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## 42

## Network Gatekeeping

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The concept of *gatekeeper* was coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947, 1951). His theory of "channels and gatekeepers" was developed as a means of understanding how to produce widespread social changes in communities. Gatekeeping theories have since been applied in various fields. In disciplines such as communication and journalism, the notions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers are used to understand social systems; in the health sciences, operations research, and technology development, the notions are used to augment service practices (Beckman & Mays, 1985; Motoyer-Duran, 1993; Shoemaker, 1991; Shumsky & Pinker, 2003). While traditional gatekeeping theories were mainly applied in communication (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989; Gieber, 1956; Shoemaker, 1991; White, 1950), they mainly referred to gatekeeping as a selection process and offered scholars a framework for analyzing, evaluating, and comprehending how communication or news selection occurred and why some items were selected while others were rejected. More generally, they offered a framework to continue Lewin's research on social change, and examine sources for cultural diversity.

As networks, and more specifically, the Internet, became ubiquitous, however, scholars have increasingly used the term *gatekeeper* (Birnhack & Elkin-Koren, 2003; Cornfield & Rainie, 2003; Hargittai, 2000) for illustration rather than referencing a specific theoretical framework. Cyberspace has notably changed both the identity and role of gatekeepers as well the gatekeeping process.

Consistent with the initial course of gatekeeping research—as discussed in the communication literature—Barzilai-Nahon (2004) proposed *network gatekeeping theory* (NGT). Comprising multidisciplinary aspects, including information systems, management, political science, and sociology, NGT offers new definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers by

adapting traditional concepts to a networked society. Based on an examination of power relations on the Internet and a space of information, NGT conceptualizes the distribution of information and processes of information control. It enables one to analyze centralization in networks, which have a decentralized design, and are commonly viewed as egalitarian spaces. NGT has many ramifications for how we comprehend information dissemination and user behavior on the Internet.

NGT comprises five basic concepts:

- 1) *Gate* – The entrance to, or the exit from, a network or its sections.
- 2) *Gatekeeping* – The process of controlling information as it moves through a gate. Activities include selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, and disregard and deletion of information.
- 3) *Gatekeeping Mechanism* – Tool, technology or methodology used to carry out the process of gatekeeping.
- 4) *Network Gatekeeper* – An entity (person, organization, or governing body) that has the discretion to exercise gatekeeping through a gatekeeping mechanism in networks and can choose the extent to which to exercise it.
- 5) *Gated* – An entity that is subject to a gatekeeping process.

Gatekeepers in networks have three main functions: 1) to prevent the entrance of undesired information from the outside; 2) to prevent the exit of undesired information to the outside; and 3) to control information inside the network. Table 42.I summarizes the exclusiveness of NGT compared to traditional gatekeeping theories.

Because the traditional concept of *gatekeeping* was developed mainly as a part of mass communication discourse, the players were conceived as acting in sender-receiver roles. The gatekeeper was conceived as a mass media agent (such as a newspaper, television, or radio station) playing the role of the sender, with the gated, (such as a newspaper reader, television viewer, or radio listener) playing the role of the receiver. The gatekeeper was responsible for editing, producing, and distributing information to be received by the gated.

Table 42.I Traditional gatekeeping vs. network gatekeeping.

	Traditional Gatekeeping	Network Gatekeeping Theory (NGT)
<b>Gatekeeping process</b>	Mainly a selection process	Information control that includes activities such as selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion
<b>Focus on gatekeepers</b>	The individual gatekeeper	Focus on two dimensions: authority and functional. Different levels in each dimension (e.g., governments, regulators, search providers, network service providers, organizations, individuals)
<b>Focus on gatekeeping mechanism</b>	Editorial mechanisms	Nine categories are part of gatekeeping mechanisms (e.g., censorship, channeling, infrastructure mechanisms), and one meta-category, the regulation mechanism
<b>Relationship</b>	Relations of sender-receiver	Frequent exchange interaction between gated and gatekeeper
<b>Information</b>	Notion of source-destination	No necessary association between source-destination and gatekeeper-gated
	Only gatekeepers produce and create information freely	The gated also create and produce information
<b>Alternatives</b>	No alternatives to gatekeeping	Possible circumvention of gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms
<b>Power</b>	Gatekeeper has power, the gated has none	The bargaining power of the gated is on the rise. On the other hand, gatekeepers have more mechanisms to control information
<b>Number of gatekeepers</b>	One to a few	A few to many
<b>Types of gatekeepers</b>	One to a few	A few to many

In the context of networks, however, the notion of separate sender-receiver is no longer valid. During any network interaction, the roles of sender and receiver are repeatedly exchanged, with the gatekeeper and the gated playing both roles.

Consistent with the notion of sender-receiver, traditional literature treats information that passes from sender to receiver as having a source-to-destination direction. The source is presumed to be the originator of the information (the gatekeeper) and the information (the gated) is presumed to be the destination. However, in the context of networks, information can also be produced by the gated, and the gated can serve as a source; likewise, the gatekeeper can also serve as a destination point. Furthermore, according to the traditional literature, only gatekeepers create and produce information; the gated audience is not considered capable of producing and creating information freely. The gated only rarely receive the right to create information, in most cases under the control and authorization of the gatekeeper. For example, a newspaper reader asked to react to an article may do so only by means of a column reserved for reader responses, and one of the editors must approve it for publication. NGT argues that in networks, the relationship between gatekeepers and gated is more complex.

