of a series of updates or posts in reverse chronological order. Typically, readers of the blog are able to comment on the articles posted and discuss them in a comments section at the end of each post (Qamra, Tseng, & Chang, 2006). Notaro (2006) defined blogs as “web publishing” and described them as “regularly updated web pages which function as a dynamic, content-focused shell” where authors can “take any number of rhetorical stances” in their “creative and analytical” posts. A key difference between a blog and a static Web page is that blogs “capture ongoing expressions, not the edits of a static creation” (Boyd, 2006). Blogs also allow for the participation of readers in discussion and content creation. This participation is often facilitated through a comments section at the end of a post (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). People, who write blogs (bloggers), write in the blogosphere, a term referring to the “intellectual cyberspace bloggers occupy” (Quick, 2002). Blogs first came into existence in the mid-90s and the blogosphere has since experienced exponential growth (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Blogpulse.com, a Web site that monitors trends in blogs has identified over 150 million blogs worldwide with about 50,000 new blogs created everyday (Blogpulse Stats, 2010).

**Micro-blogging;** Micro-blogging is a form of blogging, albeit on a dramatically smaller scale. Even though it is not the largest platform, Twitter is the main micro-blogging platform (at 500 million users, Facebook is the largest platform; however, micro-blogging is only one of many things that Facebook as a social network does) (Bennett, 2009). Twitter users can micro-blog by publishing “tweets” short posts of up to 140 characters in length. These posts could consist of a sentence fragment or two, perhaps with links to images, videos, or articles on other Web pages. Micro-bloggers use Twitter to share everything, from their mundane daily activities to more significant information; Twitterers form a community online together (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). Bennet (2009) described Twitter as basically “one very large continuous conversation being had by millions of people as we speak”. Twitter is a relatively small social network—only 8% of online Americans use it (Smith & Rainie, 2010) but it is growing quickly (Fox, Zickuhr, & Smith, 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2009).

According to Twitter’s own statistics (2010), there are 175 million Twitter users worldwide. Despite its small size, Twitter is also one of the most influential pieces of social media. Twitter’s influence is partly due to the large volume of tweets written per day (95 million according to Twitter). Twitter is mentioned regularly in the media and a majority of reporters use the network as a source (Cision & GWU, 2009).

**Social networks;** Social networks are perhaps the most popular piece of social media: As of this writing, there are hundreds of social networking sites, with Facebook and Myspace being some of the more popular in the Western world. Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social networks as: Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Social networks allow users to share and communicate in deeper ways than many of the other social media platforms. This is partly due to the fact that social networks frequently integrate other social media components into their design, e.g. a person’s social network page may contain a place for friends to write notes, a blog, media such as videos and photographs, as well as private-messaging and instant-messaging capabilities (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

**Wikis;** Wikis are collaboratively created and maintained Web sites. Where some Web sites rely on specific owners and authors to develop and maintain content, wikis are collaboratively maintained (Wagner, 2004). In some cases, that means only registered users of the wiki can edit content, while in other cases, such as Wikipedia, the wildly successful online open-source encyclopedia, anyone can edit it (Pfiel, Zaphiris, & Chee, 2006; Willinsky, 2007).

Indeed, Wikipedia actually bills itself as “the free encyclopedia anyone can edit” (Wikipedia, 2010). As of November 30, 2010, Wikipedia had almost 18 million pages in 276 languages, including over three-and-a-half million pages in English (Wikipedia, 2010).

**Media-sharing sites;** Media-sharing sites are places where users can share various media, such as images and videos, with a social group and the world at large. Two of the more popular media-sharing sites are YouTube (for videos) and Flickr (for photographs). The advent of these and other related media-sharing sites has added a layer of richness in the online social space.

While not social networks per se, media-sharing sites facilitate social behavior online as media consumption is an intrinsically social activity (Cesar et al., 2008; Kennedy, Naaman, Ahern, Nair, & Rattenbury, 2007). The use of media by members of a social group to stay connected to the other members of the group is what Lange (2007) termed a “media circuit,” noting that “a media circuit is not a social network itself, but rather it supports social networks by facilitating and technically mediating social interactions among people within a network” . This is one of the most popular reasons people use social media (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011).

**User-generated content;** as is evident from the partial list above, social media has a variety of platforms that are different from each other, but the common denominator to all of them is that they facilitate social behavior on a grand and instantaneous scale. Social media is itself a buzzword and it is also “driven by another buzzword: ‘user-generated content’ or content that is contributed by participants rather than editors” (Boyd, 2009, Locating Social Media, para 4 All citations of Wikipedia are drawn from its Web site November 30, 2010 – December 6, 2010. 2).

