

Gatekeeping theory: An evolution

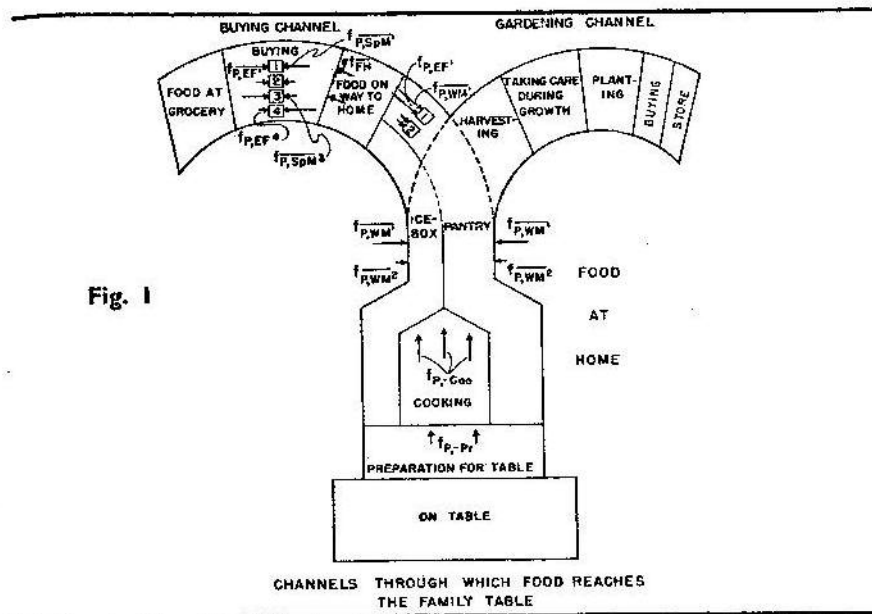


Fig. 1

From Kurt Lewin's "Frontiers in group dynamics II: Channels of group life; social planning and action research," 1947

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ABSTRACT: Gatekeeping theory, one of the original theories to come from mass communication research, has remained important since its debut shortly after World War II. While not necessarily the most interesting or controversial of mass communication theories, a series of scholars has advanced it during the past decades. The foremost gatekeeping scholar today says the theory remains relevant, and the emergence of "weblogs" has returned gatekeeping to the forefront of research considerations.

Gatekeeping theory: An evolution

Because of Winn-Dixie¹, mass communication has a theory of gatekeeping. Not the Florida-based retailer specifically, but the food business plays a minor role in the development of the theory that considers how mass media whittle the large number of available messages into the select few offered to an audience. What started with German émigré Kurt Lewin's experiments to entice Iowa women to eat more beef (hearts, livers, kidneys, and other secondary cuts of meat) as a patriotic duty during World War II (Rogers, 1994) has evolved into numerous models and hundreds of studies of media gatekeepers and gatekeeping – and into contemporary study of whether the Internet has turned solid “gates” into little more than screen doors.

As will be discussed in this paper, gatekeeping models have become increasingly sophisticated as theorists consider wider ranges of the external pressures on gatekeepers and the internal characteristics of the individual gatekeepers and the system that employs them. Moreover, gatekeeping theory has contributed to theories of social control and agenda-setting. Other researchers have spent the succeeding decades defining and refining the original approach of gatekeeping theorists. And the theory has gained new interest – or at least an upswing in the use the word “gatekeeping” – as the Internet has made it easier for anyone to publish on nearly any topic without the traditional gatekeeping of traditional mass media.

The earliest gatekeeping model (Lewin, 1947) included less than a sentence to mass communication; the most recent gatekeeping model is more than a decade old and attempts to summarize and expand upon previous models yet “still leaves many questions

¹ Opened February 18 at a theater new you, adopted from the Kate DiCamillo novel about a smiling dog.

unanswered” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 75). The theory has “appeal and plausibility” and applications wider than news decisions² (McQuail, 2000, p. 277) but, like many theories of mass communication, it has weaknesses. Gatekeeping is fundamentally a descriptive theory, with a normative bent that offers little if any predictive power. Its chief value comes in summarizing the various forces that come into play as news people make decisions about what messages will be selected to present to their audiences. It provides a framework researchers can use; it does little else.