It is likely that the gatekeepers create and produce greater volumes of information than the gated because of their vast resources. Nevertheless, the gated can create and produce information independently as well, without having to pass through a content gatekeeper. But when the gated create information independently, its significance is rather low because of the limited exposure it receives compared to information disseminated by the gatekeepers that control most of the audience's attention. The existence of alternative public platforms to gatekeepers is significant in itself because it contributes to a more pluralized cyberspace. Another way of analyzing gated power in networks is by focusing on the production of information rather than on the creation of information. The gated can produce information in networks that was created by gatekeepers, an ability that enhances the power of the gated.

A major deterministic claim put forth by the traditional concept of gatekeeping is that the gated's ability to circumvent the gatekeeping process is minimal. The only alternative is to circumvent a specific gatekeeper by

moving to another within the same community, which may well be subject to the same biases and procedures. For example, a reader can switch from one newspaper to another, but the process of gatekeeping through the editorial process continues. NGT shows that in networks the gated can circumvent gatekeeping. For example, through publishing an independent Web site, the gated can respond to events that she cannot respond to through traditional channels of the media and without the intervention of gatekeeping. However, circumvention is not always possible even in networks since often gatekeepers use more than one mechanism, depending on context, which makes the circumvention more difficult.

In traditional literature, relationships between gatekeepers and their audience are mainly uni-directional. This strengthens the gatekeepers' power and their control over their audience. Because of the presumed sender-receiver roles of gatekeeper (sender) and the gated (receiver), the gated are not perceived as possessing any significant power. In a networked environment the situation is significantly more complicated. The gated may have alternatives and the power to create and produce information. Their bargaining position and power are enhanced relative to traditional roles. Consequently, gatekeepers must avoid conditions that encourage the gated to overcome gates that have been posted in networks. On the other hand, gatekeepers have more mechanisms of information control, which they can exercise over the gated (see Figure 42.1).

Traditional gatekeeping researchers usually use ethnographic case study methodologies. In analyzing gatekeeping in a networked context, this might not be sufficient. Barzilai-Nahon (2004) suggests a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology, using a content analysis of the information combined with quantitative methods, to analyze models as part of the general NGT. NGT allows one to understand information control and to predict patterns of user behavior in the networked environment. For example, it was found that senior members of virtual communities are less likely to post messages that harm the community compared to new members (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004).

In summary, the Internet poses new paradigmatic challenges. On the one hand, it is a more open space than other offline means of communication and allows more diversity in the behavioral modes of users. On the other hand, information control is frequent, and consequently, scholars

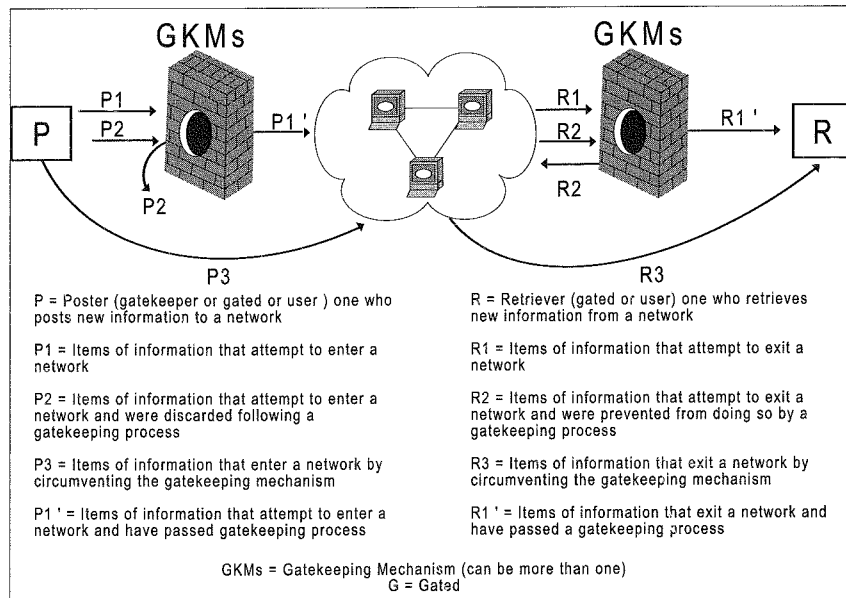


Figure 42.1 Illustrative model of network gatekeeping.

and practitioners should be aware of the importance of analyzing cyberspace through the lens of gatekeeping. NGT enables one to conceptualize and analyze information flow over the Internet, both technically and socially. NGT emphasizes power relationships among relevant actors through information flow, and identifies potential bottlenecks and obstacles. Finally, analyzing the phenomenon of information flow through NGT also helps practitioners and scholars evaluate aspects of virtual communities' cultures through an awareness of the forces that control and provide information to members of online communities.

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