User-generated content is to social media as breathing air is to humans absolutely essential. Just as the structures of the human body are fundamentally designed for and around the physiology of breathing, social media platforms are designed for and around users creating and sharing content.

User-generated content also represents a shift in communication paradigms, especially as they relate to sharing content. Where traditionally, content was created by gatekeepers (e.g. journalists, etc.) and then distributed by representatives of those gatekeepers (e.g. newspapers), with this new paradigm, content creation and distribution is only limited by whether or not one has an Internet connection. Pascu et al. (2007) noted this “shift from consumption to participation is affecting everyday social practices.” With users acting as “both clients and service providers,” there are “new possibilities in organizing people, processes, relationships, knowledge, and collaboration”.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

### **Social Media**

Social media is defined as a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010,).

### **Gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping is the process by which the 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.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The relevance of communication theory in any given research cannot be over emphasized. It is against this backdrop that this section of the research utilizes theories that are relevant to the study. The study is anchored on the gatekeeping theory as the main theory for this research while media ecology theory is used as a supporting theory.



**GATEKEEPING THEORY**

Gatekeeping refers to the traditional role of journalists to select and narrate events. It has been defined by Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley (2001, p. 233) as “... *the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media.*” Shoemaker et al. (2001) have also underlined that gatekeeping goes beyond the simple story selection. In essence, gatekeeping is the practice of deciding why one story is selected to be reported and the other is not (Bruns, 2006, p. 12, Fig. 1). The gatekeeping process (see Table 2) involves three stages the input, output and response stage (Bruns 2005, 2009) (see also Table 1):

Table 1 – *The three stages of the gate-keeping process according to Bruns (2003)*

**Stages Gate-watching Input Output Response**

Stages	Gate-watching	Input	Output	Response
<b>Gatekeeping (Bruns, 2005, p. 12)</b>	-	- Newsgathering only by staff journalists	Closed editorial hierarchy	Editorial selection of letters/calls to be made public

- At the input stage, journalists themselves chose news stories to be covered. They narrate stories by combining input from various sources with background and context information. The information is synthesized from multiple sources into one coherent news report, which is published as a product itself and which does not necessarily disclose the original sources of information.
- At the output stage, editors make the final decision and select from journalists’ material stories to be reported and published.

- At the response stage, a restrict number of audiences' responses are selected to be incorporated in the day's paper or in the on-air broadcast.

The first works on gatekeeping theory belong to White (1950) who has explored the private reasons given by a newspaper editor for discarding possible news issues. They were followed by studies focused on televisions' newsrooms (D. Berkowitz, 1990; Harmon, 1989) and on websites (Beard & Olsen, 1999; Singer, 2001). Researchers have demonstrated that organizational factors and routines have more impact than gatekeeper journalists on what the public perceives (Beam, 1990; Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Shoemaker, et al., 2001).

Gatekeeping can be influenced by several factors. It seems that events are more likely to pass through the media gates if they are consistent with an expectancy (Singer, 1998; Snider, 1967; White, 1950), if they concur within the time frame of publication (Singer, 1998) and if they are unpredicted stories (Singer, 1998). Similarly, values of both gatekeepers and their audience can influence stories' choice (Beard & Olsen, 1999; DeFleur, 1966; Singer, 1998). If an event or issue passes through the gate once, it is likely that it will pass through the gate again (Singer, 1998). In daily coverage, some issues or events are collected purely because they diverge from others (Singer, 1998). Additional variables that can affect gatekeepers' choices are expert judgment and motivation (D. A. Berkowitz, 1997), political ideology (Chang & Lee, 1992), education and other background experiences (Peterson, 1979), class position and career pressures (Gans, 1979).

Some evidence shows that journalists view the gatekeeping role as changing and adjusting rather than vanishing. Media newsrooms are adapting their characterization of gatekeepers to include concepts of both quality control and sense-making (Singer, 1997). In his book *The Power of News*, Schudson (1995) appeals readers to envisage a world in which everyone has the ability to distribute news to everyone else through a computer. He has imagined an ecosystem in which everyone can be his or her own journalist. He has advocated that individuals would be rapidly lost to figure out which sources are relevant and accurate.

Someone will be needed to sort out the legitimate information. Moreover, in order to find the best content, audience would prefer to be helped by trusted and impartial sources such as media organizations than other sources. Hence, the world imagined by Schudson is not so far from the recent reality, questioning the traditional role of gatekeeper-journalists.