Gatekeeping is the vanilla ice cream of mass communication theory. It may not be everyone’s favorite, but nearly everyone can tolerate it. And while it may have an unremarkable flavor, it serves as a building block for other theory and methodological approaches. Shoemaker noted the objection by O’Sullivan in a 1983 text that called gatekeeping theory “oversimplified and of little utility.” Yet Fisher (1978, p. 120) saw gatekeeping as “a significant element in much communication research.” Clearly, Fisher appreciates vanilla ice cream (and gatekeeping theory) for what they are – sometimes good enough on their own, and sometimes not good enough.

Kurt Lewin: From sweetmeat to gatekeep, 1947

Like other early contributors into what is now known as mass communication theory and research, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) was not a mass communicator. The Prussian-born scholar was best known as an experimental psychologist whose focus was “field theory” or group dynamics, the study of how a



² For this paper, the focus will remain on gatekeeping by news media instead of interpersonal communications, book publishing, answering machines, American Idol, or other uses of the theory.

person's behavior may change based on his/her connection to a group of people. He was a proponent of Gestalt psychology, which argues that individuals are "open systems" who are in "active interaction with their environment" (Wikipedia, 2005). This is important, as many mass communication theories take for granted the underlying assumptions of Gestalt.³ The Jewish man came to America as Hitler came to power⁴, eventually landing a position at the University of Iowa in 1935. Rogers said Lewin was largely dependent upon "soft" money to fund his research, which meant he often focused (whether forced or not) upon finding solutions to practical problems. One of these funded efforts was the "sweetbreads" study, with its wartime goal of raising homeland consumption of secondary cuts of beef⁵ so primary cuts could go to the military. Essentially, the experiment studied the effects of lectures (a one-way mass communication) to Iowa housewives on the need for increased domestic sweetmeat consumption and whether those lectures changed their shopping behavior. Lewin later drew two conclusions from that (and other studies) that make a difference today:

1. The "unfreeze – change – refreeze" approach used by parents and managers to modify behavior of their charges.
2. The theory of "gatekeeping."

Lewin died of a heart attack on February 11, 1947, before publication of the first work that established a theory of gatekeeping and introduced nomenclature still used by

³ Those Gestalt psychological assumptions, again from Wikipedia: Law of Closure- if something is missing, our mind adds it; Law of Similarity- our mind groups similar things together; Law of Proximity- things that are close together are seen as belonging together; Law of Symmetry- symmetrical images are seen as belonging together regardless of distance; Law of Continuity- our mind continues a pattern even after it stops; Figure-ground- minds have an innate tendency to perceive one aspect of an event as the figure or foreground and the other as the ground or the background.

⁴ His mother was not as fortunate; Rogers reports that Lewin's mother died in a Nazi concentration camp.

⁵ The thymus is known as "sweetbread." Other parts were beef hearts, kidneys, and livers, which were rejected by most people shopping for meat. ("People come up to me and say, 'Ooh, don't eat hotdogs; they have really weird things in them.' But it doesn't bother me because I love animal lips." Steve Martin, "Comedy is Not Pretty," 1979, Warner Brothers.)

current researchers. Lewin realized that housewives are key gatekeepers who control what food enters the “channels” that ultimately bring it from the garden or supermarket into the household and ultimately onto the dining-room table. Each channel is walled into sections surrounded by gates – the decision-making points that determine whether the food will enter the channel to start with, or move to the next section. And along the way, forces exert pressure to accept or reject food.

While Lewin was writing *about* tripe, he was not writing it; he realized that his gatekeeping model goes far beyond food choices. As he wrote, the theory of gates “holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group...” (Lewin, 1947, p. 145).

