Gate-keeping Theory

One of the most easily accessible theories is the journalist as gate-keeper, a role that clearly seems

threatened by a medium in which users can put their fingers on virtually any bit of information that

interests them. "No other medium," one observer has suggested, "has ever given individual people such

an engaged role in the movement of information and opinion or such a proprietary interest in the medium

itself" [(Katz, 1994,50)]. Though the term "gate keeper" originated with sociologist Kurt Lewin, it was

first applied directly to journalists by White, who studied the choices made by a wire service editor at a

small Midwestern newspaper. "Mr. Gates," who selected a relatively limited number of stories for

publication and rejected the rest, saw to it that "the community shall hear as a fact only those events

which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true" [(White, 1950, 390)].

Subsequent studies have indicated that the journalist's self-perception as the person who decides what

people need to know is deeply ingrained. Indeed, it has been suggested that the identification and

dissemination of what is worth knowing is the journalist's most basic and most vital task in a democratic

society, in which information plays a central role [(Janowitz, 1975)]. It would seem that the notion of

gate keeping goes right out the window with the Internet. The 'Net, and its user-friendly World Wide Web

graphical overlay, is the best example yet of a postmodern medium; it provides the opportunity for

creation of a highly personal pastiche, in which all importance, all meaning is relative to an individual

perspective. Users can find anything they want online. They don't need someone else to do the picking

and choosing. They don't need someone else to decide what's important. They don't need someone else to

digest and package their information. They don't need someone else to interpret that information for them.

Or do they?

Gate-keeping theory may provide a more valuable basis for study in this new media environment than it

first appears. "What happens when the gate keeper goes away?" is not the only question to be asked. It

might not even be the best question. Although few published studies have specifically addressed gatekeeping in the online environment, there is some evidence that journalists see that function as evolving

and adapting rather than disappearing. A study by Singer [(1997)] indicates people inside the newsroom

are modifying their definition of the gate keeper to incorporate notions of both quality control and sensemaking. In particular, they see their role as credible interpreters of an unprecedented volume of available

information as fundamental to their value -- even their survival -- in a new media environment. Her

findings are in line with the most recent survey by Weaver and Wilhoit [(1996)], who found that

journalists continue to see their primary role as interpreters, rather than mere gatherers and

disseminators, of information.

Those findings raise interesting follow-up questions for interactive media researchers to

pursue. Do the growing numbers of journalists now working online also value the interpretive role? If so,

how might they see themselves fulfilling it? Another approach might be to examine whether the real or

perceived need for a gate-keeping or sense- making role -- among both journalists and members of the

public -- increases or decreases as the amount of information expands and people are empowered to make

their own news judgments. Although the evidence is still largely anecdotal, there is some indication that

online user -- despite much-publicized exclamations of elation at their new freedom from media control

over information -- may actually be looking for some sort of gate keeper. For instance, with the

Communication Decency Act thrown out as unconstitutional, one of the hottest topics for Internet access

providers today is how to keep children from seeing certain content online. The perceived solution, so far,

has largely been a technological one: filtering software such as Cyber Sitter or Net Nanny to carry out, in

effect, editorial decisions about what is appropriate and what is not. It seems that people do still want

someone or something to make -- or help them make -- judgments about content. Or consider

"knowbots," the little personalizable pieces of software that will go rooting around like truffle-hunting

pigs in the incomprehensible, and exponentially expanding, vastness of the online universe to find content

that matches users' identified interests. In addition to help making judgments, people are searching for

help in finding information. Indeed, they also may be looking for help of a more human nature -- from,

in fact, the very journalists whose influence they can, if they choose, escape online. Aside from the search

engines, the most popular and widely used sites on the Web include many of those produced by

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employees of traditional media outlets, from CNN to USA Today to ESPN.People are even willing to pay

$49 a year for access to the online Wall Street Journal. In other words, they are turning to their favorite

selectors, organizers and packagers of information -- ones whose brand identity they know and, at least to

some extent, trust. Matt Drudge, the pseudonymous online scribe who boasts of having no editor, also has

no credibility. Michael Schudson began his recent book, The Power of News [(1995)], by inviting

readers to imagine a world in which everyone is able to deliver information directly to everyone else

through a computer, a world in which everyone can be his or her own journalist. He suggests that people

would quickly become desperate to figure out which sources were legitimate and would soon be begging

for help in sorting through the endless information. Furthermore, he said, they would prefer to have that

help come from a source that was at least relatively savvy about what all those other people were talking

about, relatively nonpartisan and therefore relatively trustworthy. Journalism, in short, would pretty

quickly be reinvented.