Major reasons for gatekeeping include the following;

- 1) In exercising its "surveillance" function, every news medium has a very large number of stories brought to its attention daily by reporters, wire services, and a variety of other sources.
- 2) Due to a number of practical considerations, only a limited amount of time or space is available in any medium for its daily presentations of the news to its audience. The remaining space must be devoted to advertising and other content.
- 3) Within any news organization there exists a news perspective, a subculture that includes a complex set of criteria for judging a particular news story - criteria based on economic needs of the medium, organizational policy, definitions of newsworthiness, conceptions of the nature of relevant audience, and beliefs about fourth estate obligations of journalists.
- 4) This news perspective and its complex criteria are used by editors, news directors, and other personnel who select a limited number of news stories for presentation to the public and encode them in ways such that the requirements of the medium and the tastes of the audience are met.
- 5) Therefore, personnel in the news organization become gatekeepers, letting some stories pass through the system but keeping others out, thus limiting, controlling, and shaping the public's knowledge of the totality of actual event occurring in reality."

### **MEDIA ECOLOGY THEORY**

McLuhan and Fiore's (1989) media ecology communication theory applies to this thesis in that it is not possible to understand social and cultural change without knowledge of the working environments of media. Media ecology is the study of personal and social environments created by the use of different communication technologies (McLuhan, 2003).

Media ecology aligns with the socio-cultural tradition of communication theory. McLuhan (2003) writes: “Given that the medium is the communication mechanism the medium utilized creates, influences and determines the social reality in which people interact”.

Television stations (and other media) broadened the ability to communicate and involve viewers with the implementation of changes in their use of technology. Smartphones and other mobile devices now allow viewers to follow the news throughout the day, and because mobile connectivity they can follow it regardless of where they are. Heaton (2011) notes that, social media is being more involved than ever in developing leads and providing information. Thus multi-media journalists are tasked to a greater degree of checking for accurate information prior to publishing it. The news directors in the survey all agreed checking data from social media platforms before using it is critical.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The study will analyze how social media has impacted television news gathering. Data collected via a survey, provided by professionals in the business of broadcasting and professionals in marketing will measure the impact from social media on television reporting.

Surveys with 20 different industry professionals on the topic will directly link the information to the research question. The professional surveys in this thesis demonstrate the power of the Internet and social media in our society. The cumulative body of the research will provide a large sample of evidence that addresses the research question. The shared and personal features of the evidence offer understanding of the changes in news-gathering at local television stations.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Question 1: How has gatekeeping changed with the advent of social media and local television stations’ websites?

Question 2: What are other media outlets doing to embrace social media and news gatekeeping?

Question 3: How is social media affecting gatekeeping?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

The basic idea of gatekeeping has been cogently stated in Shoemaker's valuable review of the literature: "simply put, gatekeeping is the process by which the 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" (1991, 1). Gatekeeping as a theory of communications began with Lewin's (1951) work on community dynamics and a notion of gatekeeping that was laid out in terms of food consumption—the selection process by which certain foods reach the dinner table, or not. Lewin saw this as a product of "communications channels" and "gates," metaphors well-suited to a theory of news selection in mass media. Media gatekeeping was then more fully developed in White's (1950) classic case study of a wire editor at a smalltown daily newspaper. White catalogued the news stories provided by wire services, and the news stories that ended up in the newspaper, and explored the editor's reasons for including or excluding certain stories.

Note that this early work, and indeed much of the gatekeeping literature since, focuses on the selection of one event or another, rather than the selective framing of a single event. Events are of course open to interpretation, and there is a large and valuable literature on issue framing (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007.) Indeed, some gatekeeping work views selection and framing in tandem (e.g., Donohe et al. 1972). The somewhat more parsimonious view, however, and the one adopted here, is that gatekeeping theory focuses on the selection mechanism.

And it is the identification of broader trends in news selection—across individuals, and media outlets, and time—that have made gatekeeping a particularly fruitful theory of news selection.

Gatekeeping is in this view more than just a product of an individual's preferences, whims, or errors. Regardless of the editor, or the media outlet, certain types of stories will be selected, while others will not. There is thus a strong possibility that there will be systematic differences between news content and the real world.

Biases in news selection have been portrayed as a function of a variety of factors, including, for instance: the organization-level factors such as administrative characteristics, working procedures, and cost and time constraints (e.g., Bass 1969; Berkowitz 1991; Donohue, Olin, and Tichenor 1989; Gieber 1964; Jones, Trohldahl, and Hvistendahl 1961; Shoemaker et al. 2001)

the story-level factors such as the geographic proximity of the story, visual features (for television), the clarity (ready interpretability) of the story, and story types—disasters, economics, crime, etc. (e.g., Abbott and Brassfield 1989; Galtung and Ruge 1965) and extra-organizational, or professional, factors such as journalistic values and norms, and views of “newsworthiness” (e.g., Gans 1979; Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1972).