Studying ‘Mr. Gates,’ 1950

David Manning White (1917-1993) found himself in the presence of academic greatness while seeking his doctoral degree in English during the early 1940s in bucolic Iowa City, Iowa. He studied with Lewin and took classes from Wilbur Schramm, largely credited with institutionalizing mass communication research within academia. White took to Schramm’s “source – message – receiver” approach to mass communication research, the dominant paradigm and one that fits nicely with the “channel” theory of gatekeeping. While spending the summer of 1947 working on the editorial copy desk of *The Peoria Star*, it occurred to White to watch how the newspaper’s wire editor chose which of the scores of available stories would be published. White asked “Mr. Gates” to document his decision-making process; Mr. Gates (who had worked for White as an adjunct faculty member at Bradley University) kept track of his decision-making process for a week in February 1949.

This was integrated⁶ into Lewin's theory posited in the 1947 *Social Forces* article; the result was what *Journalism Quarterly* called "one of the first studies of its kind" in gatekeeping.

Reese and Ballinger (2001) suggest that White's study both fit the theoretical paradigm expounded by Schramm (who received footnoted thanks for his suggestions in the 1950 article) while expanding upon it. The "sender/receiver tradition of the engineering models" (p. 647) was assumed by White's approach, as was the focus on the individual who made the gatekeeping decisions. Moreover, the authors note that White both "brought into focus the intuitive notion that not all that happens in the world gets into the news" and introduced the notion of subjectivity among gatekeepers.

While White's 1950 look at Mr. Gates has been duplicated and criticized, it has remained a seminal piece of mass communication research. Similar approaches have been used by Snider (1967), who replicated the study years later with the very same Mr. Gates and found "his 1949 answers to the questions asked are consistent with his 1966 answers" (p. 427), and with variations for women (Bleske, 1991) and different media such as photographs (Bissell, 2000) or television (Whitney & Becker, 1982).

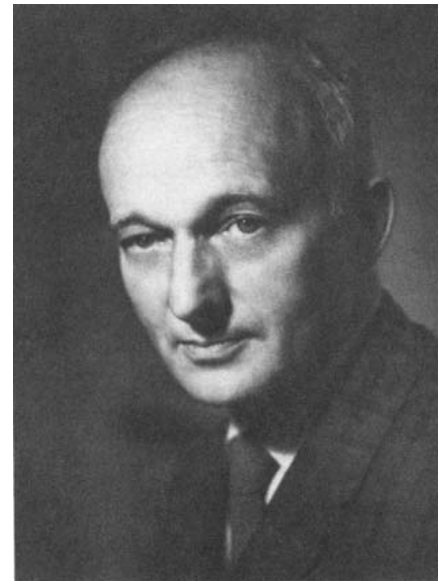
An important early expansion upon the first Mr. Gates study came from Gieber (1956), whose dissertation at the University of Wisconsin expanded White's early study to 16 wire editors. His key finding was that wire editors are "caught in a strait jacket of mechanical details" and at the mercy of the press associations because they can only publish what the wires provide. While White's study focused on the man who made the decisions, Gieber noted that the process surrounding the men who make the decisions is just as important (or perhaps even more important.). These gatekeepers are passive and reactive, unable to do

⁶ The order of events is hazy. Rogers quotes White as saying he discovered the Lewin article while writing the results. Reese and Ballinger's writing would suggest that White knew about Lewin's theory and decided to test it.

much to influence the copy they receive. (If the wires send 12 stories on a topic and all are bad, papers must decide either to not publish a story on the topic or to publish one they may not want to publish.) Moreover, Gieber notes that the gatekeepers in his study also are affected by organizational influences ignored by White, such as the work routines and the rush simply to meet deadline. Gieber's study, also imperfect, was an improvement over White because it introduced more variables and pressures into the analysis. Gieber also cites an early theory of mass communication that is further explicated the next year, in 1957, by fellow mass communication researcher Bruce H. Westley at The University of Wisconsin.