The world Schudson describes is, of course, more or less the world in which we live, one in which every

politician, advertiser, hobbyist and lunatic is able to communicate with us directly through our computers.

So perhaps it is time to revisit gate-keeping theory in this new environment. Though the role is

undoubtedly changing, it seems unlikely to lose all relevance any time soon. Potential questions for

additional intellectual exploration might include:

\* Who are the gate keepers online? What attributes or skills will online gate keepers need?

\* How does the concept of news judgment, which underlies gate-keeping theory, change as the media

change? Does it become a matter of personal taste or does it encompass a broader, more public-minded

component?

\* If users do want gate keepers -- at least of some sort, at least some of the time – what sorts of functions

might those gate keepers perform? Do users prefer that role be performed by humans or by software? Are

the ideal functions different for each?

\* The original need for gate-keeping journalists, in White's conception and the studies that followed his,

came about because of the limited space (or time, for broadcasters) available in traditional media. Online

media such as the Internet have unlimited space. Are there other limits, such as the user's time and

patience, or the media organization's resources, that create comparable constraints? If so, how can they

best be handled?

\* How is the gate-keeping function influenced by the interactive nature of this medium? For instance,

"push" technology lets users specify their interests and receive updates about them in an e- mailbox.

There is already concern that online journalists' news decisions are being perhaps unduly influenced by

user feedback [(Tucher, 1997)]. Will those influences continue to escalate? A re-examination of gatekeeping theory, then, can generate questions that are both plentiful and meaty. They offer opportunities to

connect some of the existing scholarly emphasis on online users to studies whose focus lies within the

newsroom. The following two approaches also can shine light in the same vicinity.

Diffusion of Innovation

Diffusion of innovation, a theory applied most directly to communication studies by Rogers [(1995)] and

those who have built on his work, deals specifically with the spread of change through a social system; it

therefore is a natural for this field of study. Again, much of the emphasis has been on diffusion among

members of the media audience, ranging from an exploration of readership characteristics of early

adopters [(Schweitzer, 1991)] to the degree to which the Internet is being incorporated into consumers'

information-gathering patterns [(Stempel and Hargrove, 1996)] to a examination of likely predictors of

personal computer adoption ([Lin, 1997], and earlier work). Studies within the newsroom also have been

undertaken; the adoption of such new technologies as computer pagination, to offer an example from the

world of print journalism, has received considerable attention (see, for instance, Russial, [1994];

Underwood, Giffard and Stamm, [1994]). Researchers also have begun to trace the use of computers

within the newsroom for a variety of information-gathering tasks, from data analysis [(Friend, 1994)] to

searches of online records [(Davenport, Fico and Weinstock, 1996)]. Garrison, who did extensive, earlier

work with the adoption of computer-assisted reporting, has been at the forefront of efforts to trace the

increasing use of the Internet and other interactive media by journalists([Garrison, 1997a], [1997b]). He

has documented, among other things, a steady rise in the use of online information sources by reporters

and a strong perception that such sources can be valuable journalistic tools. Studies such as these provide solid data from within the newsroom, involving changes in journalists' use

of and attitudes toward new communication technology, on which to continue building. More explicitly

theoretical approaches would enable researchers to draw connections with the diffusion of other

innovations, particularly within a fairly narrowly defined social system such as that created by journalism

professionals. Studies

such as those cited above indicate that the use and acceptance of online media are spreading, but we don't

have a clear picture of just how that process is taking place. Specific aspects of diffusion theory raise a

number of questions that have not yet been addressed. For example, innovations likely to gain a more

rapid acceptance are those perceived as having a high relative advantage, or as being better than the idea

they supersede, and as being highly compatible with the existing values of potential adopters. What are

the perceived advantages of online information sources over more traditional news-gathering methods?