Much of this work is drawn together in research by Shoemaker and colleagues, which makes clear that the process of gatekeeping occurs at multiple levels individual, organizational, and so on (Shoemaker 1996; Shoemaker et al. 2001; Shoemaker and Vos 2009).

Note that there are links between extra organizational accounts of gatekeeping and the recent and growing body of new institutionalist theory in political communications. This recent literature focuses on the ways in which institutions, defined broadly to include journalists’ practices, values, and routines, affect the production of news content. The seminal new institutionalist accounts are found in Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999). Their work takes a somewhat broader perspective than the gatekeeping literature—it deals not just with the impact of current institutions, for instance, but with the timing and evolution of (and equilibrium in) those institutions, due to a range of sociological and economic factors. Like work on gatekeeping, then, new institutionalist accounts raise questions about the impact of factors such as work routines, economic imperatives, and journalistic norms, among many others, on news content.

Distinguishing between the relative impacts of these various factors is, of course, difficult, and this article makes no effort to do so. That is, the article examines differences between media content and “reality,” where the differences are almost certainly driven by some combination of the many factors outlined above. Even so, the dimension across which information is explored points towards (theoretically if not also empirically) extra organizational or new institutional factors, particularly those surrounding views of “newsworthiness.”

In short, this article explores the degree to which newsworthiness may be linked to tone, positive or negative, and the consequent systematic differences between news content and the real world. That newsworthiness may be linked to negativity across a wide range of subjects is readily

evident in the literature on mass media (e.g., Altheide 1997; Harrington 1989; Iyengar and Reeves 1997; Patterson 1994; Shoemaker, Change, and Bredlinger 1987; Soroka 2006). These findings are buttressed by literatures on individuals' disproportionate attentiveness to negative versus positive information, across many (but certainly not all) subjects, in psychology (e.g., Van der Pligt and Eiser 1980; Vonk 1996; Weinstein and Crowds 1968), economics (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979), evolutionary biology (e.g. McDermott, Fowler, and Smirnov 2008), and neurology (e.g., Herwig et al. 2007). These literatures suggest that, for a variety of reasons, negative information is in certain situations viewed as being more important than equally positive information.

We thus regularly pay more attention to negative over positive information; or, in media terms, are more likely to select negative over positive stories. The consequent gatekeeping effect may be a systematic difference in the degree of negativity in the real world and in media content.

## **REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL WORKS**

Landau in *How Social Media is Changing Crisis Communication: A Historical Analysis*, 2011 states that as people are creating these third places online, a result has been the rise of citizen journalism à la the Rothergate bloggers and commenters on FreeRepublic.com (Bentley, 2006; Cornfield, Carson, Kalis, & Simon, 2005). Social media facilitates online communities in a way that was never possible before. These online communities exist apart from local communities, but they can be used to reinforce local communities, just as Oldenburg's third places did in their day (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009). The rise of the virtual third place has coincided with the decline in traditional journalism (Franklin, 2003, 2005; Markham, 2010; Young, 2009). Today, anyone with a cell phone camera can be a "journalist" because of the Internet. The Internet and social media in particular, facilitate citizen journalism on a grand scale (Jacobson, 2008). This has strong implications for today's crisis communicators as it only takes one person—perhaps even a person within their own organization—to spread the word about an incident. Once something has been leaked in a blog or shared on Twitter, the news is out there and unlike a

verbal conversation, which can be forgotten, content on the Internet lasts forever and can be read by anyone all over the world. It is very difficult to put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Landau further states that, today, journalists have a great deal of competition in spreading news as they are no longer the gatekeepers that they used to be. While citizen journalists may not meet the same standards of professional journalism nor produce the same caliber of content “the reality is that non-journalists are contributing to official and unofficial news outlets in greater numbers. Clearly, the definition of ‘who is a journalist’ is changing” (Jacobson, 2008, p. 6).

Journalists are recognizing this shift and many journalists monitor Twitter, blogs and other social media for breaking news. Journalists are also using social media for researching their stories, with blogs being their favored social media source (Cision & GWU, 2009). Traditional news outlets use social media as sources and social media news outlets use traditional outlets as sources—they quote each other.