A Conceptual Model, 1957

A parallel track to gatekeeping theory and a general theory of communication came through sociologist Theodore M. Newcomb (1903-1984), who called Lewin his “principal social-psychological hero” (National Academies, 1994). The two were active together through The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, of which Lewin was a founder and president in 1941-42 and Newcomb in 1945-46 (SPSSI, 2004). Newcomb's



Theodore M. Newcomb

coorientation model (1953) of communication was influenced by Lewin. And Newcomb was a teacher of Bruce H. Westley, who was with Gieber at Wisconsin. Westley teamed with Malcolm S. MacLean Jr. (1957) to publish a more complex research model that *Journalism Quarterly* said “has excited extensive comment since it first appeared” in 1955 in *Audio-Visual Communications Review*.



Bruce H.
Westley

Simply put, the coorientation theory says two people “move” toward each other and involving an object, such as “A” sending information to “B” about object “X.” The Westley-MacLean model introduced “C” – the gatekeeper – into mass communication research, noting that “C” spikes some messages that “A” tries to send to “B.” All the while, feedback flows among participants – a key ingredient missing from the previous mass communication models influenced by Lasswell’s “who says what through what channels to whom with what effect.” Their model remained a part of the dominant paradigm in mass communication research for decades.

Propping up gatekeeping theory

Gatekeeping theory quickly gained acceptance across mass communication study, and research in the succeeding years has worked to improve upon previous theory – mostly by introducing elements not considered by previous theoreticians. The diffusion of and the general acceptance of the theory also meant that gatekeeping theorists were not necessarily connected in ways that aforementioned researchers were connected. Given the simplicity of White’s original research application involving gatekeeping theory, and the relative simplicity of the Westley-MacLean model, building upon the theory has given heft to what appears to be a self-evident concept.

The most fundamental improvement to early gatekeeping theories of mass communication introduces the notion of multiple gatekeepers who control various functions along the news process. McNelly (1959) focused not on editors but on reporters, with a reminder that reporters at the “source” of news serve as the first of multiple gatekeepers

between a potential news event and ultimate publication. Different types of forces are exerted on different types of gatekeepers, McNelly noted.

Bass (1969) further extended gatekeeping theory with a more sophisticated study that included a critique that considered the White and McNelly studies to be simplistic. He noted that White's focus on the telegraph editor was misplaced because he "is not the key decision maker" (p. 71). He noted that McNelly did not differentiate between the various roles of various newsmen, and that McNelly's model included readers "as just another communicator" (p. 72). In the *Journalism Quarterly* article adopted from his dissertation, Bass introduced the "double-action internal newsflow" model that showed the flow from "raw news" into the "completed product" for news consumers. Bass' insight is that "news gatherers" (reporters and line editors) are different from "news processors" (editors and translators⁷) working at the United Nations. He argued that researchers should focus more attention on the news gathering than on news processing, since stories that are not reported will never reach a point where they can be processed.

A decade later, Brown (1979) further criticized of White for weaknesses in methodology – and especially for failing to consider a fundamental concept of Lewin's gatekeeping theory. Lewin clearly pointed out that a gatekeeper does not have independent power but instead has power that is "interdependent with other channel regions and ranges of impartial rules" (p. 595). Yet White's methodology assumed that the wire editor alone created the boundary to a channel. Without focusing on the external pressures on a gatekeeper and the "rules" of gatekeeping, Brown says, White missed a key point raised by Lewin. Brown does not restate a theory of gatekeeping but argues that researchers should closer to Lewin's original theory.

⁷ One could argue that missing from Bass is current emphasis on page designers at newspapers and video editors at broadcast organizations, who are part of the "processors" of news after it is gathered.