How do such sources mesh with the value that journalists continue to place on investigating government

claims -- or on avoiding stories with unverified content, a media role deemed "extremely important" by

almost half the journalists in Weaver and Wilhoit's [(1996)] latest study? The role of opinion leaders,

individuals within a social system who provide informal information and advice about innovations to

others within the system, also raises intriguing questions. Who are the people within the newsroom whom

others will follow? And what gives them the social status that marks them as leaders in this area? Are

they the same people seen as leaders in other facets of newsroom life, or do different opinion leaders

emerge for technological innovations? For instance, the investigative reporters who are already at the top

of the newsroom food chain may now be winning prizes for stories based on online sources, stimulating

interest in other reporters seeking to advance. Or leaders may simply emerge as random individuals,

perhaps caught up in the diffusion of computer-based media outside the newsroom, become excited and

spread the word among their colleagues. Or maybe the opinion leaders are journalists at other media

outlets, such as the ones that serve as either real or ideal destinations for large numbers of working

professionals: "If it's good enough for The New York Times, it's good enough for me." What role, if any,

do reports carried in trade journals play? The answers to such questions are not just of academic interest;

they have significant implications for managers seeking to encourage adoption of computer-based tools.

These are examples of diffusion-related questions to ask in looking within the newsroom at journalists'

use of interactive media to carry out traditional functions, primarily reporting. But journalists are

beginning to use interactive media not only to gather information but also to disseminate it. There are

numerous questions to be raised relating to diffusion of the idea of online media services as acceptable

places for journalists to work. Indications are that online journalists have not yet achieved parity with

their traditional peers. Some report being denied equal access to news events [(Quick, 1997)]. Pay and

benefits for a media outlet's online staff vary widely, but online staffers often are young and relatively

inexperienced, and their compensation reflects that status. How to treat them is a subject of ongoing

debate among union and management negotiators in many newsrooms [("On-Line: Guild Work, Guild

Jurisdiction," 1996)]. In general, traditional journalists have seemed reluctant, in these early years, to

consider online counterparts as peers. Among the questions that spring from this situation are:

\* How does acceptance of the idea of working in a non-traditional environment diffuse within the

traditional newsroom? Again, who are the opinion leaders, and what factors are significant in the process?

Right now is an ideal time to launch studies in this because right now is when the process is occurring ...

or not. Are online media going to become separate entities, as television became separate from print? Or

will they become arms of existing media forms?

\* Can the innovation-decision process for new or current journalists considering a career in interactive

media be identified? Rogers [(1995)] lists a series of steps, starting with knowledge and ending with

implementation and confirmation. What do these steps look like for journalists faced with a new wrinkle

on their jobs and professional roles? What factors might affect where an individual is in this adoption

sequence?

\* Another key element of diffusion theory is the idea of reinvention, or the degree to which an innovation

is modified as it is adopted and implemented. What sorts of reinventions -- of roles, of content, of values,

of practices -- are taking place as journalists become involved in online delivery of information?

\* Ultimately, Rogers suggests, the components involved in the diffusion process come down to an

evaluation of consequences: What will happen if an innovation is adopted or rejected? Today's journalists

are, consciously or not, weighing that question in considering whether to become involved in online

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media. A better understanding of the factors that go into that judgment may lead to a better understanding

not just of tomorrow's media but of today's media, as well.

Such questions only scratch the surface of possibilities for applying diffusion theory to the exploration of

how journalists and journalism are affected by interactive media. But even this brief overview raises

questions that point to a third fruitful approach to studying the changing newsroom environment, drawing

on a different body of work.

Gate keeping Theory examines one of the most enduring concepts in mass communication scholarship.

Simply put, gate keeping 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 da