The inter-reliance of social media and traditional media creates a vast and fast (if also somewhat fractious) information-sharing network and news community. Most traditional news outlets have a social presence, which would include a Web site with their news content complete with Web-only blog content, and a Twitter and/or Facebook account as well as perhaps video content on YouTube (Stassen, 2010). Even the smallest newspapers often have Web sites for their news content as well as blogs (Adams, 2007; Schultz & Sheffer, 2009). Reporters themselves use the Internet and social media in particular as newsgathering resources (Garrison, 2003; Hermans, Vergeer, & d’Haenens, 2009). In a joint study by Cision and George Washington University (2009), a plurality of journalists reported that social media was very important, with nine out of ten using blogs for research and about two-thirds using social networking sites (including over half using Twitter).

In their work *Social Media News Communities: Gatekeeping, Coverage, and Statement Bias*, trumper et al studied the presence of bias in online news and the social media communities that surround them. Our results support the following high-level conclusions.



In international news media, selection and coverage biases seem more correlated with geographical variables than political leaning. In other words, online news sources in a given geographical region tend to select the same stories, and write articles of similar relative length.

Social media follows the same pattern, with the communities of media in a region showing a similar proportion of tweets to stories. Political bias is evident in social media, in terms of the distribution of tweets different stories receive. This distribution is more closely related among communities of news media having the same political leaning (at least in the US for which we could obtain political leaning information). Political bias is also observable in terms of the distribution of length of articles on different stories in traditional media, but to a smaller extent than in social media. Statement bias is also evident in social media. In a sample of statements referring to world leaders, we find that the language used in social media is more opinionated, and often more negative, than the one used in traditional news media.

In terms of editorial policies regarding the prominence or importance of stories covered, we observe that magazine type of news (which in general covers less articles and stories) tends to select stories of high prominence and produce exclusive content. More importantly, we observe that social media tend to be much more focused in niche content than traditional news media. In particular, very prominent stories seem to receive much less attention in social media than in traditional news sources.

Also Soroka in his work *The Gatekeeping Function: Distributions of Information in Media and the Real World* stated that media gatekeeping has been well studied. We know that journalists and editors have to select from a wide range of stories. We know that their selection is systematically biased, driven by a combination of organizational factors, news norms, and audience interests. And we know that the resulting news content is skewed towards stories that are, for instance, more sensational, and/or unusual, and or conflictual, and or geographically proximate.

We have, in short, accumulated a considerable body of work on many different causes and consequences of gatekeeping. That said, we have across a wide range of issues only a vague

sense for the actual difference between news and reality. (Though there are some notable exceptions, discussed below.) A big part of the difficulty is that we often do not know what the “real world” looks like nor have we typically been able to deal with the entire body of news content. Getting an accurate sense of the gatekeeping effect requires both—it requires that we compare the distribution of a given phenomenon in real life to the distribution of news on that phenomenon in mass media.

The current article has two objectives. First, and most importantly, the article builds on past work to develop a “distributional” approach to understanding the factors that influence news selection in mass media. Second, the article uses that distributional approach to examine the tendency for mass media to focus on negative over positive information. Automated content analytic methods are used to capture the distribution of tone in stories on unemployment from 1980 to 2008 in the New York Times, and this is compared to the distribution of upwards and downward changes in the unemployment rate. Analyses reveal systematic differences between economic conditions in real life and economic conditions as captured by mass media; more importantly, they reveal the gatekeeping function a distribution function showing the probability with which media select and present stories across a range of tone.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

The last few years have brought many new challenges for news media. The advent of the Internet and the accompanying implementation of new distribution models have radically changed the way journalism is produced and perceived. One aspect of this is social media. Interactive offers like Facebook or Twitter have brought a new dimension and dynamic to newsgathering. As traditional news media like newspapers or broadcasters have already adapted to this information and communication tools to a large extent, there is still a big task at hand for news agencies. Their business model makes it a lot harder to make use of these platforms and interact with users. This research focuses on this aspect and tries to detect how traditional wire services can make use of social media.

In general it can be said that news agencies and their journalists use social media first and foremost as a means of newsgathering. As close to 2 billion people make use of these platforms

in one or the other form, this is simply a way of searching the web for new information that cannot be neglected.

A second very important aspect for journalists (and institutions) is to build networks with people on the ground, experts and even their customers. Not only can their knowledge be utilized, but also new audiences and clients can be reached, although each of the reviewed agencies has a very different approach to this. The distribution aspect – especially for smaller agencies with a business-to-business model – is probably the trickiest part right now. Without a proper news website of their own, it is a very difficult task to create a model for social media that enables them to distribute news there without affronting their customers. Finally, social media is a way for news agencies to be visible, to present new services and to some extent also strengthen their brand.

From the forgoing one could conclude that gatekeeping has been existence so as to curtail and curb harmful and damaging news the public. Also that the news editors in media houses tend to be the first gatekeepers.

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