Dimmick (1974) split the middle in both publication date between Bass and Brown and in his consideration of gatekeeping theory. His monograph called gatekeeping an “uncertainty” theory, pointing out that a major function of gatekeeping in news organizations is to reduce dissonance by decision-makers and to reduce ambiguity about definitions of news. Simply put, editorial decision-makers need a model to reduce their uncertainty and to decide what news is.

Dimmick (personal correspondence, February 16, 2005) said the monograph was an abbreviated version of his dissertation at the University of Michigan. His interest in the topic came from a few years while doing radio work in Indiana. He had never met previous gatekeeping scholars, and none of his professors had done noteworthy work in the field. “The people I read were influential,” he said (personal correspondence, February 15, 2005), “but my goal was to find a theoretical framework that you could fit the literature into.”

He has published a few articles with students related to the topic of media decisionmaking since his 1974 monograph, but his academic interests have moved to topics of general decisionmaking and media economics. Gatekeeping studies, he said, are like other mass communication studies: “These things come and go. For some reason, there’s a level of interest in a topic for a time, and then will wax and wane.” One reason for a decline in gatekeeping research, he said in the personal correspondence, is that fewer mass media academics spent time in the mass media industry before moving to academia. “I think that’s a shame, because it gives scholars better topics and a better understanding of what they are studying.”

Shoemaker: Today's keeper of the theory

Pamela J. Shoemaker says she was not particularly excited when Steven H. Chaffee (1936-2001), her adviser while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in the 1980s, asked her a few years after earning her doctoral degree to write about gatekeeping as part of a Sage Publications series on communication concepts.

“I said, ‘Gatekeeping? I want to do something new. It’s a moribund concept.’ But he said to me, ‘If you do this book, people will start thinking about it again.’ ... He was right. He knew there was more to get out of it than I thought there was” (Shoemaker, personal communication, February 14, 2005).

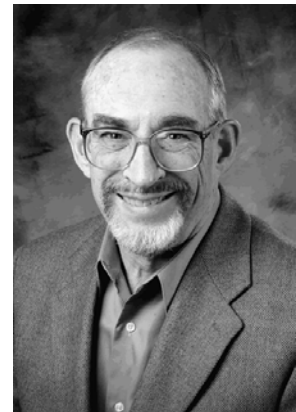
Shoemaker’s 88-page book, which has been used as a basis for other publications (see Shoemaker in Salwen & Stacks, 1996) provided a useful history of the theory, the process, and how gatekeeping is applied at the individual, communication routine,

organizational, and institutional level. Moreover, it concludes with a new gatekeeping model that acknowledges individual gatekeepers working within a single institution, internal and external forces along the channels, and feedback. Within that model are “pull-out” models to represent the characteristics of gatekeeping within an organization, and the internal processes and external forces that play a role on individual gatekeepers. The model, like other mass communication models, recognizes effects from the individual to the organizational to the institution to society.

One of the problems with the book, she said, is that she wrote it without ever having conducting gatekeeping research. She remedied that a few years later (Shoemaker, Eichholz



Pamela J. Shoemaker



Steven H. Chaffee

et al, 2001), with a study of how newspapers covered a series of congressional bills.⁸ Currently, Shoemaker's 1991 book is undergoing a Chinese translation as she is working there this year, and she and other researchers are working to synthesize the state of gatekeeping theory and research in the past dozen years. ("I never intended to do it (gatekeeping research)," the former president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication said, "but it has generated a lot of interest in all my work.")

Conclusion: Old theory for a new medium

The theory of gatekeeping has been a touchstone for research that focuses upon individual elements of the model: the channel, the message, the (internal and external) forces on the gatekeeper, the gatekeeper as an individual or as a group, and the feedback. Some researchers have focused on the message itself, which often is a secondary consideration in original models of gatekeeping and research into the topic. Other researchers have focused on the result of the gatekeeping, especially how the definitions of "news" sometimes lead to a final message that may be a distortion of reality. Each of these topics offers opportunities for further research; the intersection of and the combination of these individual elements offers still more opportunities.

Gatekeeping theory has been a springboard to other mass communication theories. It happened early with Breed's theory of social control as a gatekeeping factor. Reese and Ballinger (2001) combined discussion of seminal research into gatekeeping and social

⁸ The simple result: The more an editor wants a bill covered, the more the bill is covered. This is considered an "organizational" influence.

control⁹ to reflect how those topic were influenced by the dominant paradigm of the 1950s yet pushed into new areas for research.

More recently, gatekeeping has contributed to the development of other key mass communication theories. Lasorsa (2002) identifies a number of widely accepted mass communication theories and how they relate to diversity-related content; it is not a stretch to find a relationship between gatekeeping and many of the theories Lasorsa mentions, such as:

- Agenda-setting. The theory says media help decide the saliency of information based on what they choose to emphasize; gatekeeping is the process by which the media decide what to emphasize and neglect.

- Semantics and the use of language. As Bass notes that a function of gatekeeping is to shape news into a “completed product” for consumers, part of that function often involves settling on word choices.

- Framing. Continued study into the ways that media choose to present a story goes back to the Breed (1955) study of social control. Again, it can be argued that this is a function of gatekeeping, as “news gatherers” collect stories they believe will fit the frame of their specific news outlet and the “news processors” who decide what to accept from reporters and how to present a final product.

The latest research involving gatekeeping theory continues to improve upon previous models – and to consider Internet technology. Bennett (2004), for example, uses a modified approach to gatekeeping theory to argue that television news (and print, to a lesser degree) has shifted from hard to soft news, mostly for economic reasons. In his analysis, he

⁹ Warren Breed’s “Social Control in the News Room,” published in *Social Forces* in 1955, discussed how reporters (and editors) were “kept in line” with corporate policies that necessarily included news definitions. A footnote in this article gives credit to Newcomb, a teacher of Westley.

notes four news gates driven by the reporter, the news organization, its economics, and the newsgathering technology.

The arrival of the Internet as a mass communication source has further sparked considerations of gatekeeping in both scholarly research and in popular press. Singer (2001), for example, studied how traditional newspapers (now referred to as “mainstream” media, or MSM in some Internet parlance) chose to link or not to link to Web sites, and how those decisions forced more decisions by gatekeepers. Others are Williams and Carpini (2000), who claim that gatekeeping seems to be passé – if one information source will not publish something, another one (that is just as easy to find online) will publish it. And the topic of mainstream media as gatekeepers was in the news as recently as Feb. 11, 2005, after CNN Eason Jordan resigned after making remarks that suggested American military were intentionally targeting journalists. Bloggers¹⁰ were reacting to that remark what seemed to be real time, leading buzzmachine.com blogger (and former *Entertainment Weekly* magazine editor Jeff Jarvis) to remark: “We (in mainstream media) used to be gatekeepers” (Kurtz, 2005). A Nexis search showed that the term “gatekeeping” and “blog” appeared more than 70 times in United States newspapers between Oct. 1, 2004, and Feb. 29, 2005, suggesting that the mainstream media have made the connection.

Shoemaker (personal communication, 2005) would disagree with the past tense of Jarvis’ statement, noting that gatekeeping is a “fundamental psychological process” of every human. But she would agree with the past tense when applied to the Internet, too. “This is not an original thought,” she said (personal communication, February 14, 2005), “but each time we come across a new media, we ask new questions that are really old questions.”

¹⁰ “Web loggers,” or people who use an Internet application to post text onto Web sites. The statements are usually displayed in reverse order they are posted online. Thousands of people have “blogs” that allow them to make news or comment upon it.

Gatekeeping continues to exist despite the new technology and the new gatekeepers, she says, but only much faster. And studying the issue of how gatekeeping has changed with the Internet – and how the Internet may be changing traditional news gatekeeping – is a subject that will bear much fruit for the current and next generations of gatekeeping researchers